

## Christmas Trees, Belonging, and Baptism

By Gideon Tsang

*A tree gives glory to God by being a tree. For in being what God means it to be it is obeying Him. It "consents," so to speak, to His creative love.*

—Thomas Merton

If a tree decorates itself in the forest to fit in with other trees, does it ever truly belong?

Canada has great trees—Christmas trees, to be specific. In the late 1960s, my parents emigrated from Hong Kong to the land of hockey, beavers, and excessive apologies. Being so close to the north pole, Christmas trees looked like a scene out of the movie, *A Christmas Story*. Picture a snow-covered tree, decorated with shiny ornaments, gold garlands, and perfectly wrapped gifts, neatly tucked in to anchor its legs. Now throw in a Chinese family and add thick wool Christmas sweaters.

Despite this backdrop, it took me forty years and a move to Austin, Texas to learn a valuable lesson from a Christmas tree.

Highway 360 is an iconic road among the hills in Austin. It is lined with archetypally Christmas-shaped juniper trees. Most of the year, these trees are overshadowed by the whitewashed limestone walls that hover over the canyon. Decorating these juniper trees for Christmas has become a recent, and growing, tradition.

Inevitably, the Austin Christmas season announces itself when the weather drops below ninety degrees. You can hear the shouts from open windows: "Break out the Christmas sweaters!" Random families load their car with decorations in a chosen theme, descend upon an innocent juniper tree, and dress it up like Liza Minelli getting ready for a night out with Baryshnikov.

These poor trees have been dressed up as Pac-man, Hello Kitty, Bumble Bees, Teddy Bears, and Barbie Dolls. While these Christmas trees live past the post-Christmas cleanup, they endure being decorated with everything from glittering paper plates to pink tulle. They drip with tinsel, ribbons, and self-destructing handmade gifts that sometimes blow across the highway, littering the landscape.

Unfortunately, every season, the enthusiastic decorating has not been met with the same enthusiasm when it comes to cleaning up the décor. In the last few years, a public service announcement has begun to appear on the local news channels: "If you've decorated a tree on 360, you are responsible for cleaning up your decorations!"

I have no experience as a Christmas tree—pine or juniper—but I imagine there is a sense of relief as the decorations are removed. "Finally! You silly humans. Take these ridiculous ornaments off!" I doubt that any of the trees get sent into an existential crisis: "Before the Bumble Bees, I had no sense of who I am as a tree. The black and yellow paper plates really

grounded my sense of self. Now that they're gone, in my nakedness, *who am I!*?" The juniper tree is a tree, with or without the decorations.

I wish Thomas Merton was still around to read his words through a megaphone while folks cleaned off their hand-picked trees:

The pale flowers of the dogwood outside this window are saints. The little yellow flowers that nobody notices on the edge of that road are saints looking up into the face of God. . . . The great, gashed, half-naked mountain is another of God's saints. There is no other like him. He is alone in his own character; nothing else in the world ever did or ever will imitate God in quite the same way. That is his sanctity. . . . For me to be a saint means to be myself.<sup>1</sup>

Trees have so much to teach me about sainthood.

I remember when I started decorating myself like a Christmas tree. It was the early 1990s and my Cantonese parents now had three children. I was the middle child, sandwiched by two sisters. We moved to a suburb outside of Toronto in the middle of my freshman year. It was my seventh move in fourteen years of life.

I remember that move cementing the suspicion I've had since puberty: I do not belong anywhere in this world. I showed up on my first day without a school-sanctioned uniform. I walked through a sea of grey pants and white polos in my bright yellow sweatshirt. I felt like Moses parting a sea of Canadian teenagers, all turning their heads to look at the new, weird kid. As I passed, groups of cliques went back to their giggling and gossip, accompanied by the sound of metal lockers closing. That was it—I didn't belong. I was an Asian kid in a predominately white high school—I didn't belong. I was a short kid who loved to play basketball—I didn't belong. I was a protestant kid in a Catholic high school—I didn't belong. I was a Chinese kid who wasn't good at math(!)—I didn't belong.

After several painful weeks, I finally made one friend, named Mark. One day during lunch, he looked across his plate of French fries covered in gravy. As he shook a mound of pepper onto his swamp of potatoes, Mark invited me to a party at his house that night. I looked behind me, unsure that he was talking to me. "You want *me* to come to *your* party?" Knowing all the cool kids would be there, I said yes.

