

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

**P**lace an Advent wreath at the center of your group. Light two candles.

**LEADER:** Our ancestors have believed in God's promises.

**ALL:** We have learned who Jesus is at their knees.

**LEADER:** Let us remember and say the names of people on our family tree of faith from whom we inherit faith in Jesus. *Pause.*

**LEADER:** Spirit of God, from you we have gifts of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and courage, of knowledge, reverence, and awe.

**ALL:** May we find new ways this Advent to use these gifts for the common good.

**LEADER:** May our faith nourish one another.

**ALL:** May our love give life. Amen.

**W**hen I find myself weeding in the garden in my good clothes after I get home from Sunday Mass, I remember Grandma Mitchell used to get after my grandpa for doing the same thing. "You'll get your clean pants dirty," she objected. It makes me wonder if wearing one's best to garden after Mass may be genetic. I like to add a little adoration of growing things to a prayerful morning. Perhaps he did, too.

What runs in families are not only genes but also values lived and practiced over generations.

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# SUNDAY

## by SUNDAY



This summer I made a trip to Pictou, Nova Scotia, that made me realize how far back education goes as a value in our family DNA.

Grandma Mitchell was a MacFarlane with a leather-bound book of Bobby Burns poetry on the high shelf of her closet. She taught school for 16 years before marrying the Sunday gardener.

An enterprising relative has posted some 1,200 people on the MacFarlane family tree, including Thomas McCulloch, a Presbyterian minister and doctor who started Pictou Academy in his house shortly after arriving from Scotland in 1804. He worked stubbornly for liberal, nonsectarian university education available to all, and in doing so, influenced the quality of education in Nova

Scotia and in all Canada. Grandma was similarly relentless in encouraging me to excel at study.

**T**wo family trees figure in Sunday's readings: the children of Abraham and the house of David. Abraham and Sarah hear God's call, go to a new land, and await a child who will be the first of descendants as countless as the stars of the sky or sands of the seashore. Faith is their DNA.

The descendants of Jesse become the kings of Israel. God promises Jesse's son David, "Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me; your throne shall stand firm forever" (2 Samuel 7.14). Faith and repentance are in David's DNA.

● What's in your DNA?

# GOSPEL

## John the Baptizer preaches conversion.



**NARRATOR:** When John the Baptizer made his appearance as a preacher in the desert of Judea, this was his theme.

**JOHN 1:** Reform your lives! The reign of God is at hand.

**NARRATOR:** It was of John that the prophet Isaiah had spoken.

**ISAIAH:** A herald's voice in the desert: "Prepare the way of the Holy One, make straight God's paths."

**NARRATOR:** John was clothed in a garment of camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist. Grasshoppers and wild honey were his food. At that time Jerusalem, all

Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him. They were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins. When he saw that many of the Pharisees and Sadducees were stepping forward for this bath, John said to them:

**JOHN 1:** You brood of vipers! Who told you to flee from the wrath to come? Give some evidence that you mean to reform. Do not pride yourselves on the claim, "Abraham is our father." I tell you, God can raise up children of Abraham from these very stones. Even now the ax is laid to the root of the tree. Every

tree that is not fruitful will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

**JOHN 2:** I baptize with water for the sake of reform, but the one who will follow me is more powerful than I. I am not even fit to carry his sandals. He will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in his hand. He will clear his threshing floor and gather his grain into the barn, but the chaff he will burn in unquenchable fire.

Matthew 3:1-12

## How does conversion show its fruit?

Matthew portrays John the Baptist as a prophet who preaches judgment. The Baptist calls his contemporaries, who are children of Abraham and Sarah by blood, to become children by active faith. He compares the Pharisees and Sadducees who seek his baptism to a brood of vipers. This image of a tangle of slithering poisonous snakes suggests that John sees their differences and arguments as deadly among the people, preventing the law from leading people to holiness.

When members of these two groups step forward to bathe in the Jordan, John the Baptist challenges their sincerity.

Do they mean inwardly what they are about to express outwardly? This baptism expresses repentance, change of heart, a turning toward God. John doubts the Pharisees and Sadducees see themselves as sinners who need to change.

On the day of judgment that John the Baptist announces, biological membership in the family of Abraham will not count. John wants to see repentance bud on the family tree.

● What is poisonous to your faith?

● What in people's words and actions open you to the mystery of God present in our world?

Matthew hears the voice of an earlier—Israelite prophet—Second Isaiah—resounding in the preaching of John the Baptist. Second Isaiah readied people to go home from exile in Babylon just as John prepares people for the coming of Jesus.

In the 540s B.C., Second Isaiah saw God at work in the victories of the Persian King Cyrus over the Babylonians, who held many Israelites captive. He saw God getting ready to lead Israel home and announced, "Prepare the way of the Holy One, make straight a highway for God."

