

**CHRISTMAS TREES; LUKE 2:1-20; CHRISTMAS DAY, 12/25/16;  
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The bible is a veritable woodland: the Tree of Life, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil; the cedars of Lebanon; the oaks of Sharon; Zaccheus' sycamore; and, of course, the tree of Calvary on which Jesus was crucified.

Christmas trees do not appear in the sacred text but they are ancient and originate from our Celtic ancestors; lighting a tree or wreath made of evergreens at the winter solstice was a way of honoring and celebrating the light – a cultic ritual adopted by Christians to honor the coming of God's light – the Babe of Bethlehem – into the world.

In our house we discovered after many years that any Christmas tree we select turns out to be exactly the right one, regardless of how its branches lay or its lack of symmetry. We used to search for the "perfect" tree like Crusaders hunting for the Holy Grail. But now we purchase a tree within ten minutes of setting foot on the lot and bring it home with loving curiosity to see how it will grace our living room and how our living room will feature it in all its glory.

I was talking with a church member recently and he told me how and his family repeated the familiar ritual, drove to a Christmas tree lot in Clarence; found the right one, brought it home, put it in water in the garage, then as they have done for the last decade, put the tree up and decorated it the Sunday after Thanksgiving.

The difference this year was the size of the tree. Our friend said he could tell, even with the netting condensing the circumference of the conifer, that this one was big and heavy. After dragging it into the house and bolting it into the stand he realized, given the severe tilt of the tree, that when they made a fresh cut at the tree lot the bottom was not flat; and so our friend determined, with the help of his wife, that another cut had to be made.

Grumbling just a bit, he took the mighty tree, with no small difficulty, out of the stand, laid it down right there in the living room and started sawing. When his daughter asked him, "Daddy, why are you cutting the tree in the living room?" he said in a voice that surprised him with its terse tone and brevity, "Because, sweetie, we are not in the GAR-AGE!" Then he instructed his daughters that they were to have boy-friends by this time next year, not for romantic purposes, but so that the boys could help him carry the tree from the garage into the house.

I have heard, as you have, Christmas tree stories, sagas, that are comic and tragic and sometimes both so that you don't know whether to laugh or cry.

Like the Presbyterian minister, a friend of mine, who on Christmas Eve, before church, walked into the living room, and heard his children arguing about presents, not unlike the disciples debating who was the greatest.

Then without warning or notice he went to the tree, grabbed it, walked out the front door and threw it onto the front lawn. "To what end?" someone asked when I recounted this story. "I have no idea," I said.

Robert Frost wrote about trees of all kinds or at least those indigenous to New England. His early, great poem “Birches” and two more about that variety, one entitled “Maple” an endearing poem about a mother, her daughter, the father who is widowed after his wife’s early death and the honesty of maple trees;

he wrote of sycamores, a fallen tree, a tree at his window, the sound of trees, the witness of trees and of course trees that populate many of his poems that are not ostensibly about trees.

And he also wrote a poem about Christmas trees; it appeared in his second volume of poems, after he had returned to this country from England where he went to write and hopefully publish his poetry since he had been rejected by American publishers. The poem refers to the commercialism of Christmas and Christmas trees, but between the lines is Frost’s own frustration with the commercialization of literature and poetry – trying to write for success, for marketability and for an audience. The poem portrays the greed of the city vs. the wholesomeness of the country and ends with a twist of Frostian wit.

### **Christmas Trees**

BY ROBERT FROST

(A Christmas Circular Letter)

The city had withdrawn into itself  
And left at last the country to the country;  
When between whirls of snow not come to lie  
And whirls of foliage not yet laid, there drove  
A stranger to our yard, who looked the city,  
Yet did in country fashion in that there  
He sat and waited till he drew us out  
A-buttoning coats to ask him who he was.  
He proved to be the city come again  
To look for something it had left behind  
And could not do without and keep its Christmas.  
He asked if I would sell my Christmas trees;  
My woods—the young fir balsams like a place  
Where houses all are churches and have spires.  
I hadn’t thought of them as Christmas Trees.  
I doubt if I was tempted for a moment  
To sell them off their feet to go in cars  
And leave the slope behind the house all bare,  
Where the sun shines now no warmer than the moon.  
I’d hate to have them know it if I was.  
Yet more I’d hate to hold my trees except  
As others hold theirs or refuse for them,  
Beyond the time of profitable growth,  
The trial by market everything must come to.  
I dallied so much with the thought of selling.  
Then whether from mistaken courtesy

And fear of seeming short of speech, or whether  
From hope of hearing good of what was mine, I said,  
“There aren’t enough to be worth while.”  
“I could soon tell how many they would cut,  
You let me look them over.”

“You could look.  
But don’t expect I’m going to let you have them.”  
Pasture they spring in, some in clumps too close  
That lop each other of boughs, but not a few  
Quite solitary and having equal boughs  
All round and round. The latter he nodded “Yes” to,  
Or paused to say beneath some lovelier one,  
With a buyer’s moderation, “That would do.”  
I thought so too, but wasn’t there to say so.  
We climbed the pasture on the south, crossed over,  
And came down on the north. He said, “A thousand.”

“A thousand Christmas trees!—at what apiece?”

He felt some need of softening that to me:  
“A thousand trees would come to thirty dollars.”

Then I was certain I had never meant  
To let him have them. Never show surprise!  
But thirty dollars seemed so small beside  
The extent of pasture I should strip, three cents  
(For that was all they figured out apiece),  
Three cents so small beside the dollar friends  
I should be writing to within the hour  
Would pay in cities for good trees like those,  
Regular vestry-trees whole Sunday Schools  
Could hang enough on to pick off enough.  
A thousand Christmas trees I didn’t know I had!  
Worth three cents more to give away than sell,  
As may be shown by a simple calculation.  
Too bad I couldn’t lay one in a letter.  
I can’t help wishing I could send you one,  
In wishing you herewith a Merry Christmas.

Well, here I am surrounded by trees that could be called Christmas trees I suppose,  
and look like the ‘spires of churches’ as Frost says.

Soon you’ll be home where your Christmas tree graces your living room or  
entry way.

They are to be marveled at and appreciated for their stories, their  
symbolism and their living presence. Amen.