

Advent & The Family Story of Jesus

Scriptures: John 15:1-5; Isaiah 11:1-3 (4-10)

Christian Year and the Awakening Calendar

Advent is the season that marks the beginning of the Christian Year and what's known as the Awakening Calendar. (Show graphic). We could call Advent the Christian New Year, because it begins the seasons that mark a year ordered around the life and story of Jesus Christ. On what's known as the Awakening Calendar, or the Liturgical Calendar, Advent is a season of anticipation of Christ's coming celebrated at Christmas. According to theologian Robert Webber, there are two "cycles" in the Christian Year. The first is the Cycle of Light, which includes the anticipation of Advent, the celebration of Christmas, and the proclamation of Epiphany. It is followed by the Cycle of Life, which includes the anticipation of Lent, the celebration of Easter, and the proclamation of Pentecost and Kingdomtide. In fact, he writes in a book, "If we see the Christian year as an instrument through which we may be shaped by God's saving events in Christ, then it is not the Christian year that accomplishes our spiritual pilgrimage but Christ Himself who is the very content and meaning of the Christian year."¹

Advent is a time of opening ourselves up once again to the living Christ coming to us in new and unexpected ways. And so, this year, throughout the Advent season, we will be exploring the roots – the family story – of Jesus Christ. We're in for a fascinating journey together based on what's known as the Jesse Tree, an historic way of reflecting on Advent and Christmas by recalling the people, places, and story that are a part of Jesus' own deep family heritage. If you have your Bible, or Bible app handy turn with me to **Isaiah 11**, we'll be reading the first ten verses. **Read Isaiah 11:1-10.**

We started out today talking about Advent, because the deep roots of the Gospel are celebrated in this season. The Christmas story is one in which the Hero of the human story, the One who spoke Creation into existence, stepped into the ordinary lives of the people of earth. When Jesus came, He came with a message. That message, according to the Gospel as recorded by John, is that "Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it," (John 1:5). That Light, which illumines every heart, has come to us in the Person of Jesus Christ.

With Family At Christmas

Let's think for just a moment about the coming Christmas holiday. What do most people do on Christmas? Even non-believing people do this. They gather with their families. Holidays matter for families, because they gather together around an important event or theme, in order to mark them, to remember where they're from, and to re-orient themselves around a shared common identity.

¹ Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Time: Forming Spirituality Through the Christian Year*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 24.

Have you ever heard someone say something to the effect that “you can’t choose your family?” That’s true to an extent. We can’t choose to whom we’re related. I look back through my own family genealogy, and I’ve seen where the grandfather of my grandpa was put into an asylum, supposedly for dementia, around the beginning of the 1900’s. He was institutionalized after he attempted to kill his wife in their kitchen with a butcher knife. No one ever talked about him during family holidays growing up. He died before my grandpa was ever born. My great-grandpa, the institutionalized guy’s son, raised both his kids in the Church, and both grand kids grew up to be lifelong, faithful followers of Jesus Christ. See, through their faith in Jesus Christ, they shifted the family dynamic into a trajectory that focused on Jesus, and making Him known, instead of on their human shortcomings and weaknesses. Maybe you’ve had such colorful people in your families.

Sometimes around the holidays and thinking about our family ties can cause us pain. It can be tough to celebrate knowing you have prodigal children in other States who have nothing to do with you, despite your best efforts to raise them right and show them the love of Jesus Christ. If you’re missing a loved one who you’ve lost over the previous year, that, too, can make the holidays difficult. I’ve known people who went through severe physical and mental abuse at the hands of parents or former spouses who claimed to love them, but were more concerned about getting their next fix. Examining family dynamics around the holidays can be emotionally draining.

In all of these situations, **Jesus knows exactly what you’re going through.** He knows – because He’s experienced it right along with you. And in the relationship we have with Him, growing ever closer to Him, He’s willing and able to give us renewed joy. He wants to give us renewed hope, New Hope, because He’s not yet finished working on you. He’s in the process of perfecting you into the saints He envisions you to be. And He gives a powerful gift and promise to us when we trust Him. He tells us things like, “Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light,” (Matt. 11:28-30).

Advent: The Family Story of the Church

For the Family of God – the Church – Advent, Christmas, and other Christian holidays matter because we are gathering around the events of Jesus Christ’s life among us, ordering our time according to them, bringing them to mind over and over, year after year. By basing the liturgical calendar on the Person of Jesus Christ, we are able to meet the Lord of Life in all the themes, traditions, and rhythms of each holiday. One of the most visible signs of the coming of Christmas are Christmas trees – even people who don’t believe in Jesus put them up. I was visiting with one of our shut-ins this past week, and her family had brought a freshly cut Christmas tree into her living room.

They had already decorated it and had it lit with strings of multi-colored lights, right in front of her bay window. As the light of late afternoon faded into the dusk of early evening, we watched the multi-colored flickering from the Christmas tree grow brighter. If we pause from our busyness, friends, I'm convinced we can find evidence of the Holy One even in the most mundane things. She asked me what was the significance of the Christmas tree – why do Christians put them in their houses? I told her I didn't know – that it originated in German pagan traditions with the evergreen being the only green things in nature amid all the snowy white barrenness of winter. But, that I found it comforting to think that a real Christmas tree, of wood, was the same sort of material used to put our Savior to death for our sake. Good Friday's cross was wooden.

