

Last Things: A Devotional Offering for Grown-ups

The First Sunday of Advent - Saints

Saint: Every Christian including you, and many other persons whom you wouldn't want to hang out with.

So you think you already know what a saint is? Let's guess: someone who is (a) so admirable that if you died you'd want them to take care of your puppy (b) but with whom you wouldn't want to go to an R-rated movie. And you certainly wouldn't want to be one! As a T-shirt we saw on a little kid said, "I tried being good, but I got bored."

In this view, saints are people like Mother Teresa who are so selfless that we feel downright wicked by comparison.

But in the New Testament, the word saint never refers to a special class of super-duper Christians, rather it always refers to all Christians. For instance, the Letter to the Ephesians is addressed "to the saints in Ephesus." Saints are not saintly because of what they do but because of what Christ has done for them. Christian saints are identified not by their own wisdom, good works, holiness, and wholeness but by the fact that they belong to Jesus.

And that means, of course, that you are qualified to be a saint, too. As is your worst nightmare of a neighbor. Groucho Marx may have said, "I don't want to be a member of any club that will accept me as a member," but Jesus said, in effect, "Only sinners need apply—and I will make you saints."

from ***Crazy Talk: A Not-So-Stuffy Dictionary of Theological Terms***
Rolf A. Jacobson, Editor

SAINTS



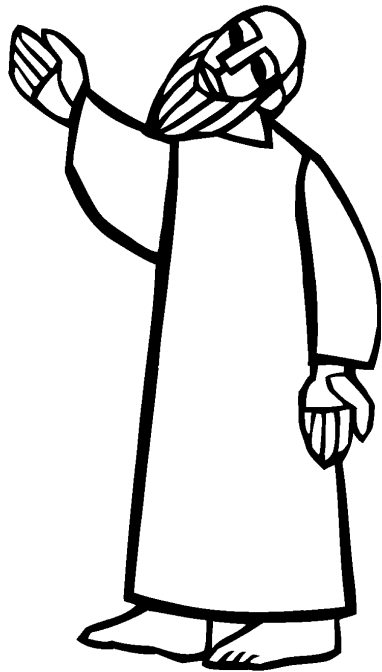


Of Jesse's Lineage: Being God's Family

Take-Home Advent Devotional

Each week during the Season of Advent, you are invited to remove this cover of your worship folder and take it home, as a devotional guide to use during the week. The interior pages of the devotional guide are especially suitable for use with young children, and the back page offers a special reading for the grown-ups. Throughout the Four Sundays of Advent, we will explore different members of God's family. From biblical times down to the present, you will have the opportunity to celebrate all of God's family: Saints, Sinners, Strangers, and the Savior.

Instructions: Simply using paper and markers (or something more creative like sticks and yarn) create a family tree. Each week, cut out the symbols below, decorate them, and add them to the tree.



Abraham



Mary

Our Biblical Family: Saints

Read -- Open your Bible to Genesis 12:1-7 and read it aloud. If there are small children in the group, retell what's happening in the story in language that they can understand.

Discuss -- What does it mean when God tells Abraham that through him all the nations of the earth will be blessed? Do you think it is impressive that Abraham listens to God and moves his whole family at the age of seventy-five?

Read -- Open your Bible to Luke 1:26-38 and read it aloud. If there are small children in the group, retell what's happening in the story in language that they can understand.

Discuss -- Mary was a teenager when the angel Gabriel visited her. What would it feel like to be her? Would you be scared? Excited? Confused? What do you think Mary means when she says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word"?

Create -- Cut out the characters on the opposite page and start building your family tree.

Our Family Today: Saints

Family Traits -- In the Bible and in our own families, today, we are given models of faith. Certain people show us how to live the kind of lives God wants us to live. Martin Luther believed that each of us is a saint because God can use us to proclaim and model God's perfect love and grace.

Family Resemblance -- Thinking about biblical saints like Abraham and Mary, who can you name in your family, today, that has been a saint in your life? What is it about them that makes them saintly to you?

Family Ties -- Open up a family photo book or pull some old photos up on your computer. Find a picture or two that remind you of a good time in your life. Share with others in your family about what the picture means to you.

Family Tree -- Find a picture of some of the family saints that you just talked about and attach them to your family tree alongside Abraham and Mary. If you don't have a photograph, simply draw a picture and write their name next to it.

