The Advent Tree

Meeting Jesus in God's Big Story

Kara Eidson

Illustrations by Kelli Cooper

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Introduction

In the chaos leading up to Christmas, Christians enter into the season of Advent, a season of waiting and anticipation that extends four Sundays prior to December 25. The sacred season of Christmas extends from December 25 to January 5 (the "Twelve Days of Christmas" that we know so well from the popular holiday tune), ending with the celebration of Epiphany on January 6.

My Christmas tree goes up the weekend after American Thanksgiving, and I have packages wrapped and under the tree long before the holy days of Christmas begin. But in a globalized economy where we can have what we want almost as soon as we want it (think strawberries in January or free one-day shipping), the sacred call of anticipation may be more important than ever, especially for those who are preparing their hearts and minds for the coming of Christ during the season of Advent.

During my childhood, my family had a tradition of participating in a Jesse tree Bible study each December. As we counted down the days to Christmas, we read Scripture each day and added an embroidered symbol related to the Bible passage to the

felt wall hanging my mother had made. My sister and I carefully kept track of whose turn it was to hang up each day's symbol and excitedly waited our turn. This is a treasured memory from my childhood, and I believe that this family tradition sparked my fascination with Scripture at an early age.

The Jesse for whom the tradition is named is the father of King David. The prophet Isaiah declared: "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots" (11:1). At the time of this prophecy, the Northern Kingdom (Israel) had fallen to the Assyrians, and the Southern Kingdom (Judah) was about to fall to the Babylonians. In a time of profound hopelessness, Isaiah's prophecy offered assurance to the children of Abraham that God would send a leader from the lineage of the great King David who would restore Israel to its golden age and usher in an age of peace and justice. Christians traditionally see Jesus as this righteous leader, descended (as Matthew's genealogy says) from King David, and so this "stump of Jesse" has come to represent Jesus' connection to the Old Testament and all the events of Scripture prior to his actual birth.

Artistic renditions of the Jesse tree date as far back as the medieval period. The images can be found in many cathedrals, depicted in stained glass windows, tapestries, and a variety of other art forms, and were used to teach the stories of Scripture. I don't know at what point the Jesse tree became associated with Advent, but as a tradition for the time leading up to Jesus' birth, the Jesse tree has been used to explore the meaning of Jesus' birth in light of the full story of Scripture.

This book is an Advent study inspired by the tradition of the Jesse tree. We'll discover a family tree of Jesus that has roots in the Hebrew Scripture's stories of God and God's people passed down through the millennia and branches that extend beyond the people of Israel to include the whole world. Some of the stories we'll read are about people in Jesus' direct family lineage, but my focus is less on genealogy and more on answering the age-old question: "Who are we?" With that question in mind, I have chosen texts that tell the story of faith, from

creation to the birth of Jesus Christ, in an exploration of the identity of the Christian people.

During the Christian season of Advent and the celebration of Christmas, we consistently come across language in Hebrew Scriptures that highlights the need for a savior. This language can be found in some of our most popular music, such as "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" (Isa. 7:14) or the lyrics of Handel's *Messiah*: "For unto us, a child is born/unto us a Son is given . . ./and His name shall be called Wonderful,/Counsellor, the Mighty God,/ the Everlasting Father,/the Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6). While it is common to hear Hebrew Scriptures calling for a savior read during this season, these passages are often read out of their own historical and cultural context. Simultaneously, it is difficult to fully understand the significance of the birth of Jesus Christ without first understanding all that leads up to his birth.

The story of Jesus does not begin in Bethlehem over two thousand years ago. The story begins in Genesis with "in the beginning" (Gen. 1:1, RSV). The entirety of Hebrew Scripture influenced and informed the story of Jesus' life and ministry, and it also impacts how the Christian community views his death and resurrection. It is also vital to remember that the story of Jesus doesn't end with the ascension. The story of Jesus continues into our present and is the story of where we are headed in the future. This Advent and Christmas season, we will explore God's greater story of the past, how it can inform us in the present, and how that story carries us into the future.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

From the First Sunday of Advent through Epiphany on January 6, each day has a Scripture reading and accompanying devotional, followed by questions that can be used for discussion or for private reflection. Following the inspiration of the Jesse tree, each day's Scripture is paired with a symbol. Illustrations of each symbol can serve several purposes:

You can use the symbols included in the book as a form of *visio divina*, a monastic practice. Adapted from the practice of *lectio divina*, in which one reads a passage of Scripture repeatedly and meditates on it, participants in *visio divina* are encouraged to choose a religious image and then look at the image, meditate on its meaning, pray about the image, and spend time in contemplation simply resting in God's presence.

