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## *How Do You Decorate Your Christmas Tree?*

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell  
Christmas Day – Year A**

One of my favorite things to do as a priest is to marry people. I love to do this in part because I get to meet with them several times before the actual ceremony. It's wonderful to be with people who are so in love with each other that they think anything I say is terribly insightful. But one of my favorite questions is to ask when you grew up, how did your family decorate the Christmas tree? This is an amazing question because I'm fascinated by how many people who grew up the right way decorating your Christmas tree, with white lights, nevertheless fall in love with people who have the audacity to decorate the tree with colored bulbs. But of course, what emerges is an understanding that there are different ways to show love, different ways to be in relationship, different ways to create a family.

Now, my mother took decorating the Christmas tree very seriously. We did it the same way each year, and it was kind of an annotated ritual. She would explain each step because it was important that we understood. First, with one strand, you wrapped very tightly the trunk from bottom to top because that would give an inner light to the tree. Then with the second strand, you buried a light about one foot between each bulb so that, again, some depth was created. Then before you put on the outer strand, you very carefully placed gold balls in the tree. Now, they didn't have to be expensive. In fact, you could buy a lot of them very cheaply. You put the smaller ones near the top and the larger ones towards the bottom, because she said, and this is very important, it's the balls that reflect the light, and it's the reflected light of the balls that brings brilliance to the tree.

Now, I believe that the writer of the fourth Gospel, John, was anticipating my mother when he said in the prologue, in the beginning, and he goes on to talk about Jesus, of course, being the light of the world and bringing life to all people. Of course, the words in the beginning really come from Genesis. He is intentionally evoking our memory of creation, which was the first part of the incarnation. The creation, when in the beginning, God breathed over the waters becoming the light that animated and gave life to creation. It was throughout all of creation that we can find God, the light that animates, the love that brings forth.

This is also what John is talking about, Christ being the second part of the creation, animating the world with life that becomes light, which is of course love, the kind of love that brings us together and bonds us with each other, the kind of love that when we acknowledge it makes us feel as if we have been fully seen and fully loved, the love which in fact lets us when we reflect it, bring life to other people, the light of love which enters the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. This is, I think, what mother knew and what she was talking about with that very simple ritual of the balls in the Christmas tree.

We lost Mother this month. She had been suffering from end stage Alzheimer's for several years, and finally it all became too much for her and it was time for her to move on. Of course, that moment, which many of you know all too well is exhausting. There is so much to do, so many feelings to have, so many people to talk to, so many logistics to execute. And so, in fact, as we spent most of this month dealing with all of that in its wonder and its sadness, its grief, and its joy, we kind of lost sight of Christmas. It was as if the Grinch had stolen it.

Mary Hunter and I agreed that we would not give each other gifts, which prompted her to give me one right away, and we told all of our friends and family they would not be getting gifts either and everybody understood, except my stepson, Mary Hunter's son, Robert, who at 11 years old still knew that it was Christmas. He came into our room at 3:30 this morning, but we pretended to be asleep, and so, he left and didn't come back until 6:00.

It was Christmas. He said, "You said 6:00. Let's go." We went downstairs and opened the stockings. Santa had not heard about the no gift policy, and we had one gift for Robert. We opened all of the stockings. We did what

you do. We played the music we normally play. Did I mention the Christmas tree? You see, even though we weren't giving gifts, we thought we do need a tree, but we didn't have a lot of time and mom wasn't around, so we went to IKEA. It's a beautiful tree, it'll probably come up next year too, but we never quite got around to decorating it. Somebody was kind enough to give us an ornament and we hung it there. It's beautiful all by itself in the tree.

We didn't have, or I didn't have time to assemble Robert's present either. It's a one-on-one arcade game where you throw the basketball into the hoop making a lot of noise and distraction. "It's okay," he said. "We'll do it later." "Oh, let's do it now," I said. We went downstairs and uncovered it, brought it up. This is a big thing. We've spread it out, put things all over the living room, the kind of thing you normally do in the middle of the night. As we were going through it, Robert looked up at me and he said, "The real present is putting this together." *The real present, he said, was putting it together.*

He was the gold ball on the tree that made it all so brilliant and beautiful. He was, in that moment without thinking about it, just instinctively acting, encompassing the whole prologue of John, in the beginning, in the beginning, Christ was here all along. The incarnation which gives light to the world has been here all along, but Christ is the one who lived it so perfectly, so completely, so truly that we ourselves are drawn into it. We are drawn into Christ who became the light. At our best, I think we learned to reflect it for others so that they too can see the light and have life. Merry Christmas. I hope you have plenty of light in your life reflected and original. Amen.