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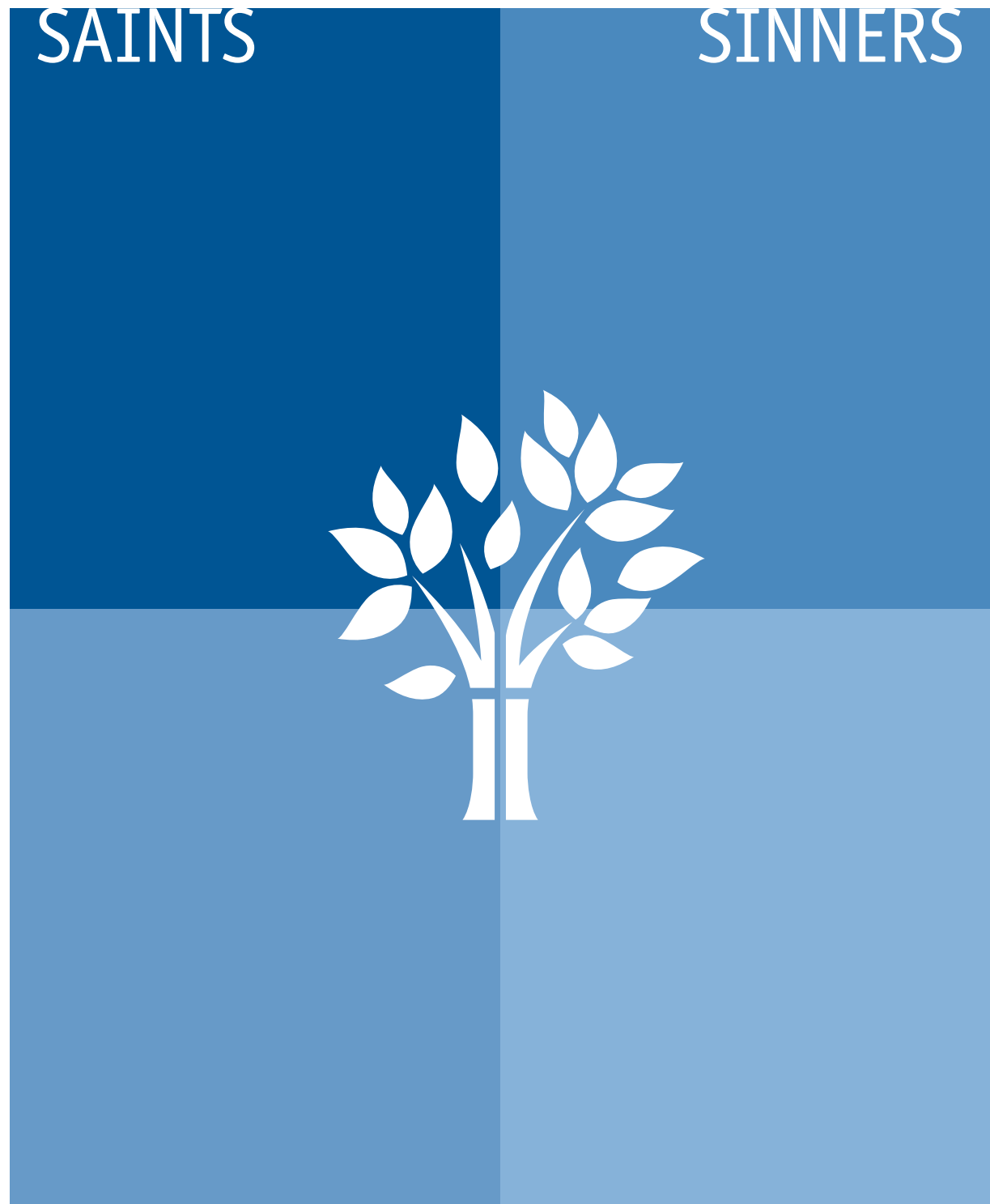
The Second Sunday of Advent - Sinners

To see myself as a sinner is simple enough, as the Oxford English Dictionary defines a sinner as “a transgressor against the divine law.” If I care to pay attention, which I usually do not, I can find all too many ways in which I transgress regularly against the great commandment to love God with all my heart and soul, and my neighbor as myself. On a daily basis, I fail to keep the balance that this commandment requires of me: that I love and care for myself, but not so well that I become incapable of loving and serving others; and that I remember to praise God as the author of life itself, but not so blindly that I lose sight of the down-to-earth dimensions of my everyday relationships and commitments...

