

# THE JESSE TREE



## TREE OF FRUITFUL MEMORIES

*A shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse —Isaiah 11:1*



Pop singer Enya has an album poetically titled, *The Memory of Trees*. Trees indeed have memories, marking time by the rings in their trunks, just as the circles of our liturgical years chronicle our journey through life. We hang ornaments on trees because trees are reliable stewards of memories. Christmas trees symbolically display our family histories by bearing holy relics of “our first Christmas together,” new homes, cherished friends, life-giving pursuits, treasured places, valued colleagues, promising students and “baby’s first Christmas.” Over the years our trees become virtual sacraments of our lives.

The Jesse Tree is the memory tree of our faith, the graceful storyteller of God’s sacred family life. The ornaments on the Jesse tree chronicle our experiences of God’s presence and action in human history. The shoot that sprouts from the stump of Jesse is a fertile reminder that our story is rooted in God’s love and God’s story is the fruit of our faithful response. This booklet is an invitation to listen again to the story of God’s coming among us throughout history. As we live the story anew in word and symbol, we celebrate the memories invoked by this incarnate faith and we know that God will surely be born again in the world.

## DAY 2

## GOD

*God saw that it was good. —Genesis 1:10*

Few people get through life without at some point thinking, “I’m no good” or “the world is evil.” These sentiments can be triggered by a glance in the mirror, a TV news story, a parent’s censure, a local tragedy or a betrayal. Our vision can then become clouded and we doubt the value of life. The story of creation grounds faith’s deep conviction in the goodness of humanity and the beauty of the world: “God looked at everything he had made and found it very good.”



## DAY 3

## ADAM & EVE

*Then the eyes of both were opened and they knew that they were naked. —Genesis 3:7*

Everyone eventually encounters a moment of lost innocence. We reach this turning point in numerous ways: we defy a parent, deceive a spouse, cheat a client or ruin a reputation. Suddenly we are faced with our own capacity for evil. At this point we must decide if we are going to shamefully hide from God—and perhaps from ourselves—or face the darkness and live in the light of God’s love. It is rarely an easy choice, but always a life-giving one.



## DAY 4

## NOAH

*I have set my bow in the clouds as a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. —Genesis 9:13*



Faithful living requires mastering the humbling art of starting over. Noah's story records the mythology of starting from scratch with a failed world. We face that challenge in smaller worlds after we fail a class, squander a career or end a marriage. It takes faith to begin again and we are blessed with divine second chances. Rainbows signal God's promise that after life's purging storms, a new world awaits us.

## DAY 5

## ABRAHAM

*Look toward heaven and count the stars if you can. So shall your descendants be. —Genesis 9:13*



We may feel small while gazing at the stars, yet Abraham's story is not about human insignificance, but connectedness. Just as Abraham was the father of countless descendants, we come from a long line of heroic, wise and loving people. Like Abraham, our contributions to the world will touch many lives in subtle and dramatic ways. It is awesome to discover that we are part of something bigger than ourselves.

## DAY 6

## ISAAC

*Abraham took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son. —Genesis 22:13*

The Isaac story is an unsettling parable about the measure of faith commitment. Isaac poses a daunting question: “What are you willing to sacrifice for God’s call or for personal conviction?”

Martyrs sacrificed their lives for the gospel, priests and nuns went to prison to decry war and Jesus died to build God’s kingdom. As Martin Luther King once wrote, “A person who won’t die for something is not fit to live.”



## DAY 7

## JACOB

*Jacob dreamed there was a ladder set up on the earth with its top reaching to heaven. —Genesis 28:12*

We live in a culture that bids us to climb the ladder of success. TV is flooded with competitions in which only one person can be the “American Idol” or the “survivor” of the island. The ladder of Jacob’s dream is not a means of personal ascent as much as God’s way of descending to commune with us. Emmanuel, “God with us,” teaches that holy ascent is found, not in besting the competition, but in bowing to serve.



DAY 8

JOSEPH

*Here comes that dreamer. Come now, let us kill him.*

—Genesis 37:19



Joseph is living proof that all God's children are called to be dreamers. He is also a reminder that being a dreamer is risky business. The establishment tends to distrust or despise dreamers as threats to the status quo. Thus, Joseph's brothers plot against him and Christ is crucified. We "put on Christ" at baptism and wear the coat of a dreamer of peace and justice, but we must suffer to make God's dream come true.

DAY 9

MOSES

*Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.* —Exodus 3:5



The burning bush is a story of sacred space. Churches reverence sanctuaries, museums rope off exhibits, and governments create nature preserves. When we find holy ground in life—a teen's room, a man cave or a woman's well—we protect it from violation. We all need sacred space and we reverence it by treading lightly and lighting candles like sanctuary lamps. It is on such holy ground that God speaks to us.

