

# The Jesse Tree

## St Paul's 2022

### Introduction: What is a Jesse Tree?

What is a Jesse Tree? Basically it's just an evergreen branch or small tree—sometimes even a bare branch. During the season of Advent biblical symbols are gradually added to the tree, symbols that tell the story of God's redemption and reveal the strong ties between the Old and New Testaments.

The idea for this "family tree" comes from Isaiah's prophecy:

*A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;  
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.  
—Isaiah 11:1*

Long before Jesus' birth, the chosen people already knew that he would come from David's family. David was the greatest of Israel's kings. And the people eagerly anticipated the coming of this second and greater David.

This emphasis on the lineage of the Messiah continued in the New Testament Church. The early Christians often referred to Jesus' roots in their attempts to convince others that he was the Messiah. "Look," they would say, "he was born of Jesse's family, of the house of David—just as the prophets said. He was born in Bethlehem, just as they promised. So he must be the Messiah."

Although today the Jesse Tree is usually simpler than these early masterpieces, it remains an excellent teacher. Through its ornaments, the Jesse Tree reveals in a very vivid way the powerful message of Advent: that the history of the Old Testament sets the stage for the drama of Christ's birth. The tree serves as a symbol of all those people who waited hundreds of years for the Promised One to come. Learning about those people can help us prepare our own hearts and lives for Christ's coming at Christmas and for his coming again.

### ADVENT I

#### **Adam and Eve**

At the end of the story of creation, the scripture says: "God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." God placed the man and the woman in a beautiful garden, to tend it, and to walk with God in the cool of the evening, giving one instruction: "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." Adam and Eve listened to the

serpent, who put before them the temptation to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They ate the fruit, and “their eyes were opened”, and they were no longer able to live in the beautiful garden. Whether we see the story as talking about sin (“the Fall”) or the dawning of consciousness (and loss of innocence), it has remained true through many generations. This story tells us about ourselves and about God: that human beings are inclined to be fickle, that God’s good creation was never meant to be marred by selfish ambition and vain conceit, and that through all generations God remains faithful, acting always to redeem and reconcile the world to Godself.

## **Noah**

The beginning of Noah’s story could read like an excerpt from our news bulletins: “Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence.” This state of affairs was grievous to God, and so God told Noah to build an ark, a large boat, to preserve humans and animals from the coming flood. To the scorn of his neighbours, Noah built the ark and summoned the animals two by two, and so a handful of people and animals survived the deluge which flooded the earth. Once the waters subsided, Noah and his family and menagerie of animals came out of the ark, and the rainbow appeared in the sky. God said: “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” Science tells us that the rainbow is seen when light is reflected, refracted, and diffused through moisture in the air, dividing the wave of light into its component bands, which we see as colours. It can’t explain the rainbow’s beauty, and it remains a symbol to us of God’s promise of new life and salvation through the “deep waters of death”.

## **Abraham and Sarah**

God called Abram and his wife Sarai to leave their home in Haran (modern day southern Turkey) and to travel to the land God promised to Abram’s descendents. Even though Abram and Sarai were too old to have children, God still promised Abram would be Abraham, the father of many nations, and Sarai Sarah the mother. They eventually had a son, Isaac, who became the father of Jacob, and grandfather of Jacob’s twelve sons. God said to Abraham: “Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ And Abraham believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.” What a thing to be said of someone’s faith. Abraham remains a symbol to us of faith even in the face of what seems impossible.

## **ADVENT II**

### **The Jesse Tree, week II**

Last week we began to tell the stories of God's people, which are all interwoven with the story of Jesus' first coming, and teach us about how to live until his return. We heard the stories of creation, of Adam and Eve in the garden, and the fall as they ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil and their eyes were opened. We heard the story of Noah, building an ark even when there wasn't a cloud in the sky, of the flood through which his family was preserved, and of the rainbow promise of God. We heard the story of Abraham and Sarah, of God's promise to them of a land for their descendants, the number of which would be more than the stars in the sky. This week we continue God's story.

