

# ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS REFLECTIONS - A JESSE TREE ACTIVITY



## FAMILIES, STILL HOPE FOR THE WORLD

### 2021 MARFAM FAMILY YEAR PLANNER Theme: OUR WORLD, A FAMILY OF FAMILIES DAILY THOUGHTS DECEMBER



These THOUGHTS are available on [www.marfam.org.za](http://www.marfam.org.za), facebook and twitter and can be e-mailed to you. Send request to [info@marfam.org.za](mailto:info@marfam.org.za)

**Abbreviations: Pope Francis:** LS = Laudato Si. AL = Amoris Laetitia FT = Fratelli Tutti. EG = Evangelii Gaudium

**Introduction.** Imagine how the Church and society would benefit if everyone was willing and able to live up to their commitments and take responsibility for their own families and all the families of the world, human animal and plant. If husbands and wives were faithful and parents concerned for children's welfare, it would go a long way to building a healthy society. And, if all family members worked at their communication, kept their promises and looked after their own health and that of the ecosystems around us. Making a decision to love even when we do not feel loving would show that is what matters to us. Good fortune and misfortune can and do happen and have done in particularly challenging ways in 2020 and 2021 because of the coronavirus and all the effects that had on our lives, but at all times our faith in God's love and mercy are there and much remains to be grateful for.

Advent and Christmas are about the story of our Salvation after the Fall. God had created everything and He saw all of creation as good, as Pope Francis reminds us, also in the words of St Francis of Assisi. People are the part of creation that was given free will by God, and we have used our free will to go against God's plan. In his love and mercy God has continually worked to restore the broken relationship. God worked in and through the beauty of creation and through people; the patriarchs, the judges, kings and prophets, priests and others. "IN THE FULLNESS OF TIME" God's Son became human, one of us, to bring about reconciliation through his birth, life, death and resurrection. The stories of the history of the families of the Old Testament help us to understand God's plan. In the last 2000 years the task became ours to continue promoting God's gift of reconciliation and new life. However, in the last 200 years we have done more harm to creation than worked for its protection. Global warming is a result of our actions and neglect. In reality climate change and the damage to our world can be seen in extreme weather conditions and extinction of animals and plants.

Telling the Bible stories of Jesus' ancestors, family sharing and praying together, and showing care for others and for the earth is a powerful way to keep the message alive. We can add a short thank you prayer each day.

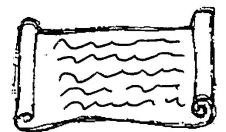
*Dear Father God, we praise you and thank you for showing us the way of merciful love through the life of Jesus your Son. As we prepare for Christmas and remember how Jesus became one of us may we spread his message of love to all the world and all those who share our lives. Amen.*

**Setting the scene.** There are many different traditions and activities we can do around Christmas in our homes as well as in parishes. For some details of suggestions go to [www.marfam.org.za](http://www.marfam.org.za). **An Advent wreath** reminds us that love is eternal as we pray and light a candle and week by week add an extra candle.. **Shelter seeking** brings to mind travellers and the homeless. **Story telling, singing and baking and making** are done together at home.



This programme of THOUGHTS FOR THE DAY is designed as a **Jesse tree** and the small images with the reflections can be copied, enlarged, coloured in and used to build up Jesus' family tree. Jesse was the father of King David. The stories are read and shared from the Bible. Each story from this programme can teach some lessons, about God, the history, culture, family traditions and behaviour of the ancestors as well as life today. The symbols for these families can then be hung on a tree during the weeks of Advent. Later the tree can also be decorated more and become the family Christmas tree. Advent begins on 28th November in 2021 and is the start of a new liturgical cycle year C. These reflections include the readings of the time on Sundays, some feasts and commemorative days, and quotations from Pope Francis *LAUDATO SI* and *AMORIS LAETITIA*.

**November 28. First Sunday of Advent. Genealogy.** Light the 1<sup>st</sup> candle on the Advent wreath today and every day of the week. Read Genesis 4-5. It begins with the story of Cain's envy of his brother Abel, how he plans and murders him, how he is punished by God and driven out into the wilderness. Adam and Eve have other sons and daughters, of whom Seth is the first of a long line until the birth of Noah. In the list in Genesis 5 everyone lived to a very great age, the oldest being Methusaleh whose days numbered nine hundred and sixty-nine years. Scripture scholars interpret these figures as symbolic, a sign of honour; the greater the person, the greater his age. Noah was said to be 500 when he became the father of Shem, Ham and Japheth, his three sons mentioned in the story of the Flood. The genealogy continues after the Flood until many generations later Abram, a descendant from Shem, was born.



The genealogy of Jesus is found in the gospels of Matthew and Luke in the New Testament with some noticeable differences. Matthew begins with Abraham, the father of the Jewish people and Luke begins with Adam, the father of all humankind. Both include David as ancestor and both trace Jesus' ancestry through Joseph, his supposed father and husband of Mary. We now

understand genealogies as literary devices rather than strict historical facts and their aim is to confirm the identity and ancestry of a person in a particular way. It is most unlikely that Methusaleh lived over 900 years. Today too, ancestors and genealogies are important in many cultures and the list may be passed on by word of mouth over many generations.

*Jesus said to his disciples, "There will be signs in sun and moon and stars and upon the earth distress of nations, men fainting with fear and foreboding of what is coming on the world; for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with Power and great Glory. Your redemption is near at hand. Luke 21-25-28. Pope Francis: Even now we are journeying towards the sabbath of eternity, the new Jerusalem, towards our common home in heaven. Jesus says, "I make all things new." LS 243. Reflection and Sharing.* After such a long history do we accept that our final redemption is near? Do we maybe believe that, from noting all the signs of weather and natural disasters, that the end is nigh?

**November 29. Adam and Eve's family.** Read Genesis 1 - 4. The creation stories of humankind are well known. God created man and woman to be close and intimate, to be united in body, mind and heart, to be 'one flesh,' being fruitful and bearing children. This fruitfulness is one of the blessings of all of creation as reproduction through a father and mother was the approach God used to continue all the different families of creation. Adam and Eve's life together in close relationship with God was near-perfect. But was their family life an experience of total harmony, even in paradise where they were tempted to want more? They were punished because they disobeyed God. Was it pride, greed or not being able to forego instant gratification? This is seen most strongly in Cain killing his brother Abel out of jealousy.