Paul’s assertion in Romans, that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23) seems easy enough to believe, when I look around and read the news. Other people most certainly fall short. But myself? It is tempting to take the pharisaical route, and judge myself to be morally sound, not like “them,” whoever they may be. Conversely, I might believe myself to be such a dreadful sinner as to be beyond remedy. Redemption is for “them,” lucky fools, and all that is left for me is to wallow in despair. To admit to being no more, no less than an ordinary sinner is not comforting, it does not shine with the glamour of despondency; above all, it does nothing to foster my self-esteem. It is easiest simply to reject the whole concept as negative and old-fashioned.

I am a sinner, and the Presbyterian church offers me a weekly chance to come clean, and to pray, along with the others, what is termed a prayer of confession. But pastors can be so reluctant to use the word “sin” that in church we end up confessing nothing except our highly developed capacity for denial. One week, for example, the confession began, “Our communication with Jesus tends to be too infrequent to experience the transformation in our lives You want us to have,” which seems less a prayer than a memo from one professional to another. At such times I picture God as a wily writing teacher who leans across a table and says, not at all gently, “Could you possibly be troubled to say what you mean?” It would be refreshing to answer, simply, “I have sinned.”

from *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* by Kathleen Norris



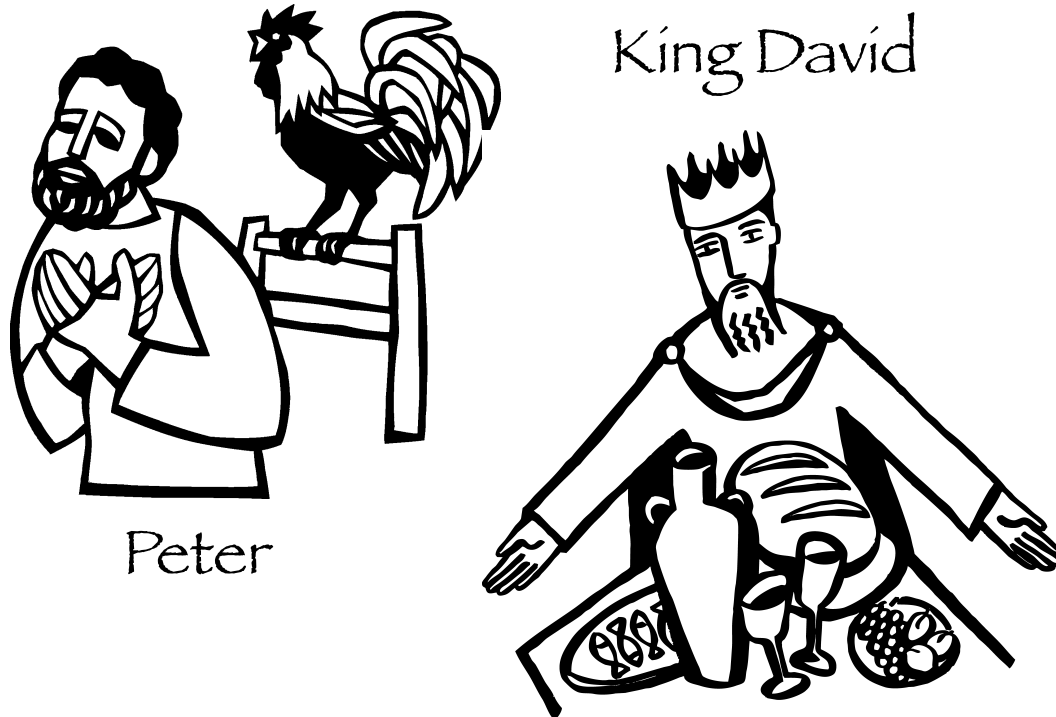


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Our Biblical Family: Sinners

Read -- Open your Bible to 2 Samuel 11:26-12:15 and read it aloud. If there are small children in the group, retell what's happening in the story in language that they can understand.

Discuss -- David was the greatest king of Israel, and yet he sinned and failed God in some huge ways. Why do you think God was willing to forgive him? Even though God forgave David, there were still consequences for his sin. Do you think there are always consequences when we sin and hurt others?

Read -- Open your Bible to Mark 14:66-72 and read it aloud. If there are small children in the group, retell what's happening in the story in language that they can understand.

