

**New Beginnings**  
(Luke 2)

12-31-23  
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The calendar year is about to end and a new year lies before us like an empty page waiting to be written on. And with thoughts of Jesus' birth still fresh on our minds, it is a good time to think about new beginnings; to reflect on the past year and to make New Year's resolutions.

I know that for some people it feels as though Christmas comes and goes too quickly and that taking down the tree and putting away the ornaments will be kind of a melancholy affair. The Christmas lights will linger on some houses much longer than on others.

**The Christmas Tree Ritual**

At our house we tend to leave the tree up a little longer and I'm glad, because lately the whole ritual of setting up a Christmas tree, enjoying it and finally taking it down, is something I am appreciating and savoring more than I used to. The whole ritual helps to put me in a good place for thinking about the past and the future.

I think that the ritual of putting up a Christmas tree works so well partly because it is such a simple hands-on task. From start to finish, it's not really complicated, so your thoughts can also wander. Which is a good

thing, because the Christmas tree with all its ornamentation is an amazingly rich symbol, that gives our minds many good places to wander to. Like all good symbols, it is a gift that keeps on giving.

During the course of the year, I know that I tend to get so carried away with my to-do lists, that any resolutions I made the past January, have gotten mushy and vague, and I go about with the nagging feeling that I have slipped unknowingly back into the very habits that I had wanted to break.

And it seems to me that just thinking about the tree as you are giving it a place in your home has a way of leading to the kinds of memories and reflections, and also surprises that can help us set our priorities straight and help us make good New Year's resolutions.

### **The Ornamentation**

Part of what makes a Christmas tree such a rich source of reflection is obviously the ornamentation. If you are a grown-up who has had kids who made some of your ornaments or you have friends who gave you some, or even if you just picked them up over the years, then each ornament has some special significance attached to it.

And so, when you are hanging them on the tree, you get a journey down memory lane. You get to reflect on how your own life has been made beautiful through the years, because of the way it has been adorned with special memories or “gifts”.

I say “gifts” because I think it is worth considering that the way each ornament finds its way onto the tree, (if that ornament truly has special meaning), is as a gift to us. In other words, that it is somehow really God’s hand and not yours or mine that provides the ornaments that give the greatest meaning and beauty to our trees.

### **Very like a Sacrament**

It seems to me that when we look upon our Christmas trees with the eyes of faith, we see that they are really an outward way of expressing what is in our hearts when we feel blessed by God, with many gifts hanging like ornaments from the branches of our memories. And all of them, gathered together under the one star of God’s love that shines over it all from its proper place at the top.

It seems to me that the Christmas tree is also a wonderful symbol for our life in community. That somehow, all the people who make up our congregation are like so many ornaments, not really delivered to us by

virtue of our own design, so much as placed onto the church's branches by God's hand, as a gift.

### **A Special Gift**

This year I happened to come across a very special ornament. I was walking around during Fete Noel, and looking through the ornaments and there hanging on one of the racks was a tiny pair of porcelain shoes, like the wooden shoes that Dutch people wore in Holland. And the surface was embroidered with blue ink, like Delft.

My mother who is now in heaven, was of Dutch ancestry, and wore wooden shoes when she was a girl, as part of her costume during the Tulip festival. And the blue porcelain Delft, was also a familiar part of her growing up. I paid my fifty cents or dollar for them and then carried them around in my pocket for a few days, rubbing them in my hands as a way of feeling close to her.

And then when we put up the Christmas tree, I took the shoes and hung them on the top branch, under the star, where they are hanging right now. The tree is extra special for me this year, because those tiny shoes are such a perfect reminder of Mom, hanging up there above the glued together popsicle stick, felt and construction paper ornaments made by

Sheryl's children when they were young and all the other assorted Christmas balls and figurines.

I guess that, if you were to identify us with characters in this morning's Gospel, you would have to say that, as Christmas lingers in our hearts and minds, we are a bit like the elderly Simeon and Anna on seeing the baby Jesus.

Perhaps Simeon and Anna, having both lived a long time, also had hearts full with many memories, like so many ornaments hanging on a tree; and that, like us, they might have spent time reminiscing and strolling down memory lane. But their concern is for the future. And when they see the baby Jesus, their anxieties about the future are relieved. They see that God has provided the blessing that is needed.

Sheryl pointed out to me that what is so remarkable about this episode in the temple is that in a world full with so many powerful and complicated and often violent forces, Simeon and Anna saw their salvation and the salvation of the world in something so small and seemingly insignificant as a tiny baby.

And I think I can also identify with that in an unusual way this year, because I also feel as though the gift of peace that I need to calm my

soul in the face of the year ahead, also came to me through the appearance of something very small and seemingly insignificant. In my case, it was a tiny pair of porcelain shoes that appeared before me that reminded me of my mother's love; the love that comes from God.

A couple of weeks from now we will begin to take down our tree at home. We will take the tree out, trying to keep sappy water from dripping on the floor and we will sweep up the inevitable shower of dry pine needles that will cover the floor. And there will be an empty space on the floor. And that empty space will prompt the question, "What will I put into that empty space as I enter into the new year?" And I will have this year's answer.

I will seek to fill it with the same love with which my mother loved us: the love that she also celebrated through the birth of the baby Jesus every Christmas Eve during her own life. And next year, God willing, I will be able to hang the shoes from the tree alongside all the other precious ornaments and say an even more heartfelt thank you than the year before for what God did when he hung her shoes on our tree.