**Pope Francis.** *Reading the scriptures makes it clear that the Gospel is not merely about our personal relationship with God. EG180 For Reflection and Sharing.* What could God be saying to your family about unity, harmony and right behaviour at this time, going into the holiday season? Disobedience within families and beyond in school and society has been a major problem for a long time. Each one wants to do their own thing. and we don't care about others. Remember God's words, "You are your brother's keeper."

**November 30. Noah and his Family.** Read Genesis 6-9. Another well-known and loved story is that of Noah and the Flood. Some time after creation God became so disappointed with the behaviour of his human creatures that he decided to destroy them all, except Noah who is described as the only righteous man of his day. We don't know what made Noah and his family stand out in this way. Was he a good father or husband or honest in his business dealings? Did they have a strong relationship with God to keep them on track? How were things with Mrs Noah and their children? After describing the events, building the ark, stocking it with 2 of each type of animal, the rain and finally the water draining away, the story tells us that after the Flood, when God was starting over, he made a covenant agreement that he would be with them and never again destroy all humankind by means of water. The rainbow was a sign of this covenant, a sign of hope, a reminder to us, each time a rainbow appears. Ham, one of the sons rebelled and broke away from his family and Shem is listed as the father of the future generations. The rainbow remains a sign of hope but the extreme weather of recent times has brought hurricanes, typhoons and floods again in many places. What is that telling us?

**Pope Francis.** *Access to safe drinking water is a basic and universal human right, since it is essential to human survival. LS30. For reflection and sharing.* How would we rate our family as a righteous one? Would God choose and use us as he used Noah? How strong is our faith, hope and our own covenant with God? Water has become a major concern at this time. How well do we care for God's creation and save water?

**December 1. World AIDS DAY.** Johnson sat thinking back over the last 25 years. "When AIDS was first diagnosed there was so much fear, shame and stigma attached to it. People would talk but few would say, 'My son is infected,'" or 'My daughter died of AIDS.' Families would close ranks. Even now it remains unsaid, although we see the signs. We know that AIDS was the reason we ended up looking after 6 grandchildren at one time and our daughter and son came home very sick. She died in those early days but he is well taking his ARVs regularly." Johnson turned to Josephine and said, "We say it is a disease and not a sin, but so often there was a sinful act committed somewhere that caused the infection. It is also not right that the infection rate is still too high. In our day the disease that has affected so many is COVID-19. While the stigma of being positive is not the same as for HIV, there is nevertheless fear of becoming infected, and fear of death and all that surrounds it.



**Pope Francis:** *To want to form a family is to resolve to be a part of God's dream, to choose to dream with him, to want to build with him, to join him in this saga of building a world where no one will feel alone. AL321 For reflection and sharing.* How committed are we to share in God's dream as individuals and members of our family?

**December 2. A braham and Sarah.** Read from Genesis 12 -25. Abraham is a giant figure in Biblical history, our father in faith and the first of the patriarchs. This might evoke negative feelings in those who reject patriarchy as oppressive of women. In the context of the society of the time women had their place; Sarah as wife and Hagar as slave woman had a different status. Abraham loved Sarah and her childlessness was a cross to them both, especially after God promised Abraham that his offspring would be as many as the stars. So Abraham had a son with Hagar his slave woman. However, God intervened, Sarah became pregnant and Isaac was accepted as the true son and heir. Hagar and her son Ishmael were rejected and sent into the wilderness where they were nevertheless provided for. Islam traces its history back to Ishmael. It is also accepted that Abraham's total and unquestioning obedience when God asked him to sacrifice his son Isaac marks him as the man of faith with whom God renewed his covenant. It is of historical interest that child and human sacrifice was an accepted practice in some cultures. It has been practised until fairly recently but it is shocking to us now.

**Pope Francis:** *By their witness as well as their words families speak to others of Jesus. AL 184. For reflection and sharing.* In today's society childlessness and infertility are problems too. How does the Church speak to such families now? What other faith moments in Abraham's family can we relate to, including understanding our Muslim brothers and sisters as descendants of Abraham?





**December 3. Isaac, Rebecca and their family.** Read from Genesis 25-27. Isaac chose Rebecca as his wife. Like her mother-in-law Sarah, Isaac's wife Rebecca, was childless until God answered their prayers and granted them twin boys. Even before their birth they seemed to be in conflict and their parents soon had favourites. Rebecca favoured Jacob and Isaac Esau. Rebecca influenced Jacob and they cleverly manipulated Esau into selling his birthright as the older twin. Later when Isaac, nearly blind in his old age, wanted to give his final blessing to his oldest son, Rebecca plotted with Jacob once again to cheat Esau and steal the blessing. This deceitful act is condemned by some later biblical writers. It is also said that God can work out his plan of salvation using sinful people to achieve his own ultimate purposes.

**Pope Francis:** *the family is the primary setting for socialisation since it is where we first learn to relate to others. AL 275.* **For reflection and sharing.** Is there division or favouritism in your family or do children see it as that? Is mother or father the controlling one? What can other family moments in this story teach about faith and life?

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**December 4. Jacob and sons.** Read from Genesis 28–35. Jacob, Isaac's son, is the last patriarch, those men of stature who, in spite of some events in their personal lives, followed the God who had made a covenant with them. His 12 sons became the heads of the 12 tribes of Israel down through the centuries, with Judah becoming the main figure in the family tree of Jesus. Jacob's own family story is an adventurous one with love as well as treachery and conflict. He wrestled with an angel in the name of God. He also eventually became reconciled with his brother Esau. He fell in love and wanted to marry his uncle's daughter Rachel. His uncle made him work for 7 years but then gave Jacob Rachel's sister Leah to be his wife. So Jacob worked for another 7 years for Rachel. Apart from 12 sons Jacob also had daughters by his various wives but Rachel was his favourite wife. The account of the rape of his daughter Dinah by foreigners and her being avenged by her brothers speaks not only of sexual immorality but of intercultural conflict. As in his earlier life there is favouritism with Joseph being his father's favourite. This caused great resentment in his brothers who plotted to get rid of him.

