

Column

Putting up a Christmas tree is a walk down memory lane, at least in my household. Each year out comes the boxes of ornaments. Some are 70 or more years old. They were already old when I was a child. The glitter and shine may have gone away, but on the tree they go just the same. Why? Because it was mother's way.

Others are newer, gifts of old and treasured friends, many no longer with us. Some are handmade. As they go on the tree, these souls are remembered and blessed.

Each year I threaten to do something different, put up a smart modern tree such as seen in magazines, maybe a nautical tree using sand dollars and starfish. In the end, however, the old and true prevails. Maybe next year.

Many will be surprised to know that Christmas trees have not always been a part of the American scene. Harnett Kane in *The Southern Christmas Book* (if you don't have a copy, by all means go on eBay or Amazon and find one. It's a classic), the first one on record came no earlier than 1842. Williamsburg, Va., was the scene.

As the story goes, Charles Frederic Ernest Minnegerode, a young German professor of Greek and Latin, persuaded Judge Nathaniel Beverly Tucker, professor of law at the College of William and Mary, to set up a tree in the Tucker home for the children.

Being Lutheran, no doubt Minnegerode told the story of Martin Luther, who is said to have brought the Christmas tree into German homes in the 1500s. Walking on a snowy Christmas Eve, Luther saw stars shining through the branches of a fir. Reminded of the shining night when Christ was born, he cut down a small fir tree, brought it inside and placed candles on it to approximate what he had seen outdoors.

Returning to our story in Virginia, after getting approval from Judge Tucker, Charles Minnegerode rode out to the nearest wood and returned with a tall fir. The challenge was how to decorate it, as none of the traditional glass ornaments he remembered back in Germany were available. The dilemma was solved with the help of the Tucker children. Puffy white popcorn was strung into garlands; yellow and red paper was fashioned into globes; gilded nuts were hung to fill in spaces

between branches. Finally, makeshift holders were devised for the candles, and a gold star was placed atop.

Needless to say, the tree was a hit with old and young alike. On Christmas Eve, the young teacher led everyone in singing carols. No longer was he a stranger in a strange land, he was home. More than that, in the years to come, the custom he introduced spread, not only to other households in Williamsburg, but throughout the South.

Christmas trees are not the essence of Christmas – God becoming man in Jesus Christ is. Jesus is the Gift which exceeds all the gifts under our trees. Even so, the scent of evergreens, the shimmering lights, the shining ornaments and the memories that go along with these things bring warmth and joy to the season of our Lord's nativity.

Let us, therefore, rejoice in those customs that are true and pure and lovely and of good report, but all the while keeping our eye on the one who stands behind the twinkling lights -- the Christ, the world's true light, who not only came but comes.

O LORD, raise up, we pray thee, thy power, and come among us, and with great might succour [help] us; that whereas, through our sins and wickedness, we are sore let and hindered in running the race that is set before us, thy bountiful grace and mercy may speedily help and deliver us; through the satisfaction of thy Son our Lord, to whom, with thee and the Holy Ghost, be honour and glory, world with out end. Amen. (Collect for the Fourth Sunday in Advent, Book of Common Prayer)

The Rev. Victor H. Morgan is rector of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Blue Ridge.