### **Jacob**

Jacob left his parents Isaac and Rebecca and headed back to Haran to find a wife. On the way, he was sleeping and had a dream: "he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the LORD stood beside him and said, 'I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring.'" When Jacob woke, he said: " 'Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!'" Once again God confirms the promises made to Abraham and to Isaac, and promises to be with Jacob too. How often do we stand in a place and fail to see God? May our eyes be open and our hearts and minds aware to God's presence in each and every moment and in each and every place we visit in our lives.

### **Joseph**

Joseph was one of Jacob's twelve sons, and his favourite. Jacob gave Joseph a colourful coat with long sleeves. Joseph was also somewhat precocious, and had two dreams in which he foresaw his family bowing down to him. Out of spite, when Joseph was sent to take his brothers a message where they were looking after their sheep, they took him, bound him, threw him in a well, and then tore his coat, dipping it in blood. They sold Joseph to traders as a slave, and told Jacob Joseph had been killed by a wild animal. Joseph eventually became an advisor to Pharaoh, saving Egypt and the lands around it from famine – and his early prophetic dreams about his family bowing to him came true: his brothers and then his father journeyed to Egypt to buy grain. Joseph forgave his brothers: "Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither ploughing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors." May

our prayer be that we are able to see God's hand in our circumstances, and that God works together for the good of those who trust God.

## **Moses**

After several hundred years in Egypt, the Israelites had become enslaved to the Egyptians. In the foundation story of the Israelite people, God sent Moses to lead the people out of slavery and into freedom in the Promised Land, the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It was Moses who stood up to Pharaoh, who, with his brother Aaron spoke God's words to Pharaoh: "Let my people go!" Moses led the people through the wilderness, crossing through the Red Sea on dry ground, led by God's presence in a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night. It was to Moses God gave the covenant, symbolised by the ten commandments received on Mount Sinai. When the Israelites reached the border of Canaan and then complained about the land of Canaan, Moses led them 40 years as they wandered the wilderness at God's command. And at the eve of a new generation poised to enter the land promised to their forebears, Moses charged the people: Which will you choose? To serve God, and worship God only? Or to turn away from God's ways and do your own thing? Choose life! Of Moses it was said: "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face." We would do well, for such a thing to be said of us; that we were such friends of God that we were known "face to face".

## **ADVENT III**

### **The Jesse tree, week III**

Over the last two weeks, we've been telling the stories of God's people as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ, and for his coming again. We heard the stories of Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham and Sarah. We heard about Jacob, and his vision of angels ascending and descending a ladder, and of the renewal of God's promises to Abraham now made to Jacob. We heard about Joseph, favourite son of Jacob, sold into slavery in Egypt, but raised up by God to save many from a great famine. We heard about Moses, called to lead the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. This week we continue God's story.

### **David**

David, the second King of Israel, holds a special place in the stories of God's people. A shepherd-boy, the stories about David tell of his daring—challenging a giant Philistine and refusing to listen to the way Goliath was blaspheming the God of Israel; leading many campaigns to the point that his military prowess was envied by King Saul. David was also a poet, who wrote and sang songs to God, the psalms which we still use in our services and prayers today. His faith was honoured to the point that God promised one of David's descendants would always sit on the throne of David's kingdom, and that among those royal successors would be the King David himself called "my Lord" in Psalm 110. David left a curious legend: the later years of his reign depict an indecisive and unstable leader, whose unruly sons were constantly vying with him for power. Nevertheless, subsequent generations looked back to David as the epitome of God's chosen leaders for God's people: kings who walked closely with God, who were successful in battle (or peace/trade), and whose long reigns brought stability to the people. The promise of David's Son who would sit on David's throne and rule the nations kept alive the dream and prophecy of a kingdom in which the lion would lie down with the lamb, and in which there would be peace on God's holy mountain.

### **Isaiah**

Isaiah was one of the many prophets of Israel, whose ministry spanned four kings and more than forty years. He was probably related to the royal family. His prophecies are vivid, and while the bulk of them are directed at Israel, they also include God's words to some of the surrounding nations. Isaiah was constantly warning the fickle people to turn to God, that if they continued in their wicked ways they would end up suffering, defenceless, wiped out by their enemies. If they followed God's ways they would prosper, defended by God's powerful presence.

