

Jesse Tree Devotions for Advent 2020
Week 2

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, December 6



Genesis 35: 9-12. Symbol: Star

⁹God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram, and he blessed him. ¹⁰God said to him, "Your name is Jacob; no longer shall you be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name." So he was called Israel. ¹¹God said to him, "I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall spring from you. ¹²The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you."

A central part of God's story with human beings is this: God chose a people to be God's own. God elected the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—here named Israel—to be God's family. The star—sometimes called a Jewish star, or a star of David—helps us remember that God chose a particular people at a particular time. Jesus was a descendent of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jesus was Jewish.

It is sometimes hard to wrap our minds around the fact that God chose a particular people. Doesn't God love everyone? Love, however, can never be love "in general," but only love in particular. We don't say to our children or our spouses or our parents, "We love you because we love children in general, or people in general. No, we love others with all their unique characteristics. That's how God loves, too: committing to a relationship with one particular people. Through the love of Jesus Christ, we have all been adopted into that particular family.

Let us pray: God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, thank you for sending Jesus to make us a part of your family. Amen.

Monday, December 7



Genesis 37: 1-4. Symbol: Fancy coat

¹Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. ²This is the story of the family of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. ³Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. ⁴But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

Jealousy is a terrible emotion to experience. It is more common than we would like to admit. It hurts to see others receive what we think we deserve! Israel loved Joseph more than his other brothers: how was that fair? The brothers' jealousy eventually led them to sell their brother into slavery in Egypt. But that story had a saving outcome. Joseph eventually became powerful in Egypt and was able to help his family through a famine.

Like Joseph, Jesus suffered the ill effects of jealousy: the good religious folks of his day were envious of his impact on the people. Their desire to be rid of him eventually led to his arrest and crucifixion. But through the cross and empty tomb, God stopped the evil cycle of jealousy, using the cross to save us all from sin and death. What human beings mean for evil, God uses for good.

Let us pray: gracious God, please help us see where envy and jealousy distorts our relationship with others, and help us trust instead in your freely given love. Amen.

Tuesday, December 8



Exodus 20:1-17. Symbol: Ten Commandments

Then God spoke all these words:

²I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me.

⁴You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

⁸Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work — you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

¹²Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

¹³You shall not murder.

¹⁴You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵You shall not steal.

¹⁶You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

¹⁷You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Once God led his people out of slavery in Egypt into the wilderness, God gave them rules to follow. One Sunday School curriculum calls these, "The Ten Best Ways to Live." God wants us to live in ways that reflect God's goodness and love.

Of course, reading these rules also helps us see the ways that our lives do not reflect God's goodness and love. All of us fall short of the commandments. Jesus was the only human being who fulfilled the commandments perfectly; that is why he can help us. He forgives us when we fall short and helps us to follow him in his way of righteousness.

Let us pray: Righteous God, thank you for showing us the best ways to live. Forgive us when we do not follow them, and help us look to Jesus. Amen.

Wednesday, December 9



Ruth 1:15-18. Symbol: Wheat

¹⁶But Ruth said,

"Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge,
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.

¹⁷Where you die, I will die —
there will I be buried.

May the LORD do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!"

¹⁸When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

Who belongs to your faith family? In the book of Ruth, a new family is formed between Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi when the husbands of both women die. Ruth follows Naomi back to her hometown. As widows, they were among the most vulnerable people in society, but a kinsman of Naomi, Boaz, looks out for them by allowing Ruth to glean wheat from his fields. He eventually marries Ruth, continuing the family line. Boaz and Ruth are among the ancestors of Jesus.

The story is significant on Jesus' family tree because Ruth was not an Israelite. Although God chooses a particular people (see the devotion from Sunday), God's circle grows wider and wider. With God, the family of faith is never a closed circle. We can always expect that God will invite someone new to be a part of the family of faith.

Let us pray: Jesus, thank you for making me a part of your family of faith. Help me see how you widen the circle of belonging, and help me welcome others to the family. Amen.

Thursday, December 10



1 Samuel 16:1, 10-13a. Symbol: Horn of Oil

The Lord said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons."

Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The Lord has not chosen any of these." Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

When it came time for the people of Israel to have a new king, God chose the youngest brother, the one who was herding the sheep. David was handsome, but compared to his brothers, he was not tall or strong. His experience was not in battle or government, but in farming.

David's kingship foreshadows that of Jesus. Jesus was born in humble circumstances and didn't look like a powerful ruler; he allowed himself to be crucified. God's choices are not our choices; God chooses what seems weak to the world in order to save it.

Let us pray: Loving God, help me trust in your ways of humility rather than in the world's ways of power. Amen.

Friday, December 11



2 Samuel 5:2b-3; Symbol: Crown

For some time, while Saul was king over us, it was you who led out Israel and brought it in. The Lord said to you: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel.” So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron; and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the Lord, and they anointed David king over Israel.

Shepherds and kings seem like exact opposites. Kings sit in palaces and wear fine clothes. Shepherds work outside in the elements and talk to sheep. Their clothing gets dirty. Kings have soft beds in which to sleep and servants to assist them. Shepherds sleep in the fields and serve the sheep, chasing away the predators that stalk the flock at night.

But when God thinks of good kings, God thinks of shepherds. David became the shepherd-king of Israel. His descendent, Jesus, would call himself the good shepherd who knows us by name.

Let us pray: thank you, Jesus, for being my shepherd. Amen.

Saturday, December 12



1 Kings 5:2-5. Symbol: Temple

Solomon sent word to Hiram, saying, ³You know that my father David could not build a house for the name of the LORD his God because of the warfare with which his enemies surrounded him, until the LORD put them under the soles of his feet. ⁴But now the LORD my God has given me rest on every side; there is neither adversary nor misfortune. ⁵So I intend to build a house for the name of the LORD my God, as the LORD said to my father David, 'Your son, whom I will set on your throne in your place, shall build the house for my name.'"

King Solomon, King David's son, wanted to build a temple where the people could worship God. A temple was not just a building—it was a place where people could meet God. God had specific plans for the place where his glory would dwell. It was a special room called the Holy of Holies. Only specific people were allowed to enter.

In his teaching, Jesus called himself the temple. To meet God, we no longer have to go to a specific place. Rather, God comes to us in Jesus. Through him, everyone can meet God.

Let us pray: Glorious God, help me seek your presence in Jesus Christ. Amen.