

ROOTED MAY OUR ROOTS OUTPACE OUR BRANCHES





rowing up, my favorite part of Christmas was putting up our Christmas tree. At my dad's house, my sister and I each had special ornaments to hang in precisely the spots we wanted. Somehow, mine always ended up front and center.

My guess is you probably have precious memories of your family and friends surrounding a Christmas tree, too. The tree has become a central part of how we celebrate the holiday season. We pass ornaments down through generations, we collect a pile of presents underneath, and when it gets dark outside, we turn on the white or multicolored lights woven from top to bottom through the branches.

But have you ever wondered how strange this tradition is? Chopping down a tree and removing it from its roots ensures that that tree is now living on borrowed time. Without access to its source of life, it will eventually die, no matter how beautiful the decorated branches appear to be.

And we are no different.

The Bible actually compares humans to trees a lot! In fact, aside from God and humans, trees are mentioned more in the Bible than any other living thing. You'd be hard-pressed to find a major story of the Bible that doesn't have a tree present in some form, whether that be mention of a seed, branch, fruit, stump, root, vine, or some other tree-related word. And when Jesus taught about the kingdom of God, trees, seeds, and fruit were his go-to metaphors.

This Advent, we're taking a page from one of the key symbols of Christmas—the tree—tracing this theme through the story of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. We'll discover what trees teach us about human nature and how when we are rooted in Jesus, he becomes the ultimate source of life and strength for all of us.

My hope is that after this month we will never look at our Christmas tree the same way again. And next year, as we add our cherished ornaments and string up the lights, we would be reminded of God's deep love for us and how we must never be removed from our source of life. May we be people who are concerned with deep roots, rather than just elaborately decorated branches.

Amen.

W Johnst

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DAY 1 DECEMBER 6



SCRIPTURE: GENESIS 1

1 In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. 2 The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

3 And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. 4 And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

6 And God said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." 7 And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so. 8 And God called the expanse Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

9 And God said, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. 10 God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

11 And God said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth." And it was so. 12 The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. 13 And there was evening and there was morning, the third day. 14 And God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years, 15 and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth." And it was so. 16 And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. 17 And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, 18 to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. 19 And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

20 And God said, "Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens." 21 So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. 22 And God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." 23 And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

24 And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds—livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds." And it was so. 25 And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds and the livestock according to their kinds, and everything that creeps on the ground according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. 26 Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

28 And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." 29 And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. 30 And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. 31 And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

\star reflection \star

rees play a significant role in the creation story. On days one through three, God creates these different kinds of environments—light, waters and sky, and land. On the third day, God also calls fourth seed-bearing plants and fruit trees, making it possible for life to be sustained on the earth. On days four through six, God fills the environments God created—the light with lights, the waters and sky with fish and birds, and the land with animals. On the sixth day, God also creates humans.

So, just like on the third day, when God created two things (land and trees), on the sixth day God created two things again (animals and humans). Just like trees, humans are called to be fruitful and multiply, filling the earth. By design, the author wants us to see a parallel between fruit-bearing trees and fruit-bearing humans. Both are planted in the Garden, both are pleasant to the sight, and just as there are multiple species and types of trees, so God's love for diversity can also be found in us as well. Humans depend on trees for the very oxygen that allows us to breathe. And humans are called by God to care for trees in return. God tells humans to subdue the earth and rule over it, to partner with God in bringing about all the beauty and potential the world has to offer. Humans are like trees!

* discussion questions *

- 1. What does it mean for you to think about the idea that humans are like trees?
- 2. How does this idea change the way you think about Creation and our calling to subdue the earth and rule over it?







The Tale of Two Trees

SCRIPTURE: GENESIS 2

1 Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. 2 And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. 3 So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.

4 These are the generations

of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens.

5 When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground, 6 and a mist was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground— 7 then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. 8 And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. 9 And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

10 A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers. 11 The name of the first is the Pishon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. 12 And the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. 13 The name of the second river is the Gihon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Cush. 14 And the name of the third river is the Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. 16 And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

18 Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." 19 Now out of the ground the LORD God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. 20 The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. 21 So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. 22 And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. 23 Then the man said,

"This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man."

24 Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. 25 And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

\star reflection \star

ut of the ground, God breathes humanity to life. And out of the ground, God also causes trees to spring up, trees that are pleasing to look at and good for food. So, we see on the second page of the Bible, humanity's unique connection to trees continues. But now, God puts the two humans in a garden, alongside two very special trees.

The first is the tree of life, representing the presence of God and eternal life. The second is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and of this tree, God commands humans not to eat, for if they do, they will surely die. In Genesis 1, God is the one who declares what is good or not good. For humans, that ability is off limits. Rather than defining for ourselves what is good or not good, we are to rely on God's definition of good and not good. And if we take that knowledge for ourselves, God warns it will lead to our death.

