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The Jesse Tree

Dennis Bratcher

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While nearly everyone has a Christmas tree, there has been reluctance in some circles to incorporate Christmas trees into the church sanctuary, arising from suspicions about the pagan origin of the symbol. However, since the Christmas tree has become such a part of Christmas celebration around the world, it seems more important to give it some clearly Christian meaning.

Some churches do this with a [service of the Hanging of the Green](#). Some use a Christmas tree with ornaments representing symbols of the Christian Faith (see [Christian Symbols: Christmas Ornaments](#)). Others use a tree, either at home or in the sanctuary, as a Jesse Tree. This is a tree, or a large banner with a symbolic tree, that is decorated each week, usually by the children, with ornaments or objects that represent Old Testament events from Creation to the Birth of Jesus. The ornaments are traditionally handmade, and are added one each day of Advent, or a group on each Sunday, with explanations of the symbols and a brief verse of Scripture from the story represented. Some churches choose to decorate the tree with small items of warm clothing as a way to minister to the needy in the community.

Some churches combine the idea of a Jesse Tree with [Christian symbol ornaments](#), making and using the ornaments to correspond to the story of the Jesse Tree. However, the Jesse Tree is really an Advent Tree anticipating the coming of Christmas. So, it may be more instructive, especially for children, to allow the Jesse Tree to represent anticipation during Advent while letting a tree with the symbol ornaments be the celebration of Christmas itself.

The Story of the Jesse Tree

The Jesse Tree is named from Isaiah 11:1: "A shoot will spring forth from the stump of Jesse, and a branch out of his roots." It is a vehicle to tell the Story of God in the Old Testament, and to connect the Advent Season with the faithfulness of God across 4,000 years of history. [The Branch](#) is a biblical sign of newness out of discouragement, which became a way to talk about the expected messiah (for example, Jer 23:5). It is therefore an appropriate symbol of Jesus the Christ, who is the revelation of the grace and faithfulness of God.

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The Israelites through the descendants of Abraham were chosen by God to be a light to the nations. When they were imprisoned by the Egyptians, they cried out to God for deliverance from their oppression. And God responded: "I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt, and I have heard their cry . . . I have come to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them to a good land" (Exod 3:7-8). And so He entered history in a marvelous way to deliver them and bring them into a place where they could worship God and serve Him in peace and joy instead of serving Pharaoh in hard service. God promised to be with them and to be their God, and they would be His people.

But as they settled into the land that God had given them, "they forgot God, their Deliverer, who had done great things in Egypt" (Psa 106:21). As they grew secure in the land, they began to believe that "my power and the strength of my own hand have gotten me these things" (Deut 8:17). Even though God had raised up godly leaders like David, later kings and religious leaders served their own interests, and the people began to worship the false gods of the land. They even gave offerings to the idol ba'al, supposedly the god of rain and fertility of the land, thanking him for the prosperity they enjoyed.

But God grieved because "she did not know that it was I who gave her the grain, the wine, and the oil, and who lavished upon her silver and gold that they used for ba'al" (Hos 2:8). God had "planted [them] as a choice vine from the purest stock" (Jer 2:21) and had expected them to grow and flourish and carry out His purposes in the world. But they had degenerated into a wild bush with worthless fruit.

Because they had forgotten God, they also forgot the call of God to "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God" (Mic 6:8). God sent prophets to warn them of the consequences of failing to be His people. Amos warned them to "seek me and live" (5:4). Through Jeremiah, God promised them that if they would turn from their wicked ways He would bless them and be with them in the land (7:5-7). But he also said: "Take heed, O Jerusalem, or I shall turn from you in disgust, and make you a desolation" (6:8).

Some of the people longed for new leaders, a new "anointed" (Heb: *meshiach*; Eng: messiah) shepherd king like David who would help them to become what God had called them to be. But most of the people would not listen. They continued to worship the idols of ba'al. They continued to cheat the poor, steal from each other, neglect the needy, and do all manner of evil.

So God let them go their own way and suffer the consequences of their choices. The Babylonian armies came and destroyed the temple, the city of Jerusalem, the land, and took the people into slavery. The choice planting of God that had such promise, that God had tended so carefully and encouraged to grow, was cut down and became a mere stump (Isa 5:1-10).

But God did not give up on this people! Even though they had disobeyed, even though they had forsaken God for other gods, even though they had miserably failed to be His people and to let Him be their God, the God of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob still loved them. He had made a commitment to these people that He would not allow to be undone even by their rejection of Him.