Discuss -- In this story, Peter fails Jesus at the very moment that he is needed most. Have you ever had a friend betray you? Have you ever failed a friend? Jesus forgives Peter, and he becomes the "Rock" of the Church. Have you ever experienced being forgiven as something that gave you power or freedom?

Create -- Cut out the characters on the opposite page and continue building your family tree.

Our Family Today: Sinners

Family Traits -- Just as we discover in the Bible and in our own lives that we all have the potential to be saints in this world, we also know that we screw up and sin. Like David and Peter, we hurt others, and we hurt ourselves. But with God, that's only the beginning of the story. Because God is so willing to forgive, sinners like David and Peter get to turn back to God and have their lives transformed.

Family Resemblance -- Thinking about biblical sinners like David and Peter, can you name some ways that sin has impacted your family or community? Can you think of an example of a sin that was forgiven and that led to something good?

Family Ties -- Talking about the brokenness in our families is rarely easy, but it is something that God wants us to do. Facing our failures and our limitations with honest and open hearts allows us to ask God for forgiveness and healing. Have each family member write down the name of someone they have hurt on a piece of tissue or toilet paper. If anyone wants to share the name, they can. If not, simply say a prayer naming God's mercy and forgiveness. Then, flush the sins away.

Family Tree -- Decorate the roots of your family tree. Down around the roots, write in words like grace, love, mercy, and forgiveness.

Last Things: A Devotional Offering for Grown-ups

The Third Sunday of Advent - Strangers

In 1975 a group of Methodists, with the support of John Wesley, founded the Strangers' Friend Society in London, dedicated to ministry among the urban poor. Wesley described the Society as "instituted wholly for the relief not of our society, but for poor, sick, friendless strangers."

Societies were quickly established in a number of cities in England and Ireland. In a letter to Adam Clarke, Wesley wrote, "You have done right in setting up the Strangers' (Friend) Society. It is an excellent institution."

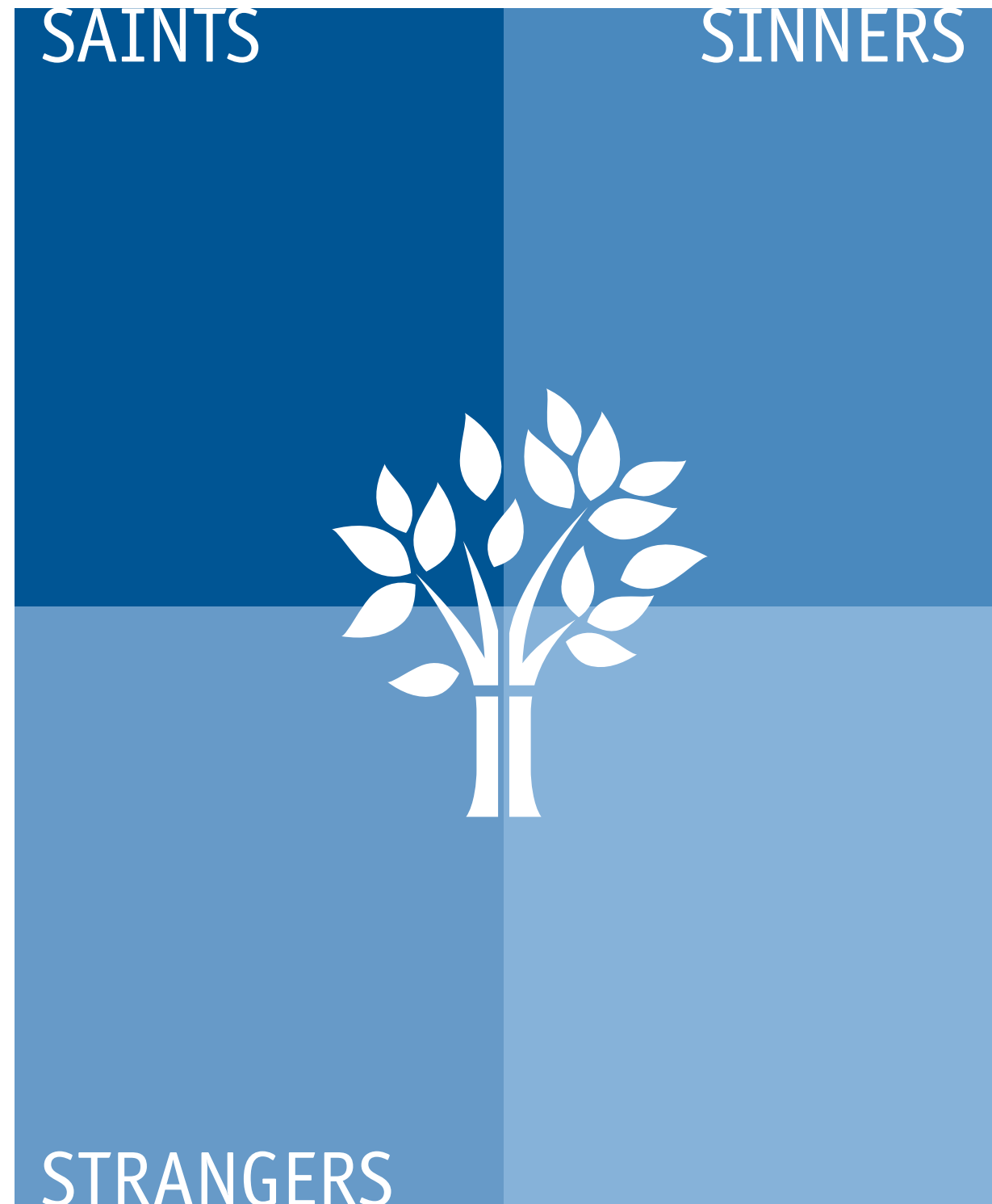
According to Clarke, the Society was founded as a response to the extraordinary human misery and poverty he had seen among the hidden poor of Dublin. Describing the local poor as "strangers" because of their "sore affliction" and their inability to find relief in the traditional sources, he characterized them as persons who had "no helper" in society. The only criterion for help was "sufficiency of evident distress."