Matthew also sees in John's rugged and uncompromising

character a prophet like Elijah, whom Jewish tradition expected to return before the messiah. His camel-hair clothes and grasshopper diet liken John to Elijah, who wore a hairy mantle and ate food ravens brought him in the wilderness.

Fierce and holy like Elijah, John is a lone voice in the wilderness, calling people to repent and prepare for one who will baptize them in Spirit and fire. Repentance is the true inheritance of Israel, John insists. The fruitful tree symbolizes the repentant person.

John says the one for whom he prepares will carry a winnowing fan. This is the shovel people used in John's time to throw grain in the air and let the wind separate the wheat from the chaff.

● **What points in your life have been days of judgment—of clearing dead from live wood or of winnowing seed from chaff?**

● **What changes in your life are you proudest of making?**

Matthew's gospel begins with a genealogy, a family tree that says Jesus is Israel's messiah, "son of David, son of Abraham" (1.1). This family tree describes 42 generations, 14 from Abraham to David, 14 from David to the exile, and 14 from the exile to Joseph. All but four of the ancestors are men. The four women in Jesus' genealogy are not Israelites. These outsiders add strengths to the family line. Two become the mothers of kings. God acts across tribal boundaries.

Tamar, a Canaanite woman not to be denied her rights, tricks her father-in-law, Judah, into fulfilling his obligation to give her a child (Genesis 38).

Rahab, a prostitute in Jericho, opens her home to

Joshua and his reconnaissance team and marries among the Israelites (Joshua 2).

Ruth, a Moabite woman, faithfully accompanies her mother-in-law, Naomi, home where she becomes King David's great grandmother.

Uriah the Hittite's beautiful wife, Bathsheba, becomes King David's lover and Solomon's mother (1 Samuel 11).

● **What characterizes the Christianity you inherit in your family?**

● **What in the family spirit you inherit do you wish to nurture more?**



## Isaiah envisions a shalom kingdom.

The prophet Isaiah sees the royal family tree of David of his day as a dead stump. No longer does David's family line produce leaders faithful to God's law. David's heirs believe in political intrigue and military strength, rather than in just rule and God's saving power. Because Isaiah trusts God's faithfulness, he foresees the stump of Jesse blossoming again.

Christians see Jesus as the sprout on the stump of Jesse. He is the Spirit-filled, just ruler Isaiah knew God would one day send. Isaiah's prophetic foresight envisions this leader transforming nations and all nature.



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## The stump of Jesse

A shoot will sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom.

God's spirit shall rest upon him: a spirit of wisdom and understanding, a spirit of counsel and strength, a spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord. His delight shall be the fear of the Lord.

He will not judge by what his eyes see, nor decide by what his ears hear. He will judge the poor with justice and decide fairly for the afflicted. He shall strike the ruthless with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked. Justice shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness a belt upon his hips.

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf, the lion, and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; the lion shall eat hay like the ox. The nursing child shall play by the cobra's den; the weaned child lay a hand on the adder's lair.

There shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be filled with knowledge of God as water covers the sea. On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal for the peoples; the nations shall seek him out, for his dwelling shall be glorious.

Isaiah 11.1-10

How often per day do we have to make up our minds and choose? As a strategy, preachers and political organizers work to remove middle ground and insist we act now. We must be for or against issues. Innovators love to contrast their brilliant new product with the hopelessly obsolete old.

Isaiah's vision of a peaceable kin\*dom challenges us to reconcile opposites, to see likenesses and affinities rather than sharpen differences. Why reduce many points of view to two or one? To hold seeming opposites in tension without letting go of either requires maturity.

To seek out viewpoints, listen to where people come from, and value them can create complexity but also new possibilities. Many insist Catholics must be pro-life and not pro-choice. What if we hold the tension? Where can it take us?

Peace requires reconciliation between lions and lambs, between traditional enemies and opposites. The leader Isaiah anticipates will use justice and faithfulness as tools of peace and community building. This Spirit-filled leader will treat the poor

like the rich. On this leader's holy mountain—a reference to Jerusalem and the mount of Israel's temple—all will flourish. Ruin and harm will come to no one.

● What seeming opposites have you held in tension and discovered something new?

● Who is new in your neighborhood? How can you extend a holiday greeting to the family?

## PRAY

Imitate Isaiah's vision of a peaceable kin\*dom, by praying, for example:

**LEADER:** May the young sit down with the elderly in our parish.

**ALL:** Gracious God, pour out your Spirit upon us.

**LEADER:** May those who think we do too little for the poor keep talking with those who think we do too much.

**ALL:** Gracious God, pour out your Spirit upon us.

Add your own prayers in this form.



CHARITY

JUSTICE

## DO SOMETHING

- Plan gift giving that includes people in need. Take children or grandchildren with you to Christmas parties, gift or food basket deliveries, so they experience your commitments.

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