

# THE JUST LOVE

STORY BIBLE

JACQUI LEWIS *and*  
SHANNