

JESSE TREE

AN ADVENT JOURNEY



A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord.

- Isaiah 11:1-2 -

ADVENT

How can we possibly experience hope, peace, joy and love when we look around and these are our circumstances? This is a question that comes up in the Scriptures again and again. Almost from the beginning of time this is a question that people of every generation have asked... "These are my circumstances. The world is in a mess. How can I possibly experience the goodness of God and know his nearness in the midst of all of this?"

It's not by chance that hope, peace, joy and love are the themes of Advent. A season in which we wait expectantly for Jesus to return in his glory and make the world right again. This time, not as a baby (that happened 2000 years ago!) but as our risen Lord and Saviour, as our Righteous Judge, Prince of Peace, and Eternal Redeemer. Come, Lord Jesus!

Hope is a vital way to start our Advent season, because a biblical worldview of hope sets for us an eternal perspective that is unshakable. As Christians, we know that it's going to get better. This doesn't mean that we bury our heads in the sand and ignore our obligations to our neighbours. And it certainly doesn't mean that our current circumstances don't often hurt. Sometimes what is in front of us can feel overwhelming. But as King David put it... "Even in the darkest valley. The valley that feels like death. We know that we are not alone." For a Christian, even in the darkest places there is hope, because we have a God who sees us. We also have a God who knows us. We have an eternal future that is beyond our wildest dreams; one in which there is no more sickness or pain, everything is fully restored and whole. Just as it was meant to be from the start. But yes, sometimes that really does feel a long way off! Come, Lord Jesus!

Advent is also a season in which we focus our attention on the fact that even if our eternal future feels like a long way off - God is still close by. He is certainly not distant from you or from me. He too desires that the beauty and majesty of heaven would consume the evils of this world. And so, we wait expectantly with him. Come, Lord Jesus!

May God's hope, peace, joy, love, and all the fruits of the Spirit fill your lives this Advent season as you focus your attention on the one who saves.

God bless you richly as you wait expectantly,

Rev'd Scott Windred
Sunnybank Anglican

THE JESSE TREE



Nov
27th

Read: Isaiah 11:1-5

Think: The Jesse Tree tradition is an ancient guide through Advent (the season that leads up to Christmas). It builds on the the prophecy from Isaiah that a shoot of life and hope will come out from the stump of Jesse.

Jesse was the father of King David, and so, this prophecy is a reminder that from this family line a Saviour will come. He will be a king whose throne endures forever and who will rule with wisdom and understanding. For hundreds of years before Jesus, people who feared and loved God waited for him to send a Saviour who would come and save us from our sin. The Jesse Tree follows this miraculous journey of love and grace. It tracks how God uses ordinary people and many trials to bring about new life and hope. The Jesse Tree reminds us that God plays the long game and can bring life and hope out of nowhere. Enjoy you Jesse Tree journey!

Chat: What are you looking forward to about Christmas? What are you not looking forward to about Christmas? How can the Jesse Tree tradition help build our faith and teach us more about God?

Pray: God were amazed by your grace and your great rescue plan. Please use this Jesse Tree to help us know you more and more each day. Amen.

MADE IN HIS IMAGE



Nov
28th

Read: Genesis 1:26-31

Think: You are made in the image of God! What? Seriously? Being made in God's image is exactly that; we are not God, but we have a likeness to God. Let's explore this a little...

God is eternal: God always was and always will be. We are alive, but we have an end point. Our days on earth are limited. God is all-powerful, all knowing, and in all places: the fact that God has complete power, and that He knows all things both on earth and in the heavens, comes from the fact that he created them. You have power in your physical strength, and you can even gain strength if you train hard, but your power is limited, just like your knowledge.

God is creative: God created this world and everything in it. He designed and created all the trees & flowers, all the animals, everything! But He was most creative and took the most joy from when He created you and me. And the Bible tells us that God created all things from nothing! We are creative in many different ways but we cannot create something from nothing.

Chat: You are made in the image of God! How does this change the amount of value you place on yourself and others? What are some ways that God might have specifically gifted you to bless the world?

Pray: Thanks so much God for creating me with such care. Please help me to continue growing into your likeness. Amen.

THE FALL



Nov
29th

Read: Genesis 3

Think: Imagine a world of peace and harmony. A world untouched by hunger, sickness, or war. This was the garden of Eden. Everything was good, wholesome, and bursting with life! Sadly, selfishness and sin took over and curses came into the world along with much suffering.

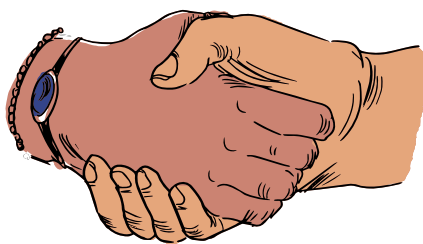
Still, as you read through Genesis 3 it's possible to see rays of light shining through the cracks in broken humanity. Adam and Eve aren't annihilated instantly; God provides garments made of an animal sacrificed to clothe them, and God speaks of a serpent crusher (v.15), who will one day crush evil under his feet.