If you enjoy having something to do with your hands while reflecting, you can download coloring pages with the symbol for each day at www.wjkbooks.com/AdventTree. There are more complex versions for adults and simplified coloring pages for kids. For those using this study, whether as an individual or family, I encourage you to think of your coloring time each day as a spiritual practice. Consider reading the Scripture and the day's devotional first, and then spend time in reflection and prayer on the readings while you color. Coloring each page can be used as a time of meditation during the Advent season. Find a place in your home to display your coloring pages throughout the season. While many of us no longer display our artwork on the refrigerator in our adult years, it's beautiful to see the story unfold before your eyes as you approach Christmas day and then move through the days leading to Epiphany.

If you are using this study as a congregation or in a small group, you might consider creating a large Christmas tree out of green butcher block paper somewhere within the church building. As the tree fills with the symbols and creative works of the congregation, it will be a fun way to see how people are participating at home.

There are twelve family devotions included in this book, with devotionals geared toward families with kids who are preschool and elementary aged. These family devotions follow the general arc of the daily devotions included in the book but are age appropriate for younger participants. These include a simplified illustration for each of the twelve devotions, discussion questions, and a repeat-after-me-prayer for the entire household.

Also available online are resources for pastors and worship leaders to use *The Advent Tree* as their worship series during the Advent/Christmas seasons. The downloadable worship resources packet includes liturgical resources, community questions, prompts for children's time and repeat-after-me prayers, suggestions for worship art, and sermon prompts for each Sunday and holy day. All direct quotations of scripture are from the NRSVue.

Advent Week One
The Stump of Jesse

When Tolkien wrote The Lord of the Rings, he wrote it as one complete book. His publisher was appalled at the length of the book, insisting no one would ever buy a book that long. Tolkien publicly disliked his publisher's final decision to break up the lengthy story into three separate books. However, any LOTR devotee can tell you that all three books are critical for understanding the long and complicated story.

There are a multitude of characters and stories present throughout the text that Christians include as canon in the book we call the Bible. Sometimes it's hard to follow and keep up. While the books included in the Christian Bible were written by many authors across the span of centuries, our body of sacred text is comprised of different ways and extensions of telling the story of God and God's people. Although our Bibles divide the Hebrew Scriptures—the Old Testament—from the books of the New Testament, the Christian tradition upholds that they are part of the same story. As Isaiah's stump of Jesse metaphor suggests, new shoots have old roots. We cannot understand the birth of Jesus Christ, including its historical, spiritual, and cultural significance, without understanding the greater story

into which this birth takes place. Our Christian story does not begin on Christmas Day; it begins in the dark void in the first chapter of Genesis.

Through Advent, we will explore various parts of this story, constantly asking the questions: (1) Who is God? (2) Who are we as God's people? and (3) How does God call us to be in community with the Divine, one another, and the entirety of God's creation? It would be hubris to assume we will find all the answers—but I believe the beauty of faith is in the journey, in asking the questions, in exploring the answers. As we prepare for and anticipate the coming of Christ, we will try to further understand how Jesus fits into God's greater story, in the hopes of better understanding how each of us fit into God's greater story as well. Just as Tolkien believed The Lord of the Rings belonged within one book because it is the same story, all the different stories of the Bible combine to tell us one great story about the Divine.

