

Everywhere you look, people are getting ready for Christmas. In the church, this is also the season of preparation for Christmas, the season known as Advent.

Now I don't know about you, but for me the spiritual side of Advent is always in tremendous danger of getting overshadowed and swallowed up by all of the secular and cultural Christmas trappings.

The Haney family is preparing to celebrate Christmas. This weekend at the Haney house, we've been busy putting up our decorations and our lights and our Christmas trees. I enjoy putting them up. I like looking at them when they are up.

But when you think about it, all of our Christmas trees are rather strange. I love Christmas trees. But if you think about it, they're a bit surreal.

Question: How do you make a Christmas tree?

There are two ways.

1. You find a living tree. You cut it off from its roots, which makes it a dying tree. You bring it into your house, so it can slowly drop needles all over the carpet. You cover it with lights and ornaments and tinsel to hide the decay. Then you throw it away before it catches your house on fire.

Or 2. someone in a factory takes some metal tubes and metal wires. They add some green plastic or nylon pieces to it. And they make an imitation tree, a tree that was never really alive. Then you can stick it in the corner and pretend it's real.

Either way, it's a little strange. I'm not trying to run down our practice of having Christmas trees. They are beautiful. They warm my heart. But ironically they're beautiful on the outside, and lifeless on the inside. External glitz and glitter. Internal lifelessness.

But if you think about it, ALL of our Christmas decorations are external. They don't really change anything.

We don't remodel our houses to prepare for Christmas. We just put up some decorations and lights. Christmas decorations give the illusion of change without really changing anything. They are superficial. They are simply exterior cosmetic things that we slap up on the outside without ever touching what's inside.

And they are very temporary. The decorations will be up for a number of weeks. Then they'll go into the box to collect dust until next year. And I'm afraid, when they go into the box, the artificial good feelings they create are often gone as well.

That's the great danger of our culture anyway. Substance is often missing. A big plastic and metal fake evergreen tree in the corner of my living room may be beautiful to look at,

but it doesn't change the way I am as a person. Hanging up a bunch of big decorated socks on the mantle is fun, but it doesn't change my heart in the slightest.

There's got to be more to Christmas than external glitz and internal lifelessness. Which is why we desperately need to hear the message of Advent.

Which brings us to our lesson from Jeremiah.

Jeremiah at first seems a strange prophet for Advent. Jeremiah was often a prophet of doom and gloom.

He was a prophet both before and during the destruction of Jerusalem. One of Jeremiah's favorite words is "waste." The land will be laid waste. Later, the land has become a waste. On and on chapter after chapter. Gloom. Despair. Jeremiah can be a very depressing book.

But then there's a switch. Towards the end of the book, Jeremiah switches from being a prophet of despair to a prophet of hope.

Just a few verses before our OT lesson this morning, Jeremiah says, "Thus says the LORD: In this place of which you say, 'It is a waste without human beings or animals,' in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without inhabitants, human or animal, there shall once more be heard the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness."¹

That's a strong turn-around. The empty wasteland becomes filled again with sounds of happiness. Jeremiah continues, "In this place that is waste, without human beings or animals, and in all its towns there shall again be pasture for shepherds resting their flocks."²

Things may look dead. Things may actually be dead and barren. But God can bring them life.

Which is where our OT lesson picks up. Jeremiah says, "The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David."

The image is that of a stump. God's people had been like a tree that had been cut down. But from the dead stump, God promises a new branch, a righteous branch, a branch from David's lineage.

The language is the language of a Messiah. God will bring new life when he sends his Messiah.

Jeremiah continues: "And he (the Messiah) shall execute justice and righteousness in the land."

¹ Jer 33:10

² Jer 33:12

When the Messiah comes, he will make things right. In fact, Jeremiah says earlier, that this Righteous Messiah will carry the title, "The Lord is our Righteousness."

So don't miss what he says in at the end of our reading: "In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it (Jerusalem) will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

Did you catch that? God's people will be called by the title that was given to the Messiah. Very literally, the people will take on the identity of the Messiah. When the Messiah comes, God's people will become like him.

From an old dead stump, the Messiah will come with new life. And that life can be shared by God's people.

My friends, that's exactly what we need during Advent. A chance to share in the new life that Jesus brings.

We do external things. We decorate the outsides of either dead or artificial trees.

But God brings new life, a new shoot from the inside, from the old dead stump. A Righteous Branch, a Messiah will spring up. And we can experience new life when he comes

We decorate decaying trees on the outside. God makes living trees grow from the inside. That's what we need this Advent. We need growth on the inside. The decorations and the trappings of our culture may produce temporary warm fuzzy feelings. They may put an exterior smile on our faces. But those feelings often disappear in January.

Instead, we need God to change us on the inside, so that we may continually grow and change and thrive.

We make trees out of metal and plastic. God makes trees by taking a seed, and water and carbon and sunlight and soil. And through the marvelous processes of biochemistry, God makes a tree one molecule at a time. The tree grows bigger and stronger as time goes on. It grows stronger solely because of what happens on the inside.

This Advent, go ahead and enjoy the externals. But more importantly, look to the internals. Don't just engage in external decorating. Engage in spiritual, interior, re-decorating.

Find some quiet time to spend with God in prayer. Sink your roots deeper into scripture. Spend some quality time with your family or friends. Do a good deed or give a gift to someone anonymously and without any hope of being paid back. And above all, don't lose your focus. Christmas isn't about decorations, lights, trees, or presents. It's about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. May God strengthen and decorate you on this inside this Advent, as you prepare for the coming of his Messiah.