

Image by Heinz Klassen

The Jesse Tree



An Advent Celebration

Questions and symbols adapted from:
Jesse Tree Devotions by Grace Claus (www.rca.org/jessetree);
The Advent Jesse Tree, by Dean Meador Lambert;
The Greatest Gift, by Ann Voskamp.

The Jesse Tree: An Advent Celebration

Many people mark the days of Advent with a calendar, opening a tiny door for each day leading up to Christmas. The Jesse Tree Advent tradition also marks each day from the first Sunday in Advent to Christmas.

We all have a family tree—branches filled with mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Jesus has a family tree as well. In Isaiah 11:1 we read, “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” Jesse was the father of David, Israel’s greatest king. And it was from David’s lineage that Jesus came.

The Jesse Tree traces the family heritage of Jesus through Advent. It reminds us that the coming of Jesus was long prophesied, and that in the stories of his ancestors, we can hear echoes of his own life, death, and resurrection.

Each symbol on the Jesse Tree represents a story in Jesus’ family line. The stories help us remember Jesus’s family and our place in it—we remember our adoption into God’s family. And as we teach the next generation, we pray that they will find themselves in this family as well as the Spirit gives them living faith.

Suggestions for using this devotional guide

1. Your Jesse Tree can take on any number of forms: A silhouette of a tree may be sewn or painted, cut out of felt, quilted, hung from the fridge, a wall, a door, a window. Or you may hang the ornaments on a small evergreen tree, a cluster of red dogwood branches, a pot of hemlock, pine, spruce, sticks or holly.
2. Decorate the ornaments. You can use coloured pencils, markers or crayons. String them up, tape them up, button them, hang them using paper clips on any tree of your own imagining or envisioning.
3. Each day read the verses and the devotional text and hang up the corresponding symbol. If you miss a day that’s ok! Just catch up by doing more than one per day. If you have children, consider having them read the Scripture, or any other section.
4. Whatever you do, be creative as much as you wish! Have fun anticipating the coming of Christ!

November 29: The Stump of Jesse

Have you ever been disappointed? Or excluded from something? Maybe you've been told you have to leave the room...

Long ago, God's people were treating each other poorly. Most of the people cared only about themselves. They ignored the poor and the vulnerable. God was fed up with that rotten behaviour, and God decided to put a stop to it, just like you would cut down a big tree.

Israel was taken out of their land and scattered about to live in foreign countries. But God made a promise.



Read: Isaiah 11:1-12

Reflect:

- ✦ We've lived our whole lives like stumps, with parts of ourselves cut off from God. In what ways do you feel like a lifeless stump?
- ✦ Isaiah is waiting for the King because the King will do certain things. What does Isaiah say the King will be like when he comes? What are you waiting and hoping for this season?
- ✦ Out of a family line of obscurity, poverty and small account, comes a King. God's in the business of clothing the ordinary and unexpected in royal robes. And out of this family tree comes forth a tender branch that will grow into a crown of thorns...a rugged cross...our ladder back to God. During Advent, we're going to hear stories about the people in Jesus' family history and how they helped God bring new life to the world. Can you name some of the people who are part of your family tree? How have they planted and nurtured God's love in your life?
- ✦ Isaiah promises that God works so that dead tree stumps can grow again—that we can grow in new ways. Have you ever seen a new shoot growing from an old tree? How do you feel when you see new plants sprouting in spring? Where do you see new life sprouting in what you may have considered dead? What is one thing you could do today to encourage new life?

Respond: Lord God, you give us Hope. Thank you for giving us Jesus, the root of rebirth. Help me to see and plant New Life today, all around me, even in the dead of winter.

November 30: A Family Resemblance

Did you see or experience something good today? Name some of those...

Now take a few moments to look in a mirror, or at the person next to you. Notice their eyes. And what happens when you (or the person next to you) smiles...are there crinkles at the corners of the mouth? Is there a cowlick in the hair? What sound does the body make when it laughs? Breathes? What other good things do you notice?

Now close your eyes and cover your ears. Try to imagine all that darkness everywhere—none of those existing.



Read: Genesis 1:1-2, 24-31; John 1:1-5

Reflect:

- ✦ The Christmas story begins in the beginning. And in the beginning there was...darkness. But then, just like a branch came forth out of a deadened stump, God's voice spoke and out of blackness, glorious something! What do you think is the most interesting (or weirdest!) thing God created?
- ✦ The authority of God made all of creation, but it was the affection of God that made humanity (Proverbs 8:31). We are made in God's image! Our clearest picture of God is Jesus. Can you think of ways that God made you to look like Jesus?
- ✦ How does it make you feel to know that you were made and blessed by God as a good creation?
- ✦ We were made by Love for love. Being made in God's image means that we get to show the whole world—all creatures and all creation—what God is like. Think of one person who you find it difficult to love. What could you create (a letter? a treat?) or do today to love him or her?

Respond: Lord God, we feel pretty special that everything you made—including us—is very good. Please help us to know Jesus so that we can look and love more and more like him. Amen.

December 1: Three Trees

What's a dumb thing you've done that was embarrassing, or got you into trouble?
 What are some sad or bad things that have happened to you, or to someone you love, or in the world?
 Have you ever wondered why bad things happen?



