

Weekly Devotional Resource

out of the

BLUE



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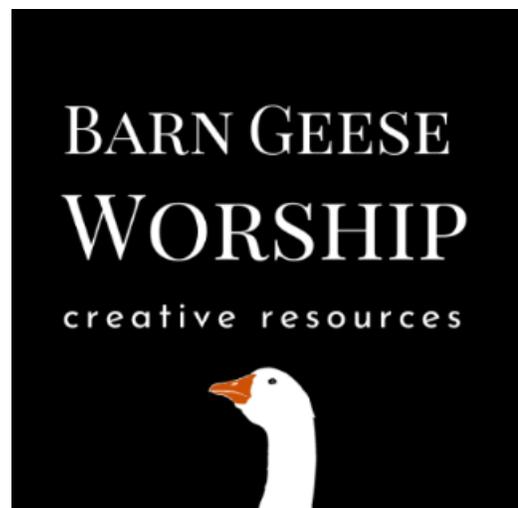
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Out of the Blue Weekly Devotional Resource

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Introduction

Welcome to the *Out of the Blue* Weekly Devotional Resource from Barn Geese Worship.

Despite the series' title of *Out of the Blue*, the idea for this devotional resource itself grew from a specific seed. The stories we have selected and the way we mark them emerge from the tradition of the Jesse tree.

The Jesse tree is a medieval symbolic depiction of Jesus' ancestry. It is also a symbol of the Advent season, sometimes used for home devotions during the weeks leading to Christmas. When used at home, a Jesse tree tells the stories of Jesus' ancestors by using Bible stories and accompanying symbolic ornaments, one for each day of Advent. By Christmas, the Jesse tree is full of biblical imagery, and you've spent the season dwelling in stories of faith. In short, you are building Jesus a family tree of sorts.

In the traditional Jesse tree used for home devotions, the Bible stories are taken from the genealogy of Jesus as described in Matthew 1. The stories we've curated are also mostly drawn from Matthew 1, with a particular focus on the women in Jesus' lineage. These stories tell us something about who Jesus will be. They testify to the consistency of God's promise within the messiness of human existence. Often, God's action seems to come out of the blue in these stories. You'll find the same biblical stories in the *Out of the Blue* Midweek Worship and the Advent and Christmas Pageant.

Who is this devotional for?

Whether you are a single adult, a single parent, a multigenerational family under one roof, or a community of friends, we hope that you can find something here to enrich your experience of the Advent season.

However, not all content may be appropriate for all people. The stories of women from Jesus' lineage include some mature themes. Prior to sharing this devotional resource with others, please consider using content warnings (CW), trigger warnings (TW), or content notifications (CN) so that participants will not be blindsided by themes that could trigger traumatic responses. The story of Bathsheba and David in Week five, as found in 2 Samuel 11:2-27a, is of particular relevance.

Households with young ones should read the stories in advance to see what they are comfortable sharing with the entire family. It is possible to find many of these stories, or different stories about the same characters, in children's Bibles. Substituting these age-appropriate stories for family devotional time can be a good way to appeal to all ages. If you also have access to Barn Geese Worship's *Out of the Blue* Advent and Christmas Pageant, you will find each story retold there in an appropriate way for all ages. You may be able to use those scripts for devotional time, or children may already be reading those stories on a weekly basis if participating in the pageant.

How do I use this devotional resource?

This is a weekly devotional resource. It includes entries for each of the seven weeks of an extended Advent season, plus one for Christmas. If your congregation marks a four-week Advent season, begin your devotional time early for extra reflection, or select your favorite four stories.

Because the format is weekly rather than daily, you have the opportunity to spread out your reflections over the course of the week. You might take one day to read the scripture, another to absorb the devotional reading, another to focus on prayer, and another to engage the found-object Jesse tree. On the other hand, perhaps you are prone to get swept away by the many offerings of the holiday season, and you might forget about your devotional for a day or two. No problem! You have a whole seven days to catch the week's entry.

