

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.