



JESSE TREE

AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



Introduction

Ever since our children were young, one of our favorite Christmas traditions is using the Jesse Advent Tree as a guide for our family Advent devotions. Every evening we gather, read the scripture for the day, and add an ornament to the Jesse Tree. Several years ago our church worked to put together trees and devotional books for the families in our congregation. Each daily devotion, written by a member of CVPC, has been a reminder that God has called us into fellowship as a church family. This time has allowed us to focus our hearts on the coming Messiah, as well as give thanks for the gift of the body of Christ.

The season of Advent is the four Sundays leading up to Christmas. The word Advent means coming. During these four weeks our hearts are preparing for the coming of Jesus, our promised Messiah. The Jesse Tree devotions are a tool that families can use to help us reflect on God's covenant story and the coming Messiah.

The idea for the Jesse tree comes from Isaiah 11:1, "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a branch will bear fruit." The purpose of the Jesse Tree devotional is to trace the story of Jesus' redemptive love from Creation to his birth. As you read these devotionals each day, hopefully you will see the arc of God's covenant woven from Genesis throughout scripture.

On each day of Advent read the scripture passage and devotional for the day. Then ponder and discuss what you have read. Take some time to sing songs and pray. We would also encourage you to pray for the person or family who wrote the devotion for the day. Our hope is that this devotional will help you and your family focus on the coming Messiah and see the rich story of God's grace woven through scripture.

Scott and Pamela Kennedy

The Stump of Jesse

ISAIAH 11: 1-5, JEREMIAH 23:5-6

By Kelli Voyles



As we begin our journey of the Jesse Tree, it is important to know why it is called a Jesse Tree. Who was Jesse and what does he have to do with Advent, or the long wait for Jesus's birth? Long before Jesus was born, a man named Jesse lived in Bethlehem. Jesse had seven sons and the youngest son was David.

When David was a young boy, God chose him to be the king of Isra-el. Not only was David the king, but God promised him that his throne would be established for-ever (2 Sam 7:13). Someday, one of David's descendants would be the King of Kings who would rescue His people from sin, darkness, and despair. Isaiah reminds God's people of this Rescuer, their Savior, when he tells them, "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit." You see, after David died, his kingdom fell into pieces and ruin, and it was in this sad and chaotic time that Isaiah lived and wrote. He understood the darkness and despair because he was living it.

The people of God had forgotten about Him, and they sinned against Him over and over and over again. Eventually, they were sent into exile far from home where they were ruled by evil kings from foreign lands. In that hopeless place, they probably thought that God had forgotten His promise of a David King that would rescue them. But God hadn't forgotten. From that seemingly dead, withered, old stump of Jesse, David's father, grew a strong Living Branch. And that Branch, Jesus, saved God's people from their sins, darkness, and despair. Just as God had promised.

DAY
01

PONDER & PRAY

- Is There an area of your life that feels like a "hopeless place" ?
- How do you stay encouraged in the waiting?
- Make a list of times that God has kept His promises in His word to you personally.

SONG

Lo' How A Rose Er Blooming

Creation

GENESIS 1:1-31

By Pam Kennedy



The Story of God’s covenant love starts at the very beginning of the Bible in Genesis with creation. In the beginning there was nothing. Through a simple spoken word God created the world. His hands placed stars in the sky, put planets in orbit and filled the earth with life.

As each work of his hand was perfectly created, God declared them good. On the sixth day He created man and named him Adam. Adam was unlike the other living creatures because he was created in the image of God. He could think, create, and make choices- but most importantly he had a personal relationship with God.

God gave Adam the important task of naming all the animals that He had created. God knew that Adam needed a helpmate and as Adam named each of the animals “there was not a helper fit for him.” So God created a helpmate for Adam out of Adam’s rib and her name was Eve. After God had created Adam and Eve he blessed them and commanded them to fill the earth and have dominion over it. Then God looked at his creation again and declared it very good.

God had given man the beautiful gift of creation to live amongst and enjoy. Man was tasked with caring for this gift. As beautiful and enormous as this gift was, there would be a much greater gift that God would give to his people some day.

DAY 02

PONDER & PRAY

- How does being created in God’s image make a difference in how we think and act?
- What is the greater gift God would one day give his people?
- How do we care for God’s creation?

SONG

For the Beauty of the Earth

Adam and Eve

GENESIS 3:1-10, 23

By Rob Chaplin



Perfection: You may have read many sad stories but none are quite as sad as the story of Adam and Eve and the Fall. Yesterday you read about all of the wonderful things that God made and how they were all good. Lakes and trees and flowers and bees - all good. Even in our passage today we read how Eve looked at the tree and saw that the tree was good for food and a delight to the eye. God had created the perfect utopia for his brand new world. And what did Adam and Eve do in this new world? They walked with God. How amazing is that? Being able to walk along with God, having Him explain the intricacies of the iguana, the ornateness of the orangutan and the curiosities of the crocodile. It was perfect because God was there until

Sin: Suddenly, Adam and Eve did not want God any more. They hid from Him. What happened? Well there was a serpent and that serpent did not love God. In fact, the serpent wanted God and His creation to fail. And Adam and Eve chose to eat the forbidden fruit, disobey God and allow sin to enter God's perfect world. And so they could no longer stay with God. He required

Separation: Man could not stay with God. That is the reason that this is the most sad story ever. Sin entered a perfect world and separated us from the love of God. God was still perfect and man no longer was. There could be no more walks in the cool of the morning. Adam and Eve were separated both physically and spiritually from God and banished from the garden. But before they left, God did something very interesting. He took an animal, killed it, and used the skin to cover up Adam and Eve. It would not be the last time that a sacrifice was offered to cover mankind. After Adam and Eve left the garden a cherubim, one of God's mighty angels with a flaming sword, was placed in the garden to guard the tree of life. For now, man was separated from God.

