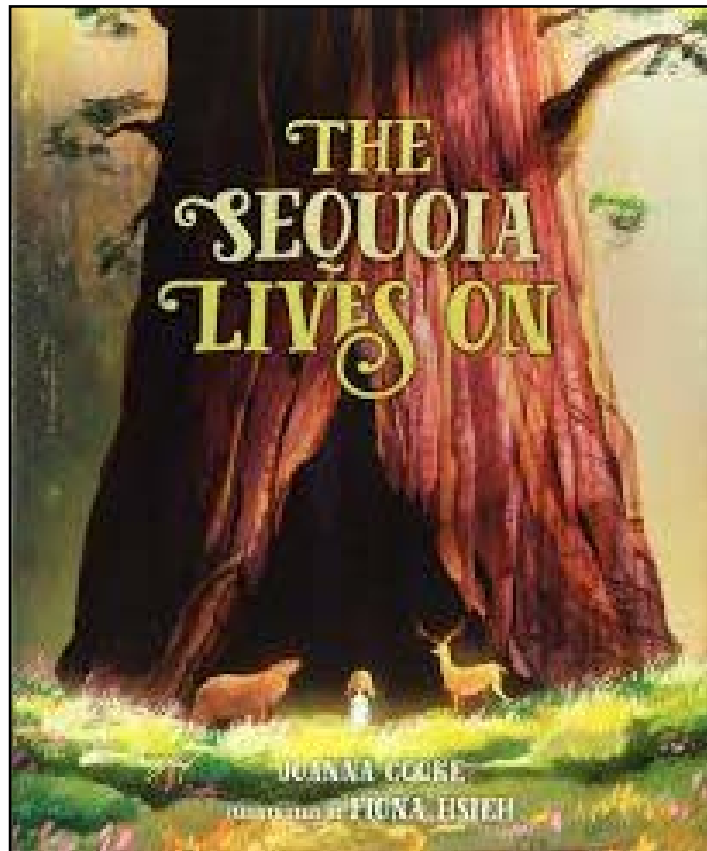


Living Grace

Cycle A 2nd Sunday
of Advent

"RELEASED BY FIRE, IGNITED BY GRACE"



The Sequoia Lives On shares the life story of the giant sequoia. From tiny seed to largest tree, this tree is a living wonder of nature. It begins life as a seed no larger than an oatmeal flake, but can grow as tall as three blue whales stacked chin to tale. The oldest sequoias have lived as long as forty human lifetimes. The largest are so enormous, twenty children holding hands can't wrap their arms around the trunks! The author explores the sequoia's life cycle from a tiny seed through its amazing growth and longevity to its eventual collapse, when it releases seeds for a new beginning. Fires clear undergrowth and allow the seeds to scatter. Wildlife has its place in the forest habitat, with deer, birds, squirrels, and more appearing in their natural activities. Several humans also appear - a diverse group of children, including one who uses a wheelchair, along with an older woman figure - all tiny at the base of the tree as they admire it in wonder.



WISDOM OF THE UNIVERSE

*Acrylic on canvas painting by Christi Belcourt
Ontario, Canada ~ 2014*

EXPLORING THE ART:

Christi Marlene Belcourt is a Métis visual artist and activist living and working in Canada. (Métis are people of mixed European and Indigenous ancestry, and one of the three recognized Aboriginal peoples in Canada.) Belcourt is best known for her acrylic paintings which depict floral patterns inspired by Métis and First Nations historical beadwork art. As a Métis visual artist with a deep respect for the traditions and knowledge of her people, the majority of her work explores and celebrates the beauty of the natural world. Much of her recent work draws attention to the urgent situation facing the planet as a result of resource extraction and climate change. "In Indigenous ways of thinking and knowing and being, the concept of walking softly on the earth is not a quaint thought," says Belcourt. "It's a practical thought about preserving life on the earth. In Ontario, over 200 species of plants and animals are listed as threatened, endangered or extinct. Of those, included in this painting (above) are the Dwarf Lake Iris, the Eastern Prairie Fringed Orchid, the Karner Blue butterfly, the West Virginia White butterfly, the Spring Blue-eyed Mary, the Cerulean Warbler and Acadian Flycatcher. All species, the lands, the waters are one beating organism that pulses like a heart. We are all a part of a whole...when we see ourselves as separate from each other and think of other species, the waters and the planet itself as objects that can be owned, dominated or subjugated, we lose connection with our humanity, and we create imbalance on the earth. This is what we are witnessing around us." Belcourt challenges us to think of art as interwoven with the variegated fabric of life, and she challenges us to walk softly in careful consideration of where and how we step. The beauty of her art is not meant to elevate the natural world to the status of art, but rather to signal the connection to the natural world as itself transformative.