Across the centuries, the identity of strangers in need of welcome has varied somewhat—but the most vulnerable have included religious and political refugees, widows, orphans, pilgrims, and the local poor. For those without protection and support that would ordinarily be associated with natural bonds of affection and responsibility, an absence of hospitable welcome could be both dangerous and cruel.

For some refugees and homeless people, a lack of welcome can literally mean death. When their "placelessness" is compounded by mental or physical illness, disability, or old age, their vulnerability is most severe. Some of the most desperate and heart-breaking human stories shared by hospitality practitioners are accounts of people who had been sick enough to be hospitalized but, upon release had no where to go. Still ill, their convalescence would have been on the street if not for a welcoming community. One woman, undergoing chemotherapy, asked a Christian community for help because she had been returning to the street after each treatment. Such desolation and need are nearly incomprehensible for most Americans but disturbingly familiar to those who live close to the needs of the most vulnerable strangers.

from ***Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition***

by Christine D. Pohl





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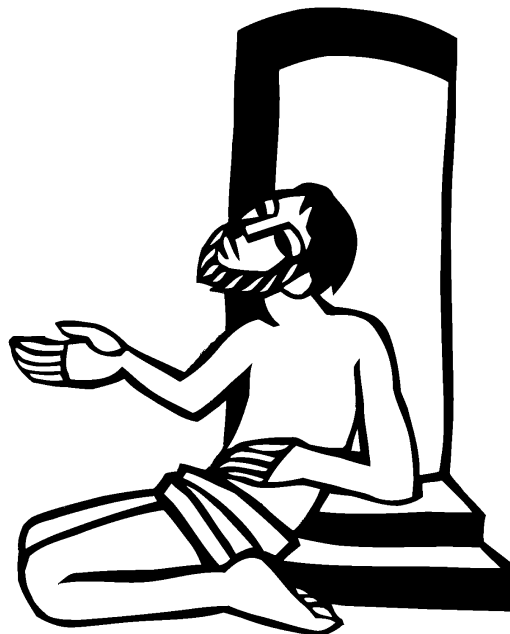
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The Poor, The Sick,
The Imprisoned



Samaritan Woman
at the well



Our Biblical Family: Strangers

Read -- Open your Bible to John 4:3-15 and read it aloud. If there are small children in the group, retell what's happening in the story in language that they can understand.

Discuss -- Jesus meets a woman from a place called Samaria when she comes to get water at a well. She asks him why he is even talking to her, since he is a Jew and she is a Samaritan. Are there kids or adults that you have a hard time talking to or understanding? What is it that keeps you apart from them?