The fall is our story and it's a sad story, yet put it in the context of salvation history and you can see God's redemptive love working even as the world unravels. At the cross, Jesus becomes the serpent crusher, giving us a heavenly hope of a new Eden, the new Jerusalem, where hunger, sickness, and war can touch us no more.

Chat: How does the story of the fall make you feel? What questions does this story stir in your heart? Why is this story foundational for the Jesse Tree and our understanding of salvation history?

Pray: Merciful God, our maker and our judge, thank you that even though we fell you lift us up again. Forgive us for our rebellion and help us to live for you by the power of your Holy Spirit. Thank you that Jesus undid the fall, crushing Satan's head at the cross. Thank you that with you there is hope after the fall. Amen.

CAIN & ABEL



Nov
30th

Read: Genesis 4:1-12

Think: When Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden, God instructed them to have 'dominion over' (which means – learn how to skillfully use) the plants and animals. God gave humans the world to care for and use for their benefit. But it is important to notice that God didn't give them dominion over two things. First, God didn't give them dominion over each other - Adam and Eve were equally in charge of the earth, working together, and sharing in the abundance of the land. Second, God didn't give them dominion over Himself; because He is God and ruler of all. So actually, when Cain asks God "Am I my brother's keeper?" the answer is YES! Cain should have been looking after Abel. But instead, he killed him. If we stop and take a look around our world today, we see that people often forget that we are still our brother's (and sister's) keepers; we are family. Every person on this earth was made in the image of God. Which means that every person has great value! We must see those around us as valuable, made in God's image, and we must take care of each other! Proverbs 22:2 tells us that, "The rich and the poor have this in common; the LORD is the maker of them all."

Chat: Calvin Miller wrote, "God made us to love people and use things. Why is it that we so often love things and use people?" What do you think about this quote? Do you have an answer? What are some ways that you can care for those around you?

Pray: Thank you God for loving us so generously. Please help us to love and care for all people just as you would. Amen.

NOAH'S ARK



Dec
1st

Read: Genesis 6:11-14, 7:17-8:3, 9:8-13

Think: Noah's Ark is the quintessential kids' story. There's a boat, animals, an epic voyage, and a rainbow of hope at the end! Noah's Ark isn't cute though. The corruption and violence of the world and God's disgust at its depravity should be heart wrenching. The idea of a 40-day flood destroying every man, woman, child, and animal in its wake should fill us with horror. The gravity of the covenant God makes with Noah should fill us with joy and awe but also a weighty sense of responsibility.

As you read the Genesis account of Noah's Ark please don't skip over the politically incorrect parts. Don't gloss over the sadness and destruction that sin brings and the drastic measures God goes to in order to give us another chance. Let this story break your heart and give you a hunger for a better world. Noah's Ark isn't just a kids' story, it's a story for us all. It foreshadows the cross and the lengths God goes to to give us another chance.

Chat: Why do you think Noah's Ark is such a popular story? How does it make you feel? How does this story foreshadow Jesus' story?

Pray: God of second chances, thank you that you take sin seriously and don't let evil off the hook. Help us to see the sin in our lives and to hate it like you do. Thank you for Jesus, who died to save us and give us another chance. Amen.

THE PROMISED LAND



Dec
2nd

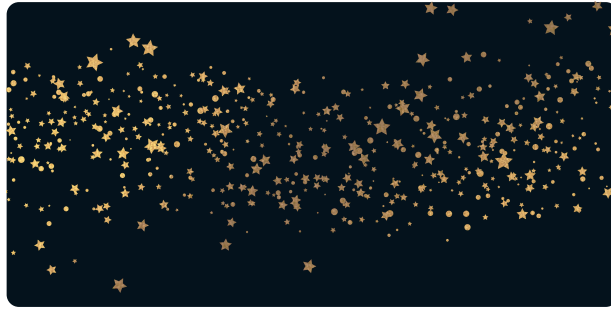
Read: Genesis 12:1-7

Think: Have you ever moved house? Why did you move houses? In today's reading, Abram not only moves house, but moves to a whole other country. Why? Because God spoke to him and told him to go. Abram must have been a little scared, as he packed up all his things and gathered his family. Would God's promise to bless him and make his family into a great nation actually come true? Well yes, of course! And we will read about that in a few days' time. But the big question is about 'why' God is asking Abram and his family to move country. The answer is found in verse 3, "...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." God was asking Abram and his family to make a move, to depend wholly on him, so that they would identify themselves as people devoted to God. But the purpose behind all of this was so that Abram and his family, by living God's way, would be a blessing to all those around them. Likewise, Abram's descendants were to also be a blessing in the generations to come. And do you know that, as a Christian, you are Abram's descendant and God still calls you to be a blessing to all those around you?

Chat: What does it mean to identify as a people devoted to God? What are some ways that we can be a blessing to those around us?

Pray: Thank you God for gathering us as your beloved children. Please help us to find our identity in you, to live your ways, and to bless those people whom we meet each day. Amen.

