# Jesse Tree Advent Prayer Service

*Rev. Lauren Hodgson & Rev. Sarah Chapman*



This worship service, rooted in the story of the Jesse Tree, hopes to remind worshippers of life’s cycles, our interconnection, and the presence of God in the midst of it all—especially in the midst of Advent.

Our focal text is Isaiah 11, which speaks of the shoot that will come out of the branch of Jesse. Throughout this section of the Book of Isaiah, the Israelites are in the midst of struggle, on the brink of judgment and destruction. We, too, find ourselves in times of transition and uncertainty.

And yet each year we return to the liturgical rhythm of this sacred season. Each year we begin again with Advent. In this worship service, the liturgical symbol of the Jesse Tree will help us to be grounded in the midst of both uncertainty and also a sense of returning. The Jesse Tree reminds us that destruction, struggle and judgment are never the whole story. God is always up to something new. How might this Advent remind us of God’s new thing in each of our lives, and help us to share Advent’s hope, anticipate and good news with others—through symbol, song, and sacred connection?

## Supplies

**A Jesse Tree**

There are many ways you can create a Jesse Tree for your worship space, including using a tree branch without leaves, placed in a bucket of sand, dirt, or rocks, or hung as a mobile using fishing line; or using felt and cardboard to craft a tree, attaching small clothes pins or pegs, from which the ornaments can be hung; or just use a small Christmas tree!

**Printed copies of ornaments, hole punched with a piece of ribbon tied on**

You may choose to make your own or search online for free printable versions. Each ornament is intended to represent a story about someone on Jesus’ family tree. When collected together, these symbols provide a simple and visual representation of Jesus’ lineage and expansive family tree. (For a list of symbols and Bible verses for each story, see the appendix.)

**Blank paper or card stock to make additional ornaments, each hole punched with ribbon attached**

**Markers, coloured pencils, crayons**

**Small felt hearts**

These are often available at the Dollar Store, sometimes as felt shapes and often as stickers.

**Paper bags**

In each bag, place a felt heart, some colouring utensils, a blank ornament, and one of the Jesse Tree ornaments. Depending on the number of worshippers you anticipate for this service, you may have a smaller number of bags, each containing more than one Jesse Tree ornament. All Jesse Tree ornaments should be placed in bags, except the first ornament of the stump with a shoot.

Close each bag with a sticker and write the word “WAIT!” on the bag. As worshippers arrive, each person or family can be given a paper bag and asked not to open it until instructed to do so. If you are doing a hybrid or online service, the bag could be delivered or mailed.



Candle Lighting

On this threshold night, we light a candle of hope.   
Through uncertainty, doubt, and despair,   
pandemic, loss, and lockdown, God is with us.  
There is always a spark of hope. *\*Light Candle*

God, as we wait for your promise,   
help us to be with you in hope.

## Call to Worship

One Come, friends. Today we gather at the beginning of Advent. We are invited to begin again, to start anew, to return anew to this holy season.

**All Advent helps us to remember that Jesus was not alone. Advent helps us to remember that we are not alone.**

One In this time of waiting and preparation, we anticipate the birth of Jesus.

**All Tonight, we remember the many generations of Jesus’ family tree.**

One We remember all those who came before him, preparing the way for his birth with hope. Let us pray…

## Opening Prayer

Advent God of new life, you call us into the mystery of this season,   
where shadows and hope unfold before us.   
The sun sets and the nights grow long—  
from evening to night and then morning again;   
the cycles of life—from before and still to come—remains.   
The world seems to surround us with rhythms of uncertainty, God,   
and yet, your rhythm of love embraces the unknown  
and remains consistent.   
You remind us, Holy Friend, that from the stump of Jesse   
comes a new branch, a new shoot—  
cracking through the seasons with promise.   
Help us to wait, God; help us to hope.   
Because this is Advent.   
We are here for it and we know that you are here for it.   
Thank you, God, that, with you, we are never alone. Amen.

