

GLIMPSE

The Tree of Life

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The American Civil Liberties Union has cleaned up all the Nativity Stables on public property in our country, well almost. The humorous element to the whole thing is that they do allow, encourage Holiday or Christmas trees with colored lights and familiar Christmas music. What is so humorous is that they do not know about the symbolism buried within the branches and needles of these towering giants of the woods.

There was not much of a sense of liturgy when my father would drag into our living room the largest tree he could find. Generally it had to be as broad near the top as at the bottom and he would cut the top off for a tree in the dining room. Something from the far outside was come inside. By doing so, it belonged. It had made its home within ours. In doing so it asked for space and the usual things had to take unusual places around the house. It was a silent presence which spoke of life.

The first ornament was, and still is, a raggedy scraggedy Santa who watched over all the gifting and seemed to delight in the 'subtreeanian' world. The lights were impatiently strung and then the ornaments of all kind and ages. There were fruit-looking rounders of many colors, but more and more the historical markers of our family's history. Child-made paper loops, delicate lace snowflakes produced from some long-forgotten class. The whole was a statement of the past and the future. The love within the family was strung up and hence a promise of that same love becoming even more fruitful as the family increased and is increasing these many years past now.

Now for the humor of the Christmas Tree in public places, even city halls and even there in Washington.

With the birth of the Mystery of God made Flesh, divinity, the out-there God has insided and taken up a permanent place in the house of humanity and it wasn't a very liturgical experience either. The Christ's infant-arms grew like the branches on the tree and reached out for ornaments. The Tree of Life pitched His trunk amidst our human furniture and asked for a little room. Somethings had to be moved and still need to be rearranged.

The lights and ornaments are pledges or signs that those who know what the tree represents will decorate those branches with the brightness and uniqueness of their lives. Each is different; each is a way of responding to make the tree alive and permanent.

There is a past, a history to the presence of the Tree. There were other divinely-initiated entrances in the history of humanity. At last, it was final and forever. The Tree of God is the invitation to be welcomed, accepted and enjoyed.

The ornaments are the pledge of the future. The Tree gives life to be seen, received and enjoyed. The pre-Christian people decorated their naked winter trees with fruits from their past harvests as a celebrational hope that the newly-returning sun which had been autumnally disappearing had not died into the southern world, but was coming back to life. There was going to be new life, new grapes, oranges, grains and they would live again.

So for days after the sun begins the celestial reversal, we too celebrate the fidelity of a God Who is never done creating new life. The tree then is a Nativity Scene right in the middle of the publicly de-Goded squares and the ACLU doesn't even know it. Maybe we haven't known that either. It is only a glimpse with a huge smile on my Advent face.