DAY 03

PONDER & PRAY

- Why is this story separated into 3 parts?
- In what ways are we separated from God?
- Where do we see sin in our own lives?
- Will the path to eternal life ever be available to us again?

SONG

Nothing but the Blood of Jesus

Noah

GENESIS 6:5-8, 9:16

By Barb Michal



Many, many years after God told Adam and Eve to leave the Garden of Eden men became very wicked. This made God very sad and he wished he had never created man. He decided to destroy the whole earth with a flood. There was only one man who loved God. His name was Noah. God told Noah to build a large ship called an Ark. God told Noah and his family to get into the Ark. God also told each animal and insect, one male and one female to into Noah's Ark. When all the animals and Noah and his family were in the Ark, God caused it to rain.

It rained and rained and rained until the whole earth was covered with water and all the wicked people died. After the flood Noah, his family and all the animals came out of the ark. God loved Noah and his family. God promised Noah he would never again destroy the earth with a flood. This promise is called a covenant. As a sign of this promise God created a beautiful rainbow. Now, every time you see a rainbow in the sky, remember how much God loves you.

Through Noah God saved mankind after the flood. Through Jesus God saved man to live with him forever in heaven.

DAY
04

PONDER & PRAY

- What do you think when you see a rainbow in the sky?

SONG

The Doxology

God's Covenant

GENESIS 15:1-6

By Dennis Louis



As a child, I heard the oft-repeated Bahamian proverb, “a promise is a comfort to a fool.” The saying reflects a kind of cumulative cultural cynicism that bears the scars of broken promises and crushed expectations. That sinful man uses promises as a tool to placate the fears and concerns of one another is not unique to Bahamian culture – it is sadly the fruit of eating the forbidden fruit.

In today's culture, there are generally three heart responses to promises. The first is that of cynicism, “I've heard that before.” The second is cautious optimism, “we'll see how it goes.” The third is in faith (belief), “I can't wait!” It is often the case that our responses to promises are contingent on both the promise's content and the one making the promise.

In Gen. 15:1-6, the promise made to Abram defies imagination. When considering the facts (old age and a barren wife), Abram's heart could have quickly fallen into heart response category one or two (cynicism or cautious optimism). But Abram wisely considered the content and source of the promise – scripture tells us that he believed the LORD, and God counted it to him as righteousness. If the pledge came from the mouth of an earthly source, then Abram could rightly respond with cynicism or cautious optimism; because the content of such a promise would be beyond the reach of fulfillment for a human source.

Of course, there are promises embedded in this passage for the whole world: (1) We too can be children of Abraham by faith and (2) If we believe God (Christ), we are counted as righteousness. Christ secured these promises with his birth, death, and resurrection! Advent season reminds us afresh of the realized promise found in Gen. 15: In Christ, we have been made the children of Abraham by faith (Gal. 3:7), and we now have the ability to believe God (Rom.1:17) – we would be fools not to!

DAY
05

PONDER & PRAY

- The revealed promises of God in scripture must be received with joy and accepted faith. The hope we have in Christ is grounded on promises that are sure because they come from Him. We would be fools not to believe them!

SONG

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus

Isaac and the Ram



GENESIS 22:1-4

By Willa Ibach

God's covenant love continues to be proclaimed through the provision of a lamb, demonstrated by Abraham's faith in God and His promises. God had promised Abraham and Sarah He would give them many grandchildren through their only son, Isaac. But one day, God asked Abraham to do a very hard thing. He asked him to kill Isaac as a sacrifice. Was God being cruel? Does God want parents to kill their children? No.

He wanted Abraham to show he had faith in God and His promises. If he really believed God would do what He said He would do, then his actions would demonstrate that faith. God had promised that Isaac would grow up and have a family. Abraham believed that if God promised it, He would make it happen - even if it meant He had to raise Isaac back from the dead. He knew God would always keep His promises no matter what and not even death could stop Him!

God was pleased with Abraham's willingness to obey God, even when it seemed so very hard, because it showed he knew who God was and trusted that He always keeps His promises. God did not allow Abraham to sacrifice Isaac but instead provided a lamb to be sacrificed in Isaac's place. We can follow Abraham's example and put our faith in God and trust Him to keep His promises. That's what faith is!

DAY
06

PONDER & PRAY

- Did you know that God has provided a lamb to be sacrificed in your place? Who is that lamb?
- Do you believe God always provides what you need?
- How does knowing that help you everyday?