A found-object Jesse tree

You may remember the take-home bags that some congregations created during the early days of the pandemic, stocked with tools for faith formation at home. With our found-object Jesse tree, we seek to recreate some of the best parts of that experience without some of the pitfalls.

Rather than using purchased items or trinkets crafted at home, you will create a Jesse tree from everyday items, or found objects, that you imbue with meaning. You'll assemble the tree over the course of the Advent season, adding to it each week, as you follow the devotional resource.

Here are a few ideas for how you might set up your tree.

1. Start with a centerpiece. We suggest options like:
 - Bare or evergreen branches in a vase
 - A potted plant
 - An Advent wreath
 - Visual artwork of a tree or plant
 - Your own Jesse tree, if your household already embraces this tradition
2. Add a couple of candles. Use one for each week of Advent or just a few for ambiance. Be mindful of fire hazards. Inexpensive LED tealights are great options for a kid-friendly space or an environment where someone is using oxygen.
3. Week by week, surround this centerpiece with your found objects. Each week of the devotional resource includes prompts about the type of object to find, such as something you would use to help others (week two) or something you would take on a trip (week four). Each prompt also includes a few examples to get you thinking. But don't stop with our suggestions! Let your imagination guide you.

When the time comes to choose your object for the week, you can select it individually or collaboratively. If you live in a household with multiple people, you can agree on one item or let each person choose their own. If you are thinking, Could this end up looking a little... weird? the answer is Yes, definitely. You may indeed end the season with a vase of branches surrounded by a Band-Aid, a stuffed animal, a book, and a can of corn. For users who enjoy a very carefully decorated home at Christmas, this may be a creative challenge. Embrace the chaos, and be open to what it can teach you about God! We hope that at the end of the season you have an entirely unique and utterly meaningful collection of found objects to remind you of the eccentric cast of characters who comprise Jesus' family tree.

Weekly Devotional Resource

WEEK ONE: LAUGHING WITH GOD

This week read: Genesis 17:15-22

By the time of this week's reading, a lot has already happened in the saga of Sarah and Abraham. They have left their home to travel to the Promised Land, crossed through enemy territory multiple times, and all but given up on God's promise to provide them with a child. They relied on Sarah's slave Hagar to bear Abraham's son, Ishmael, on Sarah's behalf. In this reading, God clarifies: Yes, of course, I'll take care of Ishmael, but that is not what I meant! Sarah herself will have a child. Go ahead and laugh. When Abraham, and later Sarah, laugh at the absurdity of the promise, perhaps God laughs along, but only because God knows how the story will end.

God's work with Sarah and Abraham is already happening. The promise is already in progress, like a current that will flow down through the generations. But Sarah and Abraham just can't believe it. Rather than letting go and joining the current, they struggle against it, trying to find their own ways to do God's work, rather than trusting God to provide. When their own son Isaac is finally born, the joy of his birth seems to take them by surprise, completely out of the blue. In the pages of Genesis, however, God has been repeating this promise to them for twenty-five years.

Sarah and Abraham are the first generation identified in Jesus' ancestry. They're an unlikely, disbelieving, at times vengeful, and meddling couple. They aren't all bad, but they aren't all good, either. And yet, God works with them. They become the ancestors of nations and of salvation itself.

Consider: When has God's goodness seemed to come out of the blue to you?

Pray: Ever-present, ever-persistent God, remind me of your goodness each day. When I am disbelieving, when I do not trust you, when I cannot hear you, speak to me again. Amen.

Find: Find something that seems impossible to understand. Examples include brainteasers, a challenging puzzle, a difficult book, your tax return). Place it near your Jesse tree.

WEEK TWO: GOD'S TRICKSTERS

This week read: Genesis 38:12-26

Matthew's gospel traces Jesus' lineage through Judah and Tamar, and today's reading tells the surprising story of their relationship. Judah and Tamar are far from a perfect couple. Their relationship is built on distrust and tragedy, and Judah is responsible for most of the problems.