He had already told them this through the prophets, but they had not understood then. Jeremiah had promised a day when God would again plant and build (31:28). And Isaiah had spoken of a time when God would cause a new shoot, a new king, to spring from the cut-off stump of the lineage of Jesse, David's father (11:1). During the Exile, suffering under the consequences of sin, they had little reason to suppose that God would do anything new. Still, the old promises echoed across the years, even if they could not believe them or even understand them.

In spite of their failures, in spite of their inability to envision a future beyond exile, there came a time when the prophets again announced a new thing, proclaiming "good tidings" to the people: "Here is your God!" (Isa 40:1-11). The Exile was ended! God would bring back to life a nation that was already dead (Eze 37). Long ago they had been slaves in Egypt, with nothing they could do to change their condition, and yet God had chosen to deliver.

So now, in the midst of their failure and hopelessness, God had again entered history as Deliverer. They would have another chance to be His people, not because they had earned it, no more than they had deserved it the first time; but simply because God in His grace had chosen to forgive.

They returned to the land. But across the years, they again struggled to obey and live up to their calling. They would never again slide into the worship of false gods. They had learned that lesson. But the great kingdom that they dreamed of restoring remained only a dream. They had hoped for a new king like David to lead them into a glorious future in which they would rule the world. They hoped to throw off the control of the Greeks and later the Romans and become a great nation. But it didn't happen. And they became disillusioned and discouraged.

So, they again hoped for God to raise up a new king, a new messiah, to deliver them from the oppression of the world. They longed for peace and deliverance from the tyranny of a sinful world. The prophets again brought the word of God to them, and promised a newness. Even though they struggled to understand and believe, they held onto the hope that the same God who brought slaves out of Egypt, and who brought exiles out of Babylon, could bring Messiah into the world!

We know the rest of that story. God was faithful to that promise, and a new King was born in Bethlehem. So we can exclaim with the old man Simeon: "My eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared before all people, a light of revelation to the nations, and for glory to your people Israel!" (Luke 2:30-32).

But we also know that the world is still with us. Even though we can have Peace and Joy through the presence of Jesus Christ, we still long for deliverance from the oppression of sin in the world. We long for the full reign of the King, and the Kingdom of Peace that He will bring. So, while we celebrate the birth of the Branch, the new shoot from the stump of Jesse, we still anticipate with hope the Second Advent, and await the completion of the promise.

The Jesse Tree helps us retell this story, and express this hope.

Making a Jesse Tree

A Jesse tree, either at home or in the sanctuary, can be either a banner or a poster on a wall, with the symbols fastened to it; or a tree, with the symbols hung from the branches.

A banner can be as plain or as elaborate as one's imagination. Usually, a banner and symbols for a sanctuary are made of heavy felt or cotton, or other appropriate fabric, the design is embroidered or appliquéd, and the symbols attached with pins or Velcro. One for the home or a Sunday School Class can be made from poster board, the design done with markers, and the symbols colored, made from construction paper, or cut from old Christmas cards or magazines.

The background is usually Purple or Blue (the colors of Advent), with a large cut stump and a single green branch growing from one side. The symbols are attached around the branch, usually with a star as the last symbol at the top.

If a tree (real or artificial, as long as it's green) is used, it should be a relatively small one if only one ornament a day is to be added. A large tree can be used if all of the children make ornaments each Sunday, or if the ornaments are a communal project. The ornaments can be widely varied, from simple hand colored paper from the children, to more elaborate craft items. Different styles can be used each year. If **Christian symbol ornaments** are used for the Jesse Tree, the primary colors of the ornaments should be the liturgical colors of Christmas, white and gold.

While it is sometimes tempting to apply "quality control" and exclude some ornaments on a sanctuary tree, especially those done by children, it is probably better to allow them for the sake of community and celebrate the unity of the tree itself, and what it represents in providing a place for such diversity.

Sample Story and Readings for a Jesse Tree

The story of God in the Old Testament can be told either in terms of the main characters of the story, or of pivotal events that helped shape and define the people's journey of Faith through the Old Testament. The Scripture readings given here provide an outline of the story. Since some of the characters and events are recounted over many chapters, some will need to be summarized and a single selection of Scripture that encapsulates the story, usually 4-8 verses, selected for public reading.

The actual story that is told with each symbol should be a short (2-4 min) summary of the person or event, including their significance in the unfolding witness to God's self-revelation in history. While connections can be made where appropriate to New Testament events, the Old Testament story should not be treated only as preparation for the New Testament. The continuity of God's love, patience, and grace across the centuries to the most unlikely people in the midst of their failures should be the focus. Of course, that climaxes in the Incarnation. But we as Christians need to listen to the Old Testament Story for what it teaches us about God and ourselves, rather than use it to get to something else. That is the function of the Old Testament as Scripture (see **Hearing Old Testament Advent Texts**).

