

Today

Nov/Dec 2018

refresh, refocus, renew



THE JESSE TREE

ALSO: ROCKS AND STONES

Friends:

I had a tree in my yard that I did not want, so I cut it down. I tried to cut it low so that my lawn mower would pass over it easily. As grass grew around it, I thought that would be the end of the tree. But then the stump started to grow shoots. New trees came up out of the ground with vigor! That tree was not done growing.



Scripture describes Jesus as a shoot growing up from the stump of Jesse. Jesse was the father of King David and an ancestor to Jesus of Nazareth, but by Jesus' time, the kings of David's line seemed long gone. Jesus, however, was not only a king but also the Lord and Savior of all.

This December, we will examine with Kurt Selles the "Jesse Tree" tradition, an Advent calendar that prompts us to reflect on a new symbol every day as we retell God's story leading up to the coming of Jesus.

But first, in November, Julia Prins Vanderveen helps us consider another biblical image—focusing on rocks and stones. Rock is everywhere, solid and secure. How is our living God like rock and stone?

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Steven Koster". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Steven" and last name "Koster" clearly distinguishable.

—Steven Koster

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“Rocks and Stones”
Julia Prins Vanderveen



“The Jesse Tree”
Kurt Selles

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ReFrame
Media

december

The Jesse Tree

Kurt Selles

During Advent we look forward to the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. There are many different ways to celebrate Advent, and the Jesse Tree is one that families have used in many parts of the world. Scanning the Bible from Genesis up to the birth of Jesus, each story and symbol in the Jesse Tree series helps us remember that the entire story of the Bible—creation, fall, and redemption—moves forward in anticipation of the birth of our Savior. Then, after Christmas, when we've finished the journey of the Jesse Tree in Bethlehem, we look forward to future glory, with Jesus returning on the clouds of heaven.

Kurt Selles is the director of Back to God Ministries International, the parent organization of ReFrame Media, which publishes the Today devotions. Kurt is a graduate of Calvin Theological Seminary and Vanderbilt University. Kurt previously served as director of the Global Center at Beeson Divinity School, where he also taught missions. He also served as a missionary in Taiwan and China. Kurt and his wife, Vicki, have three adult children.

THE STUMP OF JESSE

(SYMBOL: A TREE)

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
—Isaiah 11:1

During Advent, Christians look forward to the birth of the Savior. While Christmas joy rightly peaks at the birth of Jesus, sometimes we forget the Old Testament stories pointing to that moment at the manger. The Jesse Tree, which invites the retelling of many of those stories, can heighten our joy at Christmas as we see God's promises unfold in history.

In the chapter leading up to our reading for today, Isaiah describes God's wrath against human rebellion and sin. The prophet declares that it will be like God taking an ax to the arrogance of human evil, cutting a forlorn scene like a hillside stripped bare of trees, leaving nothing but wretched stumps.

But wait, says, Isaiah: "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit." There's

hope for God's people! God plans to raise up a Savior, both tender and powerful, a promise not only to Israel but to all nations. Isaiah declares, "In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples."

This month we will trace passages in Scripture that show the promise developing right up to the coming of the Jesse Tree himself—that is, Jesus, the Christ. As we recount the great, sweeping story of God's faithfulness, may we abound in hope, joy, and faith in God's promises of full life in Christ.

God of all hope, fill us this season with joy and peace as we remember the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

GOD, THE CREATOR

(SYMBOL: THE DOVE)

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

—Genesis 1:1

Doves often settle in at the base of our backyard birdfeeder. As I watch them, I understand why they are a symbol of peace. While other birds flit nervously back and forth, the doves, draped in their pastel hues, sit stationary for long stretches, casually taking in the scene. Doves are a picture of peace and serenity. Even their gentle cooing carries a peaceful tone.

Their peacefulness makes doves a fitting symbol of creation. In the beginning, out of nothing, God created the heavens and the earth, all things visible and invisible. And all of it was good.

But not all of creation today exudes serenity or makes a fitting symbol of the peace of all things working together in harmony. Somehow our human rebellion against God included not only terrible consequences

and conflict for our lives together, leading even to death, but it also upset the balance of God's creation, which groans for rescue as we do.

The dove serves as a small reminder of the peacefulness of God's creation as he intended it. In this way the dove also reminds us of the lack of peace in our world, and that turns our hearts in expectation and longing to the coming of the Prince of Peace.

O Lord, our God, when we in awestruck wonder consider all that you have made, we declare with all of our heart, how great you are! And at Christmas our hearts long for the coming of your Son, our Prince of Peace, in whose name we pray. Amen.

THE FIRST SIN

(SYMBOL: FRUIT)

"He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."

—Genesis 3:15

If you're like me, you love fruit! There are so many colors, textures, and flavors. Maybe you also like the adage "An apple a day keeps the doctor away."

In Eden, it wasn't the fruit's fault. The forbidden fruit may have been beautiful and sweet—or maybe not. It was attractive to Eve and Adam mainly because it was forbidden.