Read -- Open your Bible to Matthew 25:34-46 and read it aloud. If there are small children in the group, retell what's happening in the story in language that they can understand.

Discuss -- In a pretty shocking way, Jesus tells us that when we care for people who are hungry, poor, sick, or in prison, we are actually caring for him. Can you think of a time when you helped somebody who really needed it? What do you think it means for Jesus to say that it is actually him we are helping?

Create -- Cut out the characters on the opposite page and continue building your family tree.

Our Family Today: Strangers

Family Traits -- Starting in Genesis and continuing all the way through the Bible, we are told that God cares for those who are strangers to us. We are reminded that being different isn't a bad thing. In fact, seeking out another person's experience is likely the key to our understanding God in a bigger and fuller way.

Family Resemblance -- Thinking about biblical strangers and the ways that God welcomes them into God's family, can you name any family members or friends who used to be strangers? Do you have any stories of adoption in your family? How has God blessed your family through those who used to be strangers?

Family Ties -- Make two lists: one of friends or family members who used to be strangers to you, and another of people in your community who you would like to get to know better. What do you think you might need to do to move from being strangers to friends with someone on that second list?

Family Tree -- Decorate one of the branches of your family tree with a symbol or word that represents strangers who will someday become a part of your family.

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The Fourth Sunday of Advent - Savior

In the language of our creeds, Jesus is Son of God and Son of Man, the third person of the Holy Trinity, God of God, Light of Light.

He is Savior. By his life, death, and resurrection he became the atonement for our sins and for the sins of the whole world. John the Baptist, point people toward him, said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

He is Lord. All power in heaven and on earth is his. His kingdom is eternal. It is here in our midst, and he presides over it. We hail him as Lord of lords, King of kings.

He is Friend. We sing, “What a friend we have in Jesus.” He said, “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends.”

He is Teacher. Through sublime parables and exalted ethical insights, he teaches us the meaning of life. He teaches with an authority unlike all others.

He is Shepherd. He guides, he comforts, he protects, he gathers us into a flock, his church.

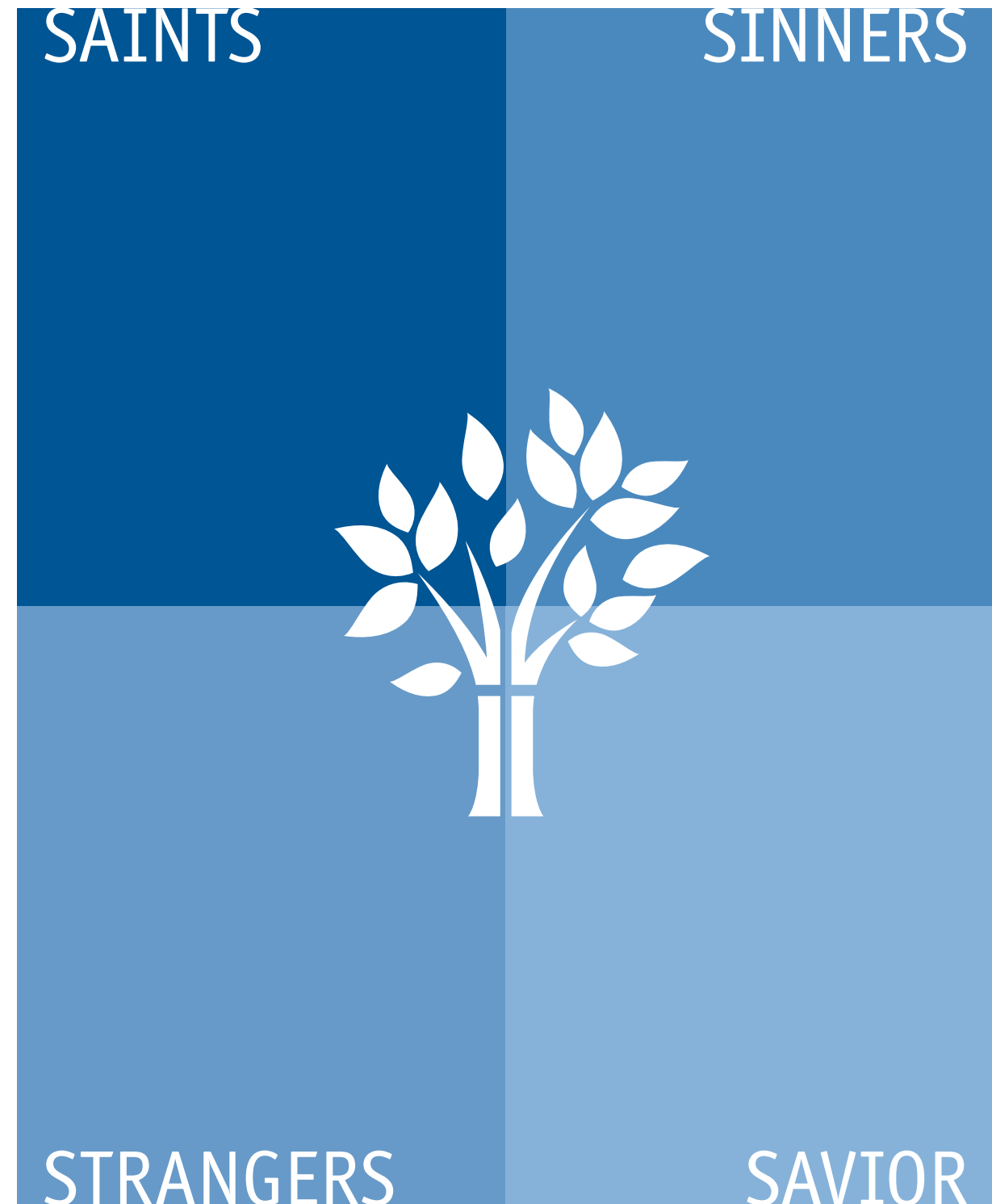
He is Example. In him we see what it means to be human. Compassion for the poor and suffering, indignation against evil and oppression, mercy for the erring, patience under trial—these are the qualities that give nobility to humanity.