So these two trees sit, side by side, in the midst of the garden. To get to the tree of life, the central point of God's presence, humans must walk past the tree that leads to death, a tree whose leaves are beautiful and fruit enticing to the eye. Both of these trees represent a choice and a test. How long will humans be able to pass up the temptation to decide for themselves what is good? Will they eat from the tree that leads to death or continue to choose life with God in the Garden?

\star discussion questions \star

- 1. The story puts the two trees side-by-side together in the Garden. Why do you think that is? What does this tell us about the choice between the two of them?
- 2. What happens when humans decide for themselves what is good and not good? Why does God say this will lead to death?









The Snake Amidst the Trees

SCRIPTURE: GENESIS 3

1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made.

He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" 2 And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, 3 but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die." 4 But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. 5 For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." 6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. 7 Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

8 And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. 9 But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" 10 And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." 11 He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" 12 The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." 13 Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

14 The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field;

on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat

- all the days of your life.
- 15 I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head,
 - and you shall bruise his heel."
- 16 To the woman he said,
 - "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children.
 - Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you."

17 And to Adam he said,

- "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree
- of which I commanded you,
 - 'You shall not eat of it,'
- cursed is the ground because of you;
- in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; 18 thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
 - and you shall eat the plants of the field.
- 19 By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread,
- till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken;

for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

20 The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living. 21 And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.

22 Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing

good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—" 23 therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. 24 He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

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A n enemy slithers into the Garden. He tempts the humans with the delight of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He whispers to them, "Take it for yourself! God is deceiving you. Life will be better, more pleasurable if you just take a bite."

And the humans fall for it. They see the tree is desirable and take it for themselves. And in one moment, it would appear as if the fate of humanity was sealed, death is now all but certain.

But hope is not lost. God turns to the serpent and announces his fate. One day, a seed of the woman will come to crush the head of the snake and all of his seed, destroying evil at its source. At the same time, this snake-crusher, the heroic seed of woman, will also be crushed.

Humans are taken from the Garden and the entrance is sealed off. Now, the tree of life and the place where they dwelled with God, is out of reach. Humans are cut off from sharing in eternal life with God. And the rest of the story is about the lengths God will go to in order to restore humans to the Garden, and ultimately get them back into full relationship with God.

\star discussion questions \star

- 1. In what ways are you tempted to define for yourself what is good or not good, rather than trusting God to do that for you?
- 2. Even in the Fall story, humanity's darkest hour, there is hope. Where do you see hope shining in this story, both for yourself and for humanity as a whole?





DAY 4 DECEMBER 9



Noah's Sacrifice After the Flood

SCRIPTURE: GENESIS 8

1 But God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the livestock that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided. 2 The fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed, the rain from the heavens was restrained, 3 and the waters receded from the earth continually. At the end of 150 days the waters had abated, 4 and in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. 5 And the waters continued to abate until the tenth month; in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, the tops of the mountains were seen.

6 At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made 7 and sent forth a raven. It went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. 8 Then he sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground. 9 But the dove found no place to set her foot, and she returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took her and brought her into the ark with him. 10 He waited another seven days, and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark. 11 And the dove came back to him in the evening, and behold, in her mouth was a freshly plucked olive leaf. So Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. 12 Then he waited another seven days and sent forth

the dove, and she did not return to him anymore. 13 In the six hundred and first year, in the first month, the first day of the month, the waters were dried from off the earth. And Noah removed the covering of the ark and looked, and behold, the face of the ground was dry. 14 In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth had dried out. 15 Then God said to Noah, 16 "Go out from the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons' wives with you. 17 Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh-birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth-that they may swarm on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth." 18 So Noah went out, and his sons and his wife and his sons' wives with him. 19 Every beast, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out by families from the ark.

20 Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. 21 And when the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma, the LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. 22 While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease."

fter humans are expelled from the Garden, chaos ensues. The first murder takes place out of pure jealousy in Genesis 4, and humanity spirals downward into violence and bloodshed. The terror is so great, God calls forth a mighty flood to cleanse the earth. And God tells a man named Noah to gather his family and create an ark out of trees. The ark acts as a new creation, with all kinds of birds and animals inside. Could this be a new and hopeful beginning for humanity?

Finally, the waters recede and Noah finds himself on a high mountaintop. Noah takes a tree, chops it up into wood, and creates an altar, where he burns sacrifices to God. And even though God says the heart of humanity hasn't changed from their evil ways, something about Noah's sacrifice on a high place causes God to relent. Never again, God promises, will He destroy creation the way He did with the flood.

\star discussion questions \star

- 1. What do you think it must have been like for Noah to spend all that time with the animals in the belly of the ark waiting for dry land to appear? Have you ever felt like that? Like you were waiting on God to show you the dry land in the midst of a storm?
- 2. What is it about Noah's sacrifice that causes God to make the promise never to destroy creation again?