GOD'S PROMISE TO ABRAHAM



Dec
3rd

Read: Genesis 15:1-6

Think: What's the biggest promise anyone has ever made you? Perhaps a promise about a gift before a birthday or Christmas? Maybe a promise to repay borrowed money? Has someone promised to love you until death before God, friends, and family? A broken promise can destroy you, but a promise kept can be the most life giving act in the world.

God promised Abram (who God later renamed Abraham) descendants in Genesis 12, but in Chapter 15 we see Abram getting impatient. He and his wife are running out of time and his inheritance may have to go to his servant Eliezer. So God affirms his promise and then takes him for a walk outside. He shows him the sky and promises that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky! The Yale Bright Star Index, first published in 1930, estimates the naked eye can see about 5000 stars in the sky on any given night. Within a few generations Abraham had many more than 5000 descendants and through Jesus we can also become descendants of Abraham. This shows us that God's promises are rock solid, even when we have doubts.

Chat: What promises of God do we see fulfilled in the Bible? What promises can we look forward to today? How can we grow in trust?

Pray: Living Lord, thank you that your promises are rock solid. Thank you for the many examples of kept promises in the Bible. Help us to trust that you will keep your promise to make all things new. Amen.

JOSEPH PART 1



Dec
4th

Read: Genesis 37:1-36

Think: Family can be the most wonderful blessing, but sometimes family can also be difficult. Family relationships can carry a lot of baggage that has been picked up over the years, and because we have been living so close to each other, our families have also seen us at our absolute worst. This is the case with Joseph and his brothers. We can see why Joseph might have been difficult to live with - he was particularly loved and treated as special by his father. He had vivid dreams that seemed to suggest that he would rule over his family one day (we'll see that these dreams were from God and were true!), and Joseph didn't mind letting his brothers know about all of this. And so, the ones who should have loved Joseph planned to kill him. But rather than kill him themselves, they sold him for a small amount of silver. Joseph's story foreshadows the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus was also betrayed by those who should have loved him for a small amount of silver. But ultimately God still had a plan to use Joseph and Jesus to rescue those who betrayed them.

Chat: Do you have any strained relationships within your family? Can you pinpoint the original reason they became strained? Are you able to still give thanks for them and seek reconciliation? What part can you take in rebuilding those relationships?

Pray: Dear Jesus, we pray for our family relationships. Please bring healing where it is needed and bind us together by your Spirit. Amen.

JOSEPH PART 2



Dec
5th

Read: Genesis 42:1-14, 45:1-15

Think: Imagine looking the people who had betrayed you in the eye, knowing your chance for revenge had arrived. Imagine then deciding to show them mercy and love instead!

This is exactly what Joseph does. His brothers, who had debated whether or not to kill him, were at his mercy and he forgave them instead. Joseph reached into his soul and found enough love for his brothers and, more importantly, love from God to share.

My favourite line in Joseph's story comes in Genesis 50:20 where he looks his brothers in the eye and says: "*You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.*" Through his pain and hardship, through his brothers' betrayal, through the suffering, God brings about the most wonderful family reunion and redemption story.

No matter what you're facing, if you follow Jesus, you can know he's working out his salvation plan around you. God works all things together for the good of those who love Him.

Chat: How did Joseph forgive his brothers? How can we trust our circumstances to God when we find it difficult to forgive?

Pray: Thank you that you work all things together for the good of those who love you. Help us to trust and to forgive. Amen.

10 COMMANDMENTS



Dec
6th

Read: Deuteronomy 5:1-22

Think: "Why so serious?" was a phrase made famous by the Joker in the 2008 film *Batman: The Dark Knight*. When people describe God, they often speak of someone who is serious, all about rules, and certainly not into joking around. While it is true that God has given us rules to live by, he didn't give them to kill our fun. Instead, the rules are there as boundaries to help us enjoy life to its fullest.

Imagine for a moment that you're playing a game of footy, when someone on the other team grabs the ball, runs outside the sidelines, throws a forward pass, and doesn't stop when the referee blows the whistle. They claim a try, but everyone else gets upset because this guy is 'wrecking the game' by not following the rules. The rules actually help us to play the game and keep it fun.

The 10 Commandments (and the other rules that God gives alongside them) are for our benefit. The first four are all about how we should live in relationship with God. And the final six are all about how we should live in relationship with other people. Thanks God!

Chat: If we didn't have the 10 Commandments, how would our world be a **worse** place to live? If everyone did keep the commandments, how much **better** would the world be to live in?

Pray: Thank you God for caring about us enough to give us good rules to live by. Help us to follow them so that we can enjoy life to the fullest. Amen.

RAHAB



Dec
7th

Read: Joshua 2:1-21

Think: She's the original 'scarlet lady', a prostitute who helps some hapless spies escape, and ultimately helps the Hebrews take Jericho. Jericho was a strong fortified city and was the gateway to the Holy Land. God only knows how the wandering children of freed slaves took such a mighty city, but Rahab played her part. Rahab is courageous, tactical, and wise. She can feel the presence of the Lord taking her city and she knows her only hope is with God's people. So she takes the most incredible risk, shielding the Hebrew spies, and helping them escape.