Judah is the son of the famous patriarch Jacob, but he's not the father's favored son. That distinction belonged to Joseph, the dreamer who annoyed the rest of his brothers. Judah was not the eldest of Jacob's children, either. That was Reuben, who decided it was better that the brothers *not* kill Joseph. Papa Jacob was a trickster and a scoundrel. Judah didn't fall far from the tree.

Today's story begins with the account of Judah's family and the birth of his three boys, Er, Onan, and Shelah. His eldest, Er, married a woman named Tamar, but Er died before the couple could have children. At the time, it would have been customary for Tamar to marry one of Judah's other sons, and that's what she did: she married Onan. But Onan also died childless. Judah told Tamar to return to her own father's house to live as a widow until it was the turn of his youngest son, Shelah, to marry her, but this added insult to injury. According to custom, Judah should have allowed Tamar to stay in his house. He should have provided for her following the death his first two sons. Instead, Tamar fades into the family background, widowed, alone, and uncertain that her father-in-law will ever provide for her.

In response, Tamar concocts a devious plan to entrap Judah. She does this to force him to care for her, per his obligation. She expects that he will act dishonorably. In fact, her whole plan revolves around Judah's predictably poor behavior. Ultimately, she succeeds.

This kind of story often shocks us when we discover it in the Bible. God is not even mentioned in Tamar's story. There is no clue whether God approves or disapproves of what happens between Tamar and Judah. Still, we know that God has already made a promise to Jacob and to Jacob's father, Abraham. God stays true to this promise even though neither Judah nor Tamar is morally perfect. Tamar acts out of desperation. Judah is duplicitous. The desperation and deception at the heart of their relationship

nevertheless become part of Jesus' family story. They do not need to behave themselves in order for God to carry them along into the divine plan and promise.

If you are searching for God's work or godly goodness in this story, consider this: once the truth comes out, Judah admits what he has done is wrong and reconciles with Tamar. They model the complicated reconciliation that Christians should seek, even in our messiest human relationships.

Consider: When has God carried you into the story of salvation despite your behavior?

Pray: God of truth and true love, we try to hide our true selves, but you see through our disguises. You know the truth behind the lies we tell. Help us admit our imperfections to one another so we can rebuild our lives in love. Amen.

Find: Find something that you would use to help others. Examples include a bandage, a cozy blanket, a donation you'd offer at your local pantry, or a book you can share. Place it near your Jesse tree.

WEEK THREE: UNEXPECTED ALLIANCES

This week read: Joshua 2:1-24, 6:24-25

Rahab's story seems to come out of the blue. The Israelites had escaped from slavery in Egypt, and they took a long, winding road for a whole generation before arriving at the edge of the Promised Land in Canaan. Before they crossed into Canaan, the people's leader, Moses, appointed his successor, a young and faithful soldier named Joshua. Joshua selected a small squad of spies to enter the land of Canaan and scout the lay of the land. The spies stayed at Rahab's place in the wall of the city. That's the story we read today.

From the moment those spies step into her life, Rahab finds herself on a new path. The Israelites represent trouble and destruction to her. They do not share her religious or moral convictions. She could avoid them or even turn them in to the authorities. But she gives them hospitality instead, and she helps them accomplish God's mission. In return, when the city falls, only Rahab and her family are spared.

You may be wondering why this story matters to the genealogy of Jesus. Rahab is not an Israelite, after all. In Matthew 1, the gospel writer identifies Rahab as the mother of Boaz, the landowner who marries Ruth, whose story you'll read next week. Rahab enters the biblical narrative as an outsider. She becomes an ancestor of Jesus. She doesn't just live as a stranger in Israel. Instead, she personally enters the story of human salvation. Her inclusion begins with an act of hospitality and bravery given to the friends of God.

Consider: What unexpected alliances in our lives can lead us deeper into God's story today?

Pray: God, when you send a visitor, help us open the door. Help us show kindness to strangers, even when loving them could change the course of our future. Amen.