Other characters or events may be substituted for some of these, as long as the main story line of God's grace, of human failure, and renewed hope

in God is clearly presented. Different aspects of some of the characters or events may be emphasized in different years. If the Jesse Tree becomes an annual practice, a three or four year cycle emphasizing various aspects of the story can be developed. Since the day on which Christmas falls will vary, the last week's characters will need to be adjusted to the number of days between Sunday and Christmas Day. The Magi can also be used on Christmas Day to conclude with the symbol of the star for the top of the tree, or a candle can be used for the Magi and the star for Christmas Day.

If the tree is used in public only on Sundays, the following week's story is given each Sunday with the corresponding symbols. This is an especially appropriate activity for children's church, or to use as the children's sermon in morning worship during Advent.

Table of Scripture Readings for the Story

Date	Persons	Events/Themes	Scripture	Symbols
First Sunday	Introduction of the Jesse Tree		1 Sam 16:1-13 Isa 11:1-10	The Tree
Mon Wk 1	God	Creation	Gen 1:1-2:3	Dove
Tues Wk 1	Adam and Eve	The First Sin	Gen 2:4-3:24	Tree with Fruit or Apple
Wed Wk 1	Noah	The Flood	Gen 6:11-22, 7:17-8:12, 20-9:17	Rainbow or Ark
Thur Wk 1	Abraham	The Promise	Gen 12:1-7, 15:1-6	Field of Stars
Friday Wk 1	Isaac	Offering of Isaac	Gen 22:1-19	Ram
Sat Wk 1	Jacob	Assurance of the Promise	Gen 27:41-28:22	Ladder
Second Sunday	Joseph	God's Providence	Gen 37, 39:1-50:21	Sack of Grain or Coat
Mon Wk 2	Moses	God's Leadership	Exod 2:1-4:20	Burning Bush
Tues Wk 2	Israelites	Passover and Exodus	Exod 12:1-14:31	Lamb
Wed Wk 2	God	Giving the Torah at Sinai	Exod 19:1-20:20	Tablets of the Torah
Thur Wk 2	Joshua	The Fall of Jericho	Josh 1:1-11, 6:1-20	Ram's Horn Trumpet
Fri Wk 2	Gideon	Unlikely Heroes	Judg 2:6-23, 6:1-6, 11-8:28	Clay Water Pitcher
Sat Wk 2	Samuel	The Beginning of the Kingdom	1 Sam 3:1-21, 7:1-8:22, 9:15-10:9	Crown
Third Sunday	David	A Shepherd for the People	1 Sam 16:1-23-17:58, 2 Sam 5:1-5, 7:1-17	Shepherd's Crook or Harp
Mon Wk 3	Elijah	The Threat of False Gods	1 Kng 17:1-16, 18:17-46	Stone Altar
Tues Wk 3	Hezekiah	Faithfulness and Deliverance	2 Kng 18:1-19:19, 32-37	An Empty Tent
			Isa 1:10-	

Wed Wk 3	Isaiah	The Call to Holiness	20, 6:1-13, 8:11-9:7	Fire Tongs with Hot Coal
Thur Wk 3	Jeremiah	The Exile	Jer 1:4-10, 2:4-13, 7:1-15, 8:22-9:1-11	Tears
Fri Wk 3	Habakkuk	Waiting	Hab 1:1-2:1, 3:16-19	Stone Watchtower
Sat Wk 3	Nehemiah	Return and Rebuilding	Neh 1:1-2:8, 6:15-16, 13:10-22	City Wall
Fourth Sunday	John the Baptist	Repentance	Luke 1:57-80, 3:1-207:18-30	Scallop Shell
Mon Wk 4	Mary	The Hope for a Future	Luke 1:26-38	White Lily
Tues Wk 4	Elizabeth	Joy	Luke 1:39-56	Mother and Child
Wed Wk 4	Zechariah	Anticipation	Luke 1:57-80	Pencil and Tablet
Thurs Wk 4	Joseph	Trust	Matt 1:19-25	Carpenter's Square or Hammer
Fri Wk 4	Magi	Worship	Matt 2:1-12	Star or Candle
Dec 24	Jesus	Birth of the Messiah	Luke 2:1-20	Manger
Dec 25	Christ	The Son of God	John 1:1-18	Chi-Rho Symbol

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Last modified: November 11, 2011