**Pope Francis;** *Every day the family has to come up with new ways of appreciating and acknowledging its members. AL 276.* **Points for reflection and discussion:** The family bonds in Jacob's family, in spite of conflict, remained strong. Certain practices like polygamy were common at the time but there were clearly sexual norms to be adhered to as well. How does your family deal with and resolve some of these issues?

**December 5. 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent C.** Two candles are lit on the Advent wreath. The people of Israel had become materialistic, greedy and selfish, had no longer obeyed God's commandments and were conquered by the Babylonians. Jerusalem was destroyed and the majority of the people were taken into exile. In due time they were allowed to return home. The prophets of the time had warned them constantly and had spoken about God's interventions, warning them and promising an eventual restoration.

*They go out, they go out full of tears, bearing seed for the sowing. they come back they come back with a song, bearing their sheaves. Psalm 126. God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low and the valleys filled up to make level ground so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God. The woods and every fragrant tree have shaded Israel at God's command." Baruch 5:1-9.* **Pope Francis:** *the experience of the Babylonian captivity provoked a spiritual crisis which led to deeper faith in God. His creative omnipotence was given pride of place in order to exhort the people to regain their hope in the midst of their wretched predicament. LS 74.* **For reflection and discussion:** How does this scenario relate to our time when again materialism, greed and selfishness has become a way of life and the environment is being destroyed all around us. Are we listening to the prophets of our day, including those at recent climate change conferences? Are we sufficiently aware of God's promises of restoration? Can we yet say the issues are being addressed and our world of creation and nature is being restored?

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**December 6. St Nicholas.** The true story of Santa Claus begins with Nicholas, who was born into a wealthy family in what is now Turkey. His parents died while he was young. Following Jesus' words to "sell what you own and give the money to the poor" Nicholas used his inheritance to assist the needy, the sick and the suffering. He dedicated his life to serving God, became Bishop of Myra while still young and helped to reorganise the Church after the time of persecution. He also became famous throughout the land for his generosity and love for children. In parts of Europe this saint is venerated as a giver of gifts.



*In the scroll of the book it stands written of me, "I delight to do your will, O my God, your instruction lies deep within me." Ps 40. Led by the Spirit, the family circle is not only open to life by generating it within itself but also by going forth and spreading life by caring for others and seeking their happiness. AL 324. The gift of the earth with its fruits belongs to everyone. Those who tilled and kept the land were obliged to share its fruits, especially with the poor, with widows, orphans and foreigners in their midst. LS71.* **For reflection and discussion.** It is sad that today, instead of a giver of gifts to the poor, St Nicholas has been turned into Santa Claus and although people genuinely want to give gifts to their loved ones and also to others less fortunate, the true spirit of generosity in gift-giving has also changed to become the most consumer-driven time of the year. How will your family celebrate this feastday and this Christmas season?

**December 7. Joseph.** Read from Genesis 37-45. The story of Joseph tells how the Israelites came to be in Egypt. Being Jacob's favourite and spoiled son, having been given his famous coat of many colours, he also had a gift for interpreting dreams. His brothers were jealous and schemed to kill him, but eventually only threw him into a pit, from where he was rescued by passing travellers and taken to Egypt. He prospered there, although he did end up in jail for a time, falsely accused of rape. It was his gift for interpreting dreams that attracted Pharaoh's attention and his skills led him to becoming Pharaoh's right hand man. When there was a famine in Israel the brothers came to Egypt for help. Joseph recognised them but they did not recognise him. After testing them he expressed his forgiveness for how they had treated him.



**Pope Francis:** *Children need help in the process of inner healing and in this way grow in the ability to understand and*



live in peace with others. AL195. **Points for reflection and discussion.** From being a spoilt child Joseph's good qualities of leadership emerged. A central message is Joseph's willingness to forgive. Would one expect such things from spoilt children? Belief in and interpretation of dreams is still an area regarded in different ways today.

**December 8. Moses' family.** Read some stories from Exodus and Numbers about Moses, another one of the giant figures. The two important events are the escape from Egypt and the Commandments. After some time in Egypt the Israelites became so numerous that they were seen as a threat, so the Pharaohs enslaved and maltreated them. One approach was to kill all male babies. Baby Moses was saved by his sister who put him in a basket in the river where the Pharaoh's daughter was bathing. She



found him and brought him up. After killing a guard who was mistreating one of the Israelites he had to flee. He married a foreign woman but remained true to his own people. When God called him from the burning bush he agreed to lead his people out of their slavery. This was no easy task and demanded patience from God and all the people. On their journey through the desert God gave Moses his law, the Ten Commandments. We know little about his family life. He was from the priestly tribe of Levi. In his mission Moses' brother Aaron, a priest, and sister Miriam were constantly at his side. Aaron and Miriam became jealous of Moses's close relationship with God. God called the three of them to account and Miriam was punished with leprosy. When Moses interceded with God she was cured.

*The Lord is not being slow to carry out his promises, as anybody else might be called slow but he is being patient with you all, not wanting anybody to be lost and everybody to be brought to change his ways. 2 Peter 3:8-14. Philp ,,,,,, Pope Francis: doing what is right means more than "judging what seems best" AL 265.* **For reflection and discussion.** Consider Moses' openness to his own people and his patience with them. He could have lived comfortably in Pharaoh's house all his life. What can we learn from Moses family? Each of the three had a role to play but clearly the sister had the minor role.

**December 9. The girls who stood up for their rights.** In the book of Numbers 27 and 36 we read of a group of girls or young women protesting, because they were concerned that after their father's death only brothers could inherit the father's property. They put their case to Moses, who put it to God. God agreed that this was not right and that if a man had no son his property should go to his daughters. Later this was changed and daughters were told this could only happen if they married someone from their own tribe. This was to protect the tribe and not lose to a foreigner.

*Why should the name of our father be taken away from his family, because he had no son? Give to us a possession among our father's brethren. Numbers 27: 4. Pope Francis: Education includes encouraging the responsible use of freedom to face issues with good sense and intelligence. AL 262. Reflect and share:* At the time there was injustice with regard to female rights in the family. How does your family and culture feel about inheritance? Is it a question of fairness or tradition?



