

W Thomas – Story as Sermon – Christmas Eve
The Three Trees
Christ Episcopal Church, Elizabeth City NC - 12-24-25

You have heard me say, the best way to prepare for the coming of Christ is to never forget the presence of Christ and frankly to share that presence and love. So when we come on a night such as tonight, when we celebrate the incarnation, the birth of Jesus, the baby Jesus, we need to remember the full story that guides us when we go back out into a world that sometimes seems dark, but the light overcame the darkness, which we will remember at the end of our worship when we sing silent night. So I'm going to tell you a story.

This is a story that has been told for centuries, I believe, because it comes from our own American heritage, from over the Appalachian Mountains in the olden days when they were trying to find ways to remember the key points of their faith journey, and this is the tale of the three trees. On top of a hill, there were three trees beginning to grow more and more to maturity. Each day rains would come and they would be watered, and each day they might grow bigger and taller to the point where they were getting close to that moment of maturity, and each of those trees had an aspiration.

The first tree that I'm going to speak of aspired because that tree liked to look up into the stars, and so the stars shine like diamonds and find jewels. And that tree's aspiration was to become a treasure chest. That tree thought that just maybe, just maybe, if it was ever to be converted into something else, to be that which would be holding fine treasure jewels encrusted all over it.

That was that tree's aspiration. The second tree didn't look so much up at the stars, but kept an eye on what happened to the rains, and saw them flood into like a little river down the hill, down towards, it could see off to the distance, maybe a larger body of water, and that tree, that tree could imagine an amazingly large body of water, almost perhaps an ocean, and in that ocean there would be these huge marvelous sailing ships carrying the most important of people around, carrying perhaps kings, and and that tree said, I would like to be part of one of those ships carrying kings on the greatest of oceans. If you're paying attention, you know where this is going.

That's the power of the story. The third tree, the third tree, well, this one had a kind of a sedentary sense of what their role was. This tree said, you know, I don't want to leave this hilltop.

I want to go grow, be big, strong, and stronger, as strong as I possibly can be, so that whenever anybody looks up to the top of this hill and they see me, their

eyes will move forward, up, up, up, over my branches, up to the top, and they will keep looking, and they will see God whenever anybody sees me. I will point to God. Well, over the years, they grew stronger, the rains came, and so on and so forth, and then one day, one, two, three woodcutters came up that hilltop and approached them.

The first woodcutter looked at the first tree and said, oh, look at how this one is, and the first tree was very excited that maybe aspiration, some destiny might happen, and the first tree is being, yes, yes, take the cut, and the first cut comes, and all of a sudden, the tree has fell because that woodcutter said, this tree is perfect for what I think it can become. I'm going to take it to the woodshop and see what I can make. And the second tree was like, well, I got my woodcutter.

I hope, oh, this woodcutter's going, ah, this is great. Look at how strong this tree is. I know just what I can put this tree into.

This is going to be fabulous. And cuts the tree. Tree's happy.

Third tree, who figured out how to do math, realized there were three woodcutters and three trees, and the thought of being able to stay on top of that hilltop wasn't going to happen. And all the worse, the third woodcutter basically went, on his hands, any old tree will do. I'll take that one.

Gone. So what happened to the trees? Well, the first tree went to that woodcutter's woodshop, was cut into the right size pieces to make some kind of a chest, but it was very coarse, very simple. It was nothing more than an animal's feed box, and it placed out, placed where the animals in the back were then fed and taken care of.

Straw was thrown in the middle of it, and that's where it was. Second tree, well, the second tree became part of something that floated on water, but not a huge sailing ship. It became a smaller boat, about big enough to float and serve fishermen on a lake.

And every day that tree was accosted by dirty, smelly fish on top of it, over and over again. Third tree, third tree was cut into some beams, and along with other trees like it, thrown into a dusty pile and forgotten. How's your imagination? You with me on this? All right, there was a night.

It's a night like the night we're remembering. It was a night when a baby was born, and a mother and a father were standing there, and the baby was born, and the cattle were lowing, and the sheep were doing what they do, and all of a sudden, the baby was put in this feed chest on top of the straw, and that's when

the first tree realized, I am holding the greatest treasure on earth. Second tree's boat was on the water with some fishermen and some other folk, and there was this man, maybe about 30 years of age, in the back of the boat, sleeping.

And all of a sudden, the wind wove over the boat, started to rocket back and forth. Everybody else on this boat, this dirty old fishing boat, were getting really nervous and worried, and they were looking, and all of a sudden, the man woke up, his hand raised, and said, Peace, be still. And that's when the second tree realized he was carrying the king of heaven and earth.

The day was as dark as it ever gets. The crowds were crying when all of a sudden, the second tree, the third tree, was pulled roughly out of its pile, and with another one snapped together and thrown on the back of a man. And it really hurt.

It was absolutely awful when the man was laid on it, and the tree felt the nails. And the man was raised up. This was a Friday.

Saturday came, and then the man was gone. But then Sunday came, the third day. And all of a sudden, the light opened up and shone on that tree in a way it had never felt before, even when it was on the little hill.

And it began to realize that its aspiration to be such that any time anybody looked at it, they would think of God. That's how our forebears held a story together to remind us what it is to be held by such huge love. There's a wonderful collect in our prayer book that pulls it all together.

Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hardwood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace. So clothe us in your spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you for the honor of your name. Perhaps this is what touches you when you see the greatest treasure on earth in the simplest of places, when you remember the power of what it is to share peace, and what it is to be a proponent of the deepest love that overcomes the darkness by being part of that light.

All these words I offer in the name of God, on this most special and holy night. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.