This year, as we enter the season of Light in the Christian year, we turn our hearts as a family toward Advent being a season of anticipation – of waiting on the Lord for Him to reveal Himself to us in profound ways. Exploring together the family story of Jesus, we're able to come with the expectation that God will meet us in our longing, once again, and that He will reveal His presence to us. A few moments ago we sang a famous Christmas carol, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." Emmanuel is a name given to Jesus Christ, which means "God-with-us." Friends, when I send you emails, and close them out with the line, "God IS with us," that's no mistake – that's very intentional. He's present, and active. We just need to be tuned in enough to Him through His Spirit to recognize He's here and continues to be active among us.

The Family Story of Jesus

He gets us. We all come from someone, somewhere, and something. Or, to put it another way, **we each come from a people, a place, and a story.** In Jesus' case, He comes to us from someone – His people, Israel – as well as God the Father. He comes to us from somewhere – the place, land, terrain, and towns of the Holy Land in the first century. He comes to us from something – the covenant story of His people's dramatic relationship with the God of the universe – Yahweh, the Great I Am – who extended His love toward the ancient Israelites, and who extends His love to us today through the shed blood of His Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Like Jesus, we also each come from a people – our extended family lines. We come from a place – hometowns and homelands. We come from a story – the story of our own family and the story of God's covenant pursuit of our family lines for generations. When you spend time in the Bible, you see that in God's Kingdom, everything is used and redeemed – nothing is wasted or lost.

In other words, Jesus has a people, a place, and a story to and through which He comes to us as Emmanuel, God-with-us, in Advent. This season we will be looking at these themes and others as we look for transforming truths for our own lives in the family story of Jesus. See friends, when we decide we're going to love and follow Je-

sus because we see the evidence presented of His great love for us, and we follow Him with our whole heart, He changes us. We aren't the same people we used to be.

This Advent, could you begin to look for Jesus at work in your family story – in the people, places, and stories from which you've come? What might our Father begin showing you about your own heart, and the gifts He's placed along the way, to bring continued redemption and restoration to you and your family line – even as He sends you into the world drawing from your own roots and your roots in the family of Jesus?

The Roots of Jesus

Isaiah the prophet, seeing far into the future of God's history-changing narrative, tells us that "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit," (Isa. 11:1). In fact, from that Person – that flesh and blood descendant of Jesse, the father of King David, would come One about whom Isaiah would also say, "The Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him – the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord – and He will delight in the fear of the Lord," (verses 2-3a). Isaiah was talking about Jesus Christ. He's the Shoot that came from the stump, the Branch that bears fruit.

In our first reading this morning, we heard that He invites us to be grafted into His family, to be connected to His vine, and to also bear much fruit for Him. He wants connection with us, because He loves us! He doesn't do things the way usual people go about doing them. Listen to what else Isaiah says about Him. "He will not judge by what He sees with His eyes, or decide by what He hears with His ears; but with righteousness He will judge the needy, with justice He will give decisions for the poor of the earth," (Isa. 11:3b-4a).

Advent is a time of anticipation, also, of Jesus' imminent return. He's coming back, friends! Isaiah talked about some of the things which would happen when He returns to make all things right. Isaiah said, "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all My holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to Him, and His place of rest will be glorious," (Isa. 11:6-10). Jesus Christ is the Root.

He's our Root – He's grafted us into Himself. When you dig into some the people in Jesus' family background, it can be fairly surprising. At the start of Matthew's gospel, he gives an outline of Jesus' ancestors, and a beginning birth story of Jesus. Some of the individuals named in Jesus' family tree were quite colorful! King David is in there – we've talked about what he did with Bathsheba before – yet "God testified concerning

him: ‘I have found David son of Jesse, a man after My own heart; he will do everything I want him to do,’” (Acts 13:22).

Rahab is also listed in Matthew 1. She was King David’s great-grandma. Prior to the walls of Jericho tumbling down, she lived the life of a prostitute. The Bible wants to carry the message to us that God has entered our world through a very human family, coming to us as Jesus – which in Hebrew is Yeshua, meaning “The Lord saves,” and as Emmanuel, “God is with us.” He understands us – flaws and all – and is able to redeem us!

Seeing God In Our Stories

As we begin to see God at work in the wild and amazing family story of Jesus, we might begin to see Him at work, powerfully and faithfully, in our own stories. That would be a great gift – even a miracle for some – this Advent season. When God helps us notice how He is at work, we learn to turn our eyes from seeing only the brokenness to seeing the fullness of God’s miraculous work to bring us – and others – closer to Himself.

As we enter the family story of Jesus, consider your own family line as far back as you have records, and those who tried to walk faithfully as well as those who stumbled and fell. Where can you see the gifts of God leading you to today, potentially those gifts that came to you through your family or their struggles? Consider your natural gifts, your appearance, your ways of thinking, and your location. Can you name a few gifts that came to you through your own family line? Can you consider how God is using you because of your family line, rather than simply in spite of it?

Prayer: Root of Jesse, the story You’ve woven together with our lives involves so many faithful men and women, people who lived and died, succeeded, stumbled, fell, got back up, and some who rose in faith to the call of their day. Open our hearts to learn from You as we step onto the path of Your story, once again, this Advent season, a story into which You’ve woven us for Your glory. We welcome You coming to us in a fresh and revelatory way this Advent. In Your name, Amen.