SUNDAY

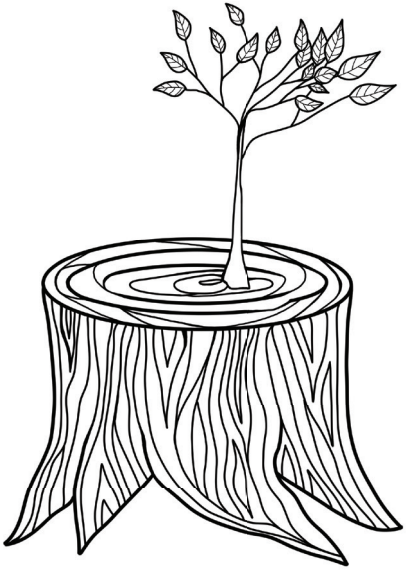
A Branch of the Tree of Jesse
Isaiah 11:1–9

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the reign of King David is often remembered as a golden age for Israel. This is why Isaiah invoked David—via David's father, Jesse—when prophesying hope to the people of Israel, saying "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots" (v. 1).

After the exodus of the Hebrew people from Egypt, they settled in the land of Israel where judges initially ruled the nation, but eventually the rule was turned over to King Saul. After Saul's death, David was crowned the next king. After the death of David's son Solomon, Israel split into the Northern Kingdom (Israel) and the Southern Kingdom (Judah). At the time of the prophecy in today's text, the people of Judah watched

nervously as Israel was defeated by the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians posed a constant threat on Judah's northern border. When Babylon rose against their Assyrian occupiers, the Assyrian Empire transformed into the Babylonian Empire, which would eventually conquer Judah.

Isaiah uses the stump metaphor to compare the fall of Israel and Judah to the felling of Jesse's family tree. To fully understand this metaphor, it's important to know that when trees are chopped down, many species will set off shoots from the stump and begin to grow again; as long as the roots are viable, there is still hope that the tree might live. Isaiah promises the people of Judah that the roots of Yahweh's people are still strong, despite everything they might see in the moment. In a time of profound hopelessness, Isaiah's prophecy offered assurance to the children of Abraham that God would send a leader from the lineage of King David who would be as powerful as King David and who would usher in an age of peace and justice.



Isaiah's prophecy assures its readers of a future peace so complete that not only will war cease to exist but also nature itself will live in peace and harmony: "The wolf shall live with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the lion will feed together, and a little child shall lead them" (v. 6).

The Gospel writers of both Matthew and Luke carefully include King David as one of Jesus' ancestors when they list his family tree. Both wrote that Jesus was the fulfillment of the

long-promised and long-awaited Messiah and develop their cases by invoking prophecies like today's reading. In the Hebrew Scriptures, we repeatedly read that this promised peace will arrive with the coming Messiah.

While this idyllic future has yet to come to fruition, we long, like our forebearers, for the just and peaceful world promised by Isaiah. In the season of Advent, Christians prepare for the coming of Christ in the past, present, and future. We prepare for the coming of Christ in the past by preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem. The coming of Christ in the present depends on those who seek to follow Jesus as we attempt to live into the powerful words of the Lord's Prayer: "thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." We invite Christ to join us in the present by working in the here and now to create this peaceable kin-dom promised by the long line of prophets. Finally, we look forward to the future coming of Christ, a time when peace will reign in God's new kin-dom.

As we move toward the hope of Christmas—God with us—we remember that even when it seems all is lost, hope (including hope for peace) is still alive when the roots are strong. In John 14:27, Jesus assures his disciples, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." Through this Advent, we will explore how God has been with humankind in the past and present and how God promises to be part of our story in the future. Through our study of texts, prayerful discernment of their historical context, and application in our modern lives, we will strengthen our roots as people of faith and expand our understanding of the hope Christmas brings.

1. Today's symbol is a tree stump. What does the symbol mean in the context of today's Scripture reading?

2. What stands out to you in Isaiah's poetic prophecy? Which lines resonate with you most deeply and why?

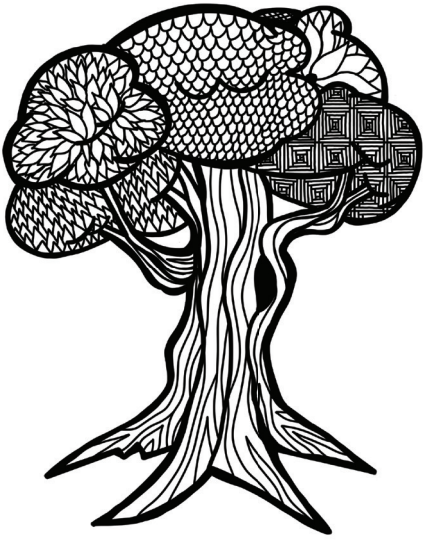
3. In the season of Advent, we prepare for the coming of Christ in the past, present, and future. How does this passage inform us of the past for God's people and what the future may hold?