The Bible explains that when Adam and Eve ate that fruit, it didn't bring delight and satisfaction, but shame, misery, and ultimately death. It spoiled all of their relationships: with God, with each other, and with creation. Indeed, all who have lived on this earth since that terrible moment have shared in the error and its consequences. The apostle Paul summarizes this way: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

The consequences are grim. And yet, almost immediately after the sin of Adam and Eve, God provides a promise. In the curse spoken to the serpent, God promises a Savior: "he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."

In this dark story, we catch the first glimpse of Christmas. Jesus is the one bruised in the crushing of sin and death that restores our relationship with God. At Christmas we enjoy the sweetest fruit—the fruit of Christ's redemption and the chance to share it with the world.

O come, O come,
Emmanuel, you who save
us and give us victory
over the grave. Amen.

THE FLOOD

(SYMBOL: A RAINBOW)

"I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth." —Genesis 9:13

One drizzly spring morning, I was out walking when the sun burst through the clouds and a rainbow appeared in front of me. It was so close and so dramatic that I almost felt I could touch it. How startling the rainbow must have been to Noah, and how amazing the promise of God it represented!

In the story of Noah and the flood we see the devastating consequences of human evil and God's wrath against it. God hates sin and will punish it. But we also see God's gracious deliverance of Noah's family and the animals in the ark. We see God's faithfulness to his promise to deliver his people.

After the flood, it didn't take long for wickedness to spread again. How did Noah keep trusting God's promise? And, indeed, how do we? God knows that our frail hearts

need a sign, a reminder of his promise. God's sign to all is the rainbow. And what is the fulfillment of the promise, God's ultimate delivery? The sign for that is a star over a baby born in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:9).

When you next see a rainbow or a bright star, let them flood you with joy and gratitude, reminding you of God's promise and fulfillment of delivery, God's promise of life to the full (John 10:10).

O God, creator of the heavens and the earth, you give us the rainbow to remind and comfort us with your love and promised presence. Help us to live fully in sharing your love with the world. Amen.

THE PROMISE

(SYMBOL: STARS)

"Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them. . . . So shall your offspring be." —Genesis 15:5

Where we live, cloud cover and urban light obscure all but a few stars at night. But I remember being in a desert once where the night sky was totally clear, dark, and filled with stars beyond number.

God tells Abram to look up at such a sky and count the stars, knowing of course that it's impossible. What is God's point?

God has promised to do what Abram now believes is impossible: to make him, an old man, the father of a great nation (Genesis 12:2). But Abram knows it's humanly impossible for him to father one child, let alone a nation! Yet God points to the stars as if to say, "The maker of those can certainly make you into a father."

Later God changed Abram's name to *Abraham*, which means "father of many na-

tions" (Genesis 17:5). And through Christ, a descendant of Abraham, God's promise now includes people from every tribe and nation (Romans 4; Revelation 5).

And what heralds the birth of Christ? A star (Matthew 2:1-12).

No matter how many stars you can see where you live, look up and rejoice at their beauty. Then remember these signs of God's promises fulfilled: the stars of Abraham, and the star of Jesus over Bethlehem.

The heavens declare your glory, O God, and the stars, your handiwork! We give you thanks for your promise to Abraham that, through Jesus, extends to us all. Help us to radiate your glory to the world. In Jesus' name, Amen.

OFFERING ISAAC

(SYMBOL: A RAM)

Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son."
—Genesis 22:8

We've taken several camping trips over the years with our children. We gather our gear and anticipate the thrill of being in the woods together.

That's not how it feels with Abraham and Isaac's camping trip. Dread hangs over this dark story as soon as they set out. Somewhere along the way, Isaac points out the obvious: they've forgotten something essential, and it's not tent stakes. It's the lamb for the sacrifice. Abraham chokes out an assurance: "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son."

When the moment comes, and Abraham raises the knife over his only, beloved son, we feel his horror and grief. We wonder, as Abraham must, what kind of God would ask such a terrible price?

Even when God does provide a sacrificial ram at the last moment, our relief is tinged with horror. The child's escape from death was too close to forget, and rightly so. Many lambs are sacrificed throughout the Bible's story, but not a son. Not until Jesus, the one whose birth we celebrate. All of this points to Jesus' sacrifice for us. God himself provides, and it's his own Son who dies in our place, paying the price for our sin.

As you prepare your heart for Christmas, keep in mind the depth of God's love, how far he goes to restore us to himself. Thank him and live for him!

What wondrous love is this, O God, that you would send your beloved, only Son to die for us? We are eternally grateful. In his name we pray. Amen.

THE PROMISE AGAIN

(SYMBOL: A LADDER)

"All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring."
—Genesis 28:14

In his dream, Jacob sees angels ascending and descending on a stairway or ladder, and above it he sees the Lord standing. God assures him that he is the God of his fathers, Abraham and Isaac. The Lord promises to be with Jacob and then repeats the promise he made to Abraham. And this time, instead of mentioning stars, God uses the image of dust spreading east and west to describe just how expansive Jacob's descendants will be.

As a part of this promise we hear God say again, "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and through your offspring" (see Genesis 12:3; 22:18).

Here at Bethel (which means "house of God") we see a touchpoint with God's promise of redemption that runs through the entire Bible. To

redeem his children, God chooses Abraham's family, and through Jacob's descendants, who become the people of Israel, God brings his Son into the world to save Abraham's spiritual family, made up of all who trust in God.