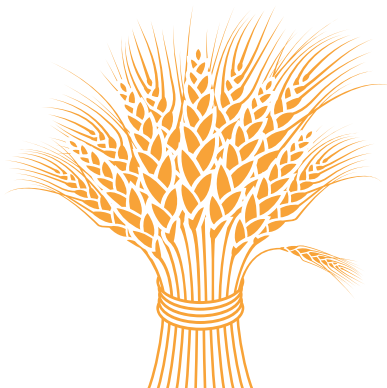
One of the most amazing parts of this story is its epilogue. Not much is said about Rahab in the Bible after Jericho is taken, but in Matthew 1:5 we read that she is an ancestor of Jesus himself. By faith she trusted her future to God and had the immense honour of becoming part of the Jesse Tree (Jesse's great grandmother in fact).

Rahab is a reminder that no matter who we are, what we've done, or what our future looks like, the path of faith always leads to life.

Chat: Who is someone you might never think would be interested in faith? What does it mean for us that Rahab was an ancestor of Jesus?

Pray: Lord God, thank you for Rahab's example of courage and faith. Help deepen my faith, Holy Spirit, and to grow in courage. Amen.

RUTH & BOAZ



Dec
8th

Read: Ruth 2:1-4:12

Think: Things were going well for Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth. But suddenly both of their husbands die and they find themselves widowed, vulnerable, and in a hopeless situation. What would they do? Where could they go? Would anyone care for them? Even though Ruth was Naomi's daughter-in-law, she said to Naomi "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God." And so they both returned from Moab to Bethlehem. In Bethlehem there was a man named Boaz who lived his life God's way. He worshipped God and cared for the vulnerable. Even though Ruth was a foreigner, Boaz ensured that she and Naomi were safe and provided for.

Ruth and Boaz both lived lives of integrity, faithfulness, generosity and care. Ruth gave her whole self to Naomi to care for her, and Boaz eventually gave his whole self to Ruth as her kinsmen redeemer. On Christmas Day, we will celebrate another kinsmen redeemer who stepped into our hopeless situation and rescued us - Jesus!

Chat: What stands out to you in this story about Naomi, Ruth and Boaz? Have you ever been rescued from a hopeless situation? Have you ever considered how hopeless your situation was before Jesus rescued and redeemed you?

Pray: Thank you Jesus for rescuing and redeeming me. Amen.

DAVID - CHILD KING



Dec
9th

Read: 1 Samuel 16:1-15

Think: David was anointed long before he became king. Whilst only a boy (no older than 13) he was out tending his sheep when he was called to a banquet for the great prophet Samuel. David must have found this invitation to eat at such a banquet with the adults very strange. Next he's anointed king of Israel, right in front of his older brothers! While the Bible tells us that David had a 'fine appearance', we're also told that God chose him because he was a man after God's own heart. God could see something in David that not even his father Jesse could. God knew that David had what it would take to lead his people, but he also knew David needed time to grow.

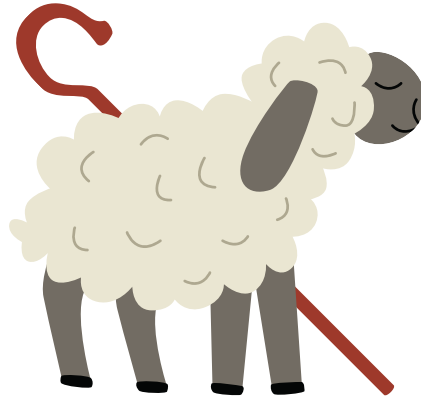
So Samuel leaves as mysteriously as he arrives, and it will be many years before David is publicly crowned King of Israel.

This is a great reminder that God may be doing great things in you on this inside, even when no one can see it. As we carry on through Advent make sure you're making time to work on your heart and invest your relationship with God. God has anointed you for service, take time to work on your heart.

Chat: Why did God chose David? How can you work on your heart and your relationship with God in the lead up to Christmas?

Pray: Majesty of Heaven, thank you that you know my heart and love me all the same. Help me draw closer to you everyday. Amen.

DAVID - SHEPHERD KING



Dec
10th

Read: 2 Samuel 5:1-5

Think: What makes a leader? Is it having a title like CEO, manager, or even Priest? Or is it something else? Something deeper? David's family said to him, "Even while Saul was our king, you were the one who really led Israel" and they recount how God had already told David that he would be a shepherd king. A shepherd is one who cares for, protects, fights for, feeds, and walks closely with the sheep. This of course was in contrast to King Saul, who came before David. In John 10, Jesus elaborates on what it means to be a shepherd king when he says that a true shepherd is so known by their sheep that the sheep know their voice and that they listen, trust and follow the shepherd's leading. Jesus says that a true shepherd will even lay down their life for the sheep, and goes on to proclaim, "I am the good shepherd... And I lay my life down for the sheep."

The thing that allowed David to be this type of leader rested on the fact that he himself knew that he had the one true King ruling over him. David was first a follower, a disciple, and then a king. And with his heart turned towards and seeking after God, he pointed us towards the true Shepherd King - Jesus the Messiah.