MONDAY

Birth of Isaac
Genesis 18:1–15; 21:1–7

God promised Abraham and Sarah that if they followed God's commands and entered into covenant with God, the Divine would make a great nation of their descendants. Because of this promise, Abraham and Sarah were expecting to have children, but many years passed, and Sarah had yet to conceive and give birth to a child.

In the ancient Near East, the predominant cultural understanding was that a woman's purpose was to bear sons for her husband. Because this was a strictly patriarchal society, women had very little agency within the culture, and having sons was one way to gain a sense of agency during that era. By this stage in her life, Sarah had reached an age where she was considered barren or unable to have children. The assumption was, in a world without birth control, that a fertile woman would get pregnant if she was in a marital relationship. True to their patriarchal culture,



there was no consideration that a fertility issue might stem from the male. In the context of today's Scripture, infertility caused a woman like Sarah to feel as if she was failing to live into her God-given purpose.

It is entirely possible that Sarah's "old age" may have actually been thirty years, or even twenty-five. Why, then, does the text say she was ninety years old? Have you ever heard someone tell a fishing story where the fish starts out the size of a goldfish, but after telling the story multiple times, the fish has become the size of a shark? Keep in mind that Sarah's story was shared by oral tradition for hundreds of years before being written down and was not intended to be taken literally. Today, we believe history should consist of precise and accurate facts. In that time, sharing oral history was not intended as a precise accounting of the fact but was instead used to convey an important message or truth.

When God's messengers appeared to Abraham by the oak trees and told him that Sarah would finally conceive, Sarah, who overheard, laughed with amused skepticism, an attitude of: "How can this be?" Sarah's amusement at the proclamation eventually led to how she named her son: the Hebrew word *laugh* (*tsachaq*) is wordplay into the name Isaac (*Yitschaq*), which means "he laughs."

God is faithful to the covenant made with Sarah and Abraham, and their descendants turned out to be more numerous than the stars in the sky. But while we know the end of the story, in the moment of today's Scripture, Sarah does not. Sarah's shock and disbelief are understandable. She carried the heavy weight of infertility while waiting many years for this moment to come to pass.

There are seasons in all our lives when it is difficult to believe good will happen again. There are times when it feels as though nothing good could possibly be a part of our future stories. During my time as a campus minister, when I provided pastoral care to young adults in the midst of rapid changes in their lives, I observed that they often experienced each traumatic event as endless. When I transitioned back into the local church, I was reminded that these overwhelming moments, and the panic we feel at a loss of control,

are not confined to the realms of youth. At all ages, sometimes the circumstances of life hit us so hard and so repeatedly that we are convinced that this horrible time will last forever.

As we reflect on the birth of the baby Isaac, we also continue to look forward to the birth of Jesus, the physical embodiment of "God with us." We are called to remember that God never abandons us, and God never leaves us. God has promised to be with us in all times and places, even the worst that this life has to offer. God wanted to be with us so much that God came incarnate to live among us. God can be a companion for us, even in times of hopelessness. God is always a part of our story.

1. Today's symbol is an oak tree. What does the symbol mean in the context of today's Scripture reading?

2. Have you ever received news that you felt was too good to be true? Have you ever received news that made you laugh because the possibility that it might be true was so outrageous? What was the news, and what were the circumstances?