## DAY 10

## ISRAELITES

*It is the Passover of the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt. —Exodus 12:27*

Military forces profess a creed that no soldier should be left on the battlefield. Educators adopt a “no child left behind” policy. Such valiant notions originate with the God who refused to abandon the children of Israel in Egypt. Christ, the Good Shepherd, leaves the ninety-nine to search for the one lost sheep. As soldiers for Christ and teachers of the faith, we too are shepherds who refuse to allow anyone to be lost.



## DAY 11

## GOD

*God gave Moses the two tablets of the covenant, stone, written with the finger of God. —Exodus 31:18*

The word of God is trustworthy, but humans sadly break their word. We sign contracts, make promises and pledge vows, but our words do not al-



ways seal the deal. Moses is so enraged by human infidelity that he breaks the stone tablets of the covenant. God realizes that the only trustworthy words are not written in stone, but deep inside us: “I will put my law within them, and I will write it in their hearts.”

## DAY 12

## JOSHUA

*Joshua said to the people, “Shout, for the Lord has given you the city.” —Joshua 6:16*



It is bad form to boastfully “blow your own horn.” In the realm of faith, however, one learns the power of blowing one’s horn for God. Joshua’s army brings down the city walls with trumpet blasts, clearing the way for victory. God’s “whistleblowers” bring down the walls of bigotry, lies and injustice by making holy and prophetic noise for the Lord. As the walls of hatred fall, the walls of God’s kingdom arise.

## DAY 13

## GIDEON

*The Lord is with you, you mighty warrior. —Judges 6:12*



When we feel oppressed, it is tempting to find comfort in bible stories about God taking sides against Israel’s enemies. Yet, Jesus comes to replace notions of a warlike God with a gospel of universal love and forgiveness. Gideon is a simple farmer who leads Israel to victory, but we are sowers of Christ’s revolutionary gospel. We cannot assume that God hates our enemies, but we know the Lord takes our side when we join the struggle for truth and justice.



## DAY 14

## SAMUEL

*Samuel poured oil on Saul's head, saying, "The Lord anoints you ruler over Israel." —1 Samuel 10:1*

As Samuel anoints Saul king, we may recall that we too have been crowned over important realms. Perhaps we were named class president, appointed district manager or elected mayor. It is then that we discovered our leadership style. Some leaders want people to know who's boss; others seek partnership. Christ calls us, not to lord power over others, but to share authority in a cooperative community of grace.



## DAY 15

## DAVID

*When David took the harp and played it, the evil spirit would depart from Saul. —1 Samuel 16:23*

It is fitting that David, slayer of Goliath and king of Israel, started out as a poetic shepherd singing God's praises. David the psalmist is a symbol of the power of the arts for doing God's work. Throughout history great artists, composers, writers and filmmakers have fostered social change where politics and war failed. The pen is often mightier than the sword when it comes to building God's peaceable kingdom.



## DAY 16

## ELIJAH

*Answer me, Lord, that this people may know that you are God. —1 Kings 18:37*



During playground confrontations, children may assure a bully that “my dad can beat your dad.” The prophet Elijah similarly taunts the prophets of Baal: “My God can beat your god.” Faith proclaims that the God of love is superior to the idols of power, but experience doesn’t always confirm that boast. The rich may win and the strong may triumph, but faith expects love and justice to prevail in God’s day.

## DAY 17

## HEZEKIAH

*I will defend this city for my own sake and the sake of David my servant. —2 Kings 19:34*



War creates emptiness. The musical *Les Miserables* laments “empty chairs at empty tables.” The vacant chairs at the Oklahoma City memorial and in veteran households haunt us with the dear cost of conflict. Hezekiah knew that defending the city of God would inflict the heavy losses of empty tents. He found consolation in trusting that the Lord delivers us and fills the void of loss with the remembrance of honor.

*I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send?”*  
—Isaiah 6:8

One of life’s defining moments involves the call to speak up. Perhaps a new student is bullied, the wrong person is blamed for a crime or no one volunteers for a crucial task. The comfortable choice is to remain silent, but then we feel God’s word like the burning coal touched to Isaiah’s lips. Silence then becomes difficult because the word of God smolders in us and we hear the Lord asking, “Whom shall I send?”