DAY 5 DECEMBER 10

Abraham Prepares to Offer His Own Son

SCRIPTURE: GENESIS 22:1-19

1 After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 2 He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." 3 So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. 4 On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. 5 Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." 6 And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. 7 And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" 8 Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.

9 When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of

the wood. 10 Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. 11 But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 12 He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." 13 And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. 14 So Abraham called the name of that place, "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."

15 And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven 16 and said, "By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, 17 I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, 18 and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice." 19 So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba. And Abraham lived at Beersheba.

fter Noah comes the story of Abraham, a righteous man to whom God promises a seed. God tells Abraham he will be greatly blessed so that he and his offspring can bless the rest of the world. After many struggles, Abraham and his wife Sarah have a son named Isaac. But one day, God calls Abraham to a high mountain, where He asks him to offer up his precious child.

Abraham obediently walks his son, a knife, and some wood up the mountain, where he builds an altar. This is his moment of testing. Will he do what looks right in his own eyes, as Adam and Eve did before him, and set his son free? Or will he follow God's wisdom, even when it doesn't seem to make sense?

In the end, Abraham chooses to trust God. He draws the knife up to strike his son, but just before the sacrifice, an angel appears and offers a ram in Isaac's place. Abraham passes the test, and because of this, God promises to give him offspring to number the stars and that they will be greatly blessed. And we're left to wait and watch: Could one of Abraham's seed be the promised snake-crusher from Genesis 3?

* discussion questions *

- 1. Of all the ways God could have saved the world, God chooses to do so through the promise of a seed. Why do you think that is?
- 2. Have you ever been in a situation where trusting God felt like death? What did you do? What happened on the other side of your decision to either trust God or not trust God?





DAY 6 DECEMBER 13



SCRIPTURE: EXODUS 3

1 Now Moses was keeping the flock of his fatherin-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. 3 And Moses said, "I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned." 4 When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." 5 Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." 6 And he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face. for he was afraid to look at God.

7 Then the LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, 8 and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. 9 And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. 10 Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that

you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt." 11 But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" 12 He said, "But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain."

13 Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' What shall I say to them?" 14 God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you." 15 God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations. 16 Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, "I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt, 17 and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey." 18 And they will listen to your voice, and you and the elders of Israel shall go

to the king of Egypt and say to him, 'The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; and now, please let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God.' 19 But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. 20 So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go. 21 And I will give this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and when you go, you shall not go empty, 22 but each woman shall ask of her neighbor, and any woman who lives in her house, for silver and gold jewelry, and for clothing. You shall put them on your sons and on your daughters. So you shall plunder the Egyptians."

\star reflection \star

braham's family grows mightily, and they find themselves in Egypt. Their swelling numbers cause Egypt's leaders great concern. So Pharaoh does what is right in his own eyes, enslaving God's people and ordering their male children thrown into the river to die. But one child escapes, through an ark made of wood. This child, named Moses, grows up in Pharaoh's own household, until the day he's forced to flee after murdering a fellow Egyptian.

And so it is that one day, Moses finds himself on a mountain, standing in front of a burning tree filled with God's presence. Just like in the original Garden, this tree marks holy ground, a sacred space. God tells Moses that he will be the one to rescue God's people from their oppression, that God Himself will be with Moses through it all, and that one day, after they are free, Moses will bring God's people back to this same mountain to meet with Him once more and establish a new covenant relationship.

\star discussion questions \star

- 1. Can you think of a time when you felt like you were standing on holy ground in God's presence? What was that experience like for you?
- 2. In the midst of the busyness and hustle of the holiday season, how can you create or make space for these holy moments this Christmas?





DAY 7 DECEMBER 14

Moses Implores the People to Choose Life

SCRIPTURE: DEUTERONOMY 30

1 "And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, 2 and return to the LORD your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, 3 then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. 4 If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there he will take you. 5 And the LORD your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it. And he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. 6 And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. 7 And the LORD your God will put all these curses on your foes and enemies who persecuted you. 8 And you shall again obey the voice of the LORD and keep all his commandments that I command you today. 9 The LORD your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all the work of your hand, in the fruit of your womb and in the fruit of your cattle and in the fruit of your ground. For the LORD will again take delight in prospering you, as he took delight in your fathers, 10 when you obey the voice of the LORD your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes that are written in this Book of the Law, when you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

11 "For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. 12 It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' 13 Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' 14 But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it. 15 "See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. 16 If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. 17 But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, 18 I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. 19 I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, 20 loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them."

oses does indeed end up partnering with God to rescue God's people from Egypt. He leads them through the wilderness and back to Mt. Sinai, where God establishes His covenant with them. But it's not long before the people break it. Later, they find themselves wandering the wilderness, lost and grumbling, wishing they could return to Egypt. Because of their rebellion, God promises that none of them will enter the Promised Land, only their children.

