

December 3, 2025 – Hosea 14:4-8, Revelation 22:1-5, John 11:17-27

Every year, at about this time, our little corner of the world grows very cold and very brown. We're surrounded by dead leaves and dead grass. And the only thing breaking up the brown vegetation is the white of snow and the blackness of the sun setting ridiculously early.

It's not surprising then that, throughout history, we have immediately reacted to the cold, brown, death of winter by bringing green into our homes and churches. Green Christmas trees in our living rooms. Green wreaths hung on our doors. Green garland wrapped around our banisters. Green holly decorating our mantles and tables. The world outside looks dead, but evergreens are defiant. They proclaim life in the midst of death. Advent is the Church's winter and evergreens preach the Gospel.

And it's a Gospel message we need to hear. Because, on our own, humans are not evergreen. We are much more like the trees whose leaves wither and fall, like the grass that dries out and decays. Our lives fade. Our hopes fade. The people we love fade. And the fear of that withering haunts us more than we like to admit.

The prophet Hosea knew this well. In his day, Israel had turned away from the Lord. They placed their hopes in idols. They trusted in their armies and the armies of their allies. They clung to what could not last. And the result was spiritual death. Branches broken from the vine. A stump in winter soil.

Yet, through the prophet, God speaks a different Word: *"I will heal their apostasy; I will love them freely... They shall blossom like the lily... They shall flourish like the grain... They shall be like the olive tree."*

Did you know that olive trees are an evergreen? They don't lose their leaves when the seasons change. This is God's promise: His redeemed people will not wither. They will be green year round. They will live forever.

I don't know about you, but I don't always feel like an evergreen. I'm only 43 years old. But I feel every one of those 43 years. And talking to some of our more senior members of the congregation, I think it's safe to say that growing older won't make me feel any younger.

We feel the winter inside us. We feel it when we visit the grave of a loved one. We feel it when someone we're close to gets that diagnosis. We feel it in our loneliness, in our guilt, in our fear that we're running out of time. So maybe we do feel like Christmas trees... cut Christmas trees. Trees that were only green for a short time, but destined to dry out and turn brown like the rest of the wintry world.

Jesus enters that winter in our Gospel reading from John 11. Lazarus is dead. The winter of death has come to Bethany. Martha weeps and speaks the fear every believer knows: *"Lord, if you had been here..."* If only. If only I had prayed more. If only the doctors had found it sooner. If only God had intervened. Martha believes in the resurrection *"at the last day."* But right now... everything just looks dead.

But to Martha in her cold grief, Jesus speaks an evergreen promise: *"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live..."* He doesn't merely say, "I bring resurrection." He is resurrection. He doesn't simply give life. He is life. Where He is, winter ends.

Jesus stands before Lazarus' tomb, the symbol of death's finality. The place where the world feels the most cold and brown and dark. He literally steps into the valley of the shadow of death. And He calls the dead by name. *"Lazarus, come out!"* And the dead man rises.

Jesus proves in that moment that He is God's evergreen. Death cannot stop Him. The grave cannot claim Him. He is life Himself.

But Lazarus' rising is only a preview. The real victory, of course, comes a short time later, at the cross. When Jesus allows Himself to be nailed to a tree. And like all of us in our sinfulness, he withers like a cut Christmas tree. He takes our sin. He dies our death.

And on the third day, He rises. Alive forevermore. Branches budding. Leaves unfading. The Root of Jesse. The Tree of Life restored. The evergreen of everlasting life. And He does it not for Himself but for you. To make you evergreen.

Let's go back to Hosea 14. After God promises to make life blossom in Israel, He concludes with these words: *"It is I who answer and look after you; I am like an evergreen cypress; from Me comes your fruit."*

He is the evergreen, but he gives us his fruit. The promise of life doesn't come from you. Your hope doesn't depend on your strength, your goodness, your ability to avoid the cold winds of suffering or stand firm against the winter of death. You are alive because you are rooted in Christ. From His evergreen branches comes your fruit.

The Book of Revelation shows us what this looks like when Christ returns. John sees the river of the water of life flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. And there, on both sides of that river, *"the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit"* grows. And John writes, *"Its leaves were for the healing of the nations... and they will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever."*

No more night. No more suffering. No more death. It's leaves will not wither, the garden will not close, and no serpent will coil among the branches. Because there is nothing accursed in that place. The curse of sin is gone. God's people are forever green. Alive forevermore.

Which brings us back to our decorations. As you can see, the evergreen is not just seasonal décor. It's a symbol almost as old as Christmas itself. Christians for centuries have used evergreens in their homes and churches to remind one another of our resurrection hope. The first ornaments for Christmas trees centuries ago, were red apples and white wafers. Symbols of the fruit that brought us death and the body of Christ given in His Supper that brings us life.

The Christmas tree, standing when every other tree lies bare, points to Christ the Life who stands victorious when everything else falls. The wreath, an evergreen circle, proclaims that in Jesus, life has no end. The holly, with its red berries and pointed leaves, reminds us of the blood He shed and the crown of thorns He wore to give us life. Garlands wrapped around surfaces show how Christ wraps our dead world with His living grace.

These decorations preach to us, in a way. They preach to our grieving hearts: you have a Savior who raises the dead. They preach to sinners who fear their guilt: Christ has taken your curse into His own flesh and buried it forever. They preach to the lonely and the afraid: you are grafted into the tree of Christ and nothing can cut you away from Him.

They preach to a world obsessed with youth, terrified of aging, desperate to avoid suffering: the real, everlasting life isn't found in cosmetics or medical advancements or self-improvement. It's found in Christ alone.

Christ doesn't decorate the dying, like pretty ornaments on a cut Christmas tree. He resurrects the dead. He makes us grow anew. The Son of God has come into our winter and the very first green shoots of eternal spring have burst from the cold ground in His empty tomb.

So hang the greens. Trim the tree. Smell the pine and spruce. Let these branches remind you of God's promise. Let them preach to you in these dark winter days. Let them point you to the Savior whose resurrection makes you evergreen.

*"Yes, Lord,"* Martha confessed. *"I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."* He has come. And He is coming again. He is the Resurrection and the Life. From Him comes your fruit. In Him you will never wither. In Him you are evergreen. Amen.