*I will cast you out of my sight.* —Jeremiah 7:15

It is no fun being an outcast. Whether we are sent to our rooms, expelled from our school or banished from our homeland, we feel the numbing impact of rejection. Jeremiah was given the unhappy task of voicing God’s displeasure with the Israelites that led to their exile. Yet, the prophet also served as a mediator to dry their tears and facilitate their return home. As we gather the outcasts, we also welcome the Lord: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”



*If it delays, wait for it. It will surely come, it will not be late. —Habakkuk 2:3*



Old people do a lot of reminiscing, but young people tend to look ahead. The burden of aging is, “I can’t remember,” but the challenge of youth is, “I can’t wait!” True advent faith trusts that memory lives on and that the days we most anticipate will arrive in God’s time. In the meantime, we treasure the gift of the moment in the faith of St. Paul: “Now is a very acceptable time; now is the day of salvation.”

*If it pleases the king, send me to Judah so that I may rebuild it. —Nehemiah 2:5*

History suggests that it is easier to destroy than to rebuild. *The Lego Movie* is a



wondrous parable about our tendency to inhibit the builder’s imagination by permanently fixing things in place. God calls us to build with flexible blueprints. This is how square churches were reshaped into circles and Berlin walls came down. We reimagine the blueprints of the city of God in order to let in more divine light and space.

DAY 22

JOHN THE BAPTIST

*I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. —Mark 1:8*

Water is normally used to douse flames, but the water of baptism is employed to ignite a fire. John knows the paradox by which the consuming fire of Jesus creates rather than destroys. Those who are baptized in Christ will be a new creation and will burn with a fire for justice. We who are born of water and the Spirit pray: “Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created. And You shall renew the face of the earth.”



DAY 23

MARY

*Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. —Luke 1:30*

Faith regards purity as a virtue, but modern prurient society often views it as an embarrassment or a joke. Gospel virginity does not begin with the physical. First and foremost, Mary was pure of heart, mind and soul. She was single-hearted, devoted to primary values. She was pure of mind like an athlete intent on the goal. Finally, her soul was like pure gold, radiant and genuine, so that it could magnify the Lord.



DAY 24

ELIZABETH

*As I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. —Luke 1:44*



Pregnant mothers have a mystical communion with their unborn children. Movements of the fetus can indicate subtle shifts in mood or the influence of an outside stimulus. This mystical faith is at play when Mary visits her cousin and Elizabeth feels her unborn child leap for joy. So should it be when we are visited by holy people who are pregnant with God. We feel God's presence and our spirits are moved with joy.

DAY 25

ZECHARIAH

*Zechariah asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." —Luke 1:63*



There is something definitive and sacred about the act of writing a name. Our names are written down when we are baptized, confirmed and graduated. We sign our names when we buy a house, accept a job or get married. Zechariah is unable to speak his son's name, but writing it down somehow seals the calling of the prophet like God's own signature. That act seals our fate as well: "I call you by name and you are mine."

DAY 26

JOSEPH

*Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.*

—*Matthew 1:20*

As a carpenter, Joseph knew the value of a tool, so he understood and embraced his role when called to be a



tool for God's handwork. Joseph was like a hammer in the hand of the Lord to protect Mary and Jesus from harm, build them a loving home and provide shelter for Christ, the refuge of sinners. We too are tools in God's hands, each of us with our own shape, size and purpose for building the kingdom.

DAY 27

MAGI

*We observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage. —Matthew 2:2*

When facing weighty decisions, many people like to draft lists of pros and cons to guide the choice. This logical method has value, but the Magi remind us of the worth of mystical approaches to guidance.



While using our head, we should also listen to our heart, heed our intuition and follow the stars. It is in such wondrous and mysterious ways that the Lord guides wise men and women to the birthplaces of God.

*She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger. —Luke 2:7*

Christmas is a day of the senses, a joyful feast of Incarnation and a time to meet God “in the flesh.” Christmas is a day to “come to our senses” to confirm our beliefs and justify our hopes. Our minds can fool us with clouded judgment, our feelings can disorient us with fleeting moods but our senses provide swift, tangible confirmation of our faith. Christmas is a day to hold a newborn infant and feel its tiny heartbeat, hear its disarming coos, and see its wondering eyes. Suddenly we know without doubt that life is sacred, love is real and God is intimately present.



Our senses testify to the light of Christ like a bodily John the Baptist. We smell the fragrance of pine and incense. We taste the hearty bread and evocative wine of our church and dinner tables. We hear the bracing peal of silver bells, the eager tearing of wrapping paper and the gleeful laughter of children. We look into the eyes of our beloved and encounter the wondrous mystery of holy communion. Christmas is still a time to reflect and to feel, but above all it is a day to come to our senses so that we may “taste and see the goodness of the Lord.”