**December 10. Judges and Jephthah.** Judges 11:29-40. The books of Joshua and Judges continue the story of the Israelites. After the death of Moses and of Joshua, his successor, there was a time of wars and conflicts when the people of Israel did not have appointed leaders. Judges was the title given to men and women from the community. At particular times when they had turned away from God, were being attacked and were calling on God once again for help, God raised up these judges from amongst them. Although they rejected God at times the Israelites were strict about purity of line. Marrying or having children by foreign women was greatly frowned upon. Jephthah was the son of a harlot and driven out of the family by his brothers. However he became a good soldier and when the Israelites saw themselves in danger they called him back to be a judge. An unfortunate situation arose.

*He made a vow to the Lord 'if you deliver the Ammonites into my power, whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites shall belong to the Lord. I shall offer him up as a holocaust.'* It happened that it was his daughter, his only child, a virgin who came to meet him. Jephthah was distraught but kept his promise. He explained to the girl, who asked for some time to prepare and "mourn her virginity." **Pope Francis: Human dignity demands that each of us act out of conscious and free choice as moved and drawn in a personal way from within. Points for reflection and discussion.** This situation of Jephthah is seen today as controversial. How far does one keep a promise or a vow? Some writers say the vow was "imprudent" in any case, as Mosaic law at this time forbade human sacrifice. From a family point of view, discuss the whole aspect of making and keeping a promise? What about marriage vows that are so regularly broken?

**December 11. Deborah and Samson.** At the time of the Judges Hebrew society was patriarchal and most judges were men. Deborah was a married woman and a prophetess who counselled people but also dealt with military matters. Read Judges 5.



Samson was another one of the Judges. He was also one of the children born to childless women who played a special role in the history. An angel visited his mother and told her the boy's hair must never be cut and he would be the strongest man alive. There are many stories about his strength as he led the people against the Philistines. However he gave into temptation and began a relationship with a spy, Delilah, who cut his hair while he was asleep. This made him lose his strength and he was taken prisoner. God allowed him a final moment of strength when he was able to pull down the pillars holding up the Philistine temple and so kill many enemies, as well as himself.

**Pope Francis: Spiritual worldliness leads some Christians to war with other Christians who stand in the way of their quest for power, prestige, pleasure and economic security. EG 98** **For reflection and discussion.** What do we understand by a good judge in our day? Today they are concerned with interpreting and upholding the law. Would they be peace-loving or ready to fight against injustice? Would political leaders be good judges? How difficult is it to take the context of the time into consideration in reading such stories about wars and God's role in victory and defeat? Also reflect on Samson's immorality as the cause of his downfall and was his death a suicide as we see in our day too?

**December 12. 3rd Sunday of Advent C. joy.** This Sunday has always been known as Gaudete Sunday, which means joy. during this penitential time the priest wears pink instead of purple. But what is true joy? The readings of the day give a long list of experiences and actions.

*"Sing aloud, o daughter of Zion, the Lord has taken away the judgements against you, he has cast our your enemies. Zephaniah 3. Rejoice in the Lord always, have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. Phil 4:4-7. John the baptist preached the Good News, "he who has two coats, let him share with him who has none. Collect no more taxes than is appointed to you. "Soldiers, rob no one by violence or by false accusation and be content with your wages." Luke 3:10-18. Pope Francis: If the world has a beginning and if it has been created, we must enquire who gave it this beginning and who was its creation. Let us sing as we go. May our struggles and our concern for this planet never take away the joy of our hope. LS 244 .* **For reflection and discussion.** What is true joy? Is it having everything we want or being able to do everything we want, or the freedom to be able to share with others? It has also been said that "true joy is the result of making a decision to love," in a marriage, in family, in all our actions towards others and the world of creation. All the suggestions above involve a decision, something that can be made daily.



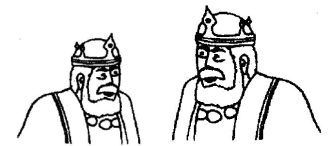
**December 13<sup>th</sup> . SAMUEL.** Read 1 Samuel 1-3 and later parts of the book. Samuel's mother, Hannah was childless and mocked by her husband's other wife. Once in the temple Hannah was praying in her distress and the prophet Eli saw her and thought she was drunk. After she explained he gave her God's blessing and promised her a son. After the boy Samuel's early years she offered him to the Lord and he went to live in the temple with the prophet Eli. One night when he was sleeping he heard a voice calling him. He thought it was Eli but discovered it was God and replied, "*Here I am Lord, your servant is listening.*" 1 Samuel 3. Samuel remained in the temple and grew up to be a good and wise prophet, guiding the political leaders of the time. The people had begun to demand a king like other local tribes but Samuel worried that a king would become power-hungry. Eventually with God's guidance he helped to establish the kingdom and anointed Saul as God's first choice for king and later after Saul was rejected he was led to seek out and anoint David.



**Pope Francis:** *If every action has its consequences an evil embedded in the structures of a society has a constant potential for disintegration and death. EG 59.* **For Reflection and Discussion.** There were two schools of thought about establishing Israel as a kingdom. Up to that time God had been their king. How is a monarchy regarded today? How important is it for political leaders to have wise counsellors?

**December 14<sup>th</sup> Saul and David.** The book 1 Samuel has a long historical account of the first years of the Israel as a kingdom. God revealed Saul to Samuel to be anointed as the first king. He was popular and a great commander but at times an evil spirit possessed him. David a young man in Saul's service could calm Saul by playing his harp. David became great friends with Saul's son Jonathan, and remained so even later when Saul and David became bitter enemies because Saul was jealous of David's growing power. Saul fell out of favour after he disobeyed God and was finally rejected by God as king.

*Samuel said to Saul, you have rejected the word of the Lord and the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel. 1 Sam 15:26.* **For reflection and discussion.** We know the saying, "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." How often does political power, at any level, even in parishes, school committees etc lead to conflict and disaster?



