

“A Charlie Brown Tree”

December 24, 2018

A Charlie Brown Advent series – Christmas Eve

Note: We're grateful to Faith Church in Bellafonte, PA for the idea for this series.

All through this month of December, in this season of Advent as we've been preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus, we've been looking through the lens of Charlie Brown, whose search for meaning has captured hearts for more than 50 years. He wants to know the true meaning of Christmas, and his journey isn't unlike ours.

I usually get to today – and even to tonight – and finally settle in to why we're really here. This month has run some of us ragged with lots of activity and planning and preparing for lots of things, and it's probably true that we haven't taken a lot of time to reflect and rest. Does anyone else feel that need for rest and reflection?

Charlie Brown can help. Lucy told him to take control and get involved, but that didn't really help him find the meaning of this season. We actually have to give up control and remember our dependence on God to find the meaning of Christmas. We're here to celebrate the coming of a Savior – Christ the Lord – who brings salvation to us and to the world. We depend on God for the gift of salvation.

Snoopy's take on the season is to celebrate all that we see and taste and touch – the decorations, food, and fun. Has anyone been doing a good job celebrating? It's enjoyable for sure, but it doesn't last.

Sally focuses on the gifts she wants – even telling Santa to bring money - \$10s and \$20s - if it's too hard to find everything on her list. But again, stuff doesn't last. What Charlie Brown wants is MORE, and it's Linus who offers the real meaning.

The story goes that network executives were hesitant about a scene involving Linus reciting the story of Christ's birth. But in a documentary about the making of the program, Charles Schulz said, "If we don't tell the true meaning of Christmas, who will?" And so the scene remained.

Schulz also felt strongly about the absence of a laugh track in the televised cartoon, maintaining that the audience should be able to enjoy the show at their own pace, without being cued when to laugh. And you might notice that when you watch. There are spaces of silence. CBS created a version with a laugh track, but that version never aired. And every year, we join Charlie Brown on his search – and we get the Christmas story.

But we also join him on the search for a tree. He chooses the barest, scraggiest tree in the lot. Not the flashy aluminum tree so popular of the time, but something like our tree here. And we still call a tree that looks less than perfect “a Charlie Brown tree.”

Everyone laughs and can’t believe that someone would choose that little tree. Charlie Brown goes back to his original question, “doesn’t anyone know what Christmas is all about?” He tells the truth – and really challenges us to go back to the things that matter. That’s when Linus speaks the truth simply. He reads from the Gospel of Luke.

Perhaps we don’t watch “A Charlie Brown Christmas” and think about the connection to the story of Jesus right away, but the tree reminds us that what’s important, what’s meaningful, what’s lasting, what matters, isn’t necessarily what we see that gets our attention first, what we can get, or what we can control. God calls us to look more closely – and see what we might overlook.

Tonight we gather here because we’re searching for meaning, too. And it’s the birth of Jesus, born to a humble couple, in a humble place, visited first by humble shepherds, that calls us to remember that God works in ways we don’t expect – and might never, ever expect. It’s the same story, but we need to hear it again.

Christian writer and blogger Jen Hatmaker says,

“Bethlehem.

The manger.

Mary.

The shepherds.

The star.

The unassuming young almost family from Nazareth.

The angels.

The beautiful baby, Lord at his birth.

I’ll never get over that this is the way God did it.

The weary world rejoices still.”

Charlie Brown’s search still resonates with us because we’re searching, even if we know why we’re here. We want to live lives that are meaningful and faithful. We want to know that there’s more than just what we see around us. We want to hear that God loves us and is with us – in everything we face. We want to know that love really does matter – that it’s stronger than anything else.

That’s a message of Christmas – God is with us and God loves us. We don’t do this alone. We’re not on our own here. Jesus came to be with us. He loved and served. He went to the cross for us so that we might have new life. He rose again so that we might know that death isn’t the end – and that we have hope to share because he is with us still through the power of the Holy Spirit.

And maybe there's something about Charlie Brown's tree that touches our hearts because we're kind of like that tree. We're not perfect, but with a little love – by God's grace – we are transformed. By the love of God that comes to us in Jesus, we are forgiven. By the love of community around us, we understand God's love more deeply. Take a look at what happens...

SHOW MEDIA: Charlie Brown tree

As we go into the world tonight, we must keep looking for Jesus – and looking in places and people we don't expect. That's the story, too. If you want to see Jesus, look among the most humble. If we want to see Jesus, we're called to look in the most unexpected, unassuming, out-of-the-way places. He is with us. He loves us, and he calls us to love, too.

Your family is invited to take a Charlie Brown tree tonight as a reminder of God who comes to save us and transform our lives – and our world by God's grace.

6:00 p.m. Let us pray...PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

11:00 p.m. CHOIR, then PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Before candles:

(6:00) Tonight, we'll pray – for ourselves, our loved ones, our world. We'll sing "Silent Night," a song that pleads for heavenly peace. People of every culture and country are celebrating Jesus' birth this night. May we sing and pray for our world and for God's peace to prevail.

(11:00) As we celebrate the coming of Jesus, we come to the table he sets for us to experience God's grace in a simple, yet powerful way. This is an open table where all who seek to follow Jesus are welcome. You're invited to come up the side/center aisle, receive Communion, take a candle, and form a circle around the outer edge of the sanctuary. We'll sing "Silent Night" together after our choir leads us.