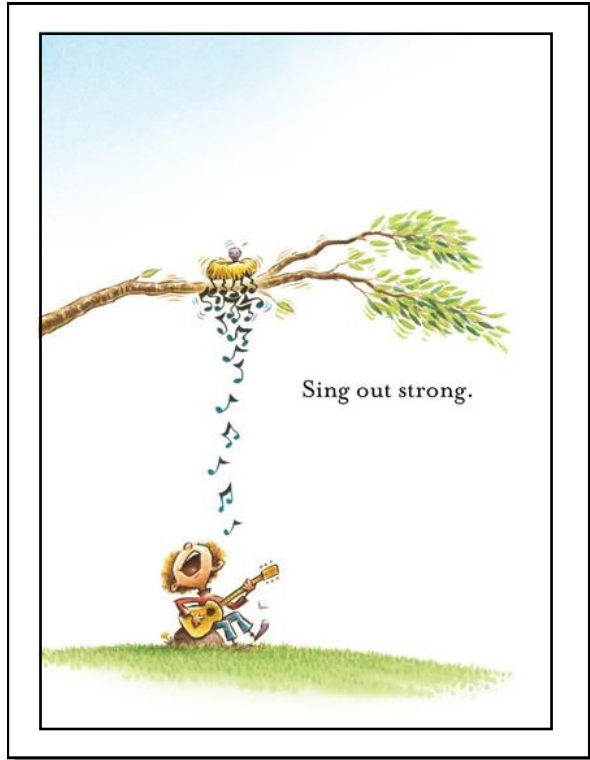


Family Activities

SHARING THE MISSION AT HOME
AND IN THE WORLD



QUESTION OF THE WEEK: Parents, share with your kids a time when you have been the scared bird in the nest, afraid to take the next step. Share a time when you were like the musician, sharing your gifts to help another person to rise. Talk as a family about the role you are being called to in offering encouragement to others this Advent.

CHARACTER QUALITIES: COURAGE
RECEPTIVITY

FAMILY ACTIVITIES: Brainstorm together families who have had a difficult time this year. Make plans to go Christmas caroling, and visit their houses. How might your song of hope and encouragement strengthen their hearts this holiday?

Gospel Illustration

JOHN THE BAPTIST
Vicki Shuck, Esperanza Arts

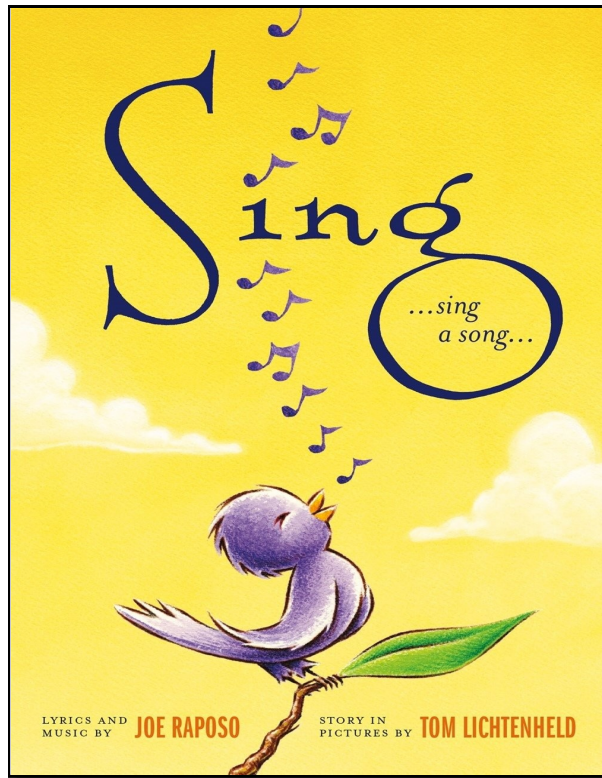


*A voice of one crying out in the desert:
"Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths."
~ Mark 1:1-8*

Living Grace

CYCLE B 2ND SUNDAY
ADVENT

"ADVENT AWAKENS US TO BELIEF"



In Sing, Tom Lichtenheld has put a visual story to this timeless and universal song that celebrates perseverance, self-expression, and the power of music to help each of us find our voice. Sing! Sing a song. Sing out loud, sing out strong."

Sunday Gospel

MARK 1:1-8

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God.

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet:
Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you;
he will prepare your way.

A voice of one crying out in the desert:

"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight his paths."

John the Baptist appeared in the desert
proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the
forgiveness of sins.

People of the whole Judean countryside
and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem
were going out to him
and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River
as they acknowledged their sins.

John was clothed in camel's hair,
with a leather belt around his waist.

He fed on locusts and wild honey.