Like many of the stories throughout the Old Testament, the one about Jacob's dream is a Christmas story. And in it we see and anticipate the coming of our Savior. In our anticipation and longing, may we live with hope for the coming of God's kingdom.

God in heaven, our faith and hope look up to you. In the birth of Jesus we see that you keep your promises. Help us to live in faith and hope for his coming again. Amen.

GOD'S PROVIDENCE

(SYMBOL: SACK OF GRAIN)

"God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance."

—Genesis 45:7

If anyone can claim to be a victim of biblical proportions, Joseph can. His brothers sell him into slavery. A false accusation lands him in prison for several years. But then, quite dramatically, Pharaoh delivers Joseph from prison and places him in authority over all of Egypt (Genesis 37-41).

If someone else were telling it, this would be the perfect setup for a vengeance story. But this is God's story. When Joseph's traitorous brothers show up looking for some grain, they get more than they ask for. They receive compassionate, abundant deliverance from God through Joseph (Genesis 42-44). Joseph, always the visionary, sees what they can't: God himself has directed the whole story. Even out of the evil that people do, God works redemption.

Those sacks of grain mean more than the survival of one family. They mean the fulfillment of God's promise to redeem his people—more populous than stars or the dust of the desert—people who trust him.

Joseph the betrayed victim became Joseph the savior. And his story prefigures another betrayal, another victim, and the ultimate Savior. Jesus, though innocent of any sin, was arrested, falsely accused, and executed on a cross. Yet out of this travesty of justice God perfected the deliverance of his people. No matter what each day brings your way, trust God and celebrate his providence.

Father, help us to fully trust you and celebrate your goodness today. Amen.

GOD'S LEADERSHIP

(SYMBOL: BURNING BUSH)

"So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."
—Exodus 3:10

Do a web search for "burning bush," and you'll discover some beautiful red shrubs. Do a search for "*the* burning bush," and you'll find images of a bush that is on fire but is not burned up. What is that about?

The explanation from salvation history is straightforward: by means of a burning bush God reveals himself and his purpose to use Moses to free his chosen people enslaved in Egypt.

Here again we see that God intends to keep the promise he made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, from whom Moses and the enslaved Israelites are descended. We also see the role of mediator introduced, with Moses standing between God and his people. Without Moses' leadership, we are told in several places, the people of Israel are like sheep without a shepherd. Helpless, in other words.

In the light of Christmas, we see that Moses' role points to another mediator. The mediator whose birth we celebrate on Christmas stands perfectly between God and his children as the ultimate fulfillment of all God's promises.

Let your heart long for the Mediator who brings God's people out of slavery to sin and death, Jesus Christ, our Savior.

Father God, we marvel at the vivid ways you reveal yourself to us, your children. We marvel even more at your amazing love revealed through Jesus, our Mediator and Redeemer from sin and death. In his name we pray. Amen.

PASSOVER AND EXODUS

(SYMBOL: A LAMB)

On that very day the Lord brought the Israelites out of Egypt.
—Exodus 12:51

The Passover is a defining moment for the people of Israel. On the eve of their escape from slavery, God's people dab their doorframes with the blood of a lamb. And as God brings judgment on all the false gods of Egypt that night, a destructive plague passes over the homes protected by lamb's blood.

The moment of Passover is to be remembered forever as a sign and seal of God's deliverance of his people. Forever after, in keeping the Passover, the people of Israel remember God's mighty deliverance from slavery and his promised faithfulness.

As important as this moment is for God's Old Testament people, it points to the defining moment for God's full family, made up of people of all nations. It also involves a sacrifice, fulfilled promises, and

an amazing deliverance. Jesus, "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29), shed his blood to protect us from the curse of death for our sins. So now all who believe in him as Savior can be freed from their slavery to sin and have new, full life.

On Christmas we celebrate the birth that looks ahead to Jesus' death on the cross. Let your longing for the birth of the Lamb of God saturate all you do today.

Jesus, your blood washes us clean of our sin and delivers us to new life. In joy and thanksgiving, help us to live for you, our precious Lord and Savior, in whose name we pray. Amen.

THE TORAH AT SINAI

(SYMBOL: STONE TABLETS)

"Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."
—Exodus 19:5-6

We don't often use the word *Torah* anymore. And it can be used in a few different ways. Generally it refers to the law given by God to Israel at Sinai, including the Ten Commandments on stone tablets (Exodus 20:1-17). But *Torah* can also refer to the five books of Moses (Genesis through Deuteronomy) in the Old Testament. At its root, *Torah* simply means God's instruction to his people for living in a way that honors him.

If we read today's story wrong, we might think of it as a business transaction: If you do this, I'll do that. But that would miss the central point: before God gives his people the Torah and calls them to obedience, he is already doing the things he promises to do. In other words, God acts *first*, showing his love and care long before the people

commit to follow him. That's the way it is with God's grace. Because God has already chosen and blessed the people, they can live in faithful obedience, as outlined in the commandments, and be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

Thinking of God's initial love and faithfulness is the best way to think about the commandments for our lives today. They are simply instructions for joyful, faithful living.

