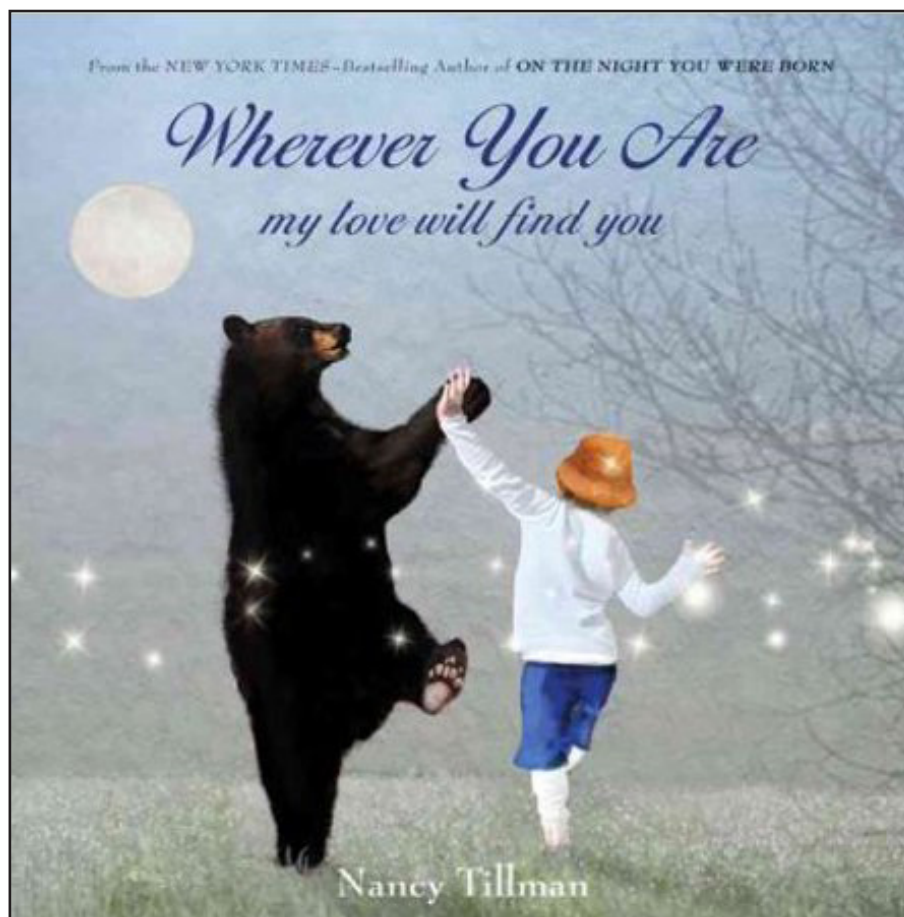


Living Grace

4TH SUNDAY OF ADVENT
CYCLE C

"GOD'S LOVE IS INESCAPABLE"



*In **Wherever You Are: My Love Will Find You**, we find a story that celebrates the ways in which the love between parents and children is forever. A child frolics in a magical version of the natural world, and has magical interactions with wild animals. He dances with a bear, picks apples from a giraffe's long neck, crosses a river on the back of a hippo, and even has a park bench chat with pandas. All the while, the parent's love follows the child wherever he goes. From the author: "It's been said that, once we become parents, we wear our hearts outside of ourselves. Love is the greatest gift we have to give our children. It's the one thing they can carry with them each and every day. It is my wish that this book helps give your children a sense of confidence that there is nowhere in the world your love can't find them."*



TWO PREGNANT WOMEN
Metal Sculpture by Charles Leplae ~ 1953
Middelheim Museum ~ Antwerp, Belgium

EXPLORING THE ART:

The unconventional Middelheim Museum is an open-air sculpture museum that spans over 30 acres and has approximately 400 works of art on display. Out in the open, it merges nature and art, is accessible to everyone, and is available free of charge. The museum exhibits sculptures created by artists from different periods and from different parts of the world. Due to its unique outdoor environment, the placement of the sculptures is just as important as the works themselves, as the intermingling with their natural surroundings transforms and augments the experience of the viewer. Visitors can spend hours strolling through trees and walking through open fields, while enjoying the permanent sculptures and revolving installations, as well as the nature-inspired architecture of various pavilions and landscape art. The Middelheim Museum began as temporary international exhibition of sculptures held in the park in 1950, and it was so successful that it became permanent at the suggestion of the mayor of Antwerp at the time. Over the years, the area belonging to the museum expanded, and the collection of works grew. Today, contemporary artists from the national and international scene, are invited to participate in individual and collective exhibitions, and to engage in projects, lectures, and performances, as they are inspired and challenged by the park environment and works in the permanent collection.

WHEN ART MEETS 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:

WHEREVER YOU ARE: MY LOVE WILL FIND YOU

Written & Illustrated by Nancy Tillman

Sunday Gospel

LUKE 1:39-45

Mary set out
and traveled to the hill country in haste
to a town of Judah,
where she entered the house of Zechariah
and greeted Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting,
the infant leaped in her womb,
and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit,
cried out in a loud voice and said,
"Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

**And how does this happen to me,
that the mother of my Lord should come to me?**

For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears,
the infant in my womb leaped for joy.

Blessed are you who believed
that what was spoken to you by the Lord
would be fulfilled."

Making the Connections

FOR ADULTS

JESUS IS BORN OF LOVE, TO BE LOVE. GOD FINDS US WHEREVER WE GO. AS A BABY IN A MANGER, WHO CAN RESIST GOD'S EMBRACE? AND BRILLIANT SCHEME TO FIND US!