*\*At the closing of the prayer, a child may come up to the Jesse Tree and place the first ornament, with the symbol of a stump with a shoot, onto the tree. This is a reminder of Isaiah’s call that “a shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” (Isaiah 11:1)*



## Scripture: Isaiah 11:1-10

All-Ages Reflection/Response

Advent is full of signs and symbols, reminders of God-with-us… candles, creche scenes, Christmas wreaths. Together we are going to spend some time with a number of different symbols—each on small paper ornaments—that help us to ground ourselves more fully in the stories before the Christmas story.

Each of you received a small paper bag. You have waited patiently with this bag, and now I invite you to reach for your bag. What do you think might be inside? What gift may rest with this bag? Do you remember as a child, ever shaking or feeling the presents under the tree to figure out what was inside?

When you were given this gift, you may have wanted to immediately open it to find out what is inside. But, thanks to that one word—WAIT! —written on each of your bags, they remain sealed.

“WAIT” has become central to the many activities that seem to define these winter months… we wait to receive presents; we wait to give presents, we wait for snow to fall, we wait for loved ones to arrive… Waiting isn’t just something we do in our cultural practices—it’s also central to our spiritual practices throughout Advent. We wait for the angels to show up; we wait for Mary and Joseph to arrive in Bethlehem; we wait for a Christ child to be born.

Our Advent story is woven together by a plethora of biblical tales. One of the stories that is often shared early in Advent is our grounding passage today, from the Book of Isaiah, in which we hear of that shoot of new life that will spring forth from the stump, and a branch that will grow from its roots (Isaiah 11:1). In the story before this story, the people of Israel have endured slavery and wilderness and are now in exile. They are weary, worn down, and uncertain of where the path is leading. And this is the context into which the prophet Isaiah proclaims that a shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse, who was the father of David, Israel’s great king. And Jesus, the new King—on whose birth we wait and anticipate—is descended from the line of David.

The shoot of Jesse is an image similar to that of a small dandelion poking its head through the sidewalk’s cement, or the log that provides the fertile ground for a new tree to grow. Isaiah reminds us that with God, our stories are connected. We do not journey alone—but with those who have come before us, and those still to come. In this reminder, may we find hope.

Now, (*finally!)* I invite you to gently open up your small paper bag. Inside your bag are a number of items, including some markers and crayons, and an ornament tag containing a symbol of one of the stories of our Jesse Tree, each one representing a story from within Jesus’ family tree—each a step toward the birth of Jesus. In each bag there is also a blank ornament for you to add your own symbol, representing your connection to Jesus and God’s family.

We’re going to take some time now for creative response, colouring the Jesse Tree symbols, and also drawing a symbol on the blank tags to represent you and your story. Read the scripture linked to the image and reflect the following questions: What does this passage symbolize for you? How would you visually represent this text? Where would you place it in your world/community? When you consider what to draw on the blank ornament, you might think of what unique gifts you/your family bring to the Christmas story.

We’ll take about five minutes of quiet time now to creatively respond, and when you’re done, you can come up to the front to place both your tags onto our Jesse Tree.

*Time for Individual Response [While worshippers respond, quiet music might play in the background.]*

Now, there’s one final item in each of your paper bags. I’m going to invite you to dig back into your bag and feel for something soft. Once you have found it, bring out the felt heart. Take a moment in quiet, close your eyes, and feel the heart between your hands. What does this shape and material remind you of? May its gentle touch be a reminder of the gift God gives us, to be able to share moments of comfort and prayer with others.

And so, this tiny felt heart brings with it the reminder that we each touch the lives of many others.

Holding your heart in your hands, I invite you to think of someone with whom you would like to share this heart’s prayer of comfort. Dedicate with intention this tiny felt heart to this person and then place it somewhere where it will stay with you… in your purse or maybe your coat pocket. Keep it in this spot so that each time you dig into your bag or reach into your pocket, you will feel that gentle felt, and be reminded of this person and your prayer of hope—for them, for yourself and for one another this Advent, a reminder that through God we are all connected, shoots and branches of one tree. Amen.



## Invitation to the Offering

Beloved Ones, God is always doing a new thing! Our world, our communities, our very selves are being transformed and birthed anew by God’s prophetic love. God’s Spirit stirs, so let us bring all of who we are and share what we have, that we, too, might prepare a new way with God—a way of love, justice, and life renewed. Our offering will now be received.