**December 15<sup>th</sup> . Ruth.** Ruth is one of the truly good Biblical characters, a faithful yet vulnerable woman. There is cultural aspect to the story, as she was a foreigner. On being widowed she decided to stay with and care for her mother-in-law Naomi rather than go back to her own people. She accompanied Naomi back to Judah. At first they were very poor and she worked at gathering up wheat remains in the fields after harvesting. Naomi planned to introduce her to Boaz, the owner of the fields, a distant relative and an honourable man. As the story unfolds, Boaz claimed Ruth's late husband's holdings and claims Ruth herself and marries her. Ruth's son Obed was the father of Jesse and grandfather of David.



**Pope Francis:** *the larger family includes fathers-in-law, mothers-in-law and all the relatives of the couple. These should not be viewed as competitors, threats or intruders. AL 198.* **For reflection and discussion.** Ruth's words, "Wherever you go I shall go, your people will be my people and your God will be my God," have become famous and are also used in speaking about marriage. In this story the beautiful relationship between mother and daughter-in-law, and God's use of foreigners for his plan, are important topics in this story. Discuss.

**December 16<sup>th</sup> . Day of Reconciliation. David's family.** The story of David's family is spread through the books of Samuel and Kings. David was recognised as the greatest of Israel's kings. He was highly successful as a warrior and overall as a ruler, but his own family life was problematical. As a father he did not control or discipline his sons well. His favourite son, Absalom, even organised a coup against him and yet David was heartbroken at his death. Another son Ammon raped his half-sister Tamar. David's own adultery with Bathsheba resulted in the death of their child. Solomon, the future king was born to Bathsheba after David married her. As David was dying his sons were squabbling over his inheritance. In the Biblical accounts and especially in the psalms David confessed his sinfulness to God. He saw the death of his infant son as God's punishment and grieved bitterly. Having acknowledged his guilt he was forgiven and so restored his relationship with God. However the saga of their family disintegration continued into the next generations.

In South Africa this is the **DAY OF RECONCILIATION** commemorating the wars and battles fought by our people over land and

power. Formerly known as the Day of the Covenant or the Day of the Vow it is particularly significant to the Afrikaner people and their relationships with God who they believed to be their protector, much as the Israelites had believed in Old Testament times.



*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other just as Christ forgave you. Eph 4: Pope Francis: Jesus reveals the nature of God as that of a Father who never gives up until he has forgiven the wrong and overcome rejection with compassion and mercy. Mv5* **For reflection and discussion.** While forgiveness is a powerful focus in David's story and relationship with God one could ask if forgiveness in broken relationships does away with the consequences? Many lessons could also be learned about personal ambition over family care and childhood discipline, about faithfulness and sexual morality. How helpful is it in a family to take time for reconciliation occasionally in order to share, listen and forgive one another for small and larger hurts? For Catholics this could be done before going to Confession around Christmastime.

**December 17<sup>th</sup>. Solomon.** Read in 1 Kings. This son of David is revered in part because in his youth when God asked him what he desired most he chose wisdom. An example of this was his judgement in the case of two mothers and two babies. The babies had become mixed up and one had died. The women were arguing over whose baby was alive. To test them Solomon said, "cut the baby in half." Then they could see the true mother who loved the baby and didn't want it harmed because she said, "no, rather let the other woman have the baby." Solomon was a good king at first, built the temple for God and also a palace for the king. He gradually became obsessed with power and wealth and had many wives and hundreds of concubines as was common practice in those days among other nations. Because eventually he valued his earthly possessions over his relationship with God he was told by God that his line of descendants would gradually be destroyed over the next generations.



*The Lord said, 'if you walk before me, as David your father walked, with integrity of heart and uprightness doing all that I have commanded you, then I will establish your royal throne over Israel for ever.' 1 Kings 10: 4* "The Lord was angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the Lord. 1 Kings 11:9. **For reflection and discussion.** Solomon began as a wise and righteous man. Why does wealth and power go to people's heads? How is it possible to remain a person of integrity? Power corrupts, absolute power

corrupts absolutely.

**December 18. Daniel.** Read the book as a story of encouragement and hope. Chapter 3 has a beautiful long Cantic of Praise of Creation. The episode of **Daniel and three teenage youths** is set at the time when the Jewish community had been taken into exile when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem. King Nebuchadnezzar chose the youths to be trained for his royal household. He insisted that they should go against their beliefs, eat the food he chose for them but which they considered forbidden, and stop praying to God. The youths continued to refuse and were punished by being thrown into a blazing furnace. They were not harmed as God saved them from the fire. A new king Darius was fond of Daniel who had interpreted his dreams and visions but when he heard that Daniel had broken the laws about praying he was also obliged to punish him. Daniel was thrown into a den of lions and again God protected him from harm. King Darius then acknowledged Daniel's God as the greatest. The Jews were eventually allowed to return to their country when Babylon was overrun by Persia.

**Pope Francis:** *Prudence, good judgment and common sense are dependent on a whole series of things that come together deep within each person at the very core of our freedom. AL262.* **Points for reflection and sharing.** Much of this book contains strange writing about visions in a particular apocalyptic style, but the stories of the commitment of the young men to their beliefs are to be admired. There are youth climate activists today who are committed to their beliefs and to their vision. Other young people do not have such commitment to a cause or what is best for themselves. Discuss the issue of commitment at a wider level.



**December 19. 4th Sunday of Advent C. Isaiah, Hosea, Micah, and the prophets.** After the judges during the time of the kings the Lord raised up prophets as counsellors to the kings and to read the signs of the time. In his prophecy Hosea uses the example of his own marriage and his unfaithful wife to explain God's undying love. He could not bring himself to give up his wife even when she continued in her unfaithfulness. This illustrates how the people turned away from God to worship idols i.e false gods and money. God punished them but continued to love them. This story also gives a unique insight into marriage and reconciliation. Where love remains, reconciliation is possible. This is the way of mercy and tenderness.