Read: Genesis 3:1-23

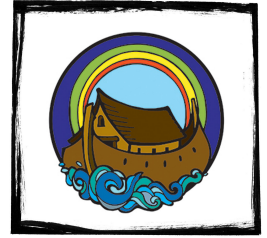
Reflect:

- ✦ What were the mistakes Adam and Eve made that damaged their relationships with God, each other, and creation? What might they have done differently? What do you do when you're tempted? Have you ever done something that left you feeling uncomfortable with God, yourself, or others? What did you say or do?
- ✦ What happened after Adam and Eve ate the fruit? What did God do? Like Adam and Eve, all of us sin and hide in the shadows (Isaiah 53:6). What would you say or do if the Voice that called life out of darkness in Genesis 1 called out to you now, "Where are you?"
- ✦ Did you notice how God cares for Adam and Eve? At the end of the Bible we get a sneak preview of the day when we will live with God again in a city with a tree in the middle (Revelation 22:2). So how do we get from the tree at the beginning to the tree at the end? God uses another tree—one that is chopped down and put together in the shape of a cross. When Jesus died on that tree, he wiped out sin, evil and death so that we might run home to the arms of God. How have you already experienced God's love and forgiveness?
- ✦ This Advent, is there something you'd like God to do away with? Is there a tender spot in your life you would like God to clothe with forgiveness? Is there something you keep hidden that you'd like to bring out of the shadows and bring to God?

Respond: Lord God, "The Fall" says it all—our life in two words. But you have so much more to write in our stories. We're sorry for the things that leave us separated from you, ourselves, each other, and creation. We hear you calling, "Where are you?" Here we are; lead us home from the rotten tree, by your cross, to the tree of Life in your city. Amen.

December 2: A Tearful Fresh Start

Have you ever felt really afraid? Or angry? Or helpless? What did you do (or not do)?
Have you ever felt overwhelmed—unable to keep up with the flood of demands?
Have you ever felt like you're drowning in sadness?
God has felt that way before.



Read: Genesis 6:5-8, 12-14, 7:17–8:3, 9:8-13

Reflect:

- ✦ God's eyes were searching those who loved the Lord, but everyone had turned their backs on God. Things go so bad that God decided a fresh start was needed. Have you ever turned away from someone? Has someone ignored you? What did a fresh start look like?
- ✦ Noah chose to cooperate with God. That choice required a sacrifice of time and energy given to cutting wood and hammering nails to make an ark. It also meant that Noah had to live in cramped quarters with a bunch of animals for over a year! The fresh start Noah experienced cost him a lot of tears. Think of a time you needed a fresh start. What did you need to do? What did you give up?
- ✦ 1 Peter 3:18-22 says that, like Noah's ark, Jesus' death and resurrection give us a fresh start. In what ways has God been an ark in the midst of your own floods? How has Jesus given you a fresh start?
- ✦ Take a deep breath. How does the fresh air smell, taste and feel? Each breath of yours is a fresh gift from God. What is one thing you might do today to please God as an act of gratitude?

Respond: Lord God, the rains remind us that you sorrow over us, and that you suffer with us. The rainbow reminds us of your promise to save and cleanse us. In the midst of all that threatens to destroy us, help us to cling to the Life that we find on the cross. Amen.

December 3: A Risky Road Trip

Have you ever been asked to do something odd? What happened?
Have you ever had to go somewhere unfamiliar—like a new class—or try something different—like eat broccoli? Maybe you've moved to a new neighbourhood. What did that feel like?



Read: Genesis 12:1-7

Reflect:

- ✦ Imagine this: God tells Abram to go to a land that God will show him. No Google Maps. No guarantee that Abram will actually *get* to the destination. Has something like that ever happened to you? Would you go?
- ✦ Abram and Sarai packed up all their things and loaded it onto a U-Haul (well, more likely a camel). They said goodbye to their friends. They visited their favorite restaurant one more time. They took one last walk through their neighbourhood. And then they moved far, far away because God told them to. How do you think Abram and Sarai heard God's voice? How do you hear God's voice?
- ✦ Hebrews 11:8-16 tells us that Abram and Sarai left behind the familiar for the unknown because they longed for the land where God lives—"heaven country." How has God blessed you, as God blessed Abram and Sarai? How do you experience "heaven country" here and now?

- ✦ Abram and Sarai took the risk of going to a new place with the promise that they would be a blessing to all the earth. John 6 tells us that Jesus left his home and came to earth so that all the earth might be blessed. Take a quiet moment to let God tell you one thing you can do to bless one person today.

Respond: Lord God, we remember that you can be trusted to take us to good places of blessing. Please give us ears to hear your voice, and courage to follow you in taking risks to love others, so that they'll know your blessing, too. Amen.

December 4: The Star

When is the last time you looked up at the stars in the night sky? Have you ever tried to count them? How many do you think there are?

One night, God told Abram to look up into the sky and count the stars...

Read: Genesis 15:1-6, 17:1-6

Reflect:

- ✦ God promised to give Abram a child in his family for every star in the sky. That's a lot of kids! How would you feel about having that many brothers and sisters?
- ✦ God told Abram that he would be the father of a great nation—even though he and Sarai were old and childless. Yet Abram believed. Would you?
- ✦ The stars Abram looked at are the same that you see in the sky. Imagine: when God showed Abram all those stars, God was including you, too—like a twinkle in God's eye. Because of Jesus, we are adopted into the family of Abraham (Galatians 3:29)! How does it feel to know that the people in the stories you're reading this Advent are your great-great-great grandmas and grandpas?
- ✦ The covenant with God changed Abram and Sarai. They ended up with new names: Abraham and Sarah. How does being part of God's family make you different?