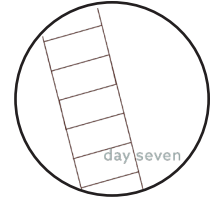
SONG

Great is Thy Faithfulness

Jacob's Ladder

GENESIS 28:1-17

By Doug Leavengood



Adam and Eve were made in God's image (Gen 1:26,27) and designed for fellowship with him (Gen 3:8a). All too soon, however, sin broke that fellowship and separated them from God (Gen 3:1-8). God drove them out of the garden and his presence because of that sin (Gen 3:22-24) and mankind has been trying to work its way back into God's presence ever since. In Genesis 11 we read of man's attempt to build the Tower of Babel which would reach to the heavens. God was displeased with their arrogance, confused their language, and scattered them over the face of the earth (Gen 11: 4-9). Instead of achieving significance and immortality they became even more alienated and alone.

But God had promised Adam and Eve a redeemer (Gen 3:15) and years later he confirmed that promise to Abraham (Gal 3:7-9). That promise was passed to Isaac and then Jacob (Gen 28:4). Isaac sent Jacob away to find a wife and on his way he dreamed a dream (Gen 28:10-17). In that dream he saw a tower with steps reaching to heaven and on those steps he saw angels ascending and descending from heaven. Unlike the Tower of Babel, however, God was the builder, and he came down to stand over Jacob. He confirmed the promise he had made to Abraham. Isaac's response was praise and worship because the LORD was in this place. Many years later Jesus would confirm to Nathanael that Jacob's dream had been about him (John 1:51).

At Christmas we celebrate the return of God to his people through the birth of his Son Jesus Christ. Our response to God's presence among us should be the same as Jacob's: praise and worship. We echo the words of Isaiah's glorious prophecy, "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given;" (Isa 9:6,7)

DAY
07

PONDER & PRAY

- Why is it not possible for us to reach God on our own?
- What does it mean to be a Redeemer?
- What does the word Immanuel Mean? Why is that important?

SONG

Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus

Joseph's Coat

GENESIS 37:1-36, 50:15-21

By Bobby and Laura Dueitt



In the story of Joseph we see that his father greatly loved him, so much that he gave him a special present. The present was a coat made with many colors. This upset all of Joseph's brothers so much that they wanted to kill Joseph, but instead of killing him they decided to sell him as a slave for pieces of silver. Joseph's brothers didn't know at this time that God had planned for their brother to be their savior in a time when they needed him.

Joseph, after being sold, was taken to Egypt where he was put into prison. While in the prison, Joseph interpreted the dreams of the Pharaoh. He told the Pharaoh that there was going to be a time when Egypt would run out of food and they needed to store food for a long period of drought. The Pharaoh was pleased and put Jacob in charge of the storage of the food so that when the time of famine came Joseph had power over the food. Joseph's family was also without food during the famine. They heard there was food in the land of Egypt, so they went and asked for food. Joseph, the person in charge of the food, showed them love and grace even after they had planned to kill him and sold him as a slave

DAY
08

PONDER & PRAY

- Who else, like Joseph, was sold by a loved one for silver?
- How does Joseph's life show God's care of His people even when they are unkind?
- How does this story show us the love of Jesus?

SONG

Be Thou My Vision

Moses and the Law

DEUTERONOMY 5:1-22

By George Granberry



The Ten Commandments may seem fairly easy to keep. No idols—no problem. Don't murder—never have. Don't steal—got it. We might get the impression that it's even within our power to keep the commandments, and by doing that, to earn God's love and favor. But as Jesus elaborates on the commandments in Matthew 5–7, obedience starts to seem harder to attain. "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect," Jesus says to the crowd. Be perfect? Now that's impossible! The Ten Commandments are a good reminder that we're incapable of earning our salvation by perfectly keeping the law.

But that's what Christmas is all about. The only person who ever has or ever will keep the commandments perfectly was Jesus. Paul reminds us that Jesus is the image of God and all the fullness of God dwells in Him and in Him all the fullness of Deity dwell in bodily form. And yet, Jesus is also fully human. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." And He, "in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin". And he hasn't come to dismiss the Law or to make it impossibly hard to keep. But Jesus came to keep all of the commandments for us. Jesus said, "I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."

So, Jesus comes to fulfill the law, to keep the commandments that we fail to keep and can't keep, to reverse the Fall, and to break the curse of sin. He does what we cannot do. And when we trust Him alone as our Savior, we are united to Him by the power of the Holy Spirit and pronounced righteous! Now we strive to obey to please the One who gave His life for us because we love Him.

Big take away--This Christmas, thank God for the Law but even more for the perfect Law keeper—Jesus! He lived a righteous life for us and took our sin upon Himself in the great exchange—our sin to Him, His righteousness to us! Hallelujah!

DAY
09

PONDER & PRAY

- How do I view the Law?
- Do I think I can attain God's favor if I just keep the law?
- Have I given my sins to Jesus and received His righteousness?

SONG

Joy to the World!

