

The Christmas tree, as we know it today, with its lights and decorations, is first met in Germany, about the time of Martin Luther. A popular legend associates the introduction of the decorated tree with the great reformer himself. We are told that on a certain Christmas Eve he was walking home along a familiar forest path. Above him towered the tops of evergreen trees, encircled with bright shining stars. As he looked, his heart was transported to the heavens and he thought of the glory of creation and of that special night when one amidst the starry host announced the coming of the Savior into the world.

"Oh," he thought, "that my children might see it -- might grasp the significance of His coming as a Baby so long ago, might feel the awe of gazing at the tree, seeing the starry heavens and the promising star."

So that night Luther set up in his home a tree decorated with many lighted candles -- and a very, very special one on the very top. And as his household gathered round, he told once again the story of how the Son came down and was made flesh by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary. All the while, the children gazed at those lighted candles, sensing the significance of the heavenly Sign; and yet today that top light reminds us all that the Father gave humanity a Star to herald the coming of the Son. Again, it may not have happened just this way, but the imagery expressed here is very true.

Ah! But what of the decorations on the tree? How do we come by them? Again, we do not know for sure. But in the notes of an unknown citizen of Strasburg, Germany, in 1605, we read, "At Christmas they set up fir-trees in the parlours at Strasburg and hang thereon roses cut out of many-colored paper, apples, wafers, gold-foil, sweets, and other such delights."

And why? Because generations of Christians have seen in the Christmas tree a symbol, a type, a shadow, of the Tree of Life, once planted in the Garden of Eden, and promised in the Revelation of St. John as part of the New Jerusalem, "And on either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations."

So, when we hang brightly colored ornaments of many kinds on our tree, we remember again the promises connected with the Resurrection. Yes, we remember that the whole creation waits and groans in anxious anticipation for the revealing of the sons of God. For the Incarnation of the Son promises that all things shall be renewed, that at our resurrection all creation will burst forth in renewed fruitfulness and will bear bright and shining fruit never known to fallen man.