In Deuteronomy, Moses addresses this second generation, the children of those who wandered the wilderness and turned their back on God. Moses lays before them a choice: life or death. They can choose to follow God, the tree that leads to life, or do what is right in their own eyes like their parents before them, the tree that leads to death. Moses begs them to choose life, to obey God and cling to God for their sustenance. And if they do, he says they will dwell in the land of their forefathers with God.

* discussion questions *

1. What does it mean for you to heed Moses' call to choose life this holiday season? What are some of the ways you are led to do this every day?





DECEMBER 15

The Seed of King David

SCRIPTURE: 2 SAMUEL 7

1 Now when the king lived in his house and the LORD had given him rest from all his surrounding enemies, 2 the king said to Nathan the prophet, "See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells in a tent." 3 And Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that is in your heart, for the LORD is with you."

4 But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, 5 "Go and tell my servant David, 'Thus says the LORD: Would you build me a house to dwell in? 6 I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent for my dwelling. 7 In all places where I have moved with all the people of Israel, did I speak a word with any of the judges of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" 8 Now, therefore, thus you shall say to my servant David, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel. 9 And I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you. And I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. 10 And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, 11 from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. 12 When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I

will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 14 I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, 15 but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. 16 And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever." 17 In accordance with all these words, and in accordance with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David.

18 Then King David went in and sat before the LORD and said, "Who am I, O LORD GOD, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far? 19 And yet this was a small thing in your eyes, O LORD GOD. You have spoken also of your servant's house for a great while to come, and this is instruction for mankind, O LORD GOD! 20 And what more can David say to you? For you know your servant, O Lord God! 21 Because of your promise, and according to your own heart, you have brought about all this greatness, to make your servant know it. 22 Therefore you are great, O Lord God. For there is none like you, and there is no God besides you, according to all that we have heard with our ears. 23 And who is like your people Israel, the one nation on earth whom God went to redeem to be his people, making himself a name and doing for them great and awesome things by driving out before your people whom you redeemed for yourself from Egypt, a nation

and its gods? 24 And you established for yourself your people Israel to be your people forever. And you, O LORD, became their God. 25 And now, O LORD GOD, confirm forever the word that you have spoken concerning your servant and concerning his house, and do as you have spoken. 26 And your name will be magnified forever, saying, 'The LORD of hosts is God over Israel,' and the house of your servant David will be established before you. 27 For you, O LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, have made this revelation to your servant, saying, 'I will build you a house.' Therefore your servant has found courage to pray this prayer to you. 28 And now, O Lord God, you are God, and your words are true, and you have promised this good thing to your servant. 29 Now therefore may it please you to bless the house of your servant, so that it may continue forever before you. For you, O Lord God, have spoken, and with your blessing shall the house of your servant be blessed forever."

\star reflection \star

any generations pass from the first of God's people, who enter the Promised Land, until the time of the kings comes upon Israel. Israel's second king, David, seeks to build God a house upon a mountain, not unlike his own made of cedar. Noble as his desire may be, God tells David that rather than David building God a house, God plans to build David a house. God promises to raise up a seed of David, whose throne will be established forever. God says, "I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son."

David is overjoyed. He breaks out in worship and thanksgiving to God. "Who am I to receive such an incredible blessing?" he thinks. And so, once again, we eagerly wait. Could one of David's offspring be the promised snake-crusher? Will his seed be the one to overthrow evil once and for all?

* discussion questions *

- David wants to build God a house, but God says it's going to be the other way around. Are there times you feel like we still fall into this trap today—thinking we have to do things for God when really it is God who does things for us?
- 2. How do you see the theme of David's 'seed' ruling forever foreshadowed in the story thus far? What do you think this story might be pointing toward?





DAY 9 DAY 9 DECEMBER 16



SCRIPTURE: PSALM 1

 Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;

2 but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.

3 He is like a tree

planted by streams of water

that yields its fruit in its season,

- and its leaf does not wither.
- In all that he does, he prospers.
- 4 The wicked are not so,

but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;6 for the LORD knows the way of the righteous,

but the way of the wicked will perish.

The first Psalm plays with the Genesis connection between humans and trees. Like in Genesis 2 and 3, the poet says we must choose between becoming one of two types of trees. Those who delight in God's law are like a tree planted by streams of water. This type of human produces good fruit in every type of season and never worries about withering. In other words, this is the tree of life. But not so with the wicked, for they whither down to dust that blows away in the wind. This is the tree of death.

The psalmist leaves you with the same choice: Which tree will you become? Will you be like the one who meditates on the Word of God day and night, who doesn't follow the prompting of the wicked, but rather trusts God to guide your steps? Like Adam and Eve, and all other humans who came before us, we have the opportunity to pass by the tree in the garden that looks desirable but leads to death, or cling to the tree that leads to life.

* discussion questions *

1. What does it practically look like for you to live this Christmas season as the tree planted by streams of water? What do you imagine might be different about this season if you were to live that way?





