

Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80: 1-7, 16-18; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25



A Charlie Brown Christmas Tree is something special. It is not the perfect and symmetrical, just-the-right-height and color, Christmas tree. Rather, it may be the last one on the lot, straggly, bedraggled, and even sad because no one has picked it yet.

Maybe you're looking for your Christmas tree on December 23 or 24<sup>th</sup> because the days leading up to now have been so jam-packed that you just couldn't find the time

or the energy to take on the daunting task of finding a Christmas tree.

Or maybe you're looking for your Christmas tree on December 23 or 24<sup>th</sup> because you're someone who sees the meaning of Advent as waiting and hope and so you don't want a tree until we're just at the point of Christmas Eve.

Did you know that traditionally Christmas trees were put up on Christmas Eve and taken down on 12<sup>th</sup> Night? As one example, "The Nutcracker" ballet takes place on Christmas Eve and celebrations abound with the decorating of the Christmas Tree. But who even knows about, let alone celebrates, 12<sup>th</sup> night in America? Not many of us.

So, if you're a traditionalist who waits to put up your Christmas tree until – or close to – Christmas Eve, chances are you're likely to find the selection somewhat limited – and to include at least one Charlie Brown tree. There are even instructions on the internet for making a Charlie Brown Christmas tree if you can't find one at your local nursery. The website includes this illuminating comment:

This instructable shows how to find the true meaning of Christmas.

It's not about fancy aluminum Christmas trees, real estate, a blue ribbon for the best decorated dog house, or cash in 10s and 20s.

It's about hope, and who has more hope than anyone else?

Charlie Brown

Who hopes to someday kick that football, who hopes to someday woo that little red headed girl, and who hopes that all his anxieties are a figment of his imagination despite wasting all those nickels and dimes on "Psychiatric Help".

This instructable is not about a sad little tree.

It's about a tree which still has some hope.<sup>1</sup>

Hope – one of the magical and mysterious feelings that permeates Advent.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.instructables.com/id/Make-a-Charlie-Brown-Christmas-Tree/> (Dec. 21, 2013).

Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80: 1-7, 16-18; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

In today's Gospel, Joseph is faced with the quandary of what to do about Mary's pregnancy. His neat, orderly, religiously observant life has been turned upside down when he learns that Mary is pregnant.

As a religiously observant Jew, Joseph has two choices. He can publically accuse Mary of adultery and have her stoned to death. Or, he can write a writ of divorce and set her aside in a quieter, less public way. Yes, in time Mary's pregnancy would be visible to everyone, but she would still be alive rather than dead.

Joseph has been faithful to God and to Jewish observances all his life. His betrothal to Mary was in accordance with accepted practices of a year's time before the marriage was celebrated. That year was as binding as a marriage, however. Imagine, if you can, all his hopes and dreams being shattered when he learns that Mary is pregnant and he knows he is not the father of the child she is carrying. Betrayal, hurt, disbelief that one he had placed such hopes and dreams in and with has let him down so much.

Agonizing over what to do, Joseph decides to write a writ of divorce and set Mary aside- not publically but quietly, probably hoping that she would go away to bear the child and he would not be faced day-to-day with the child of another father and face day-to-day the loss of his dreams and hopes.

We're told that just as Joseph had reached this terrible choice an angel of the Lord visited him in his dreams. Astoundingly, the angel tells Joseph not to do what custom commanded but rather to take Mary on as his wife anyway- that the child she carried was conceived by the Holy Spirit and that all would be well if Joseph would trust the Lord.

Think about it: how many people are locked up in a mental institution or in prisons because they claim they have heard the voice of God and that God commanded them to do this or that. It's certainly not our general experience today that when someone tells us that God has spoken to him or her that we automatically believe them. We're, at best, pretty skeptical of the claim. We're much more likely to distance ourselves from the person and want nothing more to do with them.

But Joseph, in the long tradition of Judaism, knows that angels of the Lord do appear – and sometimes appear in dreams. Think of Jacob climbing the ladder. Think of angels of the Lord appearing to Abraham who responds by offering hospitality to them as messengers. The Hebrew Bible is full of instances where the Lord or the messengers of the Lord appear to humans with a message of importance.

So perhaps Joseph is more inclined than we are to accept his dream as authentic. At any rate, he accepts the advice of the angel and does not set Mary aside. Perhaps Joseph is willing to hope again that the life he had dreamed of would become a reality.

A reality that is different than what he had originally planned, but still a life together with Mary. And if the angel was real and the child was in fact conceived of the Holy Spirit, then who was Joseph to turn aside from what God was asking him to be and to do: the earthly father of the baby Jesus.

As any of you who have held a newborn baby know, the light of the world can be seen in that new child- that new hope. An outsider might look at the tiny, wrinkled, red-faced, bald human being and see him or her as ordinary or perhaps even ugly. But to the parents or grandparents or others who already love this child from before he or she was born, this baby is a miracle. The baby is a person in whom some of our hopes and dreams reside.

The baby Jesus came to be born in part because Joseph was willing to listen to the angel and to reach out to Mary in faith. Joseph is not often referenced in the New Testament once we get past the birth narratives. Yet he had to have been a steady resource for Jesus as Jesus grew up. Chances are Joseph grew to love Jesus, even though Joseph was not his earthly father. Chances are that Joseph passed along his skills as a carpenter to Jesus.

We don't know what happened to Joseph after that time when Mary and Joseph had to return to the Temple to find Jesus at age 12 when Jesus failed to go with them on their journey home. But we have every indication that Joseph listened to the angel and was not afraid to claim this child conceived by the Holy Spirit as his own. That Joseph faced down any who criticized him for not setting Mary aside once it became known that she was pregnant before they were married. We have every indication that Joseph was faithful and righteous to the end of his days.

Just as a Charlie Brown Christmas tree can be a symbol that what has been discarded or ignored by the public can yet be a thing of beauty and hope, so we too can take heart from Joseph's story.

We, like Joseph have undoubtedly had times when our hopes and dreams were dashed. When we felt like the last bedraggled tree on the lot that nobody wanted. When we wanted to give up because life had let us down even though we have tried so hard to live a good and moral life.

In this last bit of time in Advent, give thanks for angels who came to visit our ancestors of faith. Give thanks that our ancestors were willing to listen and to follow. Give thanks for the life of Joseph who remained faithful even when all his hopes and dreams must have seemed crushed and of no account. Give thanks for the beauty that can be found in a Charlie Brown Christmas tree – the beauty of hope that God is with us. *O come, o come, Emmanuel. Amen.*