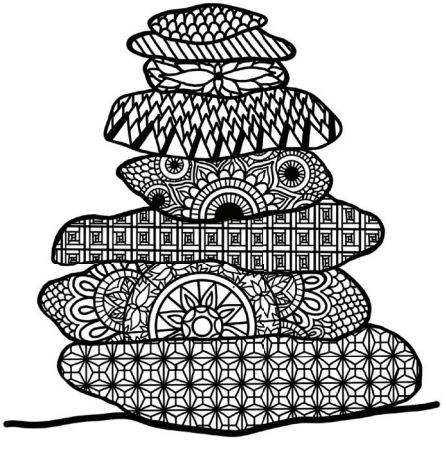
3. Name a season in your life when it felt like nothing could go right. What were the circumstances? How did you feel? Did you feel God's presence with you in that difficult time? If so, is that what kept you going? If not, what kept you holding on to your faith in God's goodness?

TUESDAY

Jacob Becomes Israel
Genesis 28:10–18; 32:24–32

Abraham and Sarah had their son, Isaac, who grew up and married Rebekah. Isaac and Rebekah had two sons, Jacob and Esau. Jacob and Esau were twins, and even their birth was a foreshadowing of their future struggles; Jacob followed Esau

out of the womb by grasping Esau's ankle. The name Jacob even translates to "heel-grabber." In their culture, the lion's share of inheritance went to the firstborn male, so the symbolism of their birth story is that Jacob entered the world attempting to usurp his older brother to gain this bulk of the inheritance. Clearly his attempt as a newborn failed, but through two incidents in young adulthood, Jacob did manage to trick his way into claiming Esau's birthright and inheritance (see Gen. 25:21–34 and 27:1–38). Esau was so angry that he threatened to kill his brother, and Jacob fled for fear of his life.



Today's reading includes two stories in which Jacob received reassurance of God's presence with him, despite all that had happened. When Jacob was first on the run, one night he had a dream about God speaking to him and a vision of a ladder ascending into heaven. When he woke up in the morning, he set up an ebenezer to mark the site as holy (Gen. 28:18). An ebenezer, literally meaning "stone of help," is a way of marking a particularly holy place by setting up a large stone or pile of stones.

Years later, Jacob finally decided to apologize to Esau, and his brother agreed to meet to attempt reconciliation. Jacob was distraught and nervous as he prepared to meet with Esau, waiting for this long-anticipated meeting. It is during this night of sleepless anticipation that Jacob saw a stranger whom he determined must be a messenger from God, and they wrestled until daybreak. This divine encounter was memorialized not by God setting up a rock but by God renaming Jacob. The messenger gave Jacob a blessing and a new name: Israel, which

means "one who struggles with God." Jacob named the holy place where he had wrestled with God Peniel, meaning, "I have seen God face-to-face, yet my life is preserved."

Throughout the Bible, we frequently encounter the importance of names and renaming, from Abram to Abraham, Sarai to Sarah, Jacob to Israel, Simon to Peter, and Saul to Paul. God gives great significance to names and to naming. Jacob demanded a blessing and was renamed "one who struggles with God." At first glance, it might seem strange that a divine being would want followers who struggle with their god, but this tells us a lot about Yahweh, the God of Israel. Often a lack of faith or feeling separated from God brings us great shame. But I would offer a reframing of struggling with our faith: the Divine delights when we struggle with God, simply because this struggle means we still have faith. We see throughout the Gospels that Jesus, who's arrival we anticipate as we prepare for Christmas, most frequently taught through stories, metaphors, and questions. Indeed, the story of God's people consistently comes back, time and time again, to those who wrestle with questions of God. But even in wrestling, they are deemed faithful. In Mary Doria Russell's novel *The Sparrow*, a priest speaks these words at the funeral of a beloved friend: "The Jewish sages also tell us that God dances when His children defeat Him in argument, when they stand on their feet and use their minds. So questions . . . are worth asking. To ask them is a very fine kind of human behavior. If we keep demanding that God yield up answers, perhaps someday we will understand them. And then we will be something more than clever apes, and we shall dance with God."[1]

1. Today's symbol is an ebenezer. What does the symbol mean in the context of today's Scripture reading?

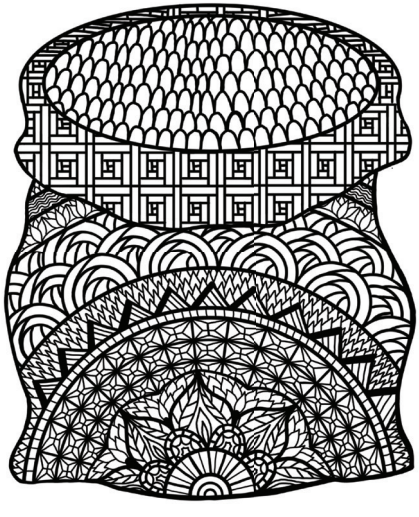
2. How did you receive your name? What does your name mean? If you don't know the answers to these questions, do some research with family or online. What is the significance of your name to you?