Respond: Lord God, thank you for adopting us into your family. Help us to grow and live so that we resemble our brother, Jesus, and your family name has a good reputation. Amen.



December 5: The Happy Crib

Do you like knock-knock jokes? God does. God likes to make people laugh. One day God appeared to Abraham and said, "Knock, knock!"

To find out what happened...

Read: Genesis 18:1-14, 21:1-7

Reflect:

- ✦ Sarah and Abraham really wanted a baby. They were completely astonished when their wishes came true. When were you surprised with a really great gift? Write down on a piece of paper 10 wishes have come true in your life, and slip it under your Jesse Tree.
- ✦ Sarah and Abraham scoffed when God said they would have a child (see Genesis 17:17), but then they rocked with laughter as they rocked the cradle. What do you need to take more lightly this Advent?



- ✦ When is the last time you laughed...*really* laughed? Today, try keeping a smile on your face all day. Look for 3 opportunities to make 3 different people laugh.

Respond: Lord God, you delight in surprising us with gifts each day! Thank you! Help us to live in the joy of being the luckiest bums on earth! Amen.

December 6: A Ladder into God's House

Do you remember your dreams? What kinds of things happen in your dreams? What's the best dream you've ever had?

Some of us are so busy during the day that we don't notice God. So sometimes God waits until we've slowed down, gotten quiet, and fallen asleep to talk to us. That happened to a man called Jacob, once...



Read: Genesis 28:10-17

Reflect:

- ✦ Jacob was alone. He had nowhere to rest and nothing to sleep with, so he used a stone for a pillow! And yet it may have been the best sleep of his life. Have you ever been so tired, that you've fallen asleep in a strange place? When and where did that happen for you?
- ✦ Jacob's dream was so vivid that it woke Jacob right up. What in Jacob's dream stands out to you? Would you say he had sweet dreams?
- ✦ God said to Jacob, "I am with you everywhere you go." When Jacob woke up, he said, "Surely the Lord is in this place and I didn't know it!" How does it make you feel to think that God is with you at your table, in the car and down the street—wherever you are?
- ✦ Have you ever been in a tree fort? What kind of ladder did you have to climb? How did it feel when you pulled yourself onto the platform? Jacob was afraid when he realized that he was in the house of God. He then vowed to serve God. How does your perspective on your everyday life change if you see right here, right now as holy? How might you live differently if you see every place in every day as the gate to heaven, God's house?

Respond: Lord God, there is a ladder even to this time and place. You make every patch of ground a gate into your holy presence. Help us to be so at home in your house that we are able to hear and respond to your voice. Amen.

December 7: In Living Colour

Has someone you know, like a brother or sister, ever gotten a present that you wished *you* had gotten? Or have you ever gotten a gift that made other people jealous?

Joseph once got a gift from his father. It caused all sorts of trouble.

Read: Genesis 37:1-36, 50:15-21



Reflect:

- ✦ Little brothers (or sisters) can be the worst. At the breakfast table, Joseph liked to tell his family about his dreams—which were often about being in charge of all his brothers. That made them furious.

Big brothers (or sisters) can be the worst. In this story, Joseph's brothers decided to kill him and his stupid dreams. They didn't quite kill him, but they did take his special coat and sell him to some slave traders for twenty pieces of silver.

All of the brothers needed to change their behaviour, and to forgive one another. Can you think of someone who annoys you? What do you do to annoy them? What could you do today to work at forgiveness with that person?

- ✦ Joseph's father loved him more than the other brothers. The sign of Jacob's favouritism was Joseph's coat. That gift caused all sorts of problems—especially for Joseph! Imagine the fear of being taken from his family, the pain of betrayal by his brothers, the loneliness in a foreign land, the danger of being in prison. What troubles cling to you, leaving you feeling as if you're coming unraveled?
- ✦ Joseph's suffering ended up for the good of Egypt *and* his family. Jesus, God's favourite son, was sold for 30 pieces of silver, stripped of his coat, and crucified. Jesus' suffering led to good for all creation—including you and me. When have you seen God take what is torn and turn it into something good, a gift?

Respond: Lord God, thank you that the power of forgiveness turns our world upside down, so that instead of seeing everything and everyone in black and white, we can live in a world full of beautiful colours. Help us to wear the richly woven robe of righteousness you give us in such a way that the God-colours are drawn out more vividly in others. Amen.

December 8: The Law of Love

Think of some places you go to where they have rules.

Have you ever seen the list of rules at the pool?

1. Shower first.
2. No running.
3. No diving.
4. No unsupervised children.
5. No food or drinks.



Why do you think those rules are there? Is it just to spoil our fun?

God once gave the people of Israel a list of rules called the Ten Commandments.

