

FEATURE

Jesse Tree recalls God's benevolence

Advent is the season of spiritual preparation for the holy day of Christmas. It also reminds us that we are waiting in joyful hope for the second coming of our Savior.

Too often, however, the commercial focus on the holiday of Christmas reminds us only of unfulfilled material wants. With no spiritual grounding, the next four weeks can be stressful, depressing and joyless.

Customs and activities can make the weeks before Christmas more meaningful and less centered on the holiday's material aspects. The prayers and lighting of candles of the Advent wreath and the notation of days on an Advent calendar are well-known traditions. Giving to the poor and unfortunate is another tradition many individuals and families use to maintain a proper focus.

For more than a quarter century, giving through the Christmas Appeal has been part of that tradition for thousands of families in the Diocese of Rochester. Each year, Christmas Appeal donors accept the invitation to respond to the needs of less fortunate brothers and sisters in

A Jesse Tree Blessing
 God of Abraham and Sarah, bless us whenever we look upon our Jesse Tree. May it remind us of our ancestors who kept hope alive, believing in God's faithfulness. In this Advent season, fill our hearts with hope, and move us to be good news to the poor. Amen.

Christ, helping them when they do not qualify for other help.

This feature begins a series intended to invite your response. It is centered on The Jesse Tree, an old, but lesser known Advent ritual.

The Jesse Tree recalls the genealogy of Jesus. Jesse was the father of King David, in whose royal line the Messiah was to be born. On its own, the Jesse Tree is an enriching activity that can help us recall Jesus' ancestors and reminds us of God's benevolence to humankind all the way back to Abraham, and that the promise of a Savior was fulfilled in the birth of Jesus.

The Jesse Tree activity is suitable

for individuals, groups or families. The tree is usually a bare branch holding ornaments that symbolize Old Testament figures. Participants read these individuals' stories from Scripture and reflect on them while making or hanging the ornaments.

You also can incorporate symbols or names of your own family members who are waiting for Jesus to come again.

The list below offers some Old Testament figures who waited in hope, and some symbols you might use to represent them:

- Rebecca (Gn 25:19-34:27) - well
- Jacob (Gn 28:10-22) - ladder
- Joshua (Jos 6:1-15) - trumpet
- Ruth (Ru) - sheaf of wheat
- Deborah (Jgs 4) - tent peg, mallet
- Samuel (1 Sm 3:1-18) - oil flask
- Daniel (Dn 6:17-24) - lion
- Elizabeth (Lk 1:39-55) - house
- Zechariah (Lk 1:5-25) - altar

As you recall these prominent Old Testament figures who waited and prepared for the Messiah, we would ask you to reflect on the brief vignettes below of those who wait today to experience the love of Christ in their lives.

Kathy is a widow who cares for her elderly mother and toddler son. They have gone without hot water in their rural home for more than a year. Kathy just does not have enough income for plumbing repairs. Christmas Appeal funds are needed to aid the household.

Hard times from long unemployment have beaten Larry Jackson down. This father of three has done his best to find a way to provide for his family. Very reluctantly, he has asked for help in getting his two youngest children new shoes.

Shawna's boyfriend is an alcoholic and drug abuser who often steals money and sells household items to support his habit. He has begun to sell the family's food, and Shawna now knows she must sever the relationship. She needs help to relocate and replenish her cupboards.

Pitman has five children, ranging in age from 7 to 15. Their mother died from a drug overdose. Pitman has been in recovery from his own drug addiction for the past two years and is struggling to keep his family together. Recently, Pitman learned he has multiple sclerosis.

He is currently unable to work. His main concern is how to provide any holiday for the children.

Fran is a mildly retarded 75-year-old single woman who lives in a senior high-rise. She is an epileptic and has been treated for cataracts and cancer. Fran lived in an institution for many years, but enjoys independent living, except for the lonely holidays. Christmas Appeal funds could provide some cheer.

Sarah was an abused child. Her first husband also beat her, damaging her eyes and causing frequent seizures. Four of Sarah's six children were also physically abused. She is now separated and determined to protect her two youngest from harm. She is in therapy to come to terms with these experiences and to develop self-esteem.

Jo and her three children fled an abusive relationship and relocated to Rochester to start a new life. They came with few possessions. Christmas Appeal donations are needed to help the family purchase bedding for the children.

George and Emily are the devoted parents of four children.

They both come from emotionally and financially troubled backgrounds. Earlier this year, one son required surgery. Then their 3-year-old daughter was hit by a car, sustaining severe injuries. George's minimum wage job does not provide health insurance. The couple needs help just to make ends meet.

Nona moved in with her 40-year-old daughter when an apartment fire left her with only the clothes on her back. Just a few weeks later, the daughter was hospitalized and died. Nona now finds herself with small children and a large debt responsibility.

Phil is a 66-year-old single man with cerebral palsy. Retired, he gets by with a modest income and some food stamp assistance. He will be alone for the holidays, having outlived his family. His parish will use Christmas Appeal funds to extend some seasonal cheer.

Clare and Gene often have to choose between food and heat during the winter. Their only qualify for minimum wage jobs. They annually rely on help from the Christmas Appeal.



† Catholic Courier
 † Catholic Charities
Christmas Appeal
Week 1

What is the Christmas Appeal?

It is a cooperative effort of the Catholic Courier and diocesan Catholic Charities to raise funds that will help people in desperate financial crises.

For 24 years, the appeal has enabled the Catholic community to help thousands of people in 12 counties to meet life's basic needs. Christmas Appeal funds have been there for them when no other sources of aid were available.

Who benefits from it?

Funding from the Christmas appeal helps individuals and families in short-term financial crises. These are people who have no financial resources and are either awaiting or ineligible for assistance through other sources.

How does it work?

The appeal consists of a series of articles in the Catholic Courier and a direct-mail solicitation of past and potential donors. Appeal proceeds are allocated to the emergency funds of the following diocesan agencies: Catholic Family Center; Finger Lakes Social Ministry; Catholic Charities of the Southern Tier; Catholic Charities Livingston County outreach; Bishop Sheen Ecumenical Housing Foundation; and diocesan Urban Services.

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