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 First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia  
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 Text: Titus 2:11-15

### **“The Treeless Christmas of 1939”**

*“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly.” Titus 2:11*

As I was musing about this text from Titus, which speaks about the tensions of endeavoring to live a godly life in this present age, I was reminded of a chapter in Eugene Peterson’s memoir. Eugene Peterson is a retired Presbyterian pastor, professor, and author of some thirty books. You may be familiar with his translation of the Bible called *The Message*. His memory of a particular childhood Christmas seemed so fitting that decided I would share it with you this morning.<sup>1</sup>

The year was 1939. Eugene was seven years old. His mother, an intense woman capable of fierce convictions, was reading the prophecy of Jeremiah and came upon words she had never noticed before:

*Thus says the Lord:*

*"Learn not the way of the nations,  
 nor be dismayed at the signs of the heavens  
 because the nations are dismayed at them,  
 for the customs of the peoples are false.  
 A tree from the forest is cut down,  
 and worked with an axe by the hands of a craftsman.  
 Men deck it with silver and gold;  
 they fasten it with hammer and nails so that it cannot move."*

There was no doubt in her mind that the Holy Spirit, through the prophet Jeremiah, had targeted American Christmas. Every detail fit Eugene’s family’s practice.

A couple weeks before every Christmas, on a Sunday afternoon, Eugene’s father would get the ax and check its edge. Being a butcher, he was used to working with sharp tools and did not tolerate dull edges. Bundled into their Model A Ford pickup, Eugene, his parents, and baby sister would set out to find a tree.

There had been a major forest fire in this region some years before, so the trees were young--the right size to fit into their living room. Eugene always got to pick the tree; it was a ritual he stretched out as long as parental patience would accommodate.

His father then took over, swinging the ax. Four or five brisk cuts and the green-needled spire was horizontal in the snow. *A tree from the forest is cut down.*

He then squared the base of the trunk so it would be easy to mount when they got it back home. Deftly he worked, the wood chips from the whittling releasing the fragrance of resin into the winter air. *Worked with an ax by the hands of a craftsman.*

When they arrived home, Eugene climbed into the attic and handed down the box of decorations. They had multicolored lights which he adored and lots of tinsel. *Men deck it with silver and gold.*

His father took slats from packing boxes that the sausage and lunch meats were shipped in. He cut them into four eighteen-inch supports and nailed them to the tree trunk. *They fasten it with hammer and nails so that it cannot move.*

When they were done decorating, Eugene ran out onto the gravel road and looked at the tree from outside, the way passersby would see it, the framed picture of their Christmas ritual adventure into and out of the woods. He imagined strangers looking at it and wishing they could be inside, part of the ax/Model-A pickup/tree-cutting/tree-mounting/tree-decorating liturgy that he loved so much.

He would look across the street at the tree where the Mitchell twins, Alva and Alan, lived--so cold and monotonous with only blue lights. They never went to church, and at times like this it showed. He couldn't help feeling privileged and superior, but also a little sorry for them: Christian pride modified by Christian compassion.

Then, in the winter of 1939, the Petersons did not have a tree: *For the customs of the peoples are false.*

It wasn't just the tree that was gone; the richly nuanced ritual was abolished. A noun, "tree," was deleted from December, but along with it its adjective "Christmas." Or so it seemed to Eugene.

And it was all because Jeremiah had preached his Christmas-tree sermon. Because Jeremiah had looked through his prophetic telescope, his Spirit-magnified vision reaching across 12,000 miles and 2,600 years, seeing in detailed focus what his family did every December and denouncing it as idolatry. And it was because his mother cared far more about scripture than the culture.

Eugene was embarrassed--humiliated was more like it--humiliated as only seven-year-olds can be humiliated. He was terrified of what his friends in the neighborhood would think. They would think his family was too poor to have a tree. They would think he was being punished for some unspeakable sin, and so deprived of a tree. They would think his family

didn't care about one another and didn't ever have any fun. They would feel sorry for his family. They would feel superior.

As a regular ritual in his neighborhood, the children went to one another's houses, looked at the presents under the tree, and wondered what treasures they contained. That year Eugene kept his friends away. He was ashamed to have them come in and see the bare, treeless room. He was afraid of the questions they might ask. He made up excuses to keep them out. He lied: "My sister has a contagious disease." "My mother is really mad, and I can't bring anybody in." But the fact of *no-Christmas-tree* could not be hidden.

