

The Jesse Tree and the whole story of God

There is a tradition that some of you have perhaps heard of. It's a way to tell the story of Jesus' family that is often referred to as The Jesse Tree. When you open the Bible, you find the family tree of Jesus. And I don't just mean all those genealogical lists of names, but stories that explain the history, the culture, the feelings and emotions that form that family. You find stories that trace the branches of Jesus' family: the limbs of the tree that go back to his great-great-great grandfather and that many-many-many great grandmother. And you go all the way back to the very beginning—to our beginning.

One of the many-many great-great-great grandfathers of Jesus was Jesse. Jesse was the father of King David. And things had become so rotten that their family tree looked more like a stump. You may recall hearing about that stump from the prophet Isaiah:

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

Out of this stump came what didn't seem possible, something miraculous and awesome: a budding branch, a green shoot of new hope, new beginnings, new freedom for the entire family. And it was all going to occur because of one person in that family line: Jesus.

Each story within the Jesse Tree tradition has a symbol that acts as a visual reminder of that story. Together, today, we are going to spend some time with a number of those visual reminders that will help us to ground ourselves more fully in the stories that lead us to the Christmas story.

Each of you here today received a small paper bag. You have waited patiently with this bag, and now I invite you to reach for your bag. When you were given this gift, you may have wanted to immediately open it to find out what is inside. But, thanks to that one word—WAIT! —written on each of your bags, they remain sealed.

We do a lot of waiting at this time of year: we wait to receive presents, we wait to give presents, we wait for snow to fall, we wait for loved ones to arrive... Waiting isn't just something we do in our cultural practices—it's also central to our spiritual practices throughout Advent. We wait for the angels to show up; we wait for Mary and Joseph to arrive in Bethlehem; we wait for a Christ child to be born.

Now, (finally!) I invite you to gently open up your small paper bag. Inside your bag are a few items, including some pencil crayons, and an ornament tag containing a symbol of one of the stories of our Jesse Tree, each one representing a story from within Jesus' family tree—each a step toward the birth of Jesus. In each bag there is also a ribbon so

that you can hang your ornament. And if you're joining us online, you can access all the Jesse Tree ornaments through our eblast and print one or all of them off.

As I share some of the stories from the Jesse Tree today, I encourage you all to look at the story ornament you received. Think of how that story connects to Jesus. As you listen, colour in your ornament—borrow colours you need from your neighbours. And at the end of our time of worship, you'll be able to show your ornament and story to others and then take it home to hang up and remember a small part of the whole story of God that leads to Christ's birth.

For now, though, let's get into our first lesson, our first story, our first budding branch on Jesus' family tree.

FIRST LESSON: Created by love

Genesis 1:1-5, 26-27

1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 2 the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. 3 Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. 4 And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

26 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."

27 So God created humankind in God's image,
in the image of God God created them;
male and female God created them.

Lesson Message:

The story of Christmas begins in the very beginning—because Christmas is about Jesus and Jesus' love, which has been looking to hold us close since the beginning of time.

Jesus was before time began, his voice hovering over the depths of the darkness. Jesus was there when the voice of God breathed wonder into the darkness: "Let there be light..." And just the sound of God's voice made light dance into being, all brightness shattering the dark.

"Let there be land." And at the music of God's voice, mountains roared and raised up through the oceans. And God said, "Let there be living plants, and let there be lights in the heavens, and let there be living beasts." And at the wonder of God's voice, leaves unfurled and stars spun happy and elephants trumpeted praise.

But what about when God dreamed up the very best at the very last? God did not say, “Let there be...” as with everything else. When God dreamed of faces like ours, God’s voice filled with gentlest love. “Let *us* make human beings...”

God the Creator gathered close to God the Son, Jesus Christ, and God the Holy Spirit, when they imagined the masterpiece that is human life. God in three persons scooped a handful of dust—of Mother Earth—and knelt down, and together they kissed warm life into God’s children with a breath of love.

The whole world was made by God’s word. But God’s children alone were made by all of God’s love. We are made of both the dust of this earth and the happiness of the highest heaven. We are made of both flesh and spirit, and we are made of two worlds longing for forever with Jesus. No matter what happens in the world, the truth is always this: we were formed by Love... for love. We were made to be human company and conversation partners with God. Not to live out life on our own, separate from God, but wholly with God, embodied by God, in loving partnership with God. Our minds were formed to be wowed by God. Wowed by God’s uncontainable, unending, unconditional, unwrappable love.

SECOND LESSON: I will make of you a great nation
Genesis 12:1-4, 7

12 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. 2 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. 3 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.” 4 So Abram went, as the Lord had told him. 7 Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him.