DAY 10 DECEMBER 17

A Root From The Stump of Jesse

SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 11:1-10

1 There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. 2 And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. 3 And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, 4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth. and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. 5 Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins. 6 The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. 7 The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. 8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. 9 They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

10 In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.

he time of the kings comes to a spectacular and tragic end. David's grandchild takes the throne and leads the people in rebellion against God. Nearly every king who comes after continues down this dark path, until the kingdom is split in two. Invading forces seize upon their weakness and strike against God's people. The northern kingdom is destroyed, the people are carted off into exile. The southern kingdom soon follows.

Israel, which once stood like a mighty tree, has been chopped down. Only a stump remains. It would seem as if all is lost. But what can't be seen are the roots that still spread deep into the soil; the tree is not dead yet. God tells the prophet Isaiah that one day, new growth will form from the stump, a shoot that comes from a seed of Jesse, David's lineage.

God says that this seed will carry God's own Spirit and will not judge by what is right in his own eyes, but on what is righteous before God. At a time when all seems bleak, God plants a seed of hope.

* discussion questions *

- 1. What lessons can we learn from Israel's fall story that are still relevant for us today?
- 2. The only reason Israel survived their fall is because of their roots. The stump wasn't torn completely out of the ground and, therefore, new growth can form. How are your roots? Do you feel like they are strong enough to withstand trials and testing? What is something you can do this season to strengthen your roots?





DAY 11 DECEMBER 20



SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 53

1 Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been

revealed?

2 For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground;

he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,

and no beauty that we should desire him.

3 He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces

he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

4 Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows;

yet we esteemed him stricken,

smitten by God, and afflicted.

5 But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities;

upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,

and with his wounds we are healed.

6 All we like sheep have gone astray;

we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him

the iniquity of us all.

7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth;like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.

8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered

that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people?

9 And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence,

and there was no deceit in his mouth.

10 Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief;

when his soul makes an offering for guilt,

he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;

the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. 11 Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;

by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,

make many to be accounted righteous,

and he shall bear their iniquities.

12 Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many,

and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death

and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many,

and makes intercession for the transgressors.

he prophet Isaiah issues one more famous word about the seed that will come. Out of the parched, dry ground of Israel will come a young shoot. Where God's people have gone astray, the seed comes to reveal what it means to live rightly by God, to choose life. It will not be a beautiful plant, not outwardly desirable like the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was in the Garden; this tree will be despised and rejected by men, and ultimately crushed by them.

Yet, just like God promised in the beginning, it is in this crushing that the seed brings restoration to all of God's people. This seed is crushed every time you and I choose to give in to the tree of death. And like the ram with Isaac, this seed will take our place in death. Because when this seed chooses life, he throws open the door to the Garden, giving all of us a chance to come and dwell with God once more.

* discussion questions *

- 1. Is there something that seems devastating or dark about your current circumstances? How does this passage give you hope that new growth can come from the stump?
- 2. How does this story reveal the faithfulness of God, despite the unfaithfulness of humans? What does this tell you about God's character?





DAY 12 DECEMBER 21



SCRIPTURE: JEREMIAH 17:1-13

1 "The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron; with a point of diamond it is engraved on the tablet of their heart, and on the horns of their altars, 2 while their children remember their altars and their Asherim, beside every green tree and on the high hills, 3 on the mountains in the open country. Your wealth and all your treasures I will give for spoil as the price of your high places for sin throughout all your territory. 4 You shall loosen your hand from your heritage that I gave to you, and I will make you serve your enemies in a land that you do not know, for in my anger a fire is kindled that shall burn forever."

5 Thus says the LORD:

- "Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD.
- 6 He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come.He shall dwell in the parched places of the

wilderness,

in an uninhabited salt land.

- 7 "Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD.
- 8 He is like a tree planted by water,

that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes,

for its leaves remain green,

and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit."

9 The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?

- 10 "I the LORD search the heart and test the mind,
- to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds."

11 Like the partridge that gathers a brood that she did not hatch,

so is he who gets riches but not by justice; in the midst of his days they will leave him, and at his end he will be a fool.

12 A glorious throne set on high from the beginning

is the place of our sanctuary.

13 O LORD, the hope of Israel,

all who forsake you shall be put to shame; those who turn away from you shall be written in the earth,

for they have forsaken the LORD, the fountain of living water.

he prophet Jeremiah speaks about Asherah poles, wooden idols placed on hills where God's people worshiped false gods. Where they were supposed to take from the tree of life on the mountain, instead they turned to worship things that looked like they could bring fulfillment but were ultimately empty. And God's anger burned against them as a result. Those who worship false idols are like a shrub in the desert, cut off from the living water spoken of in Psalm 1.

Just like in the early days of Noah, God sees that the human heart is bent toward evil. The Israelites were more concerned with their false gods than putting down roots by the stream of living water, and so they withered and grew parched. But those who put their trust in the Lord, who are connected to the tree of life, are blessed. Their roots sink deep into the rich soil fed by the living water.

