

“A Voice in the Wilderness”

Valley Presbyterian Church – December 26, 2021

Rev. John Wahl

First Sunday of Christmas

John 1:15-34

The Story of the Three Trees

Once upon a mountain top, three little trees stood and dreamed of what they wanted to become when they grew up.

The first little tree looked up at the stars and said: “I want to hold treasure. I want to be covered with precious stones and filled with gold. I’ll be the most beautiful treasure chest in the world!”

The second little tree looked out at the small stream trickling by on its way to the ocean. “I want to be traveling mighty waters and carrying powerful kings. I’ll be the strongest ship in the world!”

The third little tree looked down into the valley below where men and women worked in a busy town. “I don’t want to leave the mountain top at all. I want to grow so tall that when people stop to look at me, they’ll raise their eyes to heaven and think of God. I will be the tallest tree in the world.”

Years passed. The rain came, the sun shone, and the little trees grew tall. One day three woodcutters climbed the mountain.

The first woodcutter looked at the first tree and said, “This tree is beautiful. It is perfect for me.” With a swoop of his shining axe, the first tree fell.

“Now I shall be made into a beautiful chest. I shall hold wonderful treasure!” the first tree said.

The second woodcutter looked at the second tree and said, “This tree is strong. It is perfect for me.” With a swoop of his shining axe, the second tree fell.

“Now I shall sail mighty waters!” thought the second tree. “I shall be a strong ship for mighty kings!”

The third tree felt her heart sink when the last woodcutter looked her way. She stood straight and tall and pointed bravely to heaven.

But the woodcutter never even looked up. "Any kind of tree will do for me," he muttered. With a swoop of his shining axe, the third tree fell.

The first tree rejoiced when the woodcutter brought her to a carpenter's shop. But the carpenter fashioned the tree into a feedbox for animals.

The once beautiful tree was not covered with gold, nor with treasure. She was coated with sawdust and filled with hay for hungry farm animals.

The second tree smiled when the woodcutter took her to a shipyard, but no mighty sailing ship was made that day. Instead, the once strong tree was hammered and sawed into a simple fishing boat. She was too small and too weak to sail on an ocean, or even a river; instead, she was taken to a little lake.

The third tree was confused when the woodcutter cut her into strong beams and left her in a lumberyard.

"What happened?" the once tall tree wondered. "All I ever wanted was to stay on the mountain top and point to God..."

Many days and night passed. The three trees nearly forgot their dreams.

But one night, golden starlight poured over the first tree as a young woman placed her newborn baby in the feedbox.

"I wish I could make a cradle for him," her husband whispered.

The mother squeezed his hand and smiled as the starlight shone on the smooth and the sturdy wood. "This manger is beautiful," she said.

And suddenly the first tree knew he was holding the greatest treasure in the world.

Many more days and nights and years passed.

One evening a tired traveler and his friends crowded into the old fishing boat. The traveler fell asleep as the second tree quietly sailed out into the lake.

Soon a thundering and thrashing storm arose. The little tree shuddered. She knew she did not have the strength to carry so many passengers safely through with the wind and the rain.

The tired man awakened. He stood up, stretched out his hand, and said, "Peace." The storm stopped as quickly as it had begun.

And suddenly the second tree knew he was carrying the king of heaven and earth.

More time passed. One Friday morning, the third tree was startled when her beams were yanked from the forgotten woodpile. She flinched as she was carried through an angry, jeering crowd. She shuddered when soldiers nailed a man's hands to her.

She felt ugly and harsh and cruel.

But on Sunday morning, when the sun rose and the earth trembled with joy beneath her, the third tree knew that God's love had changed everything.

It had made the third tree strong. And every time people thought of the third tree, they would think of God. That was better than being the tallest tree in the world.

Maybe the lesson of the tale is this: The next time you feel down because you didn't get what you want, sit tight and be happy because God is thinking of something better to give you.¹

The day after Christmas seems an appropriate time to consider whether we got what we wanted. There are gifts that have been unwrapped – maybe they are the flavor, color, size, or style we prefer. We have likely also received cards, calls, and visits – were they the ones we expected or wanted to hear from or see? Have this season's music and lights, gatherings and decorations stirred within us the wonder and mystery of the incarnation: of the divine taking on human flesh and choosing to dwell among us?

This morning, we heard the gospel of John's account of this testifier, this baptizer, the *voice crying out in the wilderness*. From accounts in the other gospels, we are familiar with this man, named John, who appeared wearing camel's hair, eating locusts and honey, and preaching a message of repentance.

The John that we find here is different. His introduction says nothing about his dress, his food, his fiery words, or his baptizing. It focuses on his "testimony."

The religious leaders of his day want to know who this John is. They ask: Who are you? Are you Elijah? Are you the Prophet? They wanted an answer they could give to the people who had sent them.

¹ Alternately Titled, "The Tale of the Three Trees," Author unknown

John replied only by saying who he was not: he was not the messiah, but, instead, a witness to the messiah. He had come to point to what was to come.

John had a clear sense of who he was and who he was not; of his role in bringing about God's work on earth; of God's presence in this world and his life's work of testimony. Thus, his baptizing is not to cleanse people from their sin, but to witness to God's coming into the world.²

Like the three trees came to learn, our plans are not always God's plans; we may envision one path for our lives, but God often leads us down a different road. The gifts we actually receive are not always the ones we wanted, or thought we needed. So often, we imagine ourselves as the center of attention – the one holding great treasure or connected to the most powerful – rather than as the one providing testimony, giving witness. We pay attention fame and notoriety; when what God desires from us is faithfulness and giving.

In John's gospel, John the Baptist shows us that what we do reveals what we believe. Do our actions make use of our talents: the gifts we have received? Do our works point to God and not to ourselves? Are our words focused on providing witness to God's mercy and love?

John, the testifier, the witness, will not let others define or label him. He is clear about who he is and who he is not. He is the messenger: preparing the way for the Messiah to be seen and to be heard; that the world may know that the Word has come, full of grace and truth. Amen.

² Gilberto Ruiz from *WorkingPreacher.com*