

The Best Christmas Stories You've Never Heard

Discovering the Jesse Tree

God's character was reflected in great Bible stories before it was revealed in the birth of Jesus. We see Christ in the faithfulness of Noah, the generosity of Abraham, and the might of Moses. Some are less familiar. We can find them in the Jesse Tree, the Family Tree of Jesus. We may not think of them as Christmas stories, but they can help us have a fuller appreciation for Christmas.

This Advent at Bethany, we will prepare our hearts for the birth of the Savior by telling some stories from the Old Testament. Week to week, the story symbols will be added to our Jesse Tree to help us to draw near to Christ as we draw near to Christmas Day.

Have you heard of the Jesse Tree or used it as a tradition? If not, what other Advent traditions have been important to you?

This study guide offers readings and reflections so you can journey with us and discover some old stories that just might help you see Jesus in a new way.



Make a Jesse Tree

A Jesse Tree can be made using a twig from your yard, a wooden tree cutout from the craft store, or a branch from a real Christmas tree. Add ornaments to symbolize the stories as you read them.

Bethany Children's Ministries is offering Advent calendars with daily stories so you can read along with the Scriptures we'll be sharing in worship. During the week, other stories illuminate the Advent themes of hope, love, joy, and peace.



The Story of Jesse

First Week of Advent: November 26 & 27

1 Samuel 16:1-13, Isaiah 11:3, Matthew 1:1-17

God's redemption plan began in one family. The family that began with Adam provides our spiritual lineage, a heritage that connects us all. We're a part of the family tree and have an enduring connection to Israel, a place in God's covenant story.

Our spiritual root system begins with Jesse, the father of the great King David. Read the story from 1 Samuel 16:1-13.

What was the prophet Samuel's reaction at first? Why do you think God chooses specific people through whom to work?

What does that say about how God sees us and our potential?

"The Lord said to Samuel...I will send you to the house of Jesse, the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons." - 1 Samuel 16:1

Christmas Connection: From Jesse to Jesus

David became a great king, but in time the kingdom fell. By Jesus' time, the Jews wondered if they would ever be a kingdom again.

Isaiah 11:3 promises, "a root shall grow from the stump of Jesse." The prophet proclaimed hope in a time of despair when the kingdom was in ruins. It felt as if their family tree had become a dead stump. Isaiah proclaimed that there was still hope. God would not abandon the promise he had made. He would raise up a descendent from the line of David, who was Jesus. As we await Christmas, we hold on to the promise of new life. Verse 3 of the hymn,

O Come, O Come Emmanuel, expresses hope with the words, "O come thou root of Jesse's tree, an ensign of thy people be."

Matthew 1:1-17 traces Jesus' family line. We see important and familiar figures like Father Abraham and Joseph. Surprisingly, we also see four unlikely women- outsiders that God incorporates into the salvation story. Why do these stories matter?

We begin the Advent journey in the darkness, recognizing that we need a savior. We recall the words of the prophets who proclaimed that the messiah was coming.



A Season of Storytelling

We are storytelling people. Our faith has been passed down through story, and story is how we make sense of the world.

This Advent, in your Sunday School classes and homes, practice storytelling.

We will begin Advent at Bethany with the Hanging of the Greens and Las Posadas. Both events tell the Christmas story that we will celebrate in full on Christmas Eve. In between, we will tell Jesse Tree stories and connect them with our lives.

Each week, we will offer a story-telling prompt. (See the purple column on the right.) The storytelling is a way for Christians to learn to listen to those around them and to share the faith in an authentic way. It is also a way to connect generations in a family, an opportunity that presents itself during the holidays.

Be a listener, offering the storyteller your full attention, without offering questions or interruptions. Don't break the flow.

Be a storyteller, honoring your listeners by focusing on the question. If you wish, assign the coming weeks' stories ahead of time, giving the storyteller a chance to rehearse a 10-minute story. If possible, practice telling it two or three others who can help you cut unnecessary details or suggest a different way to begin or end the story. Try not to use notes or read the story, just speak from your experience.