Spies in Canaan

NUMBERS 13:1-2, 17-23,27

By Karen Collins



God told Moses to send spies into the special land that He promised to give them. The 12 spies agreed that the land was beautiful and the fruit was incredible (imagine if you went to the store and you and one of your siblings had to work together to pick up a huge cluster of grapes)! They also agreed that it was full of a people that were too strong, too powerful, and too big to conquer. For 10 of the spies, the promise didn't look the way they expected it to look so they told the others to not move forward with God's plan. But 2 of the spies remembered that God's promises can be trusted because He is stronger, more powerful, and bigger than anything they might face. Sadly, the Israelites decided to listen to the bad report and didn't receive God's promise at that time. Because of what we read in Joshua, we know that's not the end of the story! Even though God's people didn't obey and trust Him, He still gave them every single thing He promised.

God fulfilled another promise when He sent Jesus to earth as a baby - we know from the New Testament that was not what God's people were expecting! Most things are stronger, more powerful, and bigger than a baby. But God promised that through this baby, Jesus, He would bring good news, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, open the prisons of those bound, proclaim the Lord's favor, comfort those who mourn and rescue the whole world (Isaiah 61). He is keeping His promises to you even now through the work of His Holy Spirit, but you might have to look closely, His promises may look different than you expect. You can work on giving a good report about what God is doing in your life, but even if you fail in doing this, He will faithfully carry out everything He has said he will do!

DAY 10

PONDER & PRAY

- How does God keep His promises to you?
- Have you ever had God keep a promise to you in a way that you didn't expect?
- Have you ever faced something that seemed stronger or more powerful than you?

SONG

God of Abraham Praise

Rahab

JOSHUA 2:1-21

By Jon Abbott



The story of Rahab is a story of love, divine protection, and faithful virtue. Before invading the Promised Land, Joshua sends spies into the city of Jericho. God leads the spies to stay at the house of Rahab the prostitute. When the king in Jericho is alerted he sends men to Rahab, demanding she surrender the spies. Rahab fools the men, she tells them that the spies already left the city, when in fact they are hidden on her roof. Later Rahab helps the spies escape out her window. In exchange for her protection, the spies agree to protect her and her family when Israel destroys the city. Rahab ties a scarlet cord in her window as a signal of her protected status. When the walls of Jericho come tumbling down, the Israelites are true to their word, Rahab and her family are spared.

The scarlet cord reminds us of the Passover, the blood on the doorposts, how the Israelites were protected from the judgment on Egypt. The Passover in turn reminds us of Christ on the cross, his blood is our protection today.

Even before the spies arrived in Jericho, Rahab had heard of the mighty acts of the Lord. She heard and believed. Her faith led her to protect the spies, and led to her survival. In the New Testament (Heb 11:31, James 2:25) Rahab is described as faithful, and is an example of righteousness.

Rahab was a Canaanite - under a divine curse of doom, but God chose to protect her. One can only conclude that God must love Rahab deeply.

DAY
11

PONDER & PRAY

- God protects us in incredible ways. God loves Rahab, and protected her because of her faith. He loves us in much the same way.
- In the last week, how has God protected you, your family, your friends?

SONG

What Wondrous Love is This?

Ruth and Boaz

RUTH: 1:16, 2:5-17, 4:14

By Paula Lynch



Many years ago there was a famine in the land of Judah. Naomi, her husband, and their two sons left their home in Bethlehem and traveled to the land of Moab, where there was food. While Naomi and her family were living in Moab, Naomi's husband died, and her two sons grew up and got married. One of Naomi's sons married a lady named Orpah, and the other married a lady named Ruth. After Naomi had lived in Moab for ten years, both of her sons also died. Naomi was very sad and decided to go back home to Bethlehem now that the famine was over. Naomi told Orpah and Ruth to go back to Moab where they could find new husbands. Orpah decided to stay in Moab, but Ruth told Naomi, "Don't ask me to leave you. Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God." So Ruth went back to Bethlehem with Naomi and took care of her.

One day Ruth was gathering grain in the field of a man named Boaz. Boaz noticed how hard Ruth was working and asked his workers who she was. When Boaz found out that Ruth had left her father and mother and her home to take care of Naomi and follow the one true God, he was very kind to Ruth. He asked the workers to leave extra grain for her, and he shared his food and water with her. When Ruth went home that day, she showed Naomi all the grain she had picked and told Naomi about Boaz. Ruth went back to gather grain from Boaz's field every day for many days.

Everything that happened to Ruth and Boaz was part of God's special plan for their lives. Ruth and Boaz were married; and God gave them a baby boy. Ruth was the great grandmother of King David; and many years later another one of Ruth's descendant (named Joseph) traveled to Bethlehem with his wife Mary. Mary gave birth to a very special baby boy in Bethlehem. Can you guess what the baby's name was?

DAY
12

PONDER & PRAY

- Does God have a special plan for your life?
- Did God have a special plan for Ruth's life?
- How do you think Ruth felt when she left her family and her home to serve God?

SONG

What the Lord Has Done for Me

David as Shepherd

ISAIAH 40:9-11, PSALM 23, PSALM 78:70-72

By Joe and Joli Moore



God gives us many ways to help us understand His love for us. One of the ways God does this is by comparing us to sheep with God being our shepherd. Remember Psalm 23? It says, “the Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.”

If you had a baby lamb, would you take care of it and love it; or would you be mean to it? A shepherd is tender with his sheep. He protects them and provides food and water for them. He also watches them because he knows they sometimes do foolish things. God’s Old Testament people were sometimes foolish too. One of the men who acted like a shepherd to the people was David. God sent him to be like a shepherd over the people. When David became King, he watched over the people like a shepherd would his sheep. He wanted the best for them. He wanted them to love and obey God.