The prophet Micah is best known for the famous passage, "Act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with your God." In today's reading Micah prophesies that the Messiah will come from Bethlehem, a small, insignificant town. And Elizabeth welcomes Mary, a simple young woman, "The child leaped in her womb and Elizabeth filled with the Spirit exclaimed with a loud cry." *Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." Luke 1:39-45,*

The book of **ISAIAH** contains some of the most powerful family imagery. We also find the first messianic announcement that "a virgin will conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel, meaning God with us." Associated with Isaiah is the passage, "I will never forget you my people. Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See upon the palms of my hands I have written your name. Is 49: 15 **Pope Francis:** Christ proposed as the distinctive sign of his disciples the law of love and the gift of self for others, as a principle that fathers and mothers embody in their own lives. Another virtue stands out, one often overlooked in





our world of frenetic and superficial relationships. It is tenderness. AL27-28 **for reflection and discussion.** The tenderness which Pope Francis often speaks of and is expressed by Hosea and Isaiah is a model for an ideal family life. Can we give one another this gift for Christmas? Despite division and conflicts where love remains reconciliation and peace are possible.

**December 20. Job.** This book is a reflection on innocent suffering. In dialogue with Satan God allows "Satan" to tempt Job, an upright and wealthy family man, in order to see if he will curse God if his good fortune is reversed. He loses his land, animals, children and a disease attacks his body. His friends come to commiserate with him, ask him to acknowledge his sinfulness as the cause of his losses and challenge him to blame God. Job does eventually ask God that he should explain the cause of his suffering. In reply God does not justify this action but speaks of his own power and the greatness of creation. Job accepts this in humility and trust and God restores his fortune.

*"Job answered the Lord, 'I know that you can do all things and no purpose of yours can be thwarted. I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me which I did not know.'" Job 42. **Pope Francis:** the life of every family is marked by all kinds of crises, yet these are also part of its dramatic beauty. Surmounting a crisis need not weaken their relationship. AL232.*



**For reflection and discussion.** The last two years of dealing with the Covid pandemic have brought much suffering to all, although more to some than others. Suffering does happen to everyone, whatever their life situation. Sometimes we do bring it on ourselves but we can learn from Job of innocent suffering, as a test of fidelity. Reading how God speaks of his own creation can help us to appreciate its wonders and grow in trust and acceptance of God's ongoing care and presence.

**December 21<sup>st</sup>. Tobit.** This book includes interesting aspects around marriage and parent-child relationships. Tobit, who has become old and blind, has a serious argument with his wife over a goat given to him and he wishes to die. Sarah, a young woman who has been married 7 times and each time her new husband was killed by a demon, also prays for death. Tobiah, son of Tobit sent on a journey to bring back family money meets and falls in love with Sarah. Through the help of the angel Raphael, who appears in disguise and accompanies Tobiah, the demon is killed. Tobiah marries Sarah, the father's blindness is healed and the family is reunited in harmony. The blessing prayer of Tobiah and Sarah is often used for weddings.



*"Blessed are you, O God of our fathers. You made Adam and gave him his wife Eve to be his help and support. You said, it is not good for man to be alone, let him take a partner like himself. Now Lord, you know that I take this wife of mine not because of lust, but for a noble purpose. Call down your mercy on me and on her and allow us to live together to a happy old age. Amen." Tobit 8:1-8. **Pope Francis:** The Lord's presence dwells in real and concrete families with all their daily troubles and struggles, joys and hopes. AL314. **Points for reflection and sharing.** The story includes the role of the archangel Raphael as a messenger from God and one who brings God's healing power. Are there some family relationship issues that can be healed with God's help?*

**December 22<sup>nd</sup>. The Maccabees.** The two books of the Maccabees recount historical events around 180 BC at the time of the desecration of the temple in Jerusalem by Greek rulers of Israel at that time. The story of the martyrdom of a mother and her 7 sons describes in horrific detail how each of the sons was tortured and killed for refusing to eat pork which for them would violate God's laws. The last to die was the mother who watched her sons and all the time encouraged them to be faithful to their tradition and their belief in life after death.

*"Since it is the Creator of the universe who shapes each man's beginning as he brings about the origin of everything, he, in his mercy, will give you back both breath and life, because you now disregard yourselves for the sake of his law. 2 Mac 23.*

**Pope Francis:** We direct our gaze to the end of time when the Son will deliver all things to the Father, so that 'God may be everything to every one. (1 Cor 15:28) The creatures of this world no longer appear to us under merely natural guise because the risen One is mysteriously holding them to himself and directing them towards fullness as their end. LS 100.

**Points for reflection and discussion.** It is recognised that in the present era more Christians and other believers have been killed for their beliefs than ever before. Children can learn from hearing stories of the martyrs rather than only modern day secular heroes. How strong is our faith in the face of opposition and what sacrifices are we prepared to make for our beliefs?



**December 23. John the Baptist's family.** Luke 1 Matt 14. John was another miracle child born to a mother in her old age, Elizabeth, Mary's cousin. His special role was forerunner of the Messiah. When his father Zechariah heard that his wife Elizabeth was pregnant he doubted God at first and was struck dumb. Elizabeth was blessed with the first knowledge of Mary's pregnancy. Her greeting to Mary was, "Hail Mary full of grace," and Mary's response was the Magnificat, the prayer of praise and righteousness, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour." In adulthood John lived as a prophet in the desert, a wild, enigmatic figure, preaching repentance and baptising people, totally committed to his mission of justice and integrity. He was imprisoned by king Herod because of his criticism of Herod's unlawful marriage. Herod's wife and stepdaughter then manipulated the king into ordering that John should be beheaded.

**Pope Francis:** Friends and other families are part of the larger family who support one another in their difficulties, social commitments and faith. AL 196. Seeking and pursuing the good of others and of the entire human family also implies helping individuals and societies to mature in the moral values that foster integral human development, a striving for excellence and what is best for others' growth in maturity and health, the cultivation of values and not simply material wellbeing. FT 112. **Reflect and share.** The families of John the Baptist and Jesus shared in the joy, the mission and the pain. Do we value our wider family relationships? Think of them and share some memories across the generations too. May we show our love and support and may they not just be people we meet at funerals or in times of difficulty.