Some of the most beautiful and moving passages are amongst Isaiah's prophecies, and Christians very quickly came to see these as predicting the coming of Christ, the Son of David who would sit on David's throne:

"For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
His authority shall grow continually,  
and there shall be endless peace  
for the throne of David and his kingdom.  
He will establish and uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness  
from this time onwards and for evermore.  
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this."

## **Daniel**

True to the prophets' many warnings, the corruption in Israel's leadership over successive generations resulted in the exile to Babylon. There, the Jewish people looked back to their homeland, their culture and identity shaped dramatically through the exilic experience. Several of their number rose to hold office in the Babylonian empire, and among them Daniel, whom God had gifted with dreams and their interpretation. He became an advisor to Kings Darius and Cyrus, and was probably influential in the return of the exiles to Judah during Cyrus' reign.

One of the most iconic stories about Daniel is his sojourn in the lion's den. After being manipulated by advisors who were jealous of Daniel, Darius decreed that for thirty days the people should only pray to the king, not to their gods. Daniel (and presumably the Israelites) refused, and so was thrown into a den containing hungry lions. The next day the king had Daniel fished out of the lion's den, amazed (and relieved) to see he was alive and unharmed. Daniel's explanation was that: "My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths so that they would not hurt me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no wrong." The king then decreed that Daniel's God, the God of Israel, was the only true God (a common pattern in the scripture stories of the exile). Daniel stands as an example of quiet and determined faith in the face of opposition.

## **ADVENT IV**

### **The Jesse Tree – week IV**

Through Advent we've been tracing the stories of God's people: Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses. We heard about King David, and the promise that one of David's descendants would sit eternally on David's throne. We heard about Isaiah and the prophets who prophesied both about the destruction wickedness brings, as well as the hope of restoration and blessing for God's people. We heard about Daniel, and his bravery and faith in the face of adverse circumstances. This week, the story draws the strands of hope and prophecy together.

### **Zechariah and Elizabeth**

Zechariah was an elderly priest, who finally after years of waiting got his turn to minister in the sanctuary of the temple. He and his wife had been unable to have children. As he took the censer in his hand, with the incense billowing from it, the angel Gabriel appeared and declared that they would conceive and have a son, who would be "filled with the Holy Spirit". This child would be the Forerunner, the prophet Elijah returned to those who had waited for him through the years. Zechariah couldn't believe this news, and so was struck mute until the time that the child should be born. Sure enough, Elizabeth conceived, and the child was born. Mary, a relative of Elizabeth, came to visit while both women were pregnant, and Elizabeth's child leapt in the womb, a sign of recognition of his cousin, Jesus. When the child was born and the time came to name the child, friends and relatives gathered, and tossed names around. Zechariah wrote emphatically on a tablet, "His name is John", and so began to speak, praising God for God's goodness. Elizabeth, too, joined in praise for what God had done for her.

### **Annunciation (Mary)**

Mary, who was engaged to Joseph, a carpenter in Nazareth, also had a visit from Gabriel with a message: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

Mary remains for us an example of great faith.

## **John the Baptist**

As foretold by Gabriel to John's father Zechariah, John became a prophet with a singular message: Repent! He baptised people as a sign of their repentance from their sins, and preached and exhorted people with fiery words to live true to the calling of God, to live generously, sharing resources; to be honest in all dealings and not cheat or defraud anyone. When Jesus appeared and came down to the water to be baptised, John offered the testimony: "Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world; I am not worthy to untie his sandals." And when Jesus insisted on being baptised, John told the story of how, when Jesus rose from the deep waters, heaven parted, the dove descended, and the voice from heaven said, "Behold my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him." John is significant to us because he points the way to Jesus—which is nothing less than the vocation of all those who claim to follow him, that in all we do and say, our actions and words, our very lives, speak of Christ.