If we can understand how David was a shepherd for his people, we can learn something about how Jesus watches over us. He is our shepherd and king. Though he rules us by his Word and Spirit, he is not mean to us. He knows what is best for us and does what is good for us.

DAY 13

PONDER & PRAY

- Sometimes sheep do not do what their master wants them to do. This makes the shepherd sad.
- In what ways do we sometimes disobey God?
- Do you think God is sad when we disobey him?

SONG

Savior Like A Shepherd Lead Us

David as King

2 SAMUEL 5:1-5

By Brad Voyles



When David was just a boy he was chosen by God to be king. God's messenger, Samuel, anointed David in front of his family and told David that he was God's choice to be the king of God's people. However, David did not become king until many years later. Through years of being hunted and betrayed, trapped and escaping, hiding in caves, living in exile, and fighting for his life, David clung to the promise of God in faith and was finally made king many years later when he was thirty years old.

It is important to remember that all of God's promises are true and sure no matter how many challenges they meet. Despite trials, distance, or time, God's promises never fail. Hebrews 12:28 reads, "Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe." We should be faithful not because we are unshakable, but because our God and His promises can never be shaken. Time cannot erase them, and enemies cannot thwart them.

It was also God's promise to His people that a descendant of David would be the King of Kings and save His people from their sins. This King of Kings is Jesus and we celebrate His birth each Christmas. This Advent we also look forward to the day when Jesus will return crowned as the King of Kings to fulfill the rest of God's promises to us because God's promises never fail.

DAY
14

PONDER & PRAY

- Why should we trust God to keep His promises?
- What promises of God do you look forward to Him fulfilling?

SONG

Come Thou Almighty King

Elijah - Fed by Ravens

1 KING 17:1-7

By Bill Tate



When wicked King Ahab was ruling over Israel, God sent the prophet Elijah to tell Ahab that God was going to : punish the sins of Ahab and Israel by not sending rain. Without rain, crops wouldn't grow and people would be hungry, and some of them would be sorry for their sins and would start praying to God again.

During the time without rain, Gods' servant Elijah still needed to eat. God cared for his servant Elijah by sending him to a place called Cherith, where there was a brook that still had water. Elijah couldn't grow food there, but God told the ravens at Cherith to take bread and meat to Elijah every day so that he wouldn't starve, God gives his people what they need.

After a while, the brook at Cherith dried up. How do you think Elijah felt then? Do you think he knew that, since God had taken care of him so far, He would keep on taking care him? You can find out what happened next in I Kings 17:8-16.

DAY
15

PONDER & PRAY

- Can you think of other stories in the Bible that tell about special ways God gave food to people?

SONG

How Firm a Foundation

Prince of Peace

ISAIAH 9:2-7



Sometimes life can seem really dark, can't it? People are afraid. People are afraid of getting sick or losing loved ones. They may be afraid for their country. Sometimes, everything just seems very different and out-of-sync. Even in our own hearts, we can feel darkness and do wrong things.

God's people knew what that felt like. God's messenger Isaiah wrote about it. He said that God's people were living in great darkness; he meant that God's people were afraid, and hurt, and their "wise" men and leaders had led them to do wrong things that made their fear and their hurt worse.

But Isaiah also wrote that God promised something special that would take away His people's darkness, and it would make them rejoice and celebrate! God promised that he would send....a baby. That baby is Jesus. People would call him many names that tell about his goodness, his power, and his wisdom: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. And God tells us that Jesus' kingdom will have no end! God would send Jesus to be King over God's own people, and Jesus would be a just king, good and wise, and he would come to heal our hurt and take away our darkness. This promised king, this lamb of God would later die on the cross and take the punishment for the sins of the world.

DAY
16

PONDER & PRAY

- God promises that Jesus will be our king, that he will stamp out all the darkness of our sin, and that He will be King forever!

SONG

Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus

The Lion and the Lamb



ISAIAH 11:6-10

By

Isaiah was a prophet of God. A prophet is a special messenger, one that God tells his plans to, and then in turn tells that message to God's people. Isaiah had a very simple message for God's people: "Stop! Come back to me. You think you are loving me, but you have really forgotten me." God's people thought this was nonsense. They made all the correct sacrifices in the temple, feasted on all of the right feast days, and fasted on all of the right fast days. "See Isaiah? Of course we remember God."

But they really had forgotten. Sure, they did what they thought were all of the right things. All of the things that would keep God out of their business, and allow them to do whatever they wanted. Things like cheating their neighbors, and ignoring the weak and helpless. They even worshiped foreign gods! Isaiah told them that because they had forgotten their God, they were going to lose their land. God's people were to be invaded and scattered, serving foreign kings just as they had served foreign gods.

If the story ended right here, it would be a sad story indeed. But just as Isaiah had told them sad tales of woe about what was soon going to happen to God's people, he also told them about the happy ending to follow. You see, God had a bigger plan. He was planning to redeem his people, indeed all of creation. God would send his very own Son, who would take their sins and their punishment upon himself, and make all things right and new. In that day, God would make enemies into friends. Leopards and goats, lions and calves, God and man: All friends. And no sadness or harm would come to anyone anymore, because the whole earth would be full of the knowledge of God.