## Offertory Prayer

Renewing One, be with us in this time of worship,   
of prayer, and of dedication.   
Our world is full of heartbreak, loss, and destruction;   
yet, destruction isn’t your full story.   
Because in each place of our world and each place of our living,   
you, too, are there. You journey alongside us,   
bringing new life into this broken and beautiful world.   
May your Spirit of hope be felt and known by all.   
May these gifts be used to proclaim a new way,   
transforming each of our lives and the lives of our neighbours,   
this Advent and always.   
Bless these gifts offered in your name of justice. Amen.

### Prayers of the People

O God of great promise and mystery,   
we thank you for continuing to walk compassionately beside us   
as we await the birth of the Christ child,   
and we thank you for receiving our prayers along the long,   
and sometimes lonely journey.   
We admit, God, that we sometimes question you.   
We wonder if the covenant you made with us—  
the same covenant you made with our ancestor David—still holds true.   
God of faithfulness, we thank you for strengthening us,   
providing us with fearlessness to approach the season of Advent with great hope,   
hope amidst chaos and pain.

Into a climate of fear and apprehension,   
you, God, draw the anticipation of Christmas near,   
streaming lights of joy,   
ringing bells of hope   
and singing carols of forgiveness.

In our joy, you whisper us strength.   
Your whispers grow louder,   
quietly shouting hope and peace,   
spreading and flowing from one to the other,   
just as waves circle from endings back to new beginnings.

And so, God, we pray for your world…   
for places where violence is all encompassing,   
for those who struggle for liberation and justice,   
and for those who are sustaining regimes of violence… [*Silence*]   
We pray for the earth and all of your creatures, God,   
we pray for those of us struggling with economic despair,   
We pray for this country, God,   
for our leaders and those making decisions on our behalf,   
for educators and community builders,   
for those who speak truth… [*Silence*]

We pray for all those in our lives…   
siblings, teachers, coaches,   
parents, best friends, not-so-best friends,   
classmates, rivals, bosses,   
those whose faces we meet across screens,   
and those we quickly pass by on the street… [Silence]

We gather all of our prayers, those spoken aloud and those too deep for words,   
and offer them to you in peace and in hope,   
remembering that you are always as close to us as the breath that we breathe.   
Amen.

*This prayer draws upon and references imagery from Maya Angelou’s poem “Amazing Peace”.*

## Blessing and Benediction

Go from this space and this time out into God’s hope, peace, love and joy.

Go from here, carrying the signs and symbols of God to all you meet.

And may you journey through this Advent season reminded that you are never alone. Thanks be to God. Amen.

## Appendix: Jesse Tree Ornaments & Scripture Passages

Stump with a shoot (Isaiah 11:1-2)

Watch Tower (Habakkuk 2:1-4)

Globe (Genesis 1:26-31)

Snake and apple (Genesis 3)

Rainbow (Noah’s ark: Genesis 6-9, selected verses)

Camel (Genesis 12:1-7)

Star (Genesis 15:1-6)

Sheep (Genesis 22:1-14)

Ladder (Genesis 28:10-22)

Joseph’s multi-coloured coat (Genesis 37:1-36)

Stone tablets (Deuteronomy 5:1-22)

Red rope (Joshua 2:1-21)

Wheat sheaf (Ruth 2:1-4:12)

Shepherd’s crook (1 Samuel 16:1-15)

Crown (2 Samuel 5:1-5)

Temple (1 Kings 5:5; 1 Kings 6)

Fire (1 Kings 18: 17-24, 36-39)

Scepter (Esther 4)

Sun (Isaiah 9:2-7)

Wolf and lamb (Isaiah 11:6-9)

Whale (Jonah 3:1-5)

Lion (Daniel 6)

City of Bethlehem (Micah 5:1-5)

Praying hands (Luke 1:5-25)

Drop of water (Matthew 3:1-6)

Mary, mother of Jesus (Luke 1:26-38)

Angel (Matthew 1:18-25)

Donkey (Luke 2:1-5)

Baby in Manger (Luke 2:6-21)

Find more candle lighting resources at [Advent Unwrapped](https://united-church.ca/worship-theme/advent-unwrapped).