

Jesse Tree Devotions for Advent 2020

The Jesse Tree tradition echoes a prophecy made about Jesus in the book of Isaiah: that a shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse (Isaiah 11:2). Jesse was the father of King David, one of the Israel's greatest kings and an ancestor of Jesus. The image of the stump points to the barrenness and despair that God's people can experience. The image of the shoot points to hope: from deep roots in God, new life comes. As an Advent tradition, a Jesse tree is a simple, barren branch on which one ornament is hung on each day of Advent. Each ornament represents a story from the Old Testament and reminds us how God was getting his people ready for the coming of Jesus.

In our sanctuary at First English, we have such a tree this Advent. A team of crafters—Marj Rogner, Deb Gallagher, Karen Boltz, Jeannette Cunningham, and Zema Schaney made the ornaments that will be hung each day. These ornaments form the basis for the devotions below. Our Sunday school kids also made their own Jesse trees and ornaments at our Lutherlyn Sunday school this fall.

Please read these stories and pray with us each day as we prepare for the coming of Christ!

Sunday, November 29



Isaiah 11: 2

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

God's people had come to a place of hopelessness and despair. They had disobeyed God's laws. Children without parents had no one to care for them; old people without families had no one to check in on them. God decided to put it all to a stop, cutting off the nation from its land and heritage the way a lumberjack cuts down a large tree. Everything seemed hopeless. But, God promised that despite the cutting, new life would come. Out of the cut off stump of God's people, new life would come, a descendant of Jesse on whom God's spirit rested. This promise was fulfilled in Jesus.

Have you ever seen a shoot coming out of a stump? The shoot reminds us that there is life, even when we cannot see it. Jesus shows us that too.

Let us pray: O come, strong branch of Jesse, and free your own from Satan's tyranny. From depths of hell your people save, and give them victory over the grave. Amen.

Monday, November 30



Genesis 1:26-31

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." God said, "See, I have given you every plant

yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. *All human beings were made in the image of God. What aspects of your personality or your character—your heart—reflect God? If it is hard to imagine what God is like, consider what you know of Jesus, who is the exact image of God, the very imprint of God’s very being, Colossians tells us.*

Let us pray: Dear God, help me welcome and celebrate your image in myself and in others. Amen.

Tuesday, December 1



Genesis 3:1-7

¹Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" ²The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; ³but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" ⁴But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; ⁵for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." ⁶So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. ⁷Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

A simple definition of sin is "separation from God." We sometimes think of sin as Satan’s work, but we participate in sin by making decisions of our own. What decisions do you make that separate you from God?

The advent of Jesus promises us that our sinful separation from God will be overcome. Sin, which came into the world through the disobedient eating of a forbidden tree, is vanquished by Jesus’ obedient death on the tree of the cross.

Let us pray: Gracious God, forgive us our sins, known and unknown, and let us rest in your forgiveness. Amen.



Genesis 9:8-13

⁸Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹"As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. ¹¹I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." ¹²God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

Sometimes, there is so much evil around us that it can be hard to know what God's intentions are. If God is good why do such things happen? Is God with us or not?

God gave Noah a sign of promise, that God would never again use a flood to destroy the earth. God's intention is for all of creation—the whole earth—to experience life. That same intention is reflected in coming of Jesus, whose resurrection brought a life stronger than death into the world. If we want to know what God is like, if we want to know what God thinks about evil, if we want to know whether life will ultimately win, we can look to him. He is our rainbow.

Let us pray: Gracious God, help me trust in your promises of life, even when evil surrounds us. Amen.

Thursday, December 3



Genesis 12: 1-3

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Have you ever had to pick up and move somewhere new? God told Abram and Sarai (later named Abraham and Sarah) to move to a new land. As they did so, God promised, they would bless others—in fact, they would bless all the families of the earth. God fulfilled this promise to Abraham by sending Jesus, one of Abraham's descendants. Anyone who is baptized into Christ inherits Abraham's blessing. Blessed by God, we live to bless others.

Let us pray: Lord God, help me be a blessing to my family, my community, and to your earth. Amen.

Friday, December 4



Genesis 22:11-14

¹But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ¹²He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." ¹³And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴So Abraham called that place "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."

The story of the near sacrifice of Isaac is one of the hardest to understand in the Bible. Why would God ask Abraham to sacrifice his only son? Why would God test Abraham in this way?

There are no easy answers to these questions, but there are some things that feel true about this story. One, there are times when we are asked to do hard things, and sometimes it does feel that we can be tested beyond our strength. Second, it is good that God provides a ram for sacrifice instead of the boy. That ram foreshadows the son that God would give up for the life of the world, the lamb of God who takes away our sins and whose mercy helps us when we are tested beyond our strength.

Let us pray: Merciful God, teach us to look to Jesus for help when we are faced with hard decisions. Amen.

Saturday, December 5



Genesis 28:12-15

“And Jacob dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

Jacob was running away from home and from the anger of his brother Esau when he had this dream. God works that way sometimes—waiting until we are quiet--waiting even until we are asleep!—to speak with us. Have you ever had a powerful dream that captured your attention apart from the busy-ness of your daily life? Might God have been speaking to you through it?

Let us pray: God of silence and stillness, speak to us in quiet moments and in dreams. Amen.