DAY
17

PONDER & PRAY

- Do we remember God? Really? How is God making enemies into friends today?

SONG

O Come O Come Emmanuel

The Suffering Servant

ISAIAH 53

By Chad Dukes



Every time I have read through the Gospels, I have been surprised by how blind the “God-Experts” were. So blind that, while they were looking for a Conquering King they totally missed the Suffering Servant. This month, reading through the Gospels again, for the first time, it is different. While I am still struck by how blind they were, I am no longer surprised. This year has given me ample opportunity to think and evaluate what I have judged as a complete blindness to the “truth” that, while plainly obvious to me, seems to be missed by all those who think/act/believe differently from me. This year has given me ample opportunity to be surprised as I learn that while much of my thought and conversations have been directed at reasoning why everyone else can be so blind - they are not alone in their blindness. I am very much as blind as they are - and it really should not have surprised me.

Does suffering continue to surprise you like it does me? Like it did the Pharisees and those to whom Isaiah wrote? (v. 4) Over the last few months I have been recovering from the blindness that has missed the fact that I am called to suffer and that suffering is not just something that our Father meets us in to comfort us, but that the suffering itself is according to his plan and is serving his providence in bringing about the reconciliation of his people. God’s peace comes through suffering and is the means by which his healing is given to us (v. 5) and the comfort with which we are comforted by God is given to us in order that we might comfort others who are suffering the same as we are. (2 Cor. 1:3-7) So what? Does this mean I am without hope? That suffering is my lot and that suffering is an uniquely Christian thing? No! The fact that I have hope is because I can remind myself that our faithful God continually uses suffering to bring about peace and healing - and that even this is subject to the sovereignty of our Father.

DAY
18

PONDER & PRAY

- In what ways has your own blindness caused you to miss seeing your own self in those with whom you hold differing, even divisive opinions?
- How do you view your own suffering?
- Do you feel pressed down and overwhelmed?
- Has God met you in your suffering and encouraged you?

SONG

When I Survey the Wondrous Cross

The New Covenant



JEREMIAH 31:31-34

By Joe Moore

Do you always want to do what Mommy or Daddy tell you to do? Sometimes we know what we SHOULD do but we still do not do it. Can you think of a time when Mommy and Daddy asked you to do something and you did not do it? Did this make Mommy and Daddy happy?

The people in the Old Testament had the same problem. They knew God's rules but they did not always obey them. They disobeyed Him again and again. This made God sad.

But God knew what to do. He promises to give us the Holy Spirit to change the way we think and feel so that we will want to obey God. The Bible calls this getting a "new heart." Then we will not only know God, we will also want to obey Him.

DAY
19

PONDER & PRAY

- Do you want to obey God?
- Do you want to do what God wants you to do?
- Ask God to send His Holy Spirit to you so that you will not only know what God's rules are, but that you will want to obey Him

SONG

Spirit of God Descend Upon My Heart

Bethlehem

MICAH 5:2-5

By Joe Moore



Do you remember the Wisemen in the Christmas story? When the Wisemen came to King Herod as recorded in Matthew chapter 2, they asked, “Where is the King of the Jews?” They had seen the star which told them that an important King of the Jews had been born.

Herod did not know who they were talking about! So he asked his advisors where this King would be born. They said that the Savior would be born in Bethlehem. How did they know this was where the Savior was to be born? They knew from Micah 5:2-5 that the Savior would be born in Bethlehem. It says, “Out of you will come for me one who will be ruler Israel.” So Herod sent the Wisemen to Bethlehem to find the baby Jesus. Did they find Jesus? Yes, they did!

But this passage tells us more than where Jesus would be born. Verse 5 says, “He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord.” Jesus is King. But while he is a strong king, he is also a “shepherd” king. This means that, even though Jesus is our king and ruler, he will take care of us as a shepherd would his sheep. He watches out for us and defends us just like a shepherd.

DAY
20

PONDER & PRAY

- In what ways have you seen Jesus take care of you today?

SONG

Oh Little town of Bethlehem

Israel's Exile & Return



HABAKKUK 2:1-4; NEHEMIAH 1:3, 2:18, 6:15-16

By David Marr

ALong time ago, God's people had been in exile -- removed from their homes and sent away to another place - because they had not obeyed the Lord. Yet, the Lord never forgets His people: he forgives and restores them. So, after a long time of exile, God's people are allowed to go back to where their ancestors had lived, the land promised to them by God Himself. They waited a long time. Would God save them from slavery in a foreign land? Sometimes we begin to doubt God. But His word tells us: "if my answer seems slow, wait for it. It will surely come." We should have faith in God that He will not forget us, but will meet our every need.

When the people did come back from exile, their homes were destroyed, the city of Jerusalem was in ruins, and the wall that protected them from outside raids had been torn down, But God is faithful to His people and sends Nehemiah to the city. Nehemiah tells them that God has not forgotten them. Believing this, they rebuilt the city's walls. They worked hard, for their God was with them. They finished rebuilding the wall in a short time! Non- believers who also lived in and around Jerusalem were not happy, for they did not like the Jews, and hated God. But when they saw how quickly the work was done, they became afraid, for they knew that God had been Israel's help. They had tried many times and many ways to stop the work, but God provided what was needed for His people.