Read: Deuteronomy 5:1-22

Reflect:

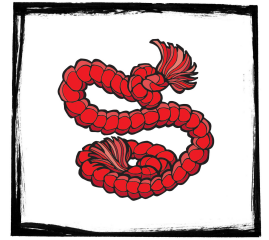
- ✦ By the time God gave the Ten Commandments, God had already chosen the people of Israel and promised to love them. The Ten Commandments were designed to help everyone live together well as God's people. What rules help your family (or your classroom, or your coworkers, or your church) live well and flourish together?
- ✦ Hold up your hands and wiggle your fingers. That's all that God gave us—just ten rules to keep. You would think we could keep just ten commandments. Which of the Ten Commandments is hardest for you to follow?
- ✦ In Galatians 3:24, we're told that the Law was given to lead us to Jesus. 2 John 6 says, "And this is love, that we walk in obedience to God's commands." In Hebrews 10:16-17, we are told that Jesus enables us to live in the Way, Truth and Life of God. What is one rule in the Ten Commandments that you would like Jesus to help you follow more? What is one step of obedience you can take today?

Respond: Lord God, thank you that your love does not end when we fail to follow the “family rules.” Help us follow the Law of Love—to love you, ourselves and others by following in your footsteps. Amen.

December 9: The Red Threads of Faith

Do you know what it’s like to have a bad reputation? Is there someone you know of who lacks respect or is unpopular? What did they do (or not do) that caused them to lose face?

What sort of reputation is required for someone to be part of God’s family? Did you know there are people in Jesus’ family tree who were unsavoury characters?



Read: Joshua 2:1-21

Reflect:

- ✦ Matthew 1:2-6 says that Rahab was the great, great grandmother of King David! How does it feel to know that God welcomes outsiders into Jesus’ family?
- ✦ Hebrews 11:31 lists Rahab in the “Great Hall of Faith.” Instead of her bad rap, Rahab is remembered for her faith. What would you want to be remembered for?
- ✦ Rahab did something out of the ordinary in her culture: she risked the wrath of her king, the revenge of her neighbors, and her very own life when she welcomed Israel’s spies into her own home. What is one time you had the courage to help someone?
- ✦ Rahab ventured big for God. She stuck her neck out for the spies, and then she stuck a red rope out her window, trusting that Israel would be true to its word. Do one thing today that would venture big for God (e.g., make a hard phone call, show kindness to a stranger, or...?).

Respond: Lord God, your blood is the lifeline that rescues us. Give us the same faith and courage as Rahab to take the risk of following you and loving others. Amen.

December 10: A Family that Loves

Have you ever felt alone? Vulnerable? Helpless? Wondering, “What am I going to do? How am I going to make it?”

Naomi and her daughter-in-law, Ruth, once found themselves in that very spot.



Read: Ruth 1:5–2:3, 3:1–4:12

Reflect:

- ✦ Naomi and Ruth had lost all the people they loved. Ruth could have stayed in her own country with her own family, but she chose to go to Bethlehem and make a mother-in-law with a broken heart her only family. Who loves you and chooses to take care of you?
- ✦ Naomi wanted to be called “bitter” because she thought the Lord was against her. What things eat away at you, worrying you—causing you to miss all the love hidden around you in plain sight? Name some of the people who have been faithful Ruths in your life.
- ✦ In Israel, there were rules to protect women whose husbands had died. The rule was that the brother of the widow’s dead husband had to marry the widow. (Back then, it was sometimes okay to have more than one wife.) That brother was called the “kinsman redeemer.” Kinsman means a relative, and redeemer means someone who rescues you. The brother would rescue the widow and her family by paying for food,

giving them a place to live, and carrying on the family name. Boaz was the kinsman redeemer for two people he didn't know: Ruth and Naomi. In Hebrews 2:11-18, Jesus is described as *our* kinsman redeemer who rescues and welcomes us—strangers!—into his family. Who are the people who have welcomed you into God's family?

- ✦ Ruth looks after Naomi. Boaz cares for Ruth. Do something to care for someone else today. Write a card to a friend you haven't seen for a while, or call someone from your church.

Respond: Lord God, when we are lost, hungry, or alone, there is a hand to hold on to, a family to come home to. Thank you. Help us to be a family that looks out and cares for the vulnerable. Amen.

December 11: Open Eyes, Open Hearts

Have you ever been told, "Don't judge a book by the cover"? What does that mean? Today we turn the page and find the Jesse of the Jesse Tree! Today we're reminded that looks aren't everything...



Read: 1 Samuel 16:1-13

Reflect:

- ✦ Samuel was charmed by size and strength and age. He thought that a good king had to have fought in battles, and needed experience in government. But God picked the weak, dorky, little sibling who spent a lot of time outdoors with the sheep. (Have you noticed how God likes to pick the underdog?) How is God using you, even though you're not a grown-up or the most powerful or important person?
- ✦ The decked out Christmas tree and the colourful lights can distract us from what's significant. Like Samuel, we can end up concentrating on the shimmer and sparkle of things. 1 Samuel 13:14 says that God was looking for someone after God's own heart. What parts of your heart—your life—do you need to open up to God in this season?
- ✦ The Lord told Samuel, "I look at the heart." If you looked at David, you wouldn't think he'd make a very good king. If you looked at baby Jesus, lying in a manger, you'd wonder how he'd be the Saviour of the world. What do you want to see with fresh eyes this Christmas?
- ✦ Samuel came to see people from a new perspective. When you look at other people today, how can you concentrate on seeing beyond appearances to the heart? Think of someone in your family—a sibling, a cousin—who, at first glance, might be someone you don't want to spend time with. Take a few moments to do one thing that would "anoint"—that is bless or encourage—them.