Ultimately, our heavenly High Priest, Jesus, writes the law on our hearts. He has made us a priesthood and a holy nation to serve him in his world.

Your instructions for living, O God, give us life in you and in your Son, our Savior, Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

FALL OF JERICHO

(SYMBOL: RAM'S HORN TRUMPET)

When the priests sounded the trumpet blast, Joshua commanded . . . "Shout! For the LORD has given you the city!"

—Joshua 6:16

Do you know what a shofar is? It's a ram's horn trumpet used by the ancient Israelites when they engaged in battle. Though you wouldn't guess it from its simple shape, the shofar gives a sound like the piercing call of a bugle.

God commands the people of Israel to destroy Jericho, the first city they encounter in the promised land. They march around the city for six days, and on the seventh day, when the Israelite army hears the blast of the shofar, they all shout. Then the walls of Jericho come crumbling down, and the Israelites charge in and take the city.

As you read about this, don't picture a huge, terrifying, well-trained army outside the walls. They were few, weary and weak. The people of Jericho were probably laughing at them—until the walls crum-

bled. This event was meant as theater, an announcement. God was making something dramatically clear: these were his people, and he alone was giving the land to them.

As we march toward Christmas, we see that the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises is not in military triumph. In Jesus, God's promises expand beyond Israel to include all people. The victory is over sin and death, and the Lord of this victory is the Prince of Peace, the peace of God that surpasses all understanding.

Father in heaven, battle cries rage in the world around us. Give us the peace that surpasses all understanding through the Prince of Peace, our Savior, Jesus. Amen.

UNLIKELY HEROES

(SYMBOL: CLAY JAR)

When the angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon, he said, "The LORD is with you, mighty warrior."
—Judges 6:12

In this story, Gideon goes on to become a successful military leader (see Judges 7). But that's surprising when we consider how the story begins.

The angel of the Lord greets Gideon with the words, "The LORD is with you, mighty warrior." But where is Gideon when the angel greets him? Polishing his armor? Mustering the troops? No. He's threshing grain in a winepress, hiding out from marauding Midianites, who are a constant threat to the Israelites at that time. So Gideon is not acting like a mighty warrior but more like a coward.

Repeatedly we see Gideon as timid and uncertain, but we should not be too hard on him. His anxiety and hesitation simply highlight the fact that God is setting him up with impossible odds. By using Gideon and

just a small army, even though many thousands of soldiers were available (Judges 7:3, 8), God is teaching his people that the battle belongs to the Lord. When Gideon and his men finally enter the Midianite camp at night, smashing clay jars, carrying torches, and blowing trumpets, God himself routs the enemies of Israel.

Weak men and fragile jars point to the coming of the Lord and Savior as a helpless, human baby. The battle belongs to the Lord.

By ourselves we are like clay jars, Lord, and only in you, Jesus, can we become mighty warriors of your kingdom. Frail though we are, please use us for the coming of your kingdom and your glory. Amen.

BEGINNING OF THE MONARCHY

(SYMBOL: CROWN)

The LORD said to [Samuel], "This is the man I spoke to you about; he will govern my people."
—1 Samuel 9:17

After more than three hundred years of intermittent leadership by judges, the people of Israel longed for a change. They were tired of the cycle of having different leaders rise up and troubleshoot what seemed like an endless series of crises. They wanted a king such as the other nations had (1 Samuel 8:4-5).

So God, though he knew the people were rejecting him as their true King, told the prophet Samuel to appoint a king over Israel. Following God's instructions, Samuel anointed Saul to be Israel's first king. But, with a few exceptions, Israel learned that having a king to rule over them was as much of a disaster as the rule of the judges.

What can we learn from Israel's monarchy? Perhaps that tears can also be shed over

answered prayers? Perhaps that no flawed human being can ever rule over us perfectly?

More than these sad lessons, we can learn the good news: the backdrop to the story of Israel's kings is that God remains faithful despite his people's unfaithfulness. God provides for them, even out of their bad choices. And through the line of the flawed kings of Israel, God eventually brings forth the perfect king. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords, and on Christmas we celebrate the birth of that king, Jesus, the Christ.

Jesus, our King, rule our hearts with your love and compassion today and always. We pray in your name. Amen.

A SHEPHERD

(SYMBOL: A SHEPHERD'S CROOK)

"There is still the youngest," Jesse answered. "He is tending the sheep."
—1 Samuel 16:11

One by one, the sons of Jesse pass before the prophet Samuel. When Samuel sees Eliab, the eldest son, he says to himself, "Surely the LORD's anointed stands here." But the Lord says, in effect, "You're only looking at appearances, but I look at the heart."

When seven of Jesse's sons have passed before him, Samuel tells Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen these." So then the youngest, the shepherd-boy David, is summoned from the fields—and at God's command Samuel anoints him king over God's people.

David turns out to be a much better king than Saul, the first king of Israel. Yet David too has flaws and failings of his own. But God, who sees what we cannot, chooses David, indicating he is "a man after [God's] own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14).

Throughout David's story and in the psalms he wrote, we see a sensitivity and a wonder at God's glory and power, as well as a deep sense of humility before God, especially when he fails. These qualities make him not only a good king but also a suitable shepherd for God's people.