Chat: Why are the characteristics of a shepherd so vital for leadership? How can we each seek to shepherd those in our care?

Pray: King Jesus, thank you for leading us as our Shepherd King. Thank you for laying down your life for us. Amen.

SOLOMON BUILDS GOD'S TEMPLE



Dec
11th

Read: 1 Kings 5:5, 6:1-38

Think: Solomon built the temple, David got the gear! The temple Solomon built was a special place, not just because it was a magnificent building, but because it was where God's people could meet with God. The Holy of Holies was where God's presence rested when the temple was finished. Sadly, the people took God's presence for granted and continued to sin even though God was in their midst. Thankfully God had better plans and while the temple was destroyed, his plan to dwell with his people wasn't. He didn't want people to have to go to a room to be with him in person.

God decided he would become the temple. Jesus called himself the temple. He is fully human and fully God, a place where humanity and divinity meet! We don't have to go to a special room anymore, instead we can come directly to God because of Jesus. How good is that?!

Chat: Why was the temple so special to Solomon and to the people? Why did God decide to let us meet him anywhere, not just in a special room? How are we temples of the Holy Spirit today?

Pray: Holy Spirit, sanctifier, thank you that you live in me and that I can be with you forever. Help me to honour your presence through holy living and may I dwell in your house forever. Amen.

ISAIAH'S PROPHECY OF A SAVIOUR



Dec
12th

Read: Isaiah 9:2-7

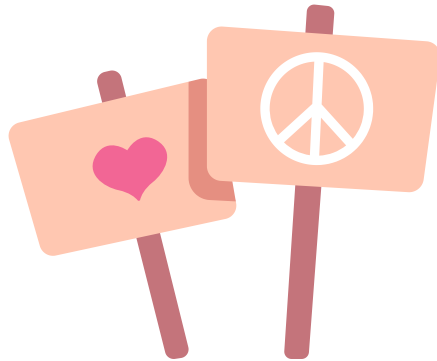
Think: Have you ever been in a place that is completely dark? Whether physical, emotional, or spiritual, the darkness is full of unknowns and often burdened with fear. This is how the author of Genesis describes the world before God said those marvellous words "let there be light!" And this is how God (through the Prophet Isaiah) describes the world before Jesus comes to dwell with us. But just as light was good on that first day of creation, God promised that it would be the greatest joy when the light of heaven came to shine among the people of Israel.

There are quite a few pieces of information that Isaiah gives us in this passage regarding this great light. Isaiah says the the light would come as a baby boy. He will break the chains that bind his people and he will bring forth a time of peace as the government rests on his shoulders. We are also told of his royal titles: Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Finally, we are told that his kingdom will be filled with righteousness and justice and that all of this would be unending. What incredible promises! Could this be true?

Chat: These promises became real and true in the person of Jesus. Try to describe a world without Jesus. How does Jesus change it all?

Pray: Jesus, you are the light of the world. Thank you for shining into our darkness. Please come again soon in all of your glory. Amen.

ISAIAH'S PROPHECY OF THE 2ND COMING



Dec
13th

Read: Isaiah 11:6-9

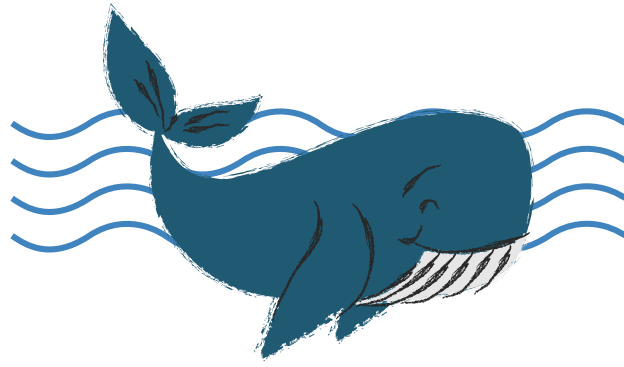
Think: When I was 11 years old, Yugoslavia invaded Kosovo. It was a particularly harrowing time for me because I was living down the road in Poland, about 900km away from the conflict. For the first time in my life I saw a war being played out on TV, only a day's journey away. The war in Kosovo fizzled out, but tensions remain between the peoples of that region. The children of these nations still long for what Isaiah foretold, a time when the wolf will lie down with the lamb. A time when children and snakes can coexist in harmony. No more war or suffering, just pure harmony.

While we're still waiting for a world like this, we know the one through whom it will come, and we have his peace. Jesus is our peace and when he comes to make all wrongs right again, heaven and earth will become one and the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord. Jesus brings everlasting peace and that's something worth living for!

Chat: What are some areas of conflict in your life? How can you ask God to help you deal with the conflict in your life? How can you share God's peace today?

Pray: Prince of Peace, thank you that you are my peace. Help me to share that peace with others today. Amen.