Find: Find something that you use to welcome others, perhaps even enemies. Examples include a candle you light at the dinner table when there are guests, a certain pan you use for baking a favorite dish, your good towel, or a prayer book. Place it near your Jesse tree.

WEEK FOUR: COME WHAT MAY

This week read: Ruth 1:1-18

The story of Ruth and Naomi begins with tragedy. After leaving her homeland with her family, Naomi experiences a string of deaths: first her husband, then her two adult sons. Left without grandchildren and without male family members to care for her, Naomi is in one of the most vulnerable and lowly places in her society.

Against reason, Naomi's daughters-in-law don't want to abandon her. Though Orpah eventually agrees to return to the family of her birth, Ruth won't leave Naomi. She protests with one of the most stirring speeches in all of scripture.

Ruth's choice to remain with her widowed mother-in-law is downright foolish by her world's standards. Nothing ties her to Naomi, and there is no hopeful future with her to be seen. It makes you wonder why Ruth did not wish to return to her own family. It makes you wonder about the welcome Ruth must have received in her husband's family home. It makes you wonder why Naomi loved and cared for Ruth as her own daughter.

Ruth makes Naomi her chosen family, a bond that many people form when their biological families can't provide the love, understanding, or support they need. Perhaps this family relationship is formed with a deep sense of justice, too. Though it may be fair to leave Naomi on her own, Ruth—an outsider to the people of Judah—upholds one of the markers of God's justice. She cares for the widow. This generation in Jesus' ancestry is formed by chosen love, tenacity, justice, and a fiercely feminine loyalty.

Consider: When has the love of someone beyond your biological family made a difference in your life?

Pray: God of all, thank you for the people who have provided me with love and support throughout my life: (*take a moment to name some*). Through their care, inspire me to act with love and justice toward others. Amen.

Find: Find something that you would take with you on a trip or that guides you in your travels. Examples include a map or atlas, favorite road snacks, a piece of camping equipment, travel games, or a spare tire. Place it near your Jesse tree.

WEEK FIVE: BROKENNESS RECLAIMED

Content notification: This week's reading and remarks deal with David's sexual assault of Bathsheba, the murder of her spouse, and the death of an infant.

This week read: 2 Samuel 11:2-27a

The story of David and his family is told over the course of several chapters in 1 and 2 Samuel. David, youngest son of Jesse, is unexpectedly anointed as the second king of Israel to succeed Saul. As an illustrious youth, David defeated Goliath with nothing more than a sling and a stone, but as he ages and reigns, he finds navigating his newfound power much more difficult. Second Samuel 11 tells the story of how he took Bathsheba, another man's wife, to his bed and then sent Uriah, her unwitting husband, to die on the front lines of battle. Bathsheba, impregnated by David, gives birth to a son, who dies just days later.

Fortunately, this is not the end of Bathsheba's story. Eventually she becomes the mother of the future King Solomon and several other of David's children. She also becomes a political force in the kingdom, a stark contrast to her seeming voicelessness in today's reading.

The flow of the story is dreadfully deliberate, as though the narrator wants us to mark all the opportunities David missed to make a different choice: He sees Bathsheba. He decides wants her. He asks after her. He brings her to his palace. He lies with her. As Bathsheba's king, David's job is to protect her. Instead, he exploits her.

What did Bathsheba think? We can only imagine. Her feelings and preferences are not once referenced in the story. The narrator's exclusion of her voice echoes David's own refusal to acknowledge the fullness of her personhood. In fact, except for a servant's report, even Bathsheba's name is unspoken in this story.

Generations later, the author of Matthew once again refers to her only as "the wife of Uriah" as he includes her in Jesus' genealogy. In this context, the title doesn't seem to obscure Bathsheba as much as it reveals the truth of David's failure. Matthew refuses to bleach out the sin that colored the threads of Jesus' ancestral tapestry. Bathsheba encounters some of the worst actions of a corrupt ruler. Is it a coincidence that she is

the foremother of Jesus, the sovereign who does not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but who empties himself instead (Philippians 2:6-8)?

