

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 20



Luke 1:26-33

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Mary pondered the angel's greeting. The exact word there means, "reasoned, examined, made an internal argument about." It's a word that is often used of philosophers and scientists. Isn't that something interesting to think about—Mary as a philosopher? Mary here shows us that thinking and pondering—using our minds—can be a vessel for God to bless the world. Mary's pondering leads her to say "yes" to the angel's message that she would become the mother of Jesus.

Let us pray: Lord, thank you for giving us minds to think and reason. Bless our ponderings, and help us, like Mary, to ponder your word to us so that we can welcome Christ into the world. Amen.

Monday, December 21



Matthew 1:18-25

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Joseph, being a righteous man, was unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace and planned to dismiss her quietly. In those details, we discover a lot about this man who served as Jesus' earthly father. It could not have been easy for him to discover that his fiancée was pregnant. Most of us can imagine why he wanted to end the engagement! But even before he heard the angel's words that this child was from the Holy Spirit, Joseph refused to expose Mary to harm, to make her supposed infidelity a matter of public comment. Even in his own disappointment, he chose to take a high road—a path that would protect Mary. He did not indulge bitterness or

vengeance. His righteousness was not self-righteousness, but a reflection of God's own love and care for sinners. In this way, Joseph also helped bring Christ to birth and heralded the arrival of the prince of peace.

Lord, show us how not to expose the wrongs of others to public disgrace. Give us the heart of your servant Joseph. Amen.

Tuesday, December 22



Matthew 3:1-11 Symbol: Baptismal Shell

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." ³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.'"

⁴Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

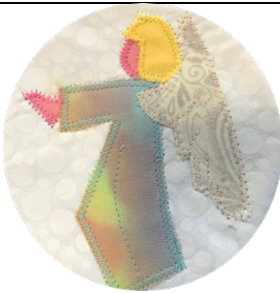
¹¹I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

No one ever sends Christmas cards with John the Baptist printed on them. "Repent, you brood of vipers!" does not make for a cheerful Christmas greeting. And if we are going to think about axes at the roots of trees, at least let them be Christmas trees, cut down in order to be decorated!

John the Baptist's bracing message prepares us, though, for the gift of the Christ child. As a people, we need to repent. We deserve judgement. Jesus ends the word of judgment upon us and absorbs its sting, setting us free for new life.

Let us pray: Almighty God, by your gracious providence your servant John the Baptist was born to Elizabeth and Zechariah. Grant to your people the wisdom to see your purpose and the openness to hear your will, that the light of Christ may increase in us, through Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Wednesday, December 23



Hebrews 13:1-2 Symbol: Angel

¹Let mutual love continue. ²Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

Our popular culture often presents Christmas as a time to be with friends and family—with people we know and love. Hebrews reminds us that God wants to draw us into community with people we do not know. The Scriptures command us to show special protection to strangers, immigrants, and refugees. By welcoming others, we may welcome messengers of God—"angels," Hebrews tells us.

On the night of Christ's birth, these angels announced the birth to shepherds. It was strange. The shepherds had never seen such a sight. But in listening to the angel's message, they heard good news of great joy. Might we hear good news of great joy when we show hospitality to strangers? You never know!

Let us pray: Gracious God, help me show hospitality to strangers even when it is strange and uncomfortable, and open my eyes to angels in our midst. Amen.

Thursday, December 24, Christmas Eve



Luke 2:1-7

¹In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

The concept of a manger is simple. It's a box on legs, filled with hay or grain for animals to eat. Today, farmers call mangers "feed troughs," but the purpose is the same.

Many things have been made out of the symbol of the manger. It conveys humility—no fancy crib for this baby! The manger also reminds us that when Jesus came, he was crowded out of the inn. The literal meaning of manger as feed trough reminds us that our need for God in our lives is as basic as our (or any animal's) need for food. And God graciously supplies that need by coming among us in the flesh.

Let us pray: Almighty God, you made this night shine with the brightness of the true light. Grant that here on earth we may walk in the light of Jesus' presence, and at the last day wake to the brightness of his glory, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

December 25, Christmas Day



John 1:14

⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

"She's got a fiery temper, just like her father."

"He got his sense of humor from his mother."

You may have heard such statements like that. We look at parents and children together and try to discern the characteristics of the parent in the child. Do they talk the same way? Have the same laugh, the same slouch?

In Jesus, we can see the Heavenly Father, although we would say about him, "He's got his Father's grace and mercy," or "He's got his father's glory—a glory which loves, which forgives, which breaks down barriers between people, which heals."

When we look at Jesus, when we read about him in the Scriptures, we discover the heart of the God the Father.

Gracious God, thank you for sending us Jesus, that in coming to love him whom we can see, we may also love you, whom we cannot see. Amen.