JONAH



Dec
14th

Read: Jonah 3:1-5

Think: "Can you hear me? Jonah, can you hear me?" Yes, Jonah could hear just fine - but it still didn't mean that he wanted to obey. Was it because Jonah was scared of travelling? No. Was it because Jonah was scared of preaching? No. Was it because Jonah didn't think those rotten scoundrels in Nineveh were deserving of God's forgiveness? Yes! Oh wow, Jonah... This is not good! In 1:9 Jonah identifies himself and says, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." And in 4:2 Jonah goes on to say, "I know that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity." And so, Jonah seems to know God quite well. The problem though lies with Jonah's disdain of his neighbours - the people of Nineveh. Jonah saw them as being undeserving of his God's love, even though God made it very clear that he loved the people of Nineveh very much - enough to send a prophet to them so that they would turn from evil and be saved! But even at the end of the story with a repentant Nineveh, Jonah still refused to soften his heart towards them and preferred to have never gone in the first place. Oh Jonah, it's good news for everyone!

Chat: Is there anyone that you find hard to love? How do you feel to hear that God's love is not contained within earthly borders?

Pray: Loving God, soften our hearts to those around us, and use us to share of your love and grace with all those that we meet. Amen.

DANIEL & THE LION'S DEN



Dec
15th

Read: Daniel 6

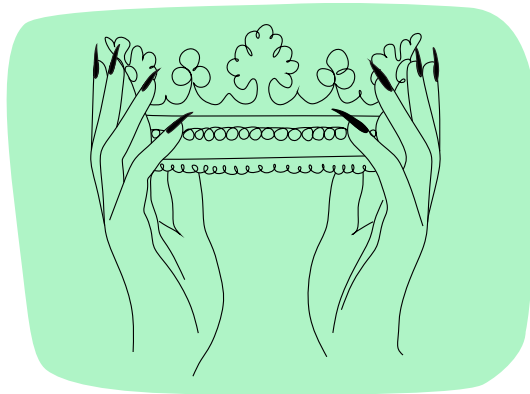
Think: Daniel and the Lion's Den is a story of bravery and faith but it's also a story of God's power to save his people. After they were exiled to Babylon, it seemed as if God had abandoned his people, and the covenant people of God were lost forever. Daniel 6 shows us how the Israelites retained their distinct identity and how God's grace pulled them through. This story also foreshadows resurrection. Daniel is faithful to God unto the end and commits to worshipping God even if he is not delivered. As a stone is rolled over the lion's den, Daniel is left for dead. The following morning though, as the stone is rolled away, Daniel is found alive and still praising God!

The echoes of a powerful ruler sentencing an innocent man to death, only for him to later rise to life, carry through the ages, to the time of Jesus, and even unto us today. In many ways we are living in Babylon today. We live in a godless empire where our faith is seen as a threat to society. Daniel's story reminds us today to never to give up on God.

Chat: How did Daniel hold onto his faith, even under the threat of death? How can I hold onto God when I'm under pressure?

Pray: Almighty God, thank you that you shut the mouths of the lions. Help me to trust you with the challenges I face, and to praise you no matter what. Amen.

ESTHER SAVES GOD'S PEOPLE



Dec
16th

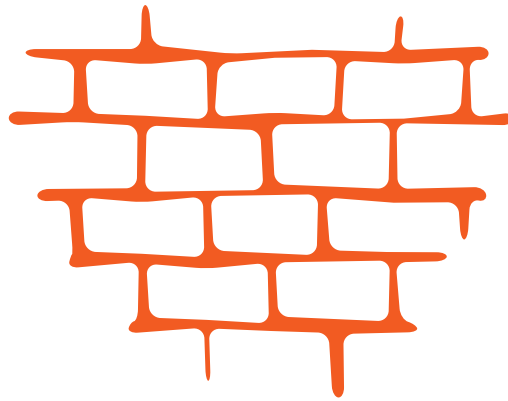
Read: Esther 4

Think: What the bravest thing you've ever done? My two year old son Ezra is all about being brave at the moment. This week he told me that he was being brave when he sat in his own seat on the airplane we were on (which was brave) but he also claimed to be brave when he let me brush his teeth (not so brave). Esther was a women who was certainly brave! A man named Haman had just convinced King Xerxes to kill the whole Jewish population - of which Esther was one. No one could enter the king's presence without fear of death, but Esther's uncle Mordecai challenged her with the words, "Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?". Esther then sets us an example as she summons all of her bravery. She calls on her whole community to fast and pray with her as they intercede for this pivotal moment in Jewish history. Esther was willing to put her life on the line so that her people might be saved. Does that sound like anyone else you've heard of? Jesus too was willing to go to the cross, but not just for his people (the Jewish population). Jesus went to the cross so "that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16).

Chat: What's something brave that you can do to make other people's lives better?

Pray: Holy Spirit, please grow in us a willingness to serve our brothers and sisters. Make us brave that we might work for your glory. Amen.