I ran home that afternoon, bursting through the front door, proclaiming my life-changing news. "Who has two thumbs and got invited to a party? This guy!" I announced. My fundamentalist immigrant parents were wary of all things in the world. I could tell by their silence and lack of eye contact that this announcement scared them. Who knew how much corruption Canadian kids could brainwash into their son during one drunken freshman party? They said, "Of course not!" However, this was my only chance. I would not let my sliver of social hope die. "I'm going!" I replied. After hours of protest and personal activism, my parents relented, setting a strict curfew of 10 pm.

I remember walking down the stairs to the basement of Mark's house. The music of Portishead was playing in the background. Everyone was dressed like a British skinhead from the 1960s—Doc Martens, bomber jackets, and Fred Perry shirts everywhere. A massive dude in the corner had an unlit cigarette tucked over his ear. I remember thinking, "How can anyone in high school look so cool?" (Yes, in hindsight, it was weird that a Chinese immigrant kid was suddenly drawn to neo-Nazi fashion.)

The first two hours of the party were an exercise in post-pubescent awkwardness. A basement full of teenagers sat around, staring at their feet, while people took turns playing a new magic game box called Nintendo. Finally, someone pulled the Nintendo plug, turned up the music, and the party started bumping. I looked at my watch—9:45 pm. I needed to be home in fifteen minutes. I had a decision to make. I could stay at the party and finally make some friends or go home and slumber in my social abyss. I stayed until midnight.

Two strangers in a Volkswagen Cabriolet dropped me off in front of my house. The car drove off before I could awkwardly say good night with a high five. I walked up my driveway, onto the two front steps. The lights were off. This was not a good sign. I opened the porch door, fumbled in the dark, and turned the key to unlock the door. It did not budge. The door was dead-bolted from the inside. I knocked quietly, hoping to awaken my sisters without my parents noticing. It finally sunk in. I was locked out of the house. This was the nail in the coffin. I didn't even belong in my own home.

Not knowing what to do, I sat on the front lawn, staring into the darkness. After several minutes, I got up and wandered the neighborhood alone for the next eight hours. As I walked up and down the silent suburban streets, walled with identical brick houses, groomed lawns, and three-foot trees, I remember loneliness having a palpable weight to it. I can still feel it today. It dawned on me that night: If I don't get my act together, get myself some better decorations, this is what the rest of my life is going to be like. That night set the trajectory for the next thirty years of my life. For the next three decades, it was Project Decoration. How can I get a better personality, hipper clothes, impressive degrees, better-looking friends, interesting stories?

The last thirty years of decoration accumulation have been exhausting.

*If we need to decorate ourselves to fit in with others in community, do we ever truly belong?*

I've recently wondered if the meaning of Christian baptism is an invitation for us to reconsider our decorations. The early church baptized its members naked for the first few hundred years, Cyril of Jerusalem (313–386) baptized individuals with these words: "Marvelous! You were naked in the sight of all and not ashamed. Truly you bore the image of the first-formed Adam, who was naked in the garden and not ashamed."<sup>2</sup> Around 400 AD, the Archbishop of Constantinople said, "In this you may know how He enriches your nakedness with His grace."<sup>3</sup> It seemed like nakedness was one of the main points of baptism. Imagine Jesus in his naked form—yes, we're uncomfortable with Jesus' humanity—like an unaccomplished youth, watching as the heavens open to tell him of his Father's affection for him: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17, NRSV).

Baptism reminds us that our worthiness isn't based on our decorations. It has nothing to do with the way we look or don't look, what we can or can't do, our successes or failures, even our talents or inabilities. We are reminded that we are known and loved in our diverse quirks and eccentricities.

If we are unable to accept the differences within ourselves, how are we able to truly accept the differences in others? What if the real challenge of diversity comes in being able to receive love in the parts of ourselves that are embarrassingly different? What if diversity helps us with the most difficult truth about ourselves—that we are actually loved? Can we trust that God loves the strangest parts of us *and* of everyone we ever meet?

May our journey into diversity begin in the naked waters of our baptism.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 30.

<sup>2</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Works of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem*, trans. Leo P. McCauley and Anthony A. Stephenson (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1969), 2:162.

<sup>3</sup> Johannes Quasten and Walter J. Burghardt, Jr., eds., *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1963), 31:228.