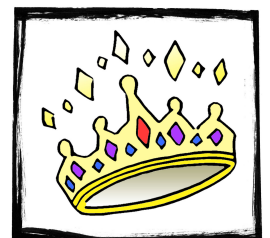
Respond: Lord God, you like to use people who the world thinks are small and insignificant. Thank you that you choose me to bless others. In this season of looking for that perfect something, may You find that which You seek: my heart open to you and others. Amen.

December 12: A Shepherd King

Think of someone you admire and follow. Maybe it's a teacher, or a coach, or a boss, or a friend. What is it about the person that makes him or her a good leader?

What makes for a bad leader?

Read: 2 Samuel 5:1-5



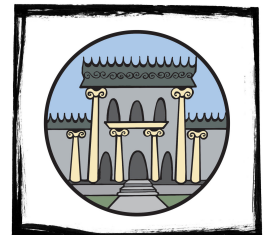
Reflect:

- ✦ Kings and shepherds seem like exact opposites. Kings sit on thrones. They wear expensive clothes and talk to important people. Shepherds, on the other hand, stand on hillsides. They wear clothes that can get dirty, and they talk to sheep and other sheep farmers. David, who had long loved his lambs and led his flocks to lush pastures, is now called by God to gently protect, serve and shepherd his own family, God's people. Make a list of leaders—it could be politicians or parent-teacher volunteers—who exercise the same wisdom, vigilance, I-will-do-everything-to-always-keep-safe attitude as the shepherd out on the hills.
- ✦ David was chosen by God to be king when he was a boy, but he didn't become king until he was thirty years old. That required patience. What people and situations require patience today?
- ✦ The prophets (Jeremiah 23:1-8; Ezekiel 34:11-16, 23-24) promised that a shepherd-king who cared more about people than power would come and lead us to rest in green pastures, provide us with all that we need, and protect us from all that threatens us because his staff would be the sceptre that rules the whole world. That shepherd is Jesus (John 10:11-18, Hebrews 13:20-21). How has Jesus been your shepherd-king?

Respond: Lord God, you search out and lay down your life for us—your lost sheep. Thank you for leaders in our cities and nations who are kind and gentle as shepherds, too. Help us to lay down our lives in worship of you and love to our neighbours. Amen.

December 13: A Living Temple

Is there a particular place you go to when you want to be with certain people? For example, maybe going to grandma's is special. Perhaps there's a favourite coffee shop where your friends meet. Some families have a tradition of gathering at a lake every summer. You might say those times and places are "holy," which means that they are set apart for something very important: building relationships.



The people of God had a holy place for building their relationship with God.

Read: 1 Kings 6:1, 7, 19-22, 37-38; 2 Chronicles 5:1-10; 6:12, 14-21; 7:1-3, 11

Reflect:

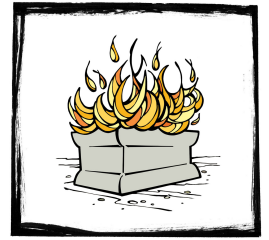
- ✦ Israel's temple was set aside as a place where the people could meet with God. Yet Solomon said that the house he had built could never contain God. So what were the benefits of building the temple?
- ✦ Fire from heaven consumed Solomon's sacrifices, and the glory of God filled the Lord's house. The fact that God could be found in the temple suggests that God can be found in other locations. Can you think of other times when God has appeared at a specific spot on earth? Has God ever appeared to you in a particular place?
- ✦ God dwelt among us in the temple of Jesus (John 1:14, 2:19-21). In fact, Jesus was called "Immanuel," which means God with us. How do you feel knowing that God is ready and willing to be with you wherever you go? How do you recognize the presence of Jesus? How might expecting God to be present change the way you live?
- ✦ 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 states that God is closer than we can imagine, since we are a temple of God because of Jesus! How does that make you feel? Solomon went through some elaborate rituals in order to enter God's presence. What is one simple practice you might adopt that would make you more aware of and in step with God's Spirit?

Respond: Lord God, to think that I would be a house filled with your holy presence is more than I can fathom. You are good, O Lord, your steadfast love endures forever. Amen.

December 14: The Fire of Faith

What is something you give time and attention to most often? For example, if you added up the minutes you spend looking at a screen, would that top the list? Or do you spend more time exercising? Or...?

It's easy for habits of heart and mind to develop without realizing it. Next thing you know, we're preoccupied with this or that thing which maybe isn't important...or healthy. I wonder if that's what happened to Israel?



Read: 1 Kings 18:17-39

Reflect:

- ✦ God's people wavered in their confidence in God. They weren't sure which was the real God...Baal? Maybe Asherah? Or was it the God of Elijah? They weren't quite sure. What sets God apart from other Gods?
- ✦ God did not wait for the people of Israel to change their hearts and minds. God simply acted. How does it feel to know that God does not expect you to get your act together in order for God to be present to you—that God has already given you all that you need?
- ✦ The people of Israel waited for a mighty sign before they fell on their knees and worshiped God. Do you think that's a good practice?
- ✦ Elijah's life was free of any idols. He was fully devoted to God, with whom he had a remarkable relationship. What do you think were some habits Elijah developed so that his heart remained set on God? What is something you can do to loosen the grip of idols in your life?