As we turn now to the New Testament story, we hold out hope that the shoot will sprout from the stump and the snake-crusher will finally come. We look for the one who is like living water, in whom we can trust to sustain us and guide our paths.

\star discussion questions \star

- When you look at your life, which would you more closely identify with: a shrub in the desert or a tree planted by living water? Why do you think that is? What can you do this holiday season to breathe life into any areas where you may feel dry or brittle?
- 2. We may not gather around literal wooden idols in worship today, but we are still guilty of bowing down to false gods. What are some of the false idols we are tempted to worship today in place of God? What does this look like for you personally?





DAY 13 DECEMBER 22



SCRIPTURE: JOHN 1:1-18

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. 8 He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

9 The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. 12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. 15 (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me."") 16 For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

he light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Just when all hope seems lost, when it feels as if God's promise to bring a deliverer will never come true, the Word becomes flesh. The seed has come. And all who receive him will be given the opportunity to choose life.

But there will be plenty who don't receive him. For this seed doesn't look at first like a tall and proud tree, it looks like a simple carpenter from Nazareth. And as is often the case, our world is far more concerned with how things appear above the surface, rather than the roots that run deep beneath. Those who reject the seed fail to see how his roots have been growing throughout the Old Testament, long before the first green stem peaked above the soil.

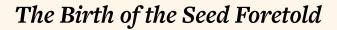
* discussion questions *

- 1. How has the story been building to this moment from the beginning? What does this tell you about who God is and who we are?
- 2. We often take for granted the birth of Jesus, but God's people waited hundreds of years to see the light dawn in the darkness, and even then, some of them missed it. What do you think it would have been like waiting for the Messiah? Do you still feel like you're waiting for Jesus today in some ways?





DAY 14 DECEMBER 23



SCRIPTURE: LUKE 1:26-56

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, 27 to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" 29 But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. 30 And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

34 And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

35 And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. 36 And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

39 In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, 40 and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 And when

Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, 42 and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! 43 And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

46 And Mary said,

- "My soul magnifies the Lord,
- 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
- 48 for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.
 - For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
- 49 for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.
- 50 And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.
- 51 He has shown strength with his arm;
- he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;

52 he has brought down the mighty from their thrones

and exalted those of humble estate;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things,

and the rich he has sent away empty. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever."

56 And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

\star reflection \star

undreds of years after the Old Testament story ends, a new story begins. A young virgin is told she will bear a seed, and not just any seed—the angel tells Mary that her baby will be called the Son of God and will inherit the throne of David, the everlasting throne spoken of in 2 Samuel 7. Mary's son will be the promised seed that all Israel had been anxiously awaiting for generations and generations. Can you imagine what she must have thought?

If you think of Mary like a tree, her branches wouldn't be high or mighty, they might feel more like one of those Charlie Brown trees you see each year in Target. After all, she's a young virgin from a small rural town in northern Israel. When we think about the people God wants to use to change the world, we think about tall oak trees, whose branches are strong and well-developed and whose height towers to the heavens. But often in the Bible, God uses the very people who are overlooked or underestimated to accomplish God's mighty works.

And it's easy to see why. While Mary's branches may not appear tall or strong, her roots are solidly planted. Her love for God runs deep, to the point where she bursts forth in song, praising God and declaring the glory of the seed growing within her.

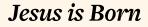


1. At last we reach the familiar stories surrounding Christmas. How has tracing the theme of trees through the Bible thus far changed the way you think about Christmas and the true meaning behind the birth of Jesus?





DAY 15 DECEMBER 24



SCRIPTURE: LUKE 2:1-21

1 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 And all went to be registered, each to his own town. 4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, 5 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. 6 And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

8 And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. 10 And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

15 When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. 17 And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. 18 And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. 20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

21 And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

oday marks one of the most holy nights in the Christian calendar, a night when we reflect on and celebrate the birth of our Savior. And as we gather around our families and sing about a silent and holy night, as we light our candles in the dark and gaze upon our Christmas trees, my hope is that we begin to see just how deep the roots of this moment extend, beyond just this one story about a young virgin and her husband.

Because this moment is the culmination of the story that began with a couple in a garden, who gave into temptation and took for themselves what didn't belong to them. The story of a man called to trust God even when it seemed like doing so would mean death, and another who faced down a burning bush and was called, against all odds, to free God's people from oppression. It's the story of a king, who despite being deeply flawed, loved God and was promised an eternal kingdom from his lineage. It's the story of an entire nation taken from their homes and brought into exile, where they eagerly longed for the one who would restore their hope.

It's also the story of you and me and the millions of other Christians around the world who rejoice because this is the moment when God came to be with us. The very name of Jesus means "God saves." So no matter how deep the darkness gets in our world, we know the light of Christ cannot be extinguished. And it is for that reason we can confidently join the heavenly host singing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

* discussion questions *

 On this Christmas Eve, take a moment to pray and thank God for the gift that is the birth of Jesus. Spend some time reflecting on what this gift means to you personally, to your family, and to the body of believers we call the Church. Is there anything God is teaching you or revealing to you this Christmas that is unique?