Lesson Message:

God, who keeps coming to us, came to Abram and asked him to leave everything he knows—his country, his relatives, his father’s family—and to trust God. When God tells Abram to leave everything and go, Abram does. “So Abram went” the text tells us. We don’t know a lot about Abram, about why God has called him or what his credentials are, or how righteous a man he is. And yet, we do. We know the ways of God through our experience of God today. In our churches, in our congregations, in our own callings and in the callings of others, we can see God’s method at work. We see that God does not always call those with the best credentials or the shining pedigrees.

God calls and Abram responds faithfully. Without questioning God, Abram gets up and goes. This is a most remarkable commencement for the whole family of faith, including us. Faith begins in God’s speaking the divine intrusive word that demands radical response. The life of faith is characterized as a journey. God calls, and we go forth in faith without a map, not quite sure where we are going, but with trust in God’s promised presence.

And God didn't call Abram in order to test him, God did this because God loved Abram and wanted to bless Abram. To help illustrate this blessing, God took Abram out to look at the night sky and to count all the stars. Every star represented a descendant of Abram's; every star represented the ways that God blessed Abram as the beginning of something new—a great nation that would follow God. It was a covenant—a promise—between God and Abram.

In fact, God promises even more: God makes *us* a blessing to others; God not only gives gifts of love, but makes us into gifts of love. We are blessed. We get to bless. God calls us to go; will our response offer blessings to those who follow us?

THIRD LESSON: Looking at things inside out

1 Samuel 16:6-7, 10-13

6 When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord." 7 But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

10 Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The Lord has not chosen any of these." 11 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." 12 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." 13 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.

Lesson Message:

Just as God promised to Abram-turned-Abraham, he and Sarah had a son and that son led to more and more descendants who lived in the land promised to them and who built up God's great nation. And it came to a point where those people wanted a king. The first king, Saul, turned out to not want much of God after all. So God sent Samuel, a man who loved God, to find another king that God had picked out—one of Jesse's eight boys, in Bethlehem.

Upon arrival, Samuel presumed God would want him to anoint the oldest and tallest, broadest, bravest looking brother—one that looked like he could carry a big sword with ease and look smart in a dazzling crown. But God drew near to Samuel and pointed out something we all could think on a little more: God doesn't see the way we see. We see the wrapping on the outside, but God sees the gift on the inside: the heart. And because of this, David, the youngest and smallest—the forgotten, sheep watching kid brother—David is seen by God for his heart and is anointed by Samuel as the next king. Those whose minds and hearts are spiritually attuned to the same values as God's will be drawn to a different set of qualities than those valued by the larger society.

Long after that forgotten little son of Jesse was anointed king of Bethlehem, there was another unseen One born in that very same little town of Bethlehem—One who was left out with sheep because no one made room for him either.

FOURTH LESSON: The Birth of Jesus

Luke 2:1-7

2 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph 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. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 And 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.

Lesson Message:

There is a painting called *The Census at Bethlehem* painted by the Flemish Renaissance artist, Pieter Bruegel. The painting was done in 1566. It depicts a wintery scene in a Flemish town of the painter's time, a scene we in 2023 are still familiar with: people going about their daily pre-Christmas tasks. In this painting, there are children playing and skating on a lake; there is a couple butchering a pig, presumably for a customer who will later take it home and cook it for a Christmas feast; a wreath hangs over the doorway to one of the shops; a labourer struggles with an overloaded cart of firewood; a huddle of people stand in front of the local tax office to be counted for the census and to pay their taxes. It looks like a typical secular scene; people out doing regular mid-winter things, whether playing or working or preparing. But if you look closer, there is something else in the scene that you may have missed amongst the hubbub of the busy day it depicts: a man with a sack of tools leads a donkey through the snow. And on that donkey, covered in a blanket, is an unassuming woman. It is Joseph the carpenter and his betrothed, Mary, come from Nazareth to pay their taxes and be counted for the census. God-with-us, Emmanuel.

Is this not the way Christ comes to us, not just on Christmas Day, but every day? Moving in silently, without fanfare or burst of trumpet, coming in the midst of life in all of its everydayness and clutter and work concerns and Zoom calls. Here is God, touching and loving earth in the form of a baby, born to lowly parents in a stable. It is so easy to miss.

Here is the impossible possibility: God is always entering our lives and our world to deliver and to save us. The problem is in our perceiving; our faith is fragile. It needs to be refreshed; and so it is, through the mystery of Christmas.

The Jesse Tree tradition may end with the birth of Christ, but God's story doesn't. It doesn't end with Christ's death. It doesn't even end with his resurrection to new life. It is a continuing, living, breathing, life-giving story that infects us all if we allow it. It is

something we clothe ourselves with both inside and outside. It is new life over and over again as we continue to express it and be thankful for all that God has given and continues to give. It is opening ourselves to a love so deep and so vast and so enveloping that it can never be wrapped up. And yet, as we hear the stories of Jesus' family tree, as we open ourselves to God's promises, to God's blessings, to the hope and light and forgiveness and love that comes through our relationship and partnership with God, we all, in a way, are always unwrapping and discovering newness in God's love for us just a little more. Amen.