Respond: Lord God, you reveal your mighty self not so much in fireworks, but in the devotion of a grizzled prophet, in simple acts of love, in a vulnerable baby. Let the flames of our faith in you be a steady burn, and not just a flash in the pan. Amen.

December 15: Fishing for Forgiveness

Have you ever been asked to do something you didn't want to do? Did you refuse? Did you do it, but under protest? Or did you do it happily?

Now, have you ever been required to do something nice for an enemy? What did that feel like? What did you do?

Read: Jonah 1:1-3, 17; 2:10; 3:1-4:4



Reflect:

- ✦ Jonah was a *very* good listener. He also knew God very well. Jonah knew that God was gracious and compassionate. Jonah didn't want to see his enemies—the Ninevites—forgiven by God. Jonah wanted to see God blow them to smithereens. For those reasons Jonah disobeyed God! Was Jonah's reluctance to forgive his enemies worth it?
- ✦ Jonah did the job God told him to do, but Jonah wasn't very happy in the end. Did Jonah practice what he preached? Who do you think needed to hear what Jonah had to say more: Jonah or the Ninevites?
- ✦ God is patient with and forgiving of both Jonah and the Ninevites. When have you experienced goodness and mercy even though you didn't deserve it—and may have refused it?

- ✦ In Matthew 12:38-41, Jesus said he was like Jonah, only greater. Similar to Jonah, Jesus was in a dark, damp tomb for three days. Jesus' resurrection invites us to repent—to change our ways—and experience mercy. Write down one thing you repent of today. Tuck your paper under the Jesse Tree as your gift to Jesus of a contrite heart.

Respond: Lord God, show us what we need to repent of, so that our lives much bring good news to others—especially our enemies. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Amen.

December 16: The Light of Peace

Have you ever been in a place that is pitch black? If you've ever gone camping, maybe you know the feeling of not being able to see anything in the woods at night. Or maybe it gets really dark in your bedroom. What do you feel in those situations? And how do you experience when there's light to see?

In 5 days we will experience the longest night of the year. But that doesn't last long—the very next day the nights start getting shorter.



Read: Isaiah 2:2-4; 9:2-7

Reflect:

- ✦ The prophet Isaiah says the people of Israel have walked in darkness. What kind of darkness is Isaiah talking about? What has made things dark for the people? And how does the light come?
- ✦ The prophet Isaiah says Jesus will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. How do those names make you feel about Jesus? What do each of those names tell you about who Jesus is and what he does?
- ✦ Isaiah says the light *has* shone. Has your hope dimmed or flickered along the way? Where in your life do you need Christ's light to shine? How do you need God to light your way?
- ✦ A very small flame makes a huge difference. Where have you seen God's light? What is one thing you could do to offer a spark of hope to someone else today?

Respond: Lord God, your light shines in our darkness. We rejoice before you. Let your peace shine forth brighter and brighter in me and in all the world. Amen.

December 17: The Little House of Bread

If your sister tells you something will happen, do you usually believe it? What if it's your dad? What if it's April 1?

It depends on *who* is making the promise, doesn't it? The details of *what* is being promised make a difference, too, don't they?

God's prophets promise lots of things: some good, and some bad; some strange, and others that make sense. How would you describe the promises Micah makes?



Read: Micah 5:2-5

Reflect:

- ✦ How does it feel when a promise is broken? Do you think we can trust the promises made in Micah? Why? Have those promises come true? If so, how?

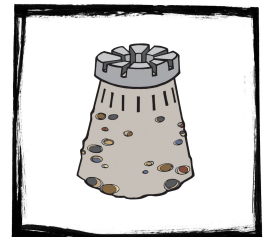
- ✦ Have you ever felt like Bethlehem...poor, small, forgotten? Are there benefits to having little, or being small or overlooked? How might you turn your weaknesses into an advantage?
- ✦ The name "Bethlehem" means "house of bread." Jesus once described himself as the "bread of life" (John 6:35, 51). Jesus, the bread of life, was born in the house of bread! How have you been satisfied by the Bread from Bethlehem?
- ✦ Micah promises big things from small places. Today, look for someone who is doing some little, good thing that often goes unnoticed. Write that person a short thank you note.

Respond: Lord God, you brought the Bread of Life to a barely-noticed, backwater town like Bethlehem. Please bring your Bread of Heaven to us, in the ordinary, out-of-the-way places where we live. Amen.

December 18: Watching and Waiting

We've been waiting a loooooong time, haven't we? It's been 21 days since Advent began. That's three weeks!

Has the waiting been hard? Are you getting impatient? What happens when you (or someone you know) loses patience?