And this is what he proclaimed:

"One mightier than I is coming after me.

I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs
of his sandals.

I have baptized you with water;

he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Art & Faith

EXPLORING THE BEAUTY & TRADITION
OF SACRED ART



THE SERMON OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST
Oil painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder ~ 1566
The Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest ~ Budapest, Hungary

EXPLORING THE ART:

A MESSAGE MEANT FOR ALL

Pieter Bruegel was the most important figure in 16th century Flemish painting, the founder of a dynasty of painters. In this painting he depicts St. John the Baptist surrounded by a crowd of people. Bruegel would visit village weddings and fairs, mix with the crowds, and make sketches of the people and their manners and clothes. He then used these sketches as reference for his paintings of Biblical scenes. Despite growing up in towns, Bruegel seemed to truly understand and be interested in the lives of farm peasants and poor villagers. He captured scenes of the poor in his local environment that illustrated cohesion and happiness, while other artists would depict the poorer elements of society in a far more negative way. During his time, the art world was focused on portraits of the rich and famous, which made Bruegel's style all the more unusual and brave. His realistic painting of peasants in both his secular and religious works gave him the nickname of "Peasant Bruegel".

This masterpiece has an abundance of detail and dramatic intensity. Our attention is first drawn to the figures in the foreground, then to the river in the background, and only then to John the Baptist, wearing a garment of camel hair. The figure of John the Baptist is almost lost in the heart of the picture, as the principal subject is the diverse and colorful crowd - a haphazard mix of believers, or people merely curious to see what was going on, some attentive, some bored. The audience is remarkably diverse as there are peasants, wealthy citizens, and clergymen. In addition to people of Bruegel's native Netherlands, the diverse crowd also includes other nationalities such as Turks and Chinese, emphasizing that the message of John the Baptist, and that of Jesus, is meant for all.

JOHN THE BAPTIST, CALLED BY GOD, TO ENCOURAGE US TO COURAGE AND FAITH. John the Baptist was born with a purpose. We remember the story of his special birth. His mother Elizabeth, was too old to have children, but when she discovered she had conceived, she ran to tell her husband Zechariah. He responds with disbelief and is struck unable to speak until John the Baptist is born! God found a way to pull Zechariah out of his daily activities and the busyness of daily life to prepare for the birth of this unexpected child. He was forced into a time of preparation by God. In our day, sometimes parents create a "time out" for their children to give them time to calm down and refocus. This is what Advent is all about. In Advent the church, in its wisdom, encourages us to take a "time out". To be still, to be quiet like Zechariah. We need to calm down and refocus, to get our hearts ready to fully receive the gift that is about to be given to us.

In this Gospel, John the Baptist sings out from his whole heart, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths". This is the song that John the Baptist was born to sing. The savior is coming, but not the warrior king that everyone expected. John was sent to wake people up so they wouldn't miss it what was about to happen. They did not expect to look low. They were looking high to find the savior. They were looking for a king, but God comes to us in the lowly, and that is a big shift in mindset. God comes into the world as a vulnerable infant. This is where we meet the living God - unfathomable! John the Baptist has a big job to do, so he becomes very outspoken and dramatic. He ushers in a brand-new way of thinking about God, and people needed help getting ready to embrace the unexpected - a lot of help, just as we do each Christmas.

Our children's story, Sing, helps us to understand the role of John the Baptist. We meet three young birds, sitting in their comfy nest, anticipating the next big step in their life - learning to fly! Imagine if after living life in a nice, secure, warm nest, you are told it is time to jump out! The nest is only a temporary step in a far greater plan for the little birds. John the Baptist came to tell the community that they were going to have to make a leap of faith. It must have seemed as outrageous like it must seem to baby birds. In Advent, we are being called to a leap of faith just like the little birds. We are being called to renewal. If we don't leap, life will not be able to live out the amazing life that God has planned for us. We are called to jump for our own good. We are called to faith and to believe in the unexpected.

John the Baptist sings his song of love and encouragement. He was born for a mission and so are we. "Don't worry that it's not good enough for anyone else to hear." Just sing, sing your song. We must be open and listening so that we can hear our own song. John the Baptist found his song, and he sang it loud and clear. Look at the difference he made for the whole wide world. We can do this, too! Now, Sing, Sing Your Song!