Consider: God took a mistake that David and Bathsheba thought had ruined them beyond recovery and made it part of God's plan for salvation. When has God taken a catastrophe in your life and found a way to bless you?

Pray: God, sometimes we think we're too broken for you to redeem. Prove us wrong. Remind us of how you love to take brokenness and transform it into blessing. Remind us of how the lost sheep was the one that was found. When we lose hope in our own goodness, surprise us with your overflowing grace. Amen.

Find: Find something broken that you still care about. Examples include a piece of jewelry or tableware waiting for repair, a beloved stuffed animal with a rip, or a favorite sweater that's beginning to unravel. Place it near your Jesse tree.

WEEK SIX: SILENCE SPEAKS

This week read: Luke 1:57-80

Zechariah would have been very little help with a baby on the way.

That's because God struck Zechariah silent after he questioned how God would give him and his wife, Elizabeth, a child. God promised their child would become the powerful prophet John (Luke 1:15-18). Zechariah questioned how God might accomplish this promise, and the angel Gabriel took away his ability to speak until the baby was born.

As the angel's promise swelled to fruition in Elizabeth's belly, she and Zechariah had to prepare the house for the baby. Imagine planning anything so complicated over text messages, or waiting for your partner to write out every response to every question. If you were Elizabeth, how long would you be patient? At what point would you give up and simply make every decision yourself? Little wonder that Elizabeth sings with joy when her cousin Mary arrives!

Mary experiences a different side of God's miracle. She expects a miracle baby, just like Zechariah and Elizabeth, but she doesn't know about Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy yet. Mary simply comes to Elizabeth because she trusts Elizabeth as her family. Together they discover that they each carry a part of the same promise from God. Mary and Elizabeth show us how relationships of trust can help us make sense of God's work in our lives.

God's promise gives Mary a new song, while it stuns Zechariah into silence. Zechariah would have learned from Mary and been inspired by her, just like Elizabeth. Even though he remains silent until his baby is born, he finally speaks when he announces the baby's name. It's John, in keeping with the angel's command. Zechariah's friends and family do not understand why he choose such a name. But this time, even if others around him are questioning this child, Zechariah is more than ready to speak.

Consider: The birth of this baby will be the largest change in Zechariah's family's life, and the couple encounters that change while adapting to his silence. Change piles atop change. But the family draws inspiration from Mary, a younger relative who is also

inspired by God's miracle. How can we learn and share and identify God's work with those older or younger than ourselves?

Pray: Inspire us, God, through the miracles you plant all around. Show us the way you grow in others. Teach us to sing when we recognize your work. Help us listen and ponder in silence when we do not understand. Amen.

Find: Find something that you're willing to speak up for. Examples include a branch from nature, a photo of people you care about, or a news article about a cause important to you. Add it to your tree.

WEEK SEVEN: A NEW SONG

This week read: Luke 1:46-55

In the story of Jesus' family heritage, Mary is as close to Jesus as you can get.

Mary's song of praise is known as the Magnificat because in Latin, the first word of "*My soul magnifies the Lord*" is not "my soul" but "magnify." As it bursts forth from Mary upon her arrival at Elizabeth's home, the song reveals much about who she is: a humble servant who knows she is blessed, not because of what she has, but because of what God has done. She is one who can recognize the mercy of God at work through the generations; a young person who already perceives the need for God to bring the proud, the powerful, and the rich low in order for God's promises to take hold. Mary believes that there is good news to be had for people who are poor and hungry. As a prophet, she employs beautiful and poetic language to inspire generations of faithful people. As a person of faith, she knows God's promise will take hold down through the generations, beyond what she will see and know.

Mary's song of praise also reveals much about who her son will be. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree!