Read: Habakkuk 2:1-4, 3:16-19

Reflect:

- ✦ Habakkuk was a prophet who wanted God to bring justice in the land. His patience ran out, so he went up to a tall tower, angrily told God, "Things are really bad! Hurry up and do something!" And then Habakkuk waited. Have you ever spoken like that to God? If so, what happened? If not, why?
- ✦ Habakkuk was waiting for certain things. What were they? What sorts of big and little things are you waiting for? How do they compare?
- ✦ God answered Habakkuk! Does that surprise you? God also said that those who seek evil would not have their wishes fulfilled, but those who seek goodness would have their prayers come true. Does that surprise you? What does that suggest about the kinds of things we should hope for?
- ✦ All Advent we've been standing at the top of the Jesse Tree like Zacchaeus, looking for Jesus. As Habakkuk waits on God at the top of the watchtower, he sees blossoms of goodness on barren plants in empty fields. Imagine that there are no gifts under the tree, no candy canes in the stockings. When all is gone, how does God truly, deeply satisfy you?

Respond: Lord God, waiting is hard. But we're grateful for all the gifts—big and small—we already have from you. Help us to patiently trust that you will do what you've said you'll do. Help us to care less for the things of this world, and to care more for You who are more than enough to satisfy. Amen.

December 19: Tough Love - Exile

Have you ever been told not to do something, but did it anyway? What happened? Were you punished? Do you think the consequences were fair?

God's people experienced exile from their land because they kept doing things that God had told them not to do.



Read: 2 Kings 17:1-23, 25:1-13; Jeremiah 30:1-3, 8-15, 17, 33:14-16

Reflect:

- ✦ 722 BCE was the beginning of a 200-year period in which God's people were conquered and taken away from the Promised Land. Israel would never return to the glory and prestige it enjoyed in the days of David and Solomon. What sorts of emotions do you feel as you read about the consequences Israel suffered in 2 Kings? Why were the people exiled? What could have been done differently?
- ✦ When fruit trees turn rotten, or berry bushes grow old and stop producing fruit, farmers will cut them down and start over by planting seeds. Do you think God was doing something similar?
- ✦ Jeremiah shares a promise from God to the people in exile: I will rescue you and bring you back. What other signs of grace does God show Israel? When have you been treated better than you deserve?
- ✦ Jeremiah says that God's punishment is meant to heal Israel of its wounds. Have you ever been shown some tough love, and found yourself grateful later on? What happened?

Respond: Lord God, we are a stubborn people. Have mercy on us. Amen.

December 20: The Risks of Love

Have you ever been asked to do something that was really difficult? How did you feel?
What did you do?

Queen Esther was once asked to risk her life for others.

Read: Esther 4

Reflect:

- ✦ The King of Persia agreed to have all the Jews in his empire killed. Queen Esther, who was Jewish, decided she was in her position "for such a time as this." What gifts did Esther have to use on behalf of others? What specific gifts has God given you? How might you use them in "such a time as this"?
- ✦ Queen Esther did not work alone. Who else helped her? What did they do? When you work in a team, what role do you play? Are you a leader, like Mordecai and Esther? Or are you more of a behind-the-scenes actor?
- ✦ Queen Esther was willing to die to save her people. What do you think gave her courage to take the risk of approaching the King? What sorts of risks for love might you take?
- ✦ Queen Esther could have stayed safe within the walls of the palace. Instead, she chose to look outside the gate. Who is one person outside your gate? What could you do this week to help him or her?

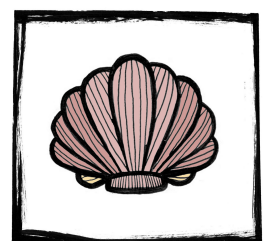
Respond: Lord God, you gave up everything because of love for us. Help us to be brave, so that we might take risks in loving others. Amen.



December 21: Grace in Silence

Spend the next minute sitting in silence. (Use a stop watch or a timer if necessary.)
Was it hard? Easy? What feelings or thoughts did you experience?
Can you imagine not being able to talk for nine months? That's what happened to Zechariah...

Read: Luke 1:5-25, 57-80



Reflect:

- ✦ It had been 400 years since the last Old Testament prophet spoke the word of the Lord. That's a long time for God to be silent! Then one day, suddenly it happened: God answered! Have you ever had to wait a long time for a reply from someone? What was it like to wait, and then to finally hear from that person?
- ✦ Zechariah and Elizabeth prayed for a child into old age. When Zechariah heard he'd be a father, he couldn't believe it. He had nine quiet months to consider how he might have responded differently. What do you think he wished he would have said or done? During what seasons of your life has God seemed silent? Looking back, can you hear quiet echoes of God moving and speaking during those times? What do you wish you would have said or done differently?
- ✦ For nine months Zechariah couldn't talk to Elizabeth about the things they needed to get ready for the baby. He couldn't tell her he loved her. He had to communicate without using words. Quietly, without drawing attention to yourself, do something kind for someone in your home today.
- ✦ The angel told Zechariah to name his son John, which means "Gracious." At the end of the long silence good news was announced: grace! Zechariah's silence made a difference in him: he was filled with the Spirit and prophesied. Pause for five quiet minutes, three times today to simply listen quietly to God. Write down on a piece of paper what you see or hear or feel, and place that paper under your Jesse Tree.

Respond: Lord God, there are surprises in the silence, wonders in the waiting. In quiet wonder we give you thanks. In our silent waiting turn our hearts to you and others, that we might hear your voice and receive your Grace. Amen.

December 22: Unexpected Servants

What do you have to do to receive a gift? Only one thing: accept it.
Now, have you ever gotten a gift you weren't expecting? Did you like it? Or was it an unpleasant surprise—something you didn't really like or want (such as brown, plaid pants)? What was your reaction?