EZRA & NEHEMIAH



Dec
17th

Read: Nehemiah 2:1-18, 8:1-10

Think: The book of Nehemiah is all about rebuilding. It begins in the palace of Emperor Artaxerxes, where his servant Nehemiah is yearning to be in Jerusalem, in God's holy city, among God's holy people. By a miracle of God, Artaxerxes decides to send Nehemiah back to his hometown and to pay for the rebuilding of Jerusalem, even the temple! In Nehemiah 8 we see the people of Israel in the courts of the newly rebuilt temple weeping. They're tears of repentance because, for the first time in generations, the law has been read in public. Nehemiah says: *“Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”* As buildings are rebuilt, so is the faith of the people. They go from weeping to rejoicing.

God has a building project to complete inside our hearts and even though our lives may be marked by pain and suffering, the story of Ezra and Nehemiah is a reminder that God deserves our trust at all times.

Chat: What are you yearning for in life? Do Christians have the same basis for rejoicing as the people did in Nehemiah's day? If so, how?

Pray: Holy, Holy, Holy Lord, thank you that you rebuild our hopes and rebuild our lives. Help us to trust your providence in all things. Amen.

PROPHECY OF A SAVIOUR BORN IN BETHLEHEM



Dec
18th

Read: Micah 5:1-5

Think: How can we be sure that God's promises are true and that he is going to keep them? Well you and I both know that unless we actually know someone, it's going to be hard to trust them. But the wonderful thing about God is that he wants us to know Him. Some of the ways that God has made Himself known to us is through nature, through our conscience, through experiencing His Spirit, and of course through the Bible. Throughout this study booklet, we have read plenty of promises that God has given to His people. And time after time, we have discovered that God is in-fact a promise keeper. Here again in Micah we find a promise - that a great ruler will come out of an insignificant town called Bethlehem. Not just any ruler. One whose origins are from ancient times. We know this promise was kept on that first Christmas Day when Jesus was born.

Chat: As you look back on your life, what are the things that cause you to see God as trustworthy? Are there any barriers that cause you to doubt God's trustworthiness?

Pray: Jesus, the Bible tells us that you are the firstborn of all creation and Saviour of all. Please help us to know you more and increase our faith in your trustworthiness as we bring all of our fears, troubles, doubts, and joys before you. Amen.

PROMISE OF A NEW COVENANT



Dec
19th

Read: Malachi 4

Think: When someone stops talking to you, you often find yourself turning their final words over in your head again and again. The book of Malachi marks the final words of the Old Testament prophets and the last words of revelation in our Bibles for 400 years.

The book of Malachi is filled with words of condemnation and rebuke for the people. They have wandered far off from God and refuse to listen to Him anymore. God promises judgement but there is also a faint flicker of hope. Malachi sees in the distance the coming of the day of the Lord, and in the lead up he will send Elijah who will turn hearts around and lead people back to God.

400 years later, John the Baptist comes on the scene preaching a message of repentance. Hearts are turned back and John clearly takes on the mantle of Elijah as God's mouthpiece. The silence is broken and John prepares the way for Jesus, who brings mercy and hope for us all. May we heed the closing words Malachi and live lives of repentance, looking forward to the day when we can speak to God face to face.

Chat: Why are these words of Malachi so urgent? In what areas of my life do I need to repent and turn back to God?

Pray: Merciful God, thank you that your nature is always to have mercy. Help us to live lives of repentance, looking forward to the day of the Lord. Amen.

ELIZABETH & ZECHARIAH



Dec
20th

Read: Luke 1:5-25

Think: If an angel were to stand in front of you and tell you that God had got you a special gift, what do you think you would say? Thank you? The Bible is full of imperfect people doing and saying imperfect things, just trying to do their best. We look back with hindsight and say, "Oh how could they!"

But let's be honest for a second. Zechariah responded in a naturally human way when faced with an angel. Even though he had been praying for a child (likely for a long time!), he was still caught off guard to hear directly from an angel that he and his wife Elizabeth were finally going to be proud parents. "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years" Zechariah said. It's a good question! Lots of people would doubt at this point, but I wonder why God caused Zechariah to be silent? Was it so that he could hear God clearly over the next nine months? Was it to prepare his heart for what it meant to be the father of John the Baptist and uncle to Jesus?

Chat: What are some ways that you can block out all the noise of Christmas to spend some quiet time with God? What would you like to say to him? What would you like to hear?

Pray: Holy Spirit, please quiet my heart and mind. Help me to be silent in your presence and to hear your voice. Please focus all of my attention on you and draw me close to your heart. Amen.

GOD CHOOSES MARY



Dec
21st

Read: Luke 1:26-38

Think: What's the toughest thing you've ever had to do? If it's harder than bearing and raising the Son of God, then you know exactly how Mary felt! As we've worked our way up the rungs of the Jesse Tree, we've seen some people take on some very hard assignments. The people in Jesus' family line were often courageous and faithful, but they were far from perfect. Mary is about as near to perfection as you get though. She's honest, faithful, and incredibly brave. She's humble, obedient, and deliberate. God chose the perfect earthly mum for his Son, and Mary was rightly daunted by the task she's given by the angel Gabriel, she's no wallflower!

In Mary, we see that God knows who we are and what we can handle. God cares enough about who we are to give us assignments that match our personalities and temperaments. That said, Mary never says: "I can do this!". Instead she says: "I am the Lord's servant". We never have what it takes to accomplish the work God has for us in our own strength. That's why we need to rely on God all the way.