TRANSFORMATION IN ART & NATURE

Living Grace

READ-ALoud STORY



ABIDE IN ME

Vicki Shuck, Esperanza Arts

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love.

~ John 7:7-9

Read-aloud video link:

THE SEQUOIA LIVES ON

Written by Joanna Cooke & Illustrated by Fiona Hsieh

Sunday Gospel

MATTHEW 3:1-12

John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" It was of him that the prophet Isaiah had spoken when he said:
A voice of one crying out in the desert,
Prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight his paths.
John wore clothing made of camel's hair and had a leather belt around his waist.
His food was locusts and wild honey.
At that time Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins.

When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones. Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees. Therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. I am baptizing you with water, for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I. **I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.** His winnowing fan is in his hand. He will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Making the Connections

FOR ADULTS

IN THE BREAKING OF THE SHELL THE SEED IS RELEASED TO GRACE AND ABUNDANT GROWTH

John the Baptist appears on the scene first thing every Advent of the church year. In the time and culture of Jesus there was no electricity, telephone, television, or social media. In the first century, when an important person came to town, a "herald" would go ahead and call to the townspeople from the center of town. John the Baptist tells Pharisees and religious leaders, that they had a false front, that they were empty and hardened. He points out that thinking that they had to be perfect was a trap, and a trap that bears no good fruit. Perfection is false. Growth is real.

Our children's story helps us to understand this Gospel. We learn that the shell of the Sequoia tree is very hard and very strong. The only way the inner seed can break through the shell is through fire. The rising heat from a forest fire is what breaks the hardened shell to release the life bearing seed. Amazing!

For us, the two things that break through our hard shells of ego and the false fronts, are repentance and suffering. Repentance is when we choose to open our hardened hearts and to admit our reliance on God. Suffering (whether caused by natural disaster, sickness, other people, or our own mistakes) is inherent within our human condition. For us, suffering is like the fire for the Sequoia seeds - it is what breaks open the shell of our hardened hearts.

As John the Baptist explains, the people who have Abraham as their father, are baptized in the grace of God's spirit, but this baptism will come through fire/suffering. Jesus, through his life, shows us the way through suffering toward God's grace. John the Baptist comes to PREPARE us for receiving the Kingdom of God, and Jesus comes to bring the Kingdom of God. Suffering and repentance break open our hard shells so that we can be open to the dynamic of grace and transformational growth. We might not become as tall as 3 blue whales or as strong as 300 elephants, but we will become free of our shells to grow into the magnificent creation that God created us to be.

Our souls are meant grow into our fullest potential and bear good fruit that will last. Only then will our lives, fruits, works, and love - like the Sequoia - LIVE ON.

Making the Connections

FOR CHILDREN

YOUR STORY: Have you taken a hike into a deep pine forest? When you look up how tall do the trees seem compared to you? Can you imagine that all those huge trees in the forest grew from a tiny seed? Have you ever examined a seed to see the difference of the seed and the shell? Which one is empty? Which one is filled with the potential for life? The shell is there to protect the seed, but if it doesn't break open the seed cannot grow.

THE CHILDREN'S STORY: How is the Sequoia's seed become broken open? What do you think about the fact that something destructive can be the agent for breaking open new life?

THE GOSPEL STORY: How does the life of Jesus show us the same truth? Suffering is a terrible challenge to the human condition - it just is. Do you know anyone who is suffering? Do you see people you don't know who are suffering? Jesus comes to show us that suffering is not the end. Suffering can be used to open us up to the amazing fruitfulness our life in God. The very same fruitfulness and potential that lies within a tiny seed. Our Gospel reading reminds us that John the Baptist came to wake us up to repent, so that our hardened hearts can open up to choose the life and graces of God! Advent reminds us that we have a choice. What will you choose this Advent season? The way of the shell or the seed?

Look around for examples of people in your faith community who are seeds. Think about the ways their lives bear fruit. How you can share in the role of John the Baptist this Advent Season? Can you invite people to wake up, repent, and open their hearts to the love of God, and then step back and watch the magic of Christmas begin to take root? THIS is Christmas!

Biblical Background

MATTHEW 3:1-12

GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING: John appears on the eastern side of the Jordan River calling out to those who cross that they need to repent (literally: turn around and come back) so that they can be baptized (dipped) under the coursing waters of this river rich with Biblical memory and miracle. The baptism by John offered a way to demonstrate the desire to restore your relationship with God and others that might have been broken by sin.

TERMS: Prophet John is a critical historical character in the story of salvation. He knows that he is the one that the Prophet Isaiah had in mind when he spoke about a predecessor, a voice of a man crying out in the wilderness who would arrive in advance of the true Messiah in order to help others prepare the way for the Lord. As the Gospel moves forward Jesus will increase and John will not. Still, his call to turn around and prepare for the arrival of the Messiah paved the way for the appearance of Jesus and the beginning of his public ministry in Israel.