Read: Luke 1:26-56

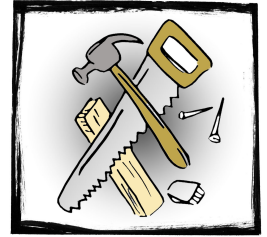
Reflect:

- ✦ Gabriel's appearance and the message the angel delivered were unexpected. After the angel left, how do you think Mary felt? Surprised? Frightened? Happy? Sad?
- ✦ After the visit from the angel, nothing was normal anymore. Was the gift given to Mary a blessing? A burden? Both? How would you have felt?
- ✦ When Mary visited Elizabeth, she sang a song. Do you think Mary realized what she had signed up for when she agreed to be the mother of Jesus?
- ✦ Mary was an ordinary person—like us—who bore the Image of God. She was physically filled with the Grace of God! What might you need to surrender? What would it look like for you to be filled more and more with God?
- ✦ Mary had to make space for God in her life. Things got rearranged. Take ten today. Make five minutes of space and stillness and silence just to be with God. Then make five minutes of space in your day for someone else—someone who has been crowded out by the busyness of life—and let that person fill your attention.

Respond: Lord God, nothing is “normal” for us. You keep appearing in unexpected ways in unexpected people. As you dwell and grow in us, we will expect the unexpected. Go beyond our wildest imaginations as you make all things new. Amen.

December 23: Joseph

Think of your dad, or someone who is a positive father-figure in your life. What do you admire about him? What does he do (or not do), and what is he like (or not like), that makes him someone you respect and care for?



Read: Matthew 1:18-25

Reflect:

- ✦ Even before the angel visited Joseph, he had dreams. What were some of the hopes Joseph had?
- ✦ The actions of God and Mary meant that some of Joseph’s dreams were taken away, and there were expectations he had to set aside. Yet God and Mary offered Joseph new hopes and dreams he hadn’t imagined. Has something like that ever happened to you? God may take away our dreams, but God is always giving new dreams. How does that make you feel?
- ✦ Matthew 1:16 says that Joseph was a descendant of King David. Joseph was a carpenter who used hammer and nails to build shelters and restore what was broken. Joseph was also like David in that he heard and obeyed God’s voice. As he grew up, what do you think Jesus learned from his father, Joseph? What can you learn from Joseph?
- ✦ Joseph could have refused to cooperate with God, but he didn’t. It seems Joseph cared more about God and Mary and less about himself and his own worries. The carpenter’s son would later use nails and a wooden cross to recover and renovate all of creation, making the heart of God our home. (No wonder we haul trees into our homes this time of year!) What broken place in your life do you need restored? Or, where is Jesus calling you to help the Father in the rebuilding project?

Respond: Lord God, build in us the trust, the love, the wisdom and strength of Joseph. Help us to do our part in the work of sheltering others, and constructing lives that allow for the flourishing of all things. Amen.

December 24: Journeying

Sometimes taking a trip is fun. But sometimes when we are on a journey, we experience something difficult like a flat tire, or a wrong turn. Sometimes we have to travel when we don’t want to, to a place we don’t want to be.

Think of a time you’ve gone on a journey. Where did you go? What did you do? What happened?

Joseph and Mary were required to go to Bethlehem. Can you think of some things that would have been enjoyable for them? What might have been inconvenient?



Read: Luke 2:1-7

Reflect:

- ✦ Mary and Joseph were looking forward to the end two journeys: arriving in Bethlehem and the arrival of their baby. And yet the end wasn’t the end. Joseph and Mary still had to travel home, and the birth of

Jesus was the beginning of parenting him! Endings and beginnings never stop for us. How does that make you feel? What difference does it make that Jesus shows up at the end and the start of journeys?

- ✦ Mary and Joseph bore burdens on the journey to Bethlehem. What—or who—helped them shoulder the load? What burdens do you carry this Christmas Eve? What—or who—has helped you make it this far?
- ✦ Mary and Joseph arrived in a town that had no room for them. What do you need to set down or put aside so that you have space and room to receive God's gift(s)?
- ✦ Koyama Kosuke describes Jesus as the "three mile an hour God" because that's the speed at which people walk. Jesus is a God who meets us wherever we are at the speed we're going. Today, put on your shoes and go outside for a walk. When you get home, write down how it was God met you.

Respond: Lord God, we've come so far and seen so much. There's farther to travel and so much more to experience! Thank you that you are with us wherever we go. I can hardly wait for you to come again. Help me to always be ready to receive you with open arms and an open heart. Amen.



Jesus Christ, the Apple Tree

Author unknown; Tune by Elizabeth Poston

The tree of life my soul hath seen,
Laden with fruit and always green:
The trees of nature fruitless be
Compared with Christ the apple tree.

His beauty doth all things excel:
By faith I know, but ne'er can tell
The glory which I now can see
In Jesus Christ the apple tree.

For happiness I long have sought,
And pleasure dearly I have bought:
I missed of all; but now I see
'Tis found in Christ the apple tree.

I'm weary with my former toil,
Here I will sit and rest awhile:
Under the shadow I will be,
Of Jesus Christ the apple tree.

This fruit doth make my soul to thrive,
It keeps my dying faith alive;
Which makes my soul in haste to be
With Jesus Christ the apple tree.