Later God makes a promise to David that his throne will be established forever (2 Samuel 7). And this means that God will bring from David's line the very greatest King and Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

You know all human hearts, O God. Purify ours so that we can be your children after your own heart. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

THREAT OF FALSE GODS

(SYMBOL: A STONE ALTAR)

"How long will you waver . . . ? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him."
—1 Kings 18:21

Elijah's confrontation with the prophets of Baal is one of the most dramatic stories in the Old Testament. Here God's people are called to choose whom they will follow, the Lord God of Israel or Baal, the generic name for the fertility gods of the nations surrounding Israel.

After the prophets of Baal have failed in their frenzy of self-mutilation to rouse their god, who doesn't even exist, Elijah raises the stakes and then prays that the people may know *the* Lord, who totally annihilates the stone altar. Then, after three long years of drought, starting from a tiny dark cloud, it begins to rain. Elijah's God shows himself to be both powerful and gracious.

Whom will we follow, false gods or the one true God, the maker of heaven and earth?

That is still the question we face. The false gods of today may not have names and temples like the gods of ancient times, but they still deceive and enslave human hearts.

Not so the Creator. Both powerful and gracious, he frees our hearts from sin. Look no further than the miracle that takes place in Bethlehem. Jesus was born with a heart filled with grace and love, and in the new birth he gives us, he replaces our hearts of stone with hearts of flesh.

On which altar will you lay your heart today?

Jesus, you gave yourself as a sacrifice for us. Help us to offer our hearts in loving service to you and the world around us. Amen.

FAITHFULNESS AND DELIVERANCE

(SYMBOL: AN EMPTY TENT)

Hezekiah trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah. . . . —2 Kings 18:5

After the division of the kingdom into Israel and Judah (1 Kings 12), the descendants of David ruled over Judah. Hezekiah was one of them, and he was faithful to God and delivered the people from their enemies.

After becoming king at the age of 25, Hezekiah set about reforming the temple and calling the people to faithfully follow the Lord. He destroyed the idols and the altars of false gods. He held fast to God, trusted him, and followed him throughout his 29-year reign.

Hezekiah was tough in adversity too. Threatened by the overwhelming Assyrian army under Sennacherib, Hezekiah trusted in God for astonishing deliverance. Hezekiah prayed honestly and earnestly for God's help, and that night God's victory over the arrogant,

brutal Assyrians was complete (2 Kings 19).

The book of Matthew reveals Hezekiah's place in the genealogy of our Savior. Step by step, person by person, we see in figures like Hezekiah not merely examples of human faith, but much more. Ultimately we see God working out his plan of salvation, a plan that springs forward at the birth of Jesus.

Be inspired by the life of Hezekiah, but be amazed by God's gracious plan of salvation through Jesus, whose birth we celebrate and whose return we long for today.

Father, as you delivered Judah long ago, so you have delivered us from sin and death. Help us now to live in faith and obedience to you. In Christ, Amen.

CALL TO OBEDIENCE

(SYMBOL: FIRE TONGS WITH HOT COAL)

"I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips . . . and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." —Isaiah 6:5

Occasionally I burn my fingers on our backyard grill. It's usually not serious, but it definitely stings. Can you imagine the sting of a burning coal touching your lips? That's what happens to Isaiah in his vision of heaven.

In the same year that Uzziah the king died, the prophet had a vision: he saw the King, the Lord Almighty, high on a throne, and his robe filled the temple. Hebrew tradition taught that no one could see God and live. Isaiah lamented his own uncleanness and that of the people of Israel. Then a seraph, an angel who attended God's throne, used tongs to take a live coal from the temple altar. Touching it to the prophet's lips, he cleansed Isaiah for service.

Purified, Isaiah could now answer God's call. "Here am I. Send me!" His passion inspires

us. But the rest of the passage is bleak. The people, still impure, hear God's call, but their hearts remain callous and closed.

Still, there is hope for repentance; there is hope for the people to "turn and be healed." And the holy seed of God's faithfulness remains, and from that "stump in the land" a shoot will grow. Jesus, coming from the stump of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1), will restore God's people.

Do you hear his call today? By the purifying fire of Christ and his Spirit, we can serve and glorify God wherever he calls and sends us.

Purify our lips and our hearts, O God. Remake us to love and serve you, and send us to do your work, in Jesus' name. Amen.

EXILE

(SYMBOL: TEARS)

"Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?"

—Jeremiah 8:22

A *jeremiad* is a long, mournful complaint, a list of woes. This word came into use as a description of long, woe-filled passages in the book of Jeremiah. Indeed, the prophet rails repeatedly against the people of God in his day.

The tone of Jeremiah's entire book is lament because the sins of the people are truly depressing: idolatry, adultery, mistreatment of the poor and widows and orphans. God's people, says Jeremiah, are like an unfaithful spouse and rebellious children. God's judgment on such unfaithfulness will inevitably come, Jeremiah declares. And it does. God's people lose the promised land and are exiled to Babylon.

In our passage today Jeremiah asks, "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?" Literally, the balm of

Gilead was a topical medicine made from a local tree. But that's not the treatment or the doctor Jeremiah is alluding to. He's talking about a physician who can salve the *eternal* wound of rebellion and separation from God himself. He's talking about salvation.