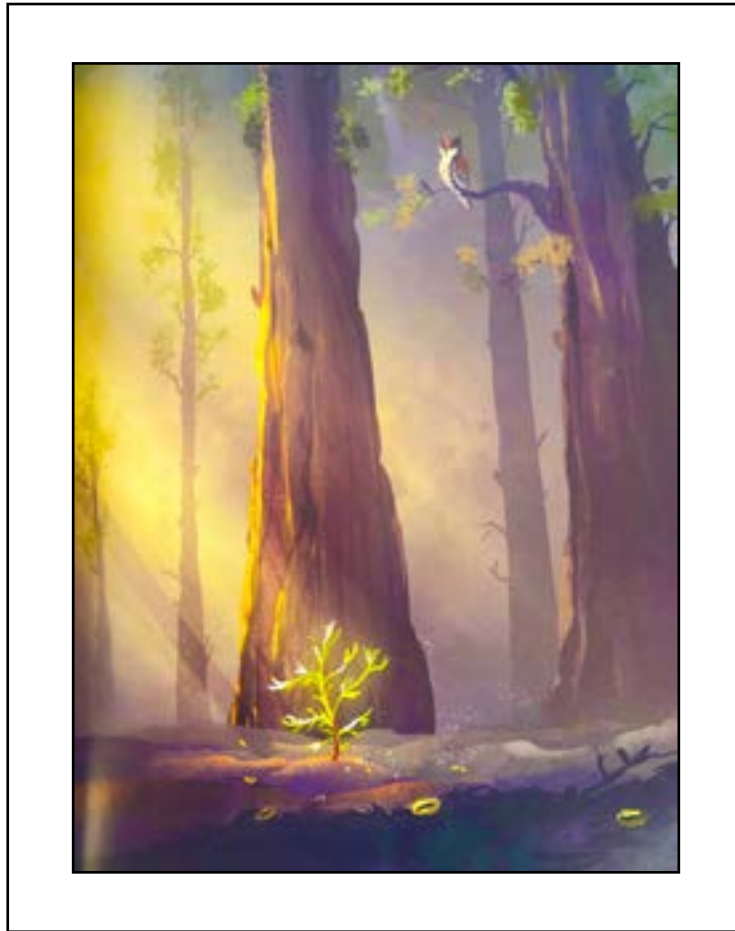
Repent The Bible defines sin as a condition of alienation and separation from God and others. We move away from God. God does not move away from us. This separation can be categorized in degrees of seriousness from simple acts of alienation and separation to those more serious. When we repent our sin is forgiven and we come back to a loving God. The Baptist's call to repent is an invitation, an invitation to restored fellowship and communion with God and others in the community of faith. John works to invite healing of the communities hardened hearts with the mission that they will be able to "see" and to "hear" the mission of Jesus.

CULTURAL INSIGHT: Luke makes mention of six unique historical characters who were on the scene when John first appeared in the Judean wilderness to dip men and women in the moving waters of the Jordan River. Luke writes that John appears baptizing in the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar who would rule the Roman world as Emperor until his death in 37 AD. Luke wants his readers to know that all of these historical characters were alive and active during the public ministry of both John the Baptist and Jesus. Luke wants the Gospel to be locked securely in history with the mention of these New Testament "influencers".

INSIGHT INTO MEANING: John was a prophet of God whose voice was clarion and clear. Whose voice carries the same weight today in your life? In the life of your faith community? Advent is the perfect season to listen for that call to repentance and restoration. Use the weeks of Advent to prepare your way back to the Lord. Fill the valleys and lower the hills in your life. In the Lord's Prayer we ask the Lord to provide for us our daily bread. We pray that God forgives our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us. This theme of the forgiveness of sins is central to the message of John the Baptist, and central to the healing of the hardened heart.

Family Activities

SHARING THE MISSION AT HOME
AND IN THE WORLD



QUESTION OF THE WEEK: Both John the Baptist and Jesus experienced suffering. How did their suffering break forth new understandings of life? How does this prepare us for the meaning of Christmas?

GOSPEL CHARACTER QUALITIES: SURRENDER OF OUR SHELLS
RECEIVING GOD'S GRACE

FAMILY ACTIVITIES: Explore different kinds of seeds. How do different seeds need different conditions to grow? Name all the conditions that bring about a seed's growth. Talk about how you see God in each family member alive in their unique essence. Find pictures of the Annunciation as Mary said, "Yes" to growing God's life in her. How was she the shell for the seed of Jesus? What did Jesus' life bring forth? How can we pray for each other as family members this Advent season for God's life to come alive and bear fruit in each member of our family? What does this tell us about them and about God?