**December 24. Mary and Joseph.** Little is known about their early history or their family backgrounds apart from the early chapters in Luke and Matthew. These two different accounts are usually interwoven into one into one tradition with the essential message being God's continued love and plan for the wellbeing of all his people. The angel Gabriel appeared to Mary to ask if she would be the mother of God's Son through the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph was warned in a dream to accept Mary and care for her and her Son. Mary and Joseph each responded to their call with love and commitment. They were simple but upright and faithful people, descendants of the house of David from whose family the Messiah was expected. In response to a call from the Roman emperor they travelled to Bethlehem, David's city where Jesus was to be born. From the beginning Jesus' life was threatened and Joseph became his protector. Mary has continued to play a very important role in the Church and there are many devotions to her in families. Joseph's role has been recognised recently, especially by Pope Francis in establishing a special year of devotion to him. (2020-1)

**Pope Francis** describes Saint Joseph as a beloved father, a tender and loving father, an obedient father, an accepting father; a father who is creatively courageous, a working father, a father in the shadows. Against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic he is honoured as one of the "ordinary people who far from the limelight, exercise patience and offer hope every day." *Patris Corde.*

**Pope Francis:** Families need constantly to grow and mature in the ability to love. This vocation is born of the Trinity, the first community of love, the unity between Christ and his Church and the loving community of the Holy Family of Nazareth. AL 325. **Reflect and share.** This time is traditionally an invitation for all Christians for commitment and working towards peace on earth and to all people of good will. Today our invitation is expanded to include ecological awareness of all of creation. Our conversion is to hear "the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor and to live a simpler more sustainable lifestyle. Is this possible in our world of families today?"



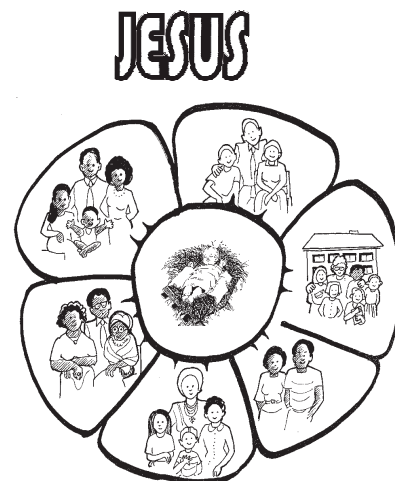
**25<sup>th</sup> December. CHRISTMAS DAY, the birthday of Jesus.** Praising God and singing for joy with the angels is what we can and should do on this day in a special way if we have done our best to prepare during these weeks. "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to people of goodwill because today a Saviour has been born to us; he is Christ the Lord." Luke 1:14. The name Jesus means Saviour, i.e. something active, but should also

maybe be understood as gift. God's merciful gift of love that he gave to us at Christmas in the Incarnation is not only an abstract something but a person, God's Son who is also our brother and friend. He came as a humble helpless baby. He lived a simple life in a small country mixing with ordinary people but showed us the way of unconditional love and complete self-giving by his life and finally his death. His Resurrection completed God's plan of salvation and paved the way for us for eternal life and happiness. How can we show our love and thank him for this amazing gift?

*The greatest gift a person can give is to give his life for his friends. John 15:13.* **Pope Francis.** The mission of Jesus received from the Father was that of revealing the mystery of divine love in its fullness. Everything in him speaks of mercy. Nothing in him is devoid of compassion. From MV8. **Reflect and Share.** LOVE CAME DOWN AT CHRISTMASTIME is MARFAM's other publication for this time built around the life and experience of St Francis and how he built a Christmas crib for the poor people in the village. As they celebrated Midnight Mass there, they had a real experience of the presence of baby Jesus.

#### **A CHRISTMAS PRAYER FOR ALL PEOPLE.**

Dear Loving God,  
 Christmas is a time for giving, loving and caring.  
 At time for being with others, having fun and sharing.  
 You gave Your Son, Lord Jesus, to save us from our sins  
 And to learn to live in such a way that everybody wins.  
 We thank you for your kindness and showing us the way  
 Help all the people in the world to follow you each day.  
 May every man and woman and every girl and boy  
 Be honest, generous and fair to bring each other joy.  
 Bless all the lonely people, and bless those who are ill.  
 Bless everyone who care for them, and those who pay the bill.  
 Bless those who have no homes, or have no food to eat  
 And as we serve each other so in heaven may we meet. Amen.



**December 26<sup>th</sup> Holy Family Sunday .** The 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Christmas, commemorates the Holy Family of Joseph, Mary and Jesus and calls every human family to be a holy family. What does that mean? Holy means being whole, complete, as good as can be, living with awareness of God and God's love and mercy. It means, like the Holy Family, living in God's presence in our family and home, sharing that with our immediate and extended family too and showing care for all of God's creation, the plants and animals and the whole environment. Find a way to connect with family especially those you did not see on Christmas Day. A special blessing can be given to families on this day, in churches or through our other means of communication that we have developed during the last years of lock-down and when being away from our church communities. *Hear my son your father's instruction and reject not your mother's teaching. Proverbs 1:8*

**BLESSING:** May the Lord bless your home and all who live there. May your home be always filled with the presence of God, in the care, love, peace and joy shared amongst you. When there is conflict made you be open to reconciliation. And may almighty God



bles you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**We pray with Pope Francis**, "Holy Family of Nazareth, may families never again experience violence, rejection and division; may all who have been hurt or scandalised find ready comfort and healing. Make us once more mindful of the sacredness of the family and its beauty in God's plan. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, graciously hear our prayer. Amen. AL 325.

**December 27. John and the evangelists.** The Word of God has been transmitted orally and written and recorded in any number of forms since the first discovery of writing on scrolls, papyrus, handwritten paper and printed books and today digitally in many different formats. The Old Testament recounts the story before the birth of Jesus while the New Testament contains the gospels as accounts and reflections on the life and words of Jesus according to the traditions of the 4 evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The New Testament also contains letters from others such as Paul, Peter, and John. John is described as the disciple whom Jesus loved, who stood by the cross with Mary and to whom Jesus entrusted his mother. The final book, Revelation presents John's reflections on the end times and eternity, the New Jerusalem. This whole library of books presents the Good News of God's love. Evangelisation is the sharing of this Good news. The New Evangelisation today is the task of all believers, each in their own way and life situation. *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, and touched with our hands concerning the word of life, we proclaim also to you. 1 John 1:1-4* Today there is also an understanding that God speaks through all of creation. **Pope Francis:** *God has written a precious book, whose letters are the multitude of created things present in the universe. We can say that alongside revelation contained in Sacred Scripture there is a divine manifestation in the blaze of the sun and the fall of night. Paying attention to this manifestation we learn to see ourselves in relation to all other creatures. LS 85* **Reflect and share.** Do we sufficiently identify with the need to share in the work of evangelisation by our lives?



