

One of the beloved Christmas traditions in my family when I was growing up was the annual outing to pick out a Christmas Tree. Every year, on the last Saturday in Advent, my parents packed my three siblings and myself into our Chevy Blazer and we went out into the woods to find the tree that we would bring home to decorate, the tree that would be at the heart of our family Christmas celebrations. The part I enjoyed the best was looking over all the trees and selecting the one that I thought made the best Christmas tree. However, the rest of my family hardly ever agreed with my taste in trees. They called the trees I chose “uneven”, “too full”, “too skinny”, they even dared to use the word “ugly”. Their lack of vision never swayed me. I was not afraid to defend the reasons why I thought the tree I selected made the best Christmas tree. Most of the time, my family relented, but they grumbled all Christmas at their ugly tree. Until one year my mom found a book that changed their mind about my taste in Christmas trees. It was a story about what makes Christmas trees beautiful called *Why Christmas Trees Aren't Perfect* by Richard H. Schneider.

I've told this story before, as it is very dear to me, but not because it made my family look at trees differently. It is a story that illustrates what John's Gospel this morning so elegantly speaks of and what the prophet Isaiah meant when they wrote “Beautiful are the feet of the messenger who announces peace and brings good news...” Today we celebrate the Mystery of Incarnation, the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. But this isn't the kind of mystery we solve, it is a mystery we can come close to, and if we are fortunate, enter into. One way to get close to a mystery is through a story, so this morning, please sit back and listen to a story of the Incarnation hidden in the reason *Why Christmas Trees Aren't Perfect*.

There was a time, very long ago, when all pine trees were perfect from their shape, to their deep green color, to the slope and spacing of each branch. This perfection was celebrated in a small kingdom in the Carpathian Mountains in Europe. Every year, on the last Saturday in Advent a pine tree from the royal forest considered to be the most perfect was selected to be cut down and taken to the palace where it was decorated with shining ornaments and became the center for the Christmas celebrations. Every tree wished for this honor and tried to outdo each other growing straight and tall with perfect shape and color.

One young tree called Small Pine showed particular promise, as from the time it was a seedling it had the best dark green color and its small tender branches looked especially perfectly beautiful. There were even grumblings of jealousy from other trees in the forest, but Small Pine didn't pay attention to them, it knew if you did your best what others say doesn't matter.

One cold winter night, when the full moon was so bright the snow sparkled in its light, a little gray rabbit came running through the forest, searching for cover. Its sides heaved in exhaustion and panic as the howling of wild dogs was heard in the distance. The rabbit ran from tree to tree, looking for a place to hide from the rapidly approaching dogs. But the trees, upset at being disturbed, lifted their lower branches from the ground, denying the rabbit a place to hide. Small Pine saw what was happening, and its heart went out to the rabbit. The little tree dipped its branches to the ground so the rabbit could slip in behind its evergreen screen, safe from the dogs that burst into the forest. When they couldn't smell the rabbit, the dogs quickly ran away, but the rabbit stayed on Small Pines soft branches the rest of the night. When it finally left in the morning, Small Pine could not lift its lower branches back to their proper place. Its perfect shape was forever spoiled. Oh well, thought Small Pine, perhaps no one will notice a few uneven branches so low to the ground.

Not long after, a terrible blizzard hit the kingdom. No one remembered having so much snow and wind and freezing temperatures in a storm before. Everyone shut themselves up in their homes, and all the animals in the forest hunkered down. All except a small bird, a wren, who had gotten lost in the strong winds. With icy, wet feathers, the little bird fluttered into the forest glen, looking for a tree branch where she could safely wait out the storm. Of course, all the trees feared the little wren would spoil their perfect shape, so they clenched their branches tight, denying a place for the bird to perch.

All the trees, that is, except one. Small Pine opened its heart and its branches to the little bird, who nestled safe, able to rest at last, on a branch. When the storm was finally over, the bird flew away. But she had been there so long, when Small Pine tried to move its branches back into place, they wouldn't budge. There would always be a gap where once there had been perfect branches.

Below zero temperatures followed the winter storm, making the snow hard and difficult for animals like deer to dig through the snow to eat the tender grass and moss beneath. A young fawn had wandered away from its mother, and it didn't take long for it to get hungry. It appeared to be starving as it wandered into the royal forest. All the tender green pine needles looked delicious to the little fawn, but of course all the trees, afraid the fawn would spoil their appearance,

pulled their branches from its little mouth. All the trees, that is, except Small Pine, who stretched its branches out to the starving fawn. By the time the fawn had eaten enough to feel strong enough go look for its mother, poor Small Pine looked pretty ragged.

It couldn't help overhearing the other trees calling it a disgrace because it looked so bad. A tear of pine gum oozed down its trunk as Small Pine realized it would never be chosen for the royal Christmas tree. Lost in despair, Small Pine did not hear the sound of sleigh bells approaching. It was the last Saturday in Advent and the queen herself was coming to choose the tree that would become the royal Christmas Tree because it was a special year for her kingdom.

Slowly the sleigh moved through the forest as the queen carefully looked at each and every tree. When she saw Small Pine, a flash of anger filled her, and the queen ordered the sleigh stop. "How could such an ugly tree with so many drooping and uneven branches and gaps be allowed in the royal forest?" She asked. She commanded her woodsmen to cut Small Pine down and throw it away then nodded for the sleigh to move on.

But then, she asked the sleigh driver to stop. She got up and turned around and looked closer at Small Pine. She noticed the tracks of animals under its uneven needles. She saw feathers of birds caught in its branches. And as she looked at the gaping hole in its side, understanding filled her heart. "This is the one," she said, pointing to Small Pine. The woodsmen were shocked, but did as the queen commanded; and to the astonishment of all the trees in the forest took Small Pine to the palace. There, in the great hall, Small Pine was decorated with shining ornaments. On Christmas Day a yule log blazed in the fireplace and the queen and her family and all the people of the kingdom sang together around Small Pine. And everyone agreed this was the finest Christmas Tree yet. For in looking at its drooping nibbled, branches, they saw the protecting arm of a father, or the comforting lap of a mother.

And a few, like the wise queen, saw the love of Christ expressed on earth.

That is why, to this day, if you go looking for a Christmas tree, you will never find a perfect one. They all have a gap where cover for animals was given or uneven branches where an animal rested or made its home. For the trees have learned that living for the sake of others makes us most beautiful in the eyes of God. Maybe we can learn the same.