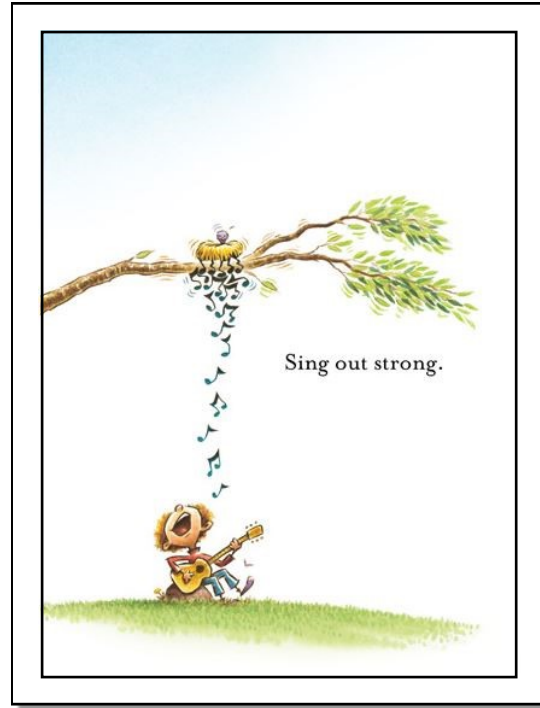
YOUR STORY: Are you ever afraid of taking a risk? What is it that gets in the way? Is it sometimes hard to trust? To believe that it is worth taking the risk? Can you give some examples? Has anyone ever come along to help you take the next step?

THE CHILDRENS' STORY: What does the musician in the story do? How does it make a difference? How are your parents, teachers, coaches, catechists, pastor, or friends sometimes like the musician in the story? Have you been the one singing a song for someone else to have courage?

THE GOSPEL STORY: How did John the Baptist sing a song to give people courage? What were the words of his song? How did it make the difference for people being ready to receive God's gift in Jesus? Can you give a gift to someone if they aren't ready to receive it? Why was John the Baptist's role so important?

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GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING: Here we find John the Baptist engaged in his ministry of dipping people in the moving waters of the Jordan River. This baptismal site is one of the three fording points across the Jordan River. The other two are much farther north near Galilee. John is on the eastern side of the Jordan and has stationed himself in the waters as pilgrims flock to the fording point to cross the river and then make their way to Jerusalem to celebrate the Biblical feast of Passover. The Jordan River bisects the Jordan River valley. After you crossing at this fording point pilgrims would head directly west toward the ancient city of Jericho, three miles in the distance. This is the same place that the Israelites crossed dry shod as the waters stood on either side as they entered the Promised Land under the guidance of Joshua. It is also the same location that saw the Prophets Elijah and Elisha miraculously cross the river as well. It is no accident that John chose this symbolic site to initiate his ministry.

TERMS: *Baptism* This word means "to dip" and refers to the Jewish bathing ritual required before making an offering at the Temple in Jerusalem. To become ritually "clean" a Jewish person would have to completely immerse themselves in a body of "moving water". The individual would be purified and it would be acceptable make an offering to God. This ritual becomes Baptism.

Wild honey This is not honey sourced from a beehive but refers to the fruit of the date palm trees. The date palm tree grows very well in the saline soils around Jericho, and they continue to produce fruit in the Middle East today. The syrup is a sweetener for cooks in the Middle East.

Camel's hair This was a scratchy, coarse fabric made from the belly hair of a camel and is like burlap in texture. It ties John the Baptist to the Elijah who wore a similar sort of garment in his day.

CULTURAL INSIGHT: John the Baptist is the son of a Levitical Priest (Zechariah) and as such could have served God in the Jerusalem Temple. John decided that he was called to live out a different vocation - one more in line with the memory of the Prophet Elijah. Elijah was "assumed" into Heaven, and because of that miracle, he could return whenever God wished. John wanted to be associated with the Prophet Elijah, because he was the Prophet who the Jews expected to appear before the arrival of the Messiah. People were leaving Judea and Jerusalem to see and hear John from Judea and from Jerusalem - they were going the wrong way! Pilgrims were supposed to arrive in the holy city of Jerusalem in advance of the pilgrimage feasts, but John had become so popular that when news about his work reached Jerusalem, people were actually leaving the city and taking the seventeen mile journey to the lowest point on the planet to see John for themselves. John and his message must have been quite compelling.

INSIGHT INTO MEANING: John and Jesus are related. In the Middle East they are cousins but might as well have been brothers. Their mothers were "kinswomen", and Jesus and John probably grew up together. It seems plausible that the Holy Family would have resided with Zechariah and Elizabeth each time that they came to Jerusalem for the week-long pilgrimage feasts. John was the elder of the two cousins, by just six months. Still, he recognizes something unique about Jesus and tells anyone willing to listen that he does not deem himself worthy to even untie the strap of his sandal (the task of a household servant at that time). In the Gospel of John we learn that John the Baptist realizes that he must decrease so that Jesus can increase. John will fade as Jesus begins to shine, but Jesus will honor John (after his death) as the greatest man ever born of women.