

Advent HERITAGE



First SUNDAY OF ADVENT

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*As he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets
from of old,
that we should be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us;
to show the mercy promised to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant.*

— Luke 1:70-72

The story of our salvation is a story of trees.

Beginning in the Garden of Eden, God placed a tree from which Adam and Eve were forbidden to take the fruit (cf. Genesis 2:16-17). This tree, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, became the great sign of humanity's fall from original grace. But, this original sin wasn't that our first parents ate the fruit of this tree; the sin was their disobedience.

In the fullness of time, however, a new tree became the great means and sign of our salvation: the cross. Through his obedience and sacrifice on the cross, Jesus undid that sin of our first parents. As St. Paul observed, *"Just as through one transgression condemnation came upon all, so through one righteous act acquittal and life came to all ... through the obedience of one the many will be made*

righteous" (Romans 5:18-20). As we enter into Advent, these words give us an insight into the true meaning of Christmas: the salvation and renewal of all humanity.

But, standing between these two trees — the tree of the Garden and the tree of the cross — is the symbol that we have come to call the Jesse Tree.

A medieval image, the Tree of Jesse depicts the generations of the ancestors of Jesus, with the great prophets and the kings of Israel who looked forward to the coming of the Messiah. These ancestors of Jesus are also our spiritual ancestors, and we owe them a debt of thanks:

If we believe, if we know how to pray, if we acknowledge the Lord and can listen to his Word, if we feel him close to us and recognize him in our brothers and sisters, it is because others, before us, lived the faith and transmitted it to us. We have received faith from our fathers and mothers, from our ancestors, and they instructed us in it.
(Pope Francis, General Audience, June 25, 2014)

During Advent, we join ourselves to our spiritual ancestors — spiritual lights who have handed their own faith and hope to us — in watching and waiting for the coming of the Sun of Justice, who will dispel the darkness that weighs down upon us.

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THE JESSE TREE: KING DAVID

What we know of King David comes to us from the stories we find about him in the Hebrew Scriptures, where he is presented as the God-fearing king of a united Israel.

The son of Jesse, and a shepherd in his youth, David was anointed as king by the prophet Samuel. During the war with the Philistines, he slew the giant Goliath and became close friends with Jonathan, the son of King Saul.

After Saul's death, David was chosen to be king and reigned for 33 years. Although he was a complex man, he was chosen by God to rule over Israel and is honored as both a poet and prophet.

The complex story of David — including his pursuit and marriage of Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, and the murder of his political rivals — reminds us that God did not always choose the noblest, most righteous, or even the most deserving to fulfill the promises made to our ancestors.

The family tree of Jesus — symbolized by the Jesse Tree — is populated with holy women and men, yes, but in its branches we also find flawed and fallen men and women. And yet, when we think about the One whose coming we await, we remember that these were the same kinds of people Jesus came to save. As one spiritual writer observed, “His is an equal opportunity ministry to crooks and saints.”

For Reflection

Whether family or friends, who handed down the faith to you? Who are the “saints” who fill your family tree?

Why is it important for us to remember that God worked through both “saints and sinners” in fulfilling the promises he made through David and our spiritual ancestors?

ADVENT INSIGHT

Q. What is the story behind the Jesse Tree?

A. Jesse Trees are a very old Christmas tradition that first began in medieval times. They are used to help tell the story of the Bible from creation to Christmas.

The name comes from Jesse, the father of the great Jewish King David. One prophecy in the book of Isaiah, says, *But a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom (Isaiah 11:1)*. A branch is a sign of new life and new beginnings. Jesus was a descendent of King David, and Christians believe that Jesus is this new branch.

The first Jesse Trees were large carvings, tapestries, or even stained glass windows put in churches. Today, Jesse Trees are used as a kind of Advent Calendar. You can use a normal Christmas tree or a banner in the shape of a tree. Each day through Advent, a special decoration or ornament that tells a story from the Bible is hung on the tree.



As we learn about the family tree of Jesus, here are some ways to research your own.

CONNECT

Find an older family member and ask questions about his or her life. Ask about parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. A simple conversation over coffee is bound to unlock some great stories!

EXPLORE

Go through your old family photo albums, letters, newspaper clippings, school records — anything saved that could help you piece together where you've come from.

SHARE

Don't just keep this history to yourself. Share it with others through a simple website, Facebook posts, or even just at a family get-together over Christmas. The more people discover about their family's story, the more they learn about themselves.

Prayer

*Lord Jesus,
this holy season reminds us
that we stand in a "time between."
We trust that you will come in glory at the end of time,
but we also see you come to us even now,
in both busy moments
and long hours of waiting.
Help us to learn how to wait in hope,
trusting that the promises of mercy made to our ancestors
are being fulfilled even today.
Amen.*

