The Tradition Behind the Chrismon Tree

We have now entered the season of Advent and our worship spaces have been decorated for the coming celebration of the birth of our Savior. Every year, when these trimmings are donned, the question is always asked… "What are those ornaments on the tree? Do they mean anything?"

The ornaments we hang on the trees are called "Chrismons". While there is no shortage of meaningful ornaments and decorations at Christmas time, the Chrismon Tree tells the greatest story of all. The word "Chrismon" is actually two words – "Christ" and monogram", translating to "symbols of Christ." The first Chrismon Tree was first developed by Mrs. Frances Spencer in 1957 at Ascension Lutheran Church in Danville, Virginia. She thought the traditional, brightly colored, Christmas decorations were not fitting for a worship setting and she was inspired to use ancient Christian symbols to tell the story of Jesus.

These ancient symbols were used by early Christians 2,000 years ago. In those days, many people were illiterate, so symbols were used to communicate the key ideas of Christian faith. Additionally, many early Christians were not free to worship in public, so the symbols were a way for followers to recognize their faith in a covert way.

Traditionally, the chrismons are handmade by members of a congregation. In that way, they not only point to the Christian faith but are also a reminder of a labor of love that is passed down from generations that came before. Our chrismon ornaments were made sometime prior to 1987 by Alma and Pauline Allen, two sisters that were longtime members of First Presbyterian, with the assistance of their fellow Presbyterian Women.

The chrismons are meant to serve as reminders of God's gift of Jesus Christ, which means all of the ornaments used on the tree hold special significance. Here are some of the most popular Chrismon tree symbols:

- Star: There are a variety of star chrismons, each with its own meaning. They range from the five-pointed star to the 8-pointed Natal Star Cross, with the former representing the five wounds of Jesus and the latter representing the Bethlehem star and the four New Testament gospels.
- Triangle: A triangle represents the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- Cross: There's a wide range of crosses used on chrismon trees. Like the various stars, each cross delivers its own special meaning from the anchor cross, the Fleur-de-Lis cross, the Celtic cross, the Jerusalem Cross, and the Latin Cross—to name a few.

- Dove: The dove is traditionally used as a symbol of the Holy Spirit.
- Lamb: A lamb signifies Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God.
- Fish: This was one of the original secret symbols used to identify followers of Christ and would be used to point in the direction of places of worship.

The colors of these ornaments and our other decorations are also symbolic. Chrismon ornaments are traditionally white and gold because white is the color for purity and gold symbolizes value, worth and God's majesty and glory. The evergreen tree itself symbolizes eternal life and the white lights point to Jesus, as the light of the World.

The signs and symbols of the Chrismon Tree uniquely serve to turn our attention to our Savior, Jesus Christ as we celebrate His coming birth. This Advent season, as we patiently wait for the coming of the Christ, spend some time reflecting on the chrismons and how they remind us of God and the mercy He shows us.