DAY
21

PONDER & PRAY

- In what ways is Nehemiah like Jesus Christ?
- Do you trust the Lord to help you when you are not happy?

SONG

O for A Thousand Tongues to Sing

Mary

LUKE 1:26-38

By Scott Finch



My momma has had a lasting impact on my life. So many of my life patterns and mannerisms were shaped by my momma which causes me to think about verse 38a more deeply. Mary has found favor with God and Gabriel has just told her she will be experiencing one of the biggest life changes of all as a young teenager. Instead of being anxious or trying to weasel out of the situation, by God's grace she responds in grateful obedience.

Hebrews 5:8 points out that Christ Jesus learned obedience. Who do you think was one of his primary teachers of what it looked like to obey? (Pause) It was Mary. Mary's response in this text shows that she would have taught (as imperfect as she was) little Jesus how to heed the voice of his Heavenly Father. Along with Joseph, she would have taught Jesus the Old Testament and he would have learned to sing Psalms everyday as a devout Jewish boy and as a toddler he would have learned how to pray!

You may remember that when it came time, Jesus would respond to the Word of the LORD consistent with the patterns that had shaped him from childhood. Christ had learned patterns of grateful obedience and so he was accustomed to submitting to the Father. This type of submission would lead him to the Garden of Gethsemane and then eventually to the cross so that you and I would be made children of God.

DAY
22

PONDER & PRAY

- Why was it important that Jesus learned to obey?
- How did God's Spirit use patterns of grateful obedience in Jesus life to give us life?
- How does God's Spirit use patterns of grateful obedience in our lives as children of God?
- How is God calling us to obey in ways this Christmas that may not be comfortable or convenient?

SONG

When I Survey the Wondrous Cross

The Star of Bethlehem

MATTHEW 2:1-12



Once upon a time, after Jesus was born, there were some people who lived in a far away land. Some of these people, called Magi, studied the stars, and one night they saw a certain bright “Star” shining in the sky where there was not supposed to be a star.

God spoke to the Magi from that Star - I don’t know how -- but I remember, in the book of Exodus, that God spoke to Moses out of a brightly burning bush that didn’t burn up. Another time, God spoke to Moses on a mountain that was covered with bright fire - and Moses didn’t burn up.

I think the “Star” that the Magi saw was really that bright fire that appeared many times in the Bible when God wanted to give His people a very special message - like when the Shepherds were watching their sheep and the “Glory of the Lord’ shone all around them and they were very scared.” But, an angel spoke to them and said, “Don’t be scared, but go to Bethlehem and see the new King.”

That same “Glory of the Lord” - a “Star” - was up in the sky, and God told the Magi about the King that was born. When they asked where he was to be born, they were told, “In Bethlehem.”

As they started to go there, the “Star” reappeared and led them down the road to a certain house - not a stable - where Baby Jesus was and stood right above it.

When the Magi saw him they knew for sure that He was the “King of all kings,” who would save them from their sins and take them to Heaven to live with Him forever. Then - They bowed down and worshipped and gave Him treasures fit for such a King.

DAY
23

PONDER & PRAY

- Shouldn’t we, too, worship God and give Him our best?

SONG

Angels From the Realm of Glory

The Angels

LUKE 2:8-14

By Karen Leavengood



Close your eyes and imagine that you are a shepherd laying on the grass in a dark, dark field. The only light you can see are the flames of the fire keeping you warm and the stars above. All of a sudden, the sheep that you are watching dart off into the field. What was that, you say to the other shepherds. Then, a blinding light appears before you and the other shepherds. There you sit, trembling with fear and an angel of the Lord appears.

The angel is so excited! He has been sent to tell you some BIG news... “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” The angel goes on to tell you that the baby is in a barn, yep, a barn in the city of Bethlehem. The baby has been wrapped in blankets and is asleep in a manger.

Then, just when you thought things couldn't get any more exciting, the sky fills with an army of God's angels singing the most beautiful song you have ever heard. They sing of God's magnificent glory and give Him all the honor and glory! Then, as suddenly as these magnificent angels appeared, they are gone. You look at the other shepherds, speechless, but everyone begins to gather their things, and you begin running. No one has to speak, you all know where you are going.. To Bethlehem, to see the King of Kings, the Holy one, the Promised Child.

DAY
24

PONDER & PRAY

- What was the good news the angels brought to the shepherds
- Why do you think God chose to tell a group of shepherds laying in a field about His son's birth?

SONG

Love Came Down at Christmas

The Birth of Christ



LUKE 2:1-10, JOHN 3:16

By Alice Sikkema

Oh! It is so exciting when a new baby comes into the world! Everybody fusses to make sure everything is just perfect for the baby's arrival. The baby's room is all decorated with matching blankets, curtains, chairs, and stuffed animals. Baby clothes are bought, washed, and put in the dresser drawers. Can you imagine how fancy the room and clothes must be if the baby were to be a king!