Our children's story expresses unending love of a parent to a child. The author communicates the powerful energy and reality of love alive and present through many different forms. So much variety, yet the same presence, Love. "Love can expand, stretch, it's fast, it goes forever, and you can't escape it. It can even fly!" It can swim.....in all things it never fades or ends. Love is present in all you do, when you work, when you play, when you sit with friends and at home and at school. Love is inescapable.

In our Gospel reading we hear about two miraculous births. This came about through two women, Elizabeth and Mary, who in faith opened their hearts and their lives to assist God in bringing Love itself, God, into the world. And what a brilliant scheme? To find God's love in the invitation to embrace a baby, a child, born in a manger! Who cannot resist embracing a baby? We are all drawn in awe to the miracle of life in a newborn. God knew how to draw us in, how to reach us with Love. God chose a family, an extended family, to fulfill his plan of salvation. Two cousins, two miraculous births, two babies. Family life is filled with change, adjustments, and surprises. Families are filled with love. It is that simple, yet so profound.

Mary and Elizabeth were open to the unexpected. They supported each other in bringing forth God's Love in the ordinary, filling our lives with the extraordinary. They surrendered to God's call, and in doing so, John the Baptist leads the way for the coming of the Baby Jesus, where heaven and earth are joined together to become one. It must have been difficult for Mary and Elizabeth, and God never promises us that our lives will be easy. Or that we will not find ourselves in unexpected, painful, or frightful circumstances. What God does promise, however, is that there is nowhere we can go, where his love will not go with us.

This is the message of Christmas. God found humanity, struggling and lost in sin and separation. He drew us with love, to a baby, to himself. He found us where we would least expect to find Him. Each one of us is "God's angel, God's darling, God's star", and this great Love that comes to us through a baby, will find you always, wherever you are.

Making the Connections

FOR CHILDREN

YOUR STORY: Where does love come from? How does love make you feel? Do you ever wonder what love looks like? Share some ways God's love has come to you, such as in a friend, in the soft wind, in a surprise happenstance.

Have you been around a newborn baby? What does everyone do when they see a baby? How can we feel love through the unconditional love of a baby? When we experience love, what does it do to us?

THE CHILDRENS' STORY: What was your favorite part of the story? What follows the child throughout the book? How does that make you feel?

THE GOSPEL STORY: God came to us in love through Mary's "yes" to be the Mother of God. How does God seek to be born in all our lives? Mary and Elizabeth were cousins, they both loved and cared for each other as God's love was found in them. How does God reach out to us in love through others?

God's love comes to us wherever we go. How can we open our hearts more fully to experience God's love? How can we help others see God's love for them?

Biblical Background

LUKE 1:39-45

GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING: Mary journeyed 90 miles from her hometown of Nazareth to the home of her cousin, Elizabeth, who lived in the village called Ein Karem, which is located two miles to the west of Jerusalem. Mary did not travel alone. Many people made the journey from Galilee to Jerusalem on a weekly basis. We know from historical sources that fish caught in Capernaum on a Sunday, could be sold in Jerusalem markets the following Friday morning. The actual journey would take the better part of three days. You would find lodging along the way with members of your extended family. Mary would have walked. Riding a donkey would subject the traveler to the possibility of Roman acquisition of your animal. It was not worth the risk.

TERMS: *"As soon as your greeting reached my ears"* Middle Eastern "greetings" are an informal technique intended to allow the exchange of important information between attending persons. These greetings typically take as much as 30 minutes to conclude. Mary clearly used this greeting occasion to fill Elizabeth in on all the details that lead to her surprise visit that day. Remember that the husband of Elizabeth, Zechariah, had also been visited by the angel Gabriel. Elizabeth would certainly remember that detail as Mary shared her own story.

"Blessed are you" Elizabeth conveys to Mary that she is honored by God. That is the meaning of the term 'blessed' in its Middle Eastern context. Blessed is synonymous with the word Honor. God is pleased with both women, because each of them said a resounding "yes" to God's plan of salvation through the two children in their wombs. John in the womb of Elizabeth, and Jesus in the womb of Mary.

CULTURAL INSIGHTS: Elizabeth hears the details of Mary's conception and pregnancy, and realizes that she is the woman prophesied about by the prophet Isaiah, through whom God is going to bring the Messiah into the world. Elizabeth acknowledges that Mary is the "mother of my Lord". Her "Lord" is God. Mary is the mother of the Messiah, the mother of God. The child in the womb of Elizabeth is approximately six months the elder of Jesus and will always be so. In John 1:29-30 we read that John the Baptist knows exactly who Jesus is when he tells his two disciples that, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'"

INSIGHTS INTO MEANING: Mary's song of praise echoes the same sort of "song of praise" sung by Hanna in 1 Samuel when she learns through the agency of an angel that she will become pregnant and give birth to a son who will save his people from their enemies. That son is the prophet, Samuel. Both Mary and Elizabeth were deeply immersed in their understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures. Mary shares the same Spirit with her Biblical ancestor Hanna, and her prayer of praise honors all the women who played a part in salvation history. Mary knows that from now on "all generations will call me blessed (honored)" and they did, and we still do today as well.

Family Activities

SHARING THE MISSION AT HOME
AND IN THE WORLD



QUESTION OF THE WEEK: What does Love look like? This Advent & Christmas Seasons are you seeing Love's effect around you? Where might you as a family demonstrate LOVE this time of year?

CHARACTER QUALITIES: GOD COMES TO US IN A FAMILY
LOVE LIBERATES

ADDITIONAL FAMILY ACTIVITIES: God comes to us in our own set of circumstances and our own families. God finds us and loves us there. Create unique and personal renditions of the Holy Family giving children a variety of mediums from which to choose. Create a picture of your own holy family. Recognize that Love comes to us through our own means, in many different forms. Explore your own expressions and how God shares LOVE through one another and your family.