

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Place 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.

When 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. A few years ago I made a

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY



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.

Two 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 slithery 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 to Israel 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?

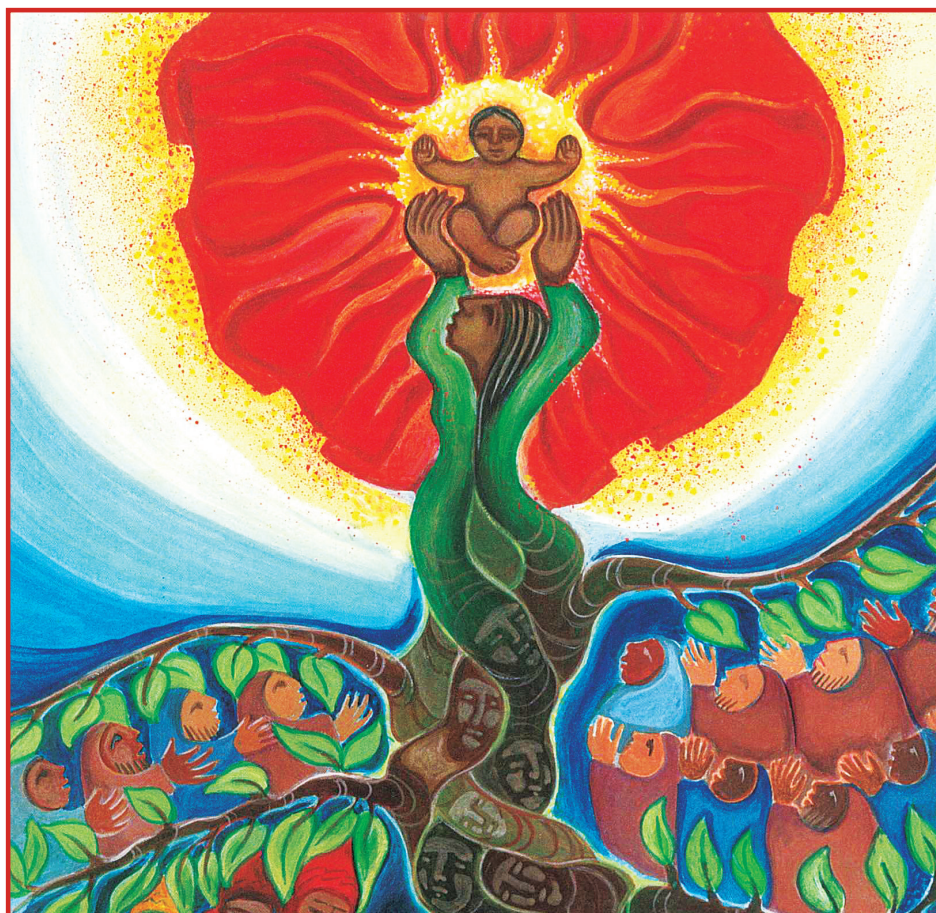
FIRST READING

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. Jesus is the Spirit-filled leader Isaiah envisions, who will transform nations and all nature.

● What do you see in the art at left?



Ansgar Holmberg, CSI

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.



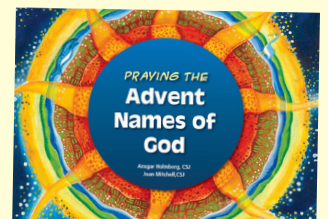
Joan Mitchell, CSJ, the editor of
SUNDAY BY SUNDAY, holds a
Masters of Theological Studies from
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or grandchildren with you to
Christmas parties, gift or food basket
deliveries, so they experience your
commitments.