3. What does it signify that Israel means "one who struggles with God"? Does this information bring you comfort in your own spiritual journey? Why or why not?

WEDNESDAY

Joseph and His Brothers
Genesis 42:1–8; 45:1–20

Today's Scripture contains so much family drama between Jacob and his sons that it could easily be mistaken for a soap opera if we set the story in modern times. We are reading only a small portion of the story today, but some summary of the full story is necessary to appreciate today's text in context.



After Jacob fled from home when Esau threatened his life, he fell in love with his cousin Rachel but was tricked into marrying Rachel's sister Leah before he could eventually marry Rachel as well. Leah had seven sons and had her maid Zilpah bear two sons on her behalf. Rachel had her maid Bilhah bear two sons on her behalf. After a lengthy stretch of infertility, the beloved Rachel finally gave birth to a son, Joseph, who became Jacob's favorite among his twelve sons. In a great display of this favor, Jacob gave Joseph a very special "ornamented robe" (Gen. 37:23).

Many of us grew up hearing about Joseph's coat of many colors, and there is even an entire Broadway musical named after

Joseph's coat. As much as I hate to disappoint fans of musical theater, "coat of many colors" is actually a Greek mistranslation perpetuated in English by the King James Bible. The original Hebrew description is a little vague, but the point is that the garment marks Joseph as special and set apart from his brothers.

Joseph understands his special standing and lords his status over his jealous brothers. They eventually sell him into slavery and convince their father that Jacob died while tending the sheep. Joseph rose in the ranks during his time in Egypt, eventually becoming the top adviser to the pharaoh. Joseph correctly interpreted a dream of the pharaoh that predicted seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine, and he was put in charge of collecting surplus from the years of plenty to prepare for the years of famine.

When the famine in the region hit Jacob's family, they heard there was food to spare in Egypt, so they traveled there to beg for assistance. The brothers did not recognize Joseph as the distributor of the food in Egypt when they arrived and asked for grain—and although Joseph put them through a complex set of misdirection, in the end, he agreed to help his family. See what I mean about this story sounding like a soap opera?

Although technology has transformed our world into one that would be unrecognizable to the people of the ancient world, I suspect they would easily recognize the sins we commit in modernity. Like the people of Joseph's time, we still struggle in our own era with similar character flaws to the ones we find in this ancient soap opera: jealousy, greed, hatred, and the desire for revenge are still rampant among us.

Perhaps the most important takeaway from this story is that God remains Joseph's constant companion. As we continue our journey to the manger in Bethlehem, we see how God was always a part of Joseph's story, even in times of devastation and hopelessness. Despite Joseph's brothers' worst intentions, God was able to turn their actions into good that continued to fulfill the covenant made with Abraham and Sarah. The God who created the cosmos can surely create something worth salvaging, even when we are in crisis and unable to see God's hand at work within our

stories. Just as God did not abandon Joseph, even when he was cast down into a literal pit of despair, God will not abandon us.

1. Today's symbol is a bag of grain. What does the symbol mean in the context of today's Scripture reading?

2. Name a time when you have experienced drama within your own family. Although sometimes family members must be cut out of our lives for our own health, forgiveness is still an essential part of the healing process. Have you healed from that family drama, or are you still working on healing and forgiveness?

3. God is not the one who sells Joseph into slavery in Egypt; this is an evil that his brothers commit. But God is able to work through something so horrible to create something beautiful for the children of Israel. How might God be able to work in your own life to turn something painful into something beautiful that can be used for the greater glory of God?

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