Eugene was mostly afraid that they would discover the real reason they didn't have a tree: that God had commanded it (at least that's what they thought at the time)--a religious reason! But religion was the one thing that made his family better than their neighbors; and now, if they were to find out their secret, it would make them worse.

Eugene's mother read Jeremiah to him and his little sister that year and talked about Jesus. She opened the Bible to the story of the Nativity and placed it on the table where the Christmas tree always stood. Eugene never told her how he felt or what he knew everyone in the neighborhood was saying. He carried his humiliation secretly, as children often do.

On Christmas Day Eugene's house was always packed with relatives, plus any people in the neighborhood who didn't have any family—bachelors, widows, runaways. Dinner was full of Norwegian talk. His uncles and aunts reminisced over their Norway Christmases and savored the sounds of their cradle tongue. Eugene loved the festivities, the laughter, the fun, the banter.

The primary source of the banter was his favorite uncle, Uncle Ernie. He was the best storyteller and always seemed to have the most fun. He also posed as an atheist, but he did come to the annual Christmas pageant, which the young Eugene thought seriously compromised his atheism. On the Christmas that there was no tree, Uncle Ernie surpassed himself in banter.

He was the first to remark on the absence of the tree: "Evelyn," he roared at Eugene's mother, "where the hell is the Christmas tree? How the hell are we going to have a Norwegian Christmas without a tree?" (He was also the only person Eugene ever heard use profanity in his home, which set him apart on a sort of craggy eminence.) Eugene's mother's reply, a nice fusion of prayer and indignation, was a match to his raillery: "No tree this year, brother. Just Jesus. We are not celebrating a Norwegian Christmas this year; we are celebrating a Christian Christmas." Then she got out Jeremiah and read it to him. He was astonished. He had no idea that anything that contemporary could come out of an old-fashioned Bible. Stunned by her impertinent piety, he muttered through a mouth full of lutefisk "damn, damn, damn" all through dinner.

The next year the tree was back. The entire ritual was back in place without explanation. Years later occasionally Peterson's mother would say, "Remember how silly I was, banning the

Christmas tree the year you were seven?” But it wasn’t silliness that drove her pursuit of a holy life, her determination to preserve her family’s practice of the Christian faith free from the secularizing contamination of a trivializing culture. She was wrestling with the tension we all face in endeavoring to be passionately faithful amid a world of worldly passions.

Peterson wrote this about that 1939 Christmas without a tree: “The feelings I had that Christmas when I was seven years old may have been the most authentically Christmas feelings I have ever had, or will have: the experience of humiliation, of being misunderstood, of being an outsider.”

He points out that Mary was pregnant out of wedlock. Joseph was an apparent cuckold. Jesus was born in poverty and quickly became a refugee--everything involved in God becoming flesh was counter to the culture.

He goes on to say, “God had commanded a strange word. The people in the story were aware, deeply and awesomely aware, that the event they were living was shaped by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit and at the same time vehemently counter to the culture. They certainly experienced considerable embarrassment and inconvenience.” He wonders if they also clumsily lied to their friends and made excuses at the same time they persisted in faith?

Peterson concludes the chapter about the treeless Christmas with this reflection: “My mother’s ‘No tree this year, brother, just Jesus’ accompanied by my uncle’s ‘damn, damn, damn’ lay dormant in me for years, but in time it developed into practiced pastoral discernments--Jesus without tinsel--as I daily face the seductions of culture-religion.”

It’s true that culture-religion does try to seduce us. Whether it’s substituting tinsel for Jesus, or condoning greed in the name of economic wellbeing, or pandering to fear in the name of security, or avoiding humiliation in order to stay popular, we are constantly discerning what is godly. The good news, Titus reminds us, is that God’s grace is training us to renounce impiety and live godly lives. God’s grace is teaching us, through all the ins and outs of our own pilgrimages if we pay attention, to give up what is false and embrace what is life-giving. God’s grace is schooling us in discernment. May we all grow ever more faithful, more upright, more counter-cultural as we follow Jesus. Just Jesus. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir*, (New York: HarperOne, 2011), pp. 50-55.