No person in all history has tantalized, comforted, disturbed, and enthralled the world as this carpenter from Nazareth. He stands quite alone, like a mountain peak rising abruptly from the plains.

Before a Nero or a Hitler, we would stand in fear; before a Beethoven or a Shakespeare, in admiration; before an Einstein, in awe; before a Lincoln, in respect. If Jesus were to walk into the room, we would fall on our knees.

Most of the world’s great are tucked away in encyclopedias, or in mouldering volumes of Who’s Who. Jesus walks the path of the world still, no longer among the hills of Judea alone, but on the highways and byways of every continent, and into the hearts of people of all races and nationalities. He is Savior and Lord.

from *The Word For Every Day: 365 Devotional Readings* by Alvin N. Rogness





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Jesus
Christ

Our Biblical Family: Savior

Read -- Open your Bible to Luke 2:1-20 and read it aloud. If there are small children in the group, retell what's happening in the story in language that they can understand.

Act -- Take out a piece of paper and write down the things that happen in Luke 2:1-20. Write out a list of the characters in the story. Now, assign family members different parts and simply act out the story of Jesus' birth. Encourage kids to get enthusiastic with their parts.

Discuss -- In this reading, an angel of the Lord tells the shepherds to not be afraid because he has good news. This Jesus that is born is the One who will bring joy to all people because he is the Savior. What do you think it would have been like to wake up with the shepherds and hear the angel say these words?

Create -- Cut out the character on the opposite page and continue building your family tree. Feel free to give Jesus a special place in your family tree.

Our Family Today: Savior

Family Traits -- If we listen closely to the words of Mary and others in the story of Jesus' birth, we will find that this little king is not what most were expecting. He doesn't live in a comfy palace, and he doesn't have an army. On the outside, he really doesn't look like much. But, this Jesus soon reveals a light that radiates from the inside, and this light that he brings is the light and life of all the world.

Family Resemblance -- Talk a little with your kids about why you are drawn to Jesus. What is it about him that causes you to believe in him? Ask them what they like about Jesus.

Family Ties -- Try to find a room in your house that has no windows or heavy blinds that can block out the sunlight. Gather your family together in the room. Light a candle (if you don't have a candle, you can use a flashlight) and turn out all other lights. Let your eyes adjust to the light. Say a prayer asking God to help your family focus on Jesus, as the light of the world, this Christmas.

Family Tree -- Add any finishing touches to your family tree and decide if you want to have it as part of your Christmas decorations. Take a picture and send a copy to other family members and to the church (office@oslmissaquah.org).