Thankfully, God doesn't leave his grieving people captive and far from home. Though the people suffer exile, God in his faithfulness heals and restores them. But the greater, eternal healing comes with the Great Physician, Jesus, who restores our souls.

O Jesus, Great Physician, you alone are the balm we need to heal our sin-sick souls. We beg your forgiveness for our sins. Heal us, we pray. Amen.

WAITING

(SYMBOL: DEER)

The sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer; he enables me to tread on the heights.

—Habakkuk 3:19

Do you ever see deer in your neighborhood? Lots of them are living closer to our cities nowadays. When I see deer startled, I'm impressed by how they spring energetically away. This image captures the surprising high note on which the prophet Habakkuk closes his book.

This ending is all the more impressive because the book starts out with a rough cry of despair: "How long, LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen?" (Habakkuk 1:2). The prophet goes on to ask, in effect, "If you are the sovereign God of the universe, why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper?"

If we have ever felt trapped in a spiritually dark place, we may have thought the same things: How long must this go on? Where is God? Is he listening? Why won't he just answer?

From his dark place, Habakkuk emerges to a newly deepened faith, a faith not dependent on what he actually sees with his eyes. Indeed, he's prepared for more struggles and waiting; yet he says, "I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior." With this confession of faith on his lips, Habakkuk's spirit is revived, like the springing, leaping feet of a deer on the hills.

In another time of great darkness and uncertainty for God's people, God was listening (as always), and he answered in the birth of Jesus Christ, our Savior.

As we await the coming of your Son, O God, we trust in your strength to revive us, that we may rejoice in you, our Lord and Savior. In Jesus' name, Amen.

REBUILDING

(SYMBOL: CITY WALL)

The surrounding nations were afraid . . . because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.

—Nehemiah 6:16

This story takes place around 445 B.C. Nehemiah, like many other Jewish people, had remained in Persia after a group of exiles were allowed to return and rebuild Jerusalem and the temple there. Though the temple was now rebuilt, the walls of the city were still in ruins.

Learning about this from visitors, Nehemiah despaired. As a cupbearer for the king of Persia, his life was good, but his people in Judah were struggling. God's people in the land of promise were vulnerable on all sides.

When the king asked Nehemiah why he looked so sad, Nehemiah explained. And, after praying to God, Nehemiah asked the king for permission to return so that he could rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. In response, the king sent Nehemiah with

authority and supplies to renovate the city.

Despite great obstacles and local opposition, Nehemiah led the people to repair Jerusalem's wall and rebuild its gates. In fact, the work was complete in just 52 days! Recognizing the amazing help of God in this feat, the surrounding nations stopped threatening Jerusalem.

We too can have hope today amid the wreckage of human failings, when we finally realize we cannot save ourselves. Into the ruins of life Jesus has been born. The Lord our God is our help and strength always.

Father, by your mighty hand you redeem and restore us through Jesus, our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

REPENTANCE

(SYMBOL: A SHELL)

John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

—Matthew 3:1-2

Christmas has become a "cozy" holiday. Christmastime in many people's minds conjures up images of a plush room with a shimmering Christmas tree and colorful packages underneath, a crackling fire, eggnog, and Christmas carols playing in the background.

In contrast, very few people think of John the Baptist. There's nothing cozy about John, with his coarse camel-skin outfit and his diet of honey and locusts. Yet people came in droves from all around the Jordan River to hear John's thunderous preaching.

John's message couldn't be further from cozy. John pounded so hard that people were reminded of the seriousness of sin and God's wrath against it. "Repent and believe!" he called out.

Yet John's message is not all fire and warning. There is hopefulness here too, for he is preparing the way for the Savior. One of the symbols the church uses for John is a clam or scallop shell. It is said that he used a shell to pour the water of baptism. For John, baptism is a sign and seal of our repentance and forgiveness, of our belonging to the Messiah.

So have a wonderful Christmas with family and friends. But don't get too cozy. Remember and reflect on the great need our Savior has come to fill.

Jesus, cleanse us from all our sins; forgive us and make us new again. May we celebrate Christmas with joy, knowing our hope is in you. Amen.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

(SYMBOL: WHITE LILY)

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled."
—Luke 1:38

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is one of the most highly revered women in history. So it comes as no surprise that white lilies, or "Madonna lilies," as they are sometimes called, often symbolize her purity, humility, and devotion. Across the ages, Mary remains a powerful witness to unyielding faith.

To appreciate the sturdiness of Mary's faith, we need only put ourselves in her place and imagine an angel suddenly appearing to us. Many of us would probably faint from terror. Yet, despite her bewilderment, Mary remains composed as she listens and responds to the angel Gabriel. The message this high-ranking angel delivers is even more startling. "By the power of the Holy Spirit you will conceive God's Son," Gabriel tells Mary, in effect, "and you are to call

him Jesus, because he will save God's people from their sins" (see Mathew 1:21).

And Mary responds serenely, "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled."

For her example of unwavering faith in the face of great uncertainty, Mary deserves our deep respect. Of course she's not divine herself, but she provides a *divinely inspired* example of how we too can respond when we are faced with unsettling calls to follow Jesus.

