

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, December 13



Isaiah 42:5-9. Symbol: Rose and Candle

⁵Thus says God, the LORD,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it
and spirit to those who walk in it:
⁶I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,
⁷to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.
⁸I am the LORD, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to idols.
⁹See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth,
I tell you of them.

This week, each day's symbol and reading introduces us to a different prophet in the Old Testament. Prophets were those who helped people understand what God was doing. In moments when the people were too comfortable, prophets challenged their self-absorption. When they were broken-hearted, they spoke words of hope. We believe that Jesus Christ, the word of God, spoke through the prophets; he is the fulfillment of the promises God made through them. The symbol of the rose reminds us that the words of the prophets came in Christ to a full flower.

Let us pray: Faithful God, thank you for fulfilling all your promises. Help me to attend to your Word spoken through the prophets. Amen.

Monday, December 14



1 Kings 18:36-39. Symbol: Fire

At the time of the offering of the oblation, the prophet Elijah came near and said, "O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back." Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench. When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God."

The prophet Elijah was engaged in a fierce contest with the prophets of another god, Baal. In calling down fire from heaven, he demonstrated that Baal was no god at all. Only God is God!

Baal no longer tempts us as a god, but there are plenty of other things that tempt us to believe that they hold the power over our future. The size of our bank accounts. The homes we make. The plans we establish. What does it mean for us to believe that God is more powerful than these things?

Let us pray: Dear God, help me see the ways that you alone are our God. Amen.

Tuesday, December 15



Isaiah 2:1-5. Symbol: Sword and Ax

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

²In days to come
the mountain of the LORD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.

³Many peoples shall come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

⁴He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

⁵O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the LORD!

A world without war! It sounds fantastic, doesn't it? But in the world to come—the world in which Jesus is all in all—peace will reign. There will no longer be weapons, just tools for growing food. The prophet Isaiah saw a glimpse of that future in the midst of our current circumstances, which are too often marked by suffering and war. In Christ, that possibility of peace breaks in to the here and now. Clinging to Christ, we are set free to find ways to seek peace.

Let us pray in the words of St. Francis:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace

Where there is hatred, let me sow love

Where there is injury, pardon

Where there is doubt, faith

Where there is despair, hope

Where there is darkness, light
 And where there is sadness, joy
 O Divine Master, grant that I may
 Not so much seek to be consoled as to console
 To be understood, as to understand
 To be loved, as to love
 For it is in giving that we receive
 And it's in pardoning that we are pardoned
 And it's in dying that we are born to Eternal Life
 Amen

Wednesday, December 16



Jeremiah 23:5-6

⁵The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

Jeremiah preached constantly that there was no way for people to be faithful while they continued to oppress those who had little power: widows, orphans, immigrants, and people who were poor. A righteous land, one which followed God's laws, was one that saw to the well-being of everyone within it. Jeremiah also longed for the day when this righteousness did not have to be taught—a day when the law of God would be written on our hearts.

The ministry of Jesus was the very fulfillment of this righteousness. Born poor, Jesus served those who did not have status in society. God's law was written on his heart. When we follow him, we also seek his way of justice for all.

Let us pray: Lord, open my eyes to the ways I can seek justice for those with the least power. Amen.

Thursday, December 17



Daniel 6:10-11, 16, 19-22. Symbol: Lion

Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open toward Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously. The conspirators came and found Daniel praying and seeking mercy before his God.

Then the king gave the command, and Daniel was brought and thrown into the den of lions. The king said to Daniel, "May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you!"

Then, at break of day, the king got up and hurried to the den of lions. When he came near the den where Daniel was, he cried out anxiously to Daniel, "O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God whom you faithfully serve been able to deliver you from the lions?" Daniel then said to the king, "O king, live forever! My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths so that they would not hurt me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no wrong."

Serving God requires courage. It means following a different set of rules than the world around us. When a wicked, ambitious, and self-serving king demanded that God's people not pray to God, Daniel disobeyed! With his ego bruised, the king ordered Daniel to be thrown into the den of lions. But God was with him there, sending an angel to close the lions' mouths and bring Daniel to safety.

That is a consolation for us when we feel that we are surrounded by bloodthirsty lions: lions that want us to live by might, by power, by ambition. Jesus is sometimes known as the lion of Judah. His power comes through humility and service. Through him, God is with us to show us another path to life.

Let us pray: O God, still the voices that tell us that we are worthy only when we can compete. Give us instead the fierce courage to live by kindness, gentleness, and trust. Amen.

Friday, December 18



Nehemiah 4:15-20

¹⁵When our enemies heard that their plot was known to us, and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his work. ¹⁶From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and body-armor; and the leaders posted themselves behind the whole house of Judah, ¹⁷who were building the wall. The burden bearers carried their loads in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and with the other held a weapon. ¹⁸And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me. ¹⁹And I said to the nobles, the officials, and the rest of the people, "The work is great and widely spread out, and we are separated far from one another on the wall. ²⁰Rally to us wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet. Our God will fight for us."

Nehemiah was governor of God's people when they returned from exile to rebuild Jerusalem. His first project was to organize the people to repair the city's walls. It was a monumental undertaking—but not as large as the task of repairing people's spirits and their faith and trust in God. When the builders were threatened again with attack, Nehemiah encouraged them to rally, reminding them that God would fight for them.

Have you ever experienced your faith waning in the midst of hardship? God understands how hard faith can be. In the incarnation, God entered our world completely and fully in the person of Jesus and experienced our trials. As God-with-us, Jesus stands ready to encourage us when our ability to trust falters.

Let us pray: Loving God, you see when I need encouragement. Build up my faith. Amen.

Saturday, December 19



Luke 1:5-17

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

When Zechariah was praying, an angel came and told him he would become the father of John the Baptist! But do you think he believed it? Luke tells us that Zechariah did not—at least, not initially. Zechariah was struck dumb, unable to speak until his son was born. Zechariah's silence reminds us: God does speak to us. Prayer can be the moment when we hear God's voice.

Let us pray: Loving God, help us be silent so that we can hear your voice. Speak to us. Tell us of the ways you would like us to prepare for the coming of your Son. Amen.