If the ancestors of Jesus have all lent something to the story of salvation, then how much more will his own mother offer? Just imagine her in the stable on Christmas, or later, perhaps more comfortable in a rocking chair Joseph made. Picture Mary when her son first experiences injustice on the streets or at the playground, or when Jesus sees the brutality of Roman soldiers and the violence of empire. Hear Mary, time and again, singing the words of today's reading over her child Jesus, hoping he will take them to heart.

Consider: Where do you see the themes of Mary's Magnificat in Jesus' life and teaching? Where do you see them in your own life?

Pray: Holy One, spark genuine joy within me. Give me joy at being your servant, joy at doing justice, joy at serving others, and joy at caring for those who are young or vulnerable. May my words and deeds sing a song of praise for the great things you have done for me. Amen.

Find: Find something that sparks genuine joy for you, even in the midst of hard times. Examples include a program from a special event, a memento from a particular occasion, a photo of a person who brings you joy, or your baptismal candle. Add it to your tree.

CHRISTMAS: GROWING IN GOD

During the twelve days of Christmas read: Luke 2:1-20

The day is here! Christmas has come! The baby is born!

In the birth of Jesus, the promise that God pushed through the generations is finally birthed. Emmanuel! God is with us! Cue “Hark the Herald Angels Sing!” And they all lived happily ever after...

Yet there is more to come.

The birth of Jesus means that God is present in our human existence in an entirely new way. God’s promise persevered through generations of a flawed, feisty, fearful, and fearless family to bring about Jesus’ birth to Mary and Joseph. The promise doesn’t end there. Rather, like any birth, this one is a beginning. From this moment, God’s promise will take root and grow in a new way.

We are part of that growth. Saints and sinners alike can find a place around the manger on Christmas because we know that Jesus’ own family tree was full of folks like us. Like Jesus’ family stories, our own histories can be fraught with pain, like Tamar and Bathsheba’s. They can be dramatic, like Rahab’s, or full of faith and doubt intertwined, like Sarah and Abraham’s. Sometimes we choose our own families, like Ruth, or long for more, like Naomi. Perhaps on a good day, we’re thrilled and overjoyed with God’s goodness, and we burst into prophetic praise like Zechariah and Mary.

In entering our human story, God makes all our histories into holy ground, fertile for new growth.

Consider: What stories have most captured your attention this Advent? How might you carry their lessons beyond Christmas into a new season?

Pray: Jesus, you have arrived! In our hearts, in our homes, in our world, you are here. You have entered our own histories to heal and unite, forgive and save. As we welcome you this Christmas, plant the seeds of something new in our hearts. Help us grow into new ways of sharing your love. Amen.

Find: Find something that points to new life or to a baby. Examples include a toy or baby item, a flower or bud, or a new greeting from an old friend. Add it to your tree.

Leave your tree up throughout the twelve days of Christmas until Epiphany on January 6. Take some time to look back on the various items you have added. See if you can remember which idea, character, or story inspired each. When taken as a whole, what do these items say about Jesus' family tree? What do they say about your own or your household's history? Can they plot a course through your journey of faith this season?

Contributors

The Rev. Victoria Larson (she/hers) is a self-professed liturgy nerd who enjoys creative writing, social dancing, and long walks with her dog Zin and a good podcast on. She is currently studying for her Doctor of Theology degree at Duke University, where she spends much of her time trying to get from the chapel to the library without getting lost.

The Rev. Justin Kosec (he/his) loves board games, names all his rescued greyhounds after literary characters, and delights in creating liturgical dramas and dramatic liturgies. He serves as Pastor of Outreach and Communication at Our Savior Lutheran Church (ELCA) in Sioux Falls, SD.

The Rev. Emily Trubey-Weller (she/hers) is a home-loving rambler who has put down roots from coast to coast and at several points in-between. She's passionate about ministry to and with the youngest members of the church, and serves as Pastor of Families at First United Methodist Church in South Bend, IN, where she lives on a farm with her growing family and 20 lbs. of home-grown pickled jalapenos.