**December 28. Holy Innocents.** Matthew's gospel tells the story of the three foreign Wise Men bringing gifts. It also tells how King Herod out of jealousy and fear about a possible new king of the Jews ordered the murder of all baby boys in Bethlehem. Joseph was warned in a dream to take Mary and baby Jesus and escape into exile.



*Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the Wise Men, was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem who were two years old or under. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, a voice was heard in Ramah, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled because they were no more." Matt 2. The second task of the family as the domestic church is to serve life from conception until natural death."* **John Paul II, Familiaris Consortio. Reflect and Share.** There are many lessons here. We are outraged daily at news reports of the injustice of killing innocent children. However, should we not

feel greater outrage at the killing of so many unborn babies through abortion all over the world? And at the same time should we not also feel concern for the situations that lead to such a drastic choice? The task of families is to serve life in the widest sense. Would that not also include drinking and driving and destroying our health through substance abuse? How genuinely lifegiving are we being, starting at home?

**December. 29. KWANZAA** comes from a Swahili word meaning first fruits. It is a current African-American celebration aiming to link African tradition with western Christianity. It is a 7 day long celebration from December 27 to Jan 3. Seven candles for each of 7 principles of life are used. They include unity, self-determination, responsibility, cooperative economics (sharing), purpose, creativity and faith. These are helpful principles for anyone to share.

*Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise think about these things. Philippians 4:8. Pope Francis:* *The word culture has to do with desire, interests and ultimately the way a people live their lives. To speak of a culture encounter means that we, as a people, should be passionate meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone. FT216. Reflect and share.* How much can we learn from the traditions and religions in other parts of Africa? Share any experiences you have had.



**December 30. Disciples of today.** There are many millions of followers of Jesus Christ in the world today belonging to thousands of different churches with new churches starting almost every day. We can ask, "Why is there no unity amongst Christians? Is it right for so many break-away churches, all claiming to follow Jesus Christ?" Unity amongst the followers of Jesus is a dream to work for. Unity within a church, within a parish, within groups in a parish and in our own families is a dream too. The words of a popular hymn are a call to us all. "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me."



*"I am writing to you little children, because your sins are forgiven for his sake. I am writing to you, fathers because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you young people because you are strong and the world of God abides in you and you have overcome the Evil one. Do not love the world or the things in the world. The world passes away and the lust of it, but he who does the will of God abides forever. 1 John 2:12-17 Pope Francis:* *Society benefits when each person and social group feels truly at home. In a family, parents, grandparents and children all feel at home. If someone has a problem even if he brought it upon himself, the rest of the family comes to his assistance. His problems are theirs. In a family everyone contributes to the common purpose and works for the common good, not denying each person's individuality, but encouraging and supporting it. If only we could view our political opponents or neighbours in the same way that we view our children or our spouse, mother or father. How good this would be! FT230. Reflect and Discuss.*

**December 31<sup>st</sup> New Years Eve. Ancestors for today.** A beautiful image we have been given for the Church in Africa is the Church as God's Family. We are also taught that a family is a little church of the home where God is present in the family's history, our traditions and the events of our daily lives. African tradition has a greater openness to this focus than western Christianity and ancestors play an important role in African families. We can all consider who our role models are that can continue to inspire us to love as God loves all of creation. They may be from our own family in the past or even the present. They may be other families or recognised saints and martyrs even of today.

*"May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life! May you see your children's children!" Ps 128:5-6. **Pope Francis.** The spirituality of family love is made up of 1000s of small but real gestures. In that variety of gifts and encounters which deepen communion, God has his dwelling place. AL 315 . Society benefits when each person and social group feels truly at home. In a family, parents, grandparents and children all feel at home. If someone has a problem even if he brought it upon himself, the rest of the family comes to his assistance. His problems are theirs. In a family everyone contributes to the common purpose and works for the common good, not denying each person's individuality, but encouraging and supporting it. If only we could view our political opponents or neighbours in the same way that we view our children or our spouse, mother or father. How good this would be! FT230.*



**Reflect and Share.** We have reflected in 2020 and 2021 on the theme OUR WORLD AS A FAMILY OF FAMILIES, that includes our human, animal and plant families and ecosystems. During this time the Church has adopted other themes too. The AMORIS LAETITIA YEAR with its focus on families will end in June 2022 with the World Meeting of Families. The 5th anniversary of LAUDATO SI which now continues with a 7 year programme LAUDATO SI ACTION PLATFORM developing the environmental focus. Its 7 goals are to be implemented in different sectors, the first being Families. A number of related initiatives focused on Care of Creation; The Season of Creation, the COP15 and COP26 conferences and a petition towards "HEALTHY PLANET, HEALTHY PEOPLE." The Year of St Joseph is ending in December, but St Joseph has gained prominence in the Church and hopefully in families too. A focus on Grandparents and the Elderly, the Poor and Migrants and Refugees were commemorated during the year and are ongoing.

Locally there were commemorations of Grandparents and Marriage and widowhood too.

All these as well as a number of feastdays of Our Lady, St Francis and other popular and relevant saints were remembered.

As we come to the end of this year how have these commemorations contributed to our faith experience in families? Have we become more aware of the vision MARFAM is promoting of OUR WORLD AS A FAMILY OF FAMILIES, created and loved by God who invites us to love him, love one another and all the elements of creation? As we look forward to the New Year and once again reflect on OUR WORLD and its families, let us thank God for his many blessings, and especially for teaching us the way of love.

Toni Rowland

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**Also see:**

Advent and Lenten reflections , booklets on Marriage, Widowhood and Prayer.

FAMILY MATTERS, a weekly e-newsletter is published.

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