Chat: What are some aspects of Mary's character that you'd like God to instil in you? What are some things God might be calling you to?

Pray: God of all hopefulness and love, create in me a faithful and obedient heart, that I may accomplish your plans for me. Amen.

ANGEL APPEARS TO JOSEPH



Dec
22nd

Read: Matthew 1:18-25

Think: Have you ever wished for a quiet and 'normal' life? Put yourself in Joseph's shoes for a moment. He loves Mary, but to be the adoptive dad to the Son of God... Really? How would he explain this to all the people who think he's making a bad choice? And so he thinks to himself, "I'll just slip away quietly. I don't want to embarrass Mary, but also I didn't sign up for all of this!"

Unfortunately for those who do wish for 'quiet and normal' (whatever normal is?), God is not really in the business of providing those levels of comfort. He would much rather invite us to partner with him in what he is doing in the world. And what he is doing is always beyond our wildest dreams. For God, all things are possible and his love extends to all people and places. If we make space for God to lead us, it will be full, exciting, probably a bit messy as we try to figure it out, but ultimately, the best choice we could make. Joseph said "yes" to God even though he didn't understand. God then took Joseph's "yes" and used him in a truly marvellous way.

Chat: Will you say "yes" to God even if it means that other people think you're weird or silly? How does Joseph inspire you to offer yourself into God's hands - to do whatever he sees fit?

Pray: Jesus, please use us for your purposes and your glory - however you see fit. May you be honoured in all we say and do. Amen.

MARY & ELIZABETH



Dec
23rd

Read: Luke 1:39-56

Think: I love the relationship that Mary and Elizabeth have. Elizabeth might have been put out that her younger cousin was stealing her thunder by getting pregnant at the same time. She might have been jealous of Mary's greatness, especially considering she was so young. Instead, Elizabeth and Mary cling to one another and rejoice in the favour the Lord has shown each other them. The Holy Spirit unites these two dancing spirits and their joy is palpable. God gives them to each other to share this miraculous season in their lives together. Mary supports Elizabeth through childbirth and Elizabeth cares for Mary at a time when she needs an older woman to show her the way. Mary's song is a worship song, and it's also a friendship song. She has a friend in Elizabeth and she has a friend in God. She is highly favoured, but she also has a heart wrenching task to complete. This is why she will need a friend like Elizabeth to help her along the way. Thank God for friends and thank God that he makes it possible for us to be friends with him through Jesus Christ our Lord. May we revel in the friends God has given us and in the friendship he extends to us.

Chat: Who are some friends in your life who point you to God? How can you honour and enjoy their friendship on a regular basis?

Pray: My soul glorifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour!
Amen.

MARY & JOSEPH GO TO BETHLEHEM



Dec
24th

Read: Luke 2:1-5

Think: What's your most memorable family holiday? I'm guessing that for Mary and Joseph, a 150km journey with a donkey whilst heavily pregnant was something they talked about often. I've only recently supported my wife through pregnancy as we welcomed our second son into the world. But I for one can't even imagine what that must have been like for this newlywed couple. Upon seeing Bethlehem coming closer and closer, Mary might have echoed those words that many women before and after her have said, "I don't want to be pregnant anymore. I just want to hold my baby."

It's good for us to pause here for a moment, because this is the heart cry of Advent. We continue to wait expectantly in the midst of all the discomfort and unknowns for the return of Jesus. Could it be tomorrow? Am I prepared? Am I ready?

Chat: If Jesus was to come tomorrow, would you feel prepared and ready? Why? Why not? What would help you to feel ready?

Pray: Glorious God, only you know the day and time when you will wrap all of this up. As we wait expectantly, please continue to prepare and sanctify us. By your grace, help us to prepare and guide to you the hearts of many others who do not know of your forgiveness and love. We wait and pray, come, Lord Jesus!

JESUS IS BORN



Read: Luke 2:6-21

Think: He is the Messiah, the Lord! What wonderful news the angels shared with the shepherds that night. What an honour to have a chorus of angels sing before you and herald the wondrous things God has done for you. Sometimes Christmas can leave us underwhelmed. The presents unexciting, the food overcooked, and the family time tense. The pageantry of Christmas in the 21st century can distract us from the raw unbridled joy of the shepherds. It's amazing that the shepherds don't need to be told what to do or where to go, all they need to know is what is happening and what's been done for them. The wonder of God coming into our world as a little child should fill us with awe on a daily basis.

Today's reading reminds us that at the top of the Jesse Tree and right at the heart of all things is Jesus: the Messiah, the Lord. Without him, Christmas doesn't matter, and thanks to him, everything takes on new meaning, purpose and potential. Don't let anything distract you from Christ today. He really is the King of Christmas.

Chat: What's distracting you from Jesus this Christmas? How can you put those things aside to concentrate on Him?

Pray: Jesus, Messiah, Lord. Thank you for this time to celebrate you today. Thank you for coming to earth to save us. May we take on the awe and wonder the shepherds felt on the night of your birth. Amen.



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