So you would think that the King of Kings and Lord of Lords would have the best baby room of all! Not so! The Almighty God's son was not given a beautiful room; instead he slept in a stinky stable. He didn't have matching decorations, instead he had pitchforks and shovels and grungy walls. He didn't have cutesy stuffed animals; instead he had dirty, smelly live cattle. He didn't have a nice fancy crib; instead he had an old feeding box stuffed with hay. He didn't have new baby clothes from Target; instead he wore only strips of torn up sheets wrapped around him. This doesn't sound right at all. Surely this can't be a place for the King of Kings to be born. But that is exactly what happened. Jesus willingly left his glorious home in heaven to become a helpless baby born in a very icky place.

Why would Jesus do that? It is because He loves us so very much. Jesus showed us that he is willing to do anything for us. Jesus showed us that nothing is too icky for him, not even our icky, sinful hearts! Remember at the very beginning how wonderful everything was before Adam and Eve disobeyed God? Remember how sin spoiled the world? Remember the promise God made to Adam and Eve about a Savior who would take care of sin? Well that is exactly what God did when Jesus was born. He sent Jesus to this spoiled world and our soiled hearts. Jesus came in the center of all this mess so that we could be restored to have a relationship with God! O what wondrous love is this!

DAY
25

PONDER & PRAY

- What kind of King is Jesus?
- What does this story tell us about the king we serve?

SONG

Go Tell it on the Mountain

The Symbolism of the Wreath

By Rachel Staven

A golden hoop is the base of each wreath. It is the shape of a crown, so that we think of the crown of King Jesus as he rules right now at the right hand of God (Heb. 2:9).

The wreath's shape is circular. Circles have no beginning and no end, and the rule of Jesus also is never ending. Circles are complete and perfect, and Jesus' work on our behalf is complete and perfect (Heb. 2: 10).

But the green branches in the wreath are not a finished circle. Even though Jesus' work and rule are a "done deal"--finished and completely perfect--our world is not perfect. There is still rebellion against the rule of King Jesus (Heb. 2:8). There is suffering, evil, disease and death in the world. We have all experienced the heartbreak of an imperfect world this year, and each of our hearts wants more than anything to see the return of King Jesus to make it right again.

Most of the greenery on the wreath is Eastern Red Cedar. Cedar is mentioned 61 times in the Bible. Its leaves (needles) stay green all winter, even while other plants are dying. Cedar is filled with a special sap called 'resin.' This gives cedar a spicy smell and keeps rot and insects from attacking it, so anything built of cedar lasts longer than things made of other woods.

The evergreen, ever-living cedar reminds us that we are not afraid of the death that is all around us (Heb. 2:14, 15). Jesus beat death when he rose from the dead, and we have been invited to share the same glorious eternal life with Him (Phil. 3:20-21).

I added gold berries and leaves to the cedar. Did you know that the entire inner sanctuary of Solomon's temple was made of cedar and then covered with a layer of gold (I Kings 6: 16-20)? The gold and the cedar of that most holy room are a shadow picture of what's now true: that Christ's Church--that's you and me!-- is the place God's Spirit lives now. "Don't you know," says Paul, "That you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (I Cor. 3:16)

The fragrance of the cedar that fills our sanctuary reminds us that we are called to "spread the fragrance of the knowledge of [Christ] everywhere" (2 Cor. 2:15). Just as

Eastern Red Cedar grows all over our Chattanooga Valley, so we members of the Body of Christ are planted next to our valley neighbors, and are called to smell like Christ to them because the Holy Spirit lives in us.

Can you find the mushrooms in each wreath? These are Turkey Tail Fungus. Instead of making its own food like plants do, fungus get energy from the dead things in the forest, like decomposing leaves or rotting tree trunks (the scientific word for this is 'saprotrophic'). So from dead things fungus receives life. Romans 6:3-4 says that we have become a part of (been "baptized into") Christ's death. Sharing his death has made us right with God, and we're invited to share eternal life with Jesus! Our old sinful nature is dead like the rotting tree; our new self has been given life and grows more and more like Jesus each day (Col. 3: 3,4).

Can you find the holly with the red berries on the windowsill below each wreath? It stands for blood and suffering. Its spiny leaves poked my fingers, reminding me of the pain I experience because of the curse that comes from my sin (Gen. 3:17, 18). And the holly reminds me of Jesus' suffering, born a helpless human baby and crying his first cry in that stinky stable (Heb. 2:14). It reminds me of the suffering of his human life: as a human Jesus was tempted to sin, hungry and tired, homeless, disliked by many and abandoned by his friends (Heb. 2:18). Most of all, the holly reminds me of where baby Jesus was headed--to the cross. Jesus suffered as he wore a crown of thorns on his head, bleeding and dying on the cross in the very place I deserved to be because of my sin (Heb. 2:17).

Within each crown of holly sits a candle. If you've ever sung, "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine," then you're familiar with the symbolism of the candles in our sanctuary windows. The light of the candle, seen by everyone outside our building, reminds us that we are to be lights to our neighbors. Unbelievers must see our joy in tough times, our unexpected love for them, and our deep love for one another shining brightly. This light is meant to point them to Jesus, the "light of the world" and their only source of hope (Jn.1:9-14; Phil. 2:14, 15).



Chattanooga Valley Presbyterian Church