Let us know how you enjoy this practice. We hope to host some community storytelling events at Bethany this spring.



Tell a Story

God's people were promised the messiah would be born of a kingdom that was once great but now seemed vanquished, like a sprout grows out of a tree stump.

Tell a story of a time you saw a tiny sprout of hope when all hope seemed lost.





Tell a Story

Josiah was cut to the heart when he realized how far his people had strayed from God's commands.

Tell a story of a time you realized you had strayed.

The Story of Josiah

Second Week of Advent: December 3 & 4

2 Kings 22, Isaiah 64

Josiah was one of many kings in Jesus' family line. Some kings were faithful, some were not. Josiah came to the throne as a young man during a long period of unfaithfulness in the kingdom. During the renovation of the temple, the law scrolls are discovered, and Josiah realized that they have not been following in God's ways. He was brokenhearted. God loved them so much, guiding them and offering them a holy way of life, yet they had rejected it.

Josiah is remembered as a good and faithful king because he instituted reforms that brought God's people back to faith, but it did not last.

As we wait in Advent, we long for lasting faithfulness, for the king of kings, bringing order and peace. We long for someone to make things right. A traditional Advent Scripture, Isaiah 64, begins, "Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" Josiah's heart prayed this prayer, wishing for God to act again among his people. Read the chapter and reflect on the longing we have for justice and for God. As Christians we long for the one who helps us when we go astray and fall short of the law. **Have you ever felt like Josiah? What prompted you to acknowledge the mistake? How did you make amends?**

Verse 2 of *O Come, O Come Emmanuel* calls us to sing of the giving of the law. Advent is a time of preparation and repentance, and so like Josiah, we repent that we have forgotten and ignored God's good law. **When has the law of God been helpful to you in living a faithful life?** How does it reflect that God loves us?



The Story of Miriam

Third Week of Advent: December 10 & 11

Exodus 15: 1-20, Luke 1:46-56 and 67-79

Throughout the Old Testament, up through Jesus' family tree, there were those who led God's people in joyous celebration, reminding them of the promise, pointing out answered prayer. The angels sang "Glory to God in the highest!" on Christmas, but before them, there were others who began the song. We recognize them on our Jesse tree.

Miriam was the sister of Moses. She led the dancing and celebration with tambourines

after the overthrow of the Egyptians at the Red Sea. Much of Scripture was passed on orally; the song of Miriam is thought to be one of the oldest recorded verses of Scripture that was written down. Read the account in Exodus 15.

Celebration is important in a life of faith. God commands that we gather to remember and celebrate in the many festivals of the Old Testament.

Who in your life plans and leads celebrations? Which ones have been memorable to you?

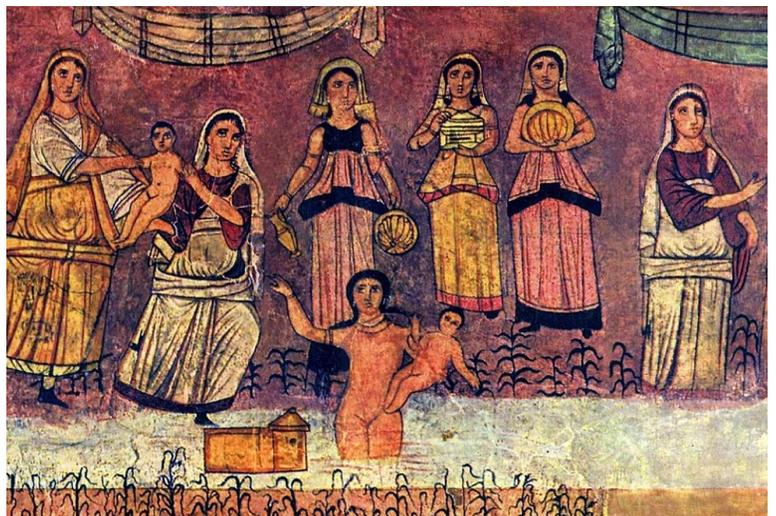
Songs in the Christmas Story

Sometimes, like Miriam, we tell our stories in song. The Bible records several.