May each of us be able to say, "I am the Lord's servant," and then follow Jesus with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Lord, increase our faith
and our faithfulness.
We pray in Jesus' name.
Amen.

JOY TO THE WORLD!

(SYMBOL: MANGER)

"I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."

—Luke 2:10-11

I enjoy the Christmas season. I like the cheerful decorations, spending time with family and friends, and eating Christmas goodies. My favorite part of Christmas, by far, though, is singing carols—and, above all, "Joy to the World!"

"Joy to the world! The Lord is come," God's people announce at Christmastime. Based on Psalm 98, Isaac Watts's eighteenth-century carol celebrates the coming of Jesus, the Christ. The joy of the Savior's coming resounds throughout all of creation, even the fields and rocks and hills and plains "repeat the sounding joy." This is good news for *all* of God's world!

What's so good about this news announced each Christmas? Why sing this carol with such exuberance? Watts answers that question in the third

stanza, where he declares that Jesus has come to deal with the curse of human sin and rebellion. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus brings the blessing as "far as the curse is found."

In Watts's hymn, this phrase repeats several times—and for good reason. Released from bondage to sin and the power of death over us, we are now freed to live with joy, to love God and our neighbor, and to cultivate the earth God has given us. So let's sing with joy that good news: "Joy to the world! The Lord is come!"

Jesus, you have come and released us from the power of sin and death. Help us to live in ways that proclaim the wonders of your love. Amen.

THE WORD BECAME FLESH

(SYMBOL: AN OPEN BIBLE)

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. —John 1:14

The gospels give a complete and trustworthy account of Jesus' coming, but they don't all repeat the same events. In Matthew and Luke we learn details about Jesus' birth. John doesn't mention Jesus' birth, but he explains its deep *meaning*.

Dramatically, John links Jesus with the creation of the world: "In the beginning was the Word." Who is this eternal Word? As the rest of John's gospel shows, the Word is the one and only Son of God. But he did not create the world and then step back, remaining aloof from his creation. He entered the world he had made, took on flesh, and became just like us.

Wholly divine and wholly human? Christians have pondered this question since the earliest days of the church. We

can't explain it logically. God, who is not bound by human logic, sent his Son, who became flesh, to provide the very Savior we need. Fully divine and fully human (though without sin), he makes us right with God by his sacrifice on the cross.

Tracing the branches of the Jesse Tree brings us to Christmas, where we see, as Joseph, Mary, and the shepherds saw long ago, the glory of the Son of God, who became like us to save us from our sins. Now that's good news of great joy!

Jesus, full of grace and truth, great Creator and gentle Savior, be born in our hearts today. Amen.

THE GIFT OF SALVATION

(SYMBOL: A WRAPPED PRESENT)

On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him.

—Matthew 2:11

Many Christmas cards feature a decorated Christmas tree with colorful presents beneath its branches. Of course we love Christmas gift-giving, but attractive packages can make us forget how the custom of Christmas gifts started and what it signifies.

Most likely, Christmas-gift giving stems from the story about wise men from the east who came to visit Jesus after his birth in Bethlehem. Following a star and a prophecy, they arrived at last. The star stood over the place where Jesus and his parents were staying, and the visitors dismounted their dusty camels and entered the house.

Matthew says that when they saw the child Jesus, “they bowed down and worshiped him.” He uses this expression several times throughout his

gospel to describe people’s reactions to Jesus. The wise men also came bearing lavish gifts.

Mystery surrounds this story, but it teaches us several important things. Like the wise men, we too should bow and worship Jesus as King. We should also offer gifts to him, the best of all that we have, and, most important, our hearts and our service. That’s the least we can do for the One who brings us the choicest gift of all: salvation and new life.

Lord, lead us, like the wise men long ago, to kneel before you in adoration and humble service. Thank you for coming to save us! We pray in your name. Amen.

SEEKING THE COMFORT OF ISRAEL

(SYMBOL: AN OLD MAN)

Simeon . . . was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him.

—Luke 2:25

In this story related to Christmas, we meet Simeon, a righteous and devout man who was waiting for the consolation (or comfort) of Israel. Based on a promise made to him by God, Simeon was waiting for God to rescue and comfort his people. Isaiah had spoken about this consolation with the words “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God” (Isaiah 40:1), and these words point to the coming of the Messiah, God’s anointed, to rescue and deliver his chosen people.

Simeon had been waiting and watching at the temple in Jerusalem for this Messiah. Then one day, prompted by the Holy Spirit, he recognized Israel’s comfort in the baby Jesus, brought in by Joseph and Mary “to do for him what the custom of the Law required.” Through the witness

of Simeon, Luke announces that the comfort of Israel has come to save all God’s people from sin, wherever they are throughout the world.

At Christmas we celebrate that Jesus, the comfort and hope of the world, comes to us. He lives in our hearts, and through the Holy Spirit we trust in him as we live by faith. We have received the comfort of Jesus, and now we live in joyful obedience, serving him in the world.

Give thanks today for the comfort of knowing Jesus, and prepare your heart for his second coming.