DAY 16 DECEMBER 27



Jesus as the Tree of Life

SCRIPTURE: JOHN 15:1-17

1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. 2 Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. 3 Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. 5 I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. 9 As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. 10 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. 11 These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

12 "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15 No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. 16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. 17 These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

ne of Jesus' favorite images to use when teaching his disciples is that of trees. He often speaks of fruit and seeds when sharing about what it means to belong to the kingdom of God. In John 15, Jesus compares himself to a type of tree, a vine with many branches. Each of these branches represent a person who is abiding in Jesus. And it is only when we are connected to him that we are able to bear fruit. Those who are not connected to him will wither away into nothing.

In other words, Jesus is comparing himself to the tree of life from Genesis 1-3, where those who trust in him are able to find life and meaning. Instead of being planted in the soil and trying to grow on our own, we are called to be rooted in Jesus. And as we each begin to grow new fruit, it's like we're adding to a new garden of God's people that draws upon Jesus as the source of life.

* discussion questions *

- 1. Even as we begin to pack up our Christmas trees and decorations this week, the image of the tree stays with us. Jesus compares himself to a tree. Why do you think he chooses this imagery when describing what it means to follow him?
- 2. What do you think it means to 'abide' in Jesus? What does this look like for you practically as you think about the year to come?





DAY 17 DECEMBER 28



SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 21:1-22

1 Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will send them at once." 4 This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying,

5 "Say to the daughter of Zion,'Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden."

6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. 7 They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them. 8 Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9 And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" 10 And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, "Who is this?" 11 And the crowds said, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee."

12 And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. 13 He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you make it a den of robbers."

14 And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them. 15 But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were indignant, 16 and they said to him, "Do you hear what these are saying?" And Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read,

"Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise'?"

17 And leaving them, he went out of the city to Bethany and lodged there.

18 In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he became hungry. 19 And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves. And he said to it, "May no fruit ever come from you again!" And the fig tree withered at once.

20 When the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree wither at once?" 21 And Jesus answered them, "Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' it will happen. 22 And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith."



t the end of his ministry, Jesus rides into Jerusalem, a city that was supposed to represent the hotspot of God's relationship with His people. But what Jesus finds there is a corrupt Temple that prays on the vulnerable and keeps others at arms length instead of inviting them in. Jesus is indignant at the sight of his Father's house, a place of restoration and hope, being turned into a place of oppression and greed. While to all those in Israel the Temple's branches appear strong and tall, Jesus knows the tree is all but dead because it has already been cut off from its roots in God.

The next day, while returning to the city, Jesus stumbles upon a fig tree. But instead of finding abundant fruit, he finds only leaves. So he curses the tree and it withers away at once. While it may appear these stories are separate, they actually are intricately interwoven. The prophets often referred to Israel as a fig tree. Micah 7:1-2 says, "There is no cluster to eat, no first-ripe fig that my soul desires. The godly have perished from the earth, and there is no one upright among mankind." And Psalm 1 reminds us that all who are planted by the stream of living water are able to bear fruit in any season. But here we find a fig tree with nothing on it but leaves.

Jesus uses the tree as an image for the fact that the Temple system in Israel is failing, there is no fruit to be found. What looks like a bright shiny building, a tall tree stretching toward the heavens, has no roots and, therefore, cannot produce good fruit. Jesus curses the tree, "May no fruit ever come from you again!" Jesus is looking forward to the day when a new tree is planted in Israel and all those who abide in this new tree of life will bear much fruit.

\star discussion questions \star

- 1. The Temple looked good on the outside (the branches were large), but the root system was failing (they were not truly connected to God). What are some of the ways culture leads us today to be more concerned with our branches than our roots?
- 2. Which of the two do you find yourself focusing on, your branches or your roots? Why do you think that's the case?





DAY 18 DECEMBER 29



SCRIPTURE: ROMANS 11:1-24

I I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.
2 God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? 3 "Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life." 4 But what is God's reply to him? "I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." 5 So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. 6 But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

7 What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, 8 as it is written,

"God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day."

9 And David says,

"Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them; 10 let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see,

and bend their backs forever."

11 So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather, through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. 12 Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!

13 Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry 14 in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. 15 For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? 16 If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches.

17 But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, 18 do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. 19 Then you will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." 20 That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. 21 For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. 22 Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. 23 And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. 24 For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree.

\star reflection \star

B y cursing the fig tree, has God rejected the people in Israel? As Paul writes, by no means! Jesus wants to restore Israel to its original mission, a nation who was blessed by God, so they could be a blessing to the rest of the world. Paul reminds his peers that it is not the fact that they are Israelites that saves them. It is not the branches that provide life, the Temple system or their rituals, but the deep roots to which they are connected.