Zachariah, Jesus' uncle, was the first to hear that the messiah was coming soon. In response, he sang a song.

Mary celebrated God's mighty acts and the joy of being chosen by to bear the messiah. Her song begins, "My soul magnifies the Lord," and so it is often set to music and called "The Magnificat" from the Latin word for "magnifies."

We are practicing storytelling as a church. This week, choose a hymn to sing that tells a faith story. **Pick up a hymnal and tell your favorite.**



The Story of Abigail

Fourth Week of Advent: December 17 & 18

1 Samuel 25

The Jesse Tree is a way to share Jesus' family tree and share the stories of those who went before. In a way, they are Christmas stories because these heroes of the Bible show us in a small way what God showed us love in a BIG way in Jesus. These stories can help get us ready for Christmas.

We are sharing some Old Testament stories that you might not have heard before, like the story of Abigail.

Abigail was married to a man named Nabal. Nabal refused to share food with David's hungry men. This almost led to war, but Abigail intervened and made peace by bringing abundant food to King David and asking forgiveness on behalf of her people. David was so moved that he ended up marrying her after Nabal died, therefore she is indirectly in Jesus' family line.

Abigail's story is a complicated one. What do you make of her decision to defy her husband? King David had multiple wives, and his complicated family ended up at war with one another.

How have you seen God at work in complicated families?

As the light of Advent grows brighter, we see more and more of God reflected in the people who bring peace, and we wait for the one who brings ultimate peace, the peace which surpasses all understanding. **What is giving you peace right now?**



Tell a Story

Abigail's act of reconciliation was surprising.

Tell a story of a time someone surprised you with generosity.



The Story of Jesus

Luke 2:1-20

The story of Jesus is familiar and deep. How did you first learn it? Do you remember a time when it was told in such a way that you heard it anew?

What are your family's traditions for hearing the Christmas story?

As you think about our journey with the Jesse Tree, what Old Testament stories help you

understand the nature of God that is reflected in Jesus?

How do you hope to see Jesus in the coming year? What attributes of his are you longing to see in the world?

The Shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.” - Luke 2:20



Storytelling at Home

How does your family share stories?

In what settings do you find yourselves sharing family history or recalling meaningful memories? How can you make space for more opportunities?

See if you can engage your family and friends in some storytelling over the holidays. Here are some prompts to share around the table:

Whose life do you envy? Why?

What is the most dangerous thing you have ever done?

What do you remember about your first day of school/work?

What do you feel is most important to pass on to future generations? Be intentional about writing down your memories or making a date to share some special stories with your children and/or grandchildren.





Chrismon Prayer Stations: An Invitation

This year, we were introduced to the Jesse Tree, but we continue to treasure another Christmas tradition, the Chrismon Tree.

Chrismons, or Christmonograms, are gold and white symbols of Jesus.

On New Year's Eve, you are invited to the church between 5 and 6 pm to begin your 2023 celebration with Jesus. The Chrismon symbols will serve as prayer stations that you can walk through at your own pace to consider how you will walk with Jesus this year.

Come to church for a good story.

Hear the story of the symbols of Christmas and their meanings at **Hanging of the Greens** on Saturday, November 26 at 5 pm. It will be a special part of our regular Saturday worship service.

Participate in the story of Mary and Joseph seeking shelter at **Las Posadas** on Sunday, November 27 at 5 pm. We will act out the story and end the night with a fiesta.

Hear what children want for Christmas at **Breakfast with Santa** and ask artists for their stories of how their masterpieces came to be at **Merry Marketplace**, both on Saturday, December 3 at 8:30 am.

Sing the Christmas story at **Cocoa and Carols** on December 18 at 5 PM.

Be inspired by the ways God meets us at Christmas time, even when we are walking through grief at **Blue Christmas** Worship service, a special gathering for those who are grieving on Wednesday, December 21 at 6:30 pm.

And of course, hear the best story of all at our **Christmas Eve** worship services

- 3 pm Children's Service
- 5 pm Contemporary
- 7 pm Classic
- 11 pm Celtic