Jesus, you are our comfort and our hope. Help us to trust and serve you in all things. Amen.

BREAD OF LIFE

(SYMBOL: LOAF OF BREAD)

"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

—John 6:35

The branches of the Jesse Tree stretch across Scripture, providing a helpful way to see God's plan of salvation leading to the coming of Jesus. And the story of Christ's coming does not end in Bethlehem. Jesus' ministry and teaching help us grasp the meaning of our Savior's birth.

In the setting of our text for today, Jesus has just miraculously fed a crowd of over five thousand people from a few loaves of bread and some fish (John 6:1-13). Not surprisingly, the crowd wants more of Jesus and his miracles, so they follow him around. Their hungering for physical bread gives Jesus a teaching moment to talk about spiritual life and sustenance.

Jesus declares, "I am the bread of life." In their eagerness for free food, the crowds have

missed the spiritual significance of Jesus' feast in the wilderness. The physical bread that Jesus provided not only gave nourishment—like the bread (manna) God gave the people of Israel long ago—but also pointed to the spiritual bread of Jesus' body. Through his sacrificial death and resurrection, Jesus provides the bread of eternal life for God's children.

Bread is wonderful and nourishing, but it can't feed our souls. Only Jesus, broken for us, can do that. Whatever you eat today, remember the one who gives you new life.

Father in heaven, thank you for our daily bread. And thank you for sending Jesus, who nourishes and satisfies our souls. Amen.

LIGHT OF THE WORLD

(SYMBOL: CANDLE)

"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." —John 8:12

The sun is the light of our natural world. Without the sun, no life on earth could exist. According to the Bible, though, life means more than merely physical existence; it also includes spiritual life. At Christmas, we celebrate the spiritual life-giving light given to a world shrouded in spiritual darkness.

At the end of the Feast of Tabernacles, in the context of our passage from John, four gigantic lampstands (possibly 75 feet high) were lit in the temple. While this light blazed over the temple courts, the crowds celebrated, commemorating the travels of Israel in tents in the wilderness after God delivered his people from slavery in Egypt.

In this setting Jesus claims to be the "light of the world." He does not claim that he will

liberate Israel from the oppression of Rome, however. Instead, he makes the more startling claim of delivering sinners from the darkness of rebellion against God, a darkness that infects us individually and plagues our world with hatred and violence. Jesus' salvation is for all who believe in him. He is a "light to the nations," to all peoples around the world who believe in him.

Many people reject Jesus' claim. Do you know the "light of the world?" If you do, let him shine in your life and bring you into closer fellowship with the Father and the people around you.

Light of the world, shine in our hearts so that we can reflect your love in this dark world. Amen.

THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE

(SYMBOL: A BROKEN TOMBSTONE)

"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die."
—John 11:25

Have you heard the saying "In this world nothing is certain but death and taxes"? Taxes can be adjusted, but death remains final. One day we will die. At Christmas, with the birth of Jesus, we celebrate his victory over sin and death.

In his "I am" statement today, Jesus claims to be "the resurrection and the life." Scientifically, it's easy to reject Jesus' claim, because, after all, we don't see the dead coming back to life. But Jesus, the Lord of life, is not bound by the power of death, and his resurrection seals his victory over sin and death for our sake.

Why is the resurrection so important? Because, as the apostle Paul says, if God did not raise Jesus from the dead, our faith is futile and we are the most pitiful of all people (see 1 Corinthians 15:17-19).

But by faith generated through the Holy Spirit's work in our hearts, we believe that God *did* raise Jesus from the dead. And we now enjoy new life in Jesus and look forward to life with him forever. This is no myth or "pie-in-the-sky, by and by" escape from the present; it's simply the truth at the very heart of the salvation story.

Christmas 2018 is behind us, but we look forward to continuing to celebrate the meaning of Christmas at Easter. Live each day with the joy of Easter in your heart!

Jesus, you came to die for us so that we might live. Now help us, we pray, to live for you. May our lives reflect your love every day. In your name we pray. Amen.

COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN

(SYMBOL: A CLOUD)

"You will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

—Mark 14:62

Do you know the word *nadir*? It means "the lowest point." It's hard for us to recognize our own nadir, since it may seem that things can always get worse. Though most of us don't use this word every day, it fits this scene in Mark's gospel. This scene shows the world's condemnation of the Savior promised through the Jesse Tree.

God loved the world so much that he sent his only Son to seek and save the lost. The people living in darkness, however, didn't recognize God's Son. In fact, they condemned him to die a shameful death on a cross, here in this scene in the high priest's courtyard.

But in this rock-bottom moment in history, Jesus himself points beyond his humiliation and death to an entirely different future, to his glorification.

When the high priest asks him if he is indeed "the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One," Jesus responds, "I am, and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

Here we have the full story of the Jesse Tree. It points to Christmas, which points to Easter, when Jesus rose from the dead. And Easter points to the second coming of Jesus on the clouds of heaven to live with us forever (Revelation 21-22).

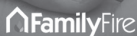
Do you believe in this Jesus as your Lord and Savior? Is he the Lord of your life?

Lord, on this last day of 2018 we give thanks for your faithfulness as we long for the return of Jesus in glory. Amen.



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