And now, Jesus has opened the connection to that root system to not just to the Israelites, but to all those who will trust in him. All those branches who do not believe will be cut off. Paul says God is severe toward those who have fallen, but to those who have faith, God's kindness abounds. It is this kindness, God's willingness to graft in wild branches, that allows for you and me to be part of the faith—a faith that is not closed off to any, but open to all who desire to link themselves to the root system of Jesus.

\star discussion questions \star

- 1. As you look forward to a new year, what are some of the ways you can begin to focus more on growing your root system? Jot down a few practical ideas that you might want to include as part of your New Year's Resolutions.
- Israel was always blessed by God so they could be a blessing to others. And the same is true for us today. As you think about all the ways you are blessed this year, consider how God might be calling you to share those blessings with those around you.





DAY 19 DECEMBER 30

The New Jerusalem

SCRIPTURE: REVELATION 21

1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

5 And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." 6 And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. 7 The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. 8 But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."

9 Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." 10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, 11 having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. 12 It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed— 13 on the east three gates, on the north three gates. 14 And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

15 And the one who spoke with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. 16 The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width. And he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia. Its length and width and height are equal. 17 He also measured its wall, 144 cubits by human measurement, which is also an angel's measurement. 18 The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, like clear glass. 19 The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel. The first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, 20 the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. 21 And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass.

22 And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. 23 And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. 24 By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, 25 and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. 26 They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. 27 But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

\star reflection \star

t Christmas, we celebrate the moment when light broke into a dark world, making hope possible for all. But even though the light has come, we still live in a world plagued by darkness. And as we prepare for a new year, we yearn for the day when God will come to restore all things, when there will be no more tears or mourning or crying or pain. We long for the New Jerusalem.

Revelation 21 tells us what that city will be like—a place where God will once again dwell with humans forever. It's a city adorned with gold and gemstones, but without a Temple. Because when Jesus reigns as king, there will be no need for a Temple. There will be no need either for the sun or moon to give their light, because light will come from the glory of God and the Lamb—and there is no darkness that can overcome that light.

And while we wait for this day to come, Jesus doesn't want us to wait as those with no hope. Jesus calls us to pray for God's kingdom to come on earth in the here and now, and he teaches us how to be part of actually making that happen. Yes, we long for the day when all wrongs are set right and every tear is dried, but in the meantime, we get to work loving God and loving our neighbor, becoming more like Christ each and every day

\star discussion questions \star

- 1. It's not hard to see the ways darkness is still present in the world. Spend a few moments asking God to reveal ways you can be part of spreading the light even as we wait for God to come and make all things right.
- 2. What do you think it will be like in the new city at the end of the age? What do you hope it looks like or feels like?





DAY 20 DECEMBER 31



The River of Life

SCRIPTURE: REVELATION 22

1 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. 3 No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. 4 They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

6 And he said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place."

7 "And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book."

8 I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me, 9 but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God."

10 And he said to me, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. 11 Let the

evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy."

12 "Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. 13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."

14 Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. 15 Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

16 "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star."

17 The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.

18 I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, 19 and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. 20 He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! 21 The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen.

* reflection *

In this final chapter of the Bible, all of the tree imagery we've traced from the first pages of Scripture come to fruition. We find a river of life, flowing from the throne of God in the midst of the tree of life. This tree yields fruit in every season, and its leaves bring healing to the nations. At the foot of this tree is where we will see God, and His name will be on our foreheads, a sign of our ultimate allegiance to God. This is the New Jerusalem, where there's no need for light beyond the light that comes from God. In this new Garden, darkness has no authority anymore.

As we celebrate the dawning of a new year, looking forward to the hope of new beginnings and new opportunities, and as we struggle with the anxiety of not knowing what comes next or how certain circumstances will resolve themselves, may we hold fast to the knowledge that Jesus is coming soon. And until that day, may we be like trees planted by streams of water, grafted into the root system of Jesus, finding our life in him. It doesn't matter how big our branches appear to be—how much we have or how little, how successful we are or unsuccessful—it is only when our roots run deep in Jesus that we can even hope to bear fruit.

So, may we be people whose roots are outpacing our branches, whose deep faith in Jesus is what gives us lives. May we be people who do not turn to the false things of this world for hope or sustenance, who attempt to do it all on our own, cut off from the tree of life. But may we instead rely on our faith in Christ to guide us and sustain us, all the days of our lives.

\star discussion questions \star

- 1. The imagery of the tree is found on the first page of the Bible and here on the last. How does tracing this theme throughout the rest of Scripture change the way you think about the grand narrative of the Bible?
- 2. Most of us will encounter trees around us as an everyday reality of where we live. Has this devotional changed the way you think about trees and our relationship to them? If so, in what ways?
- 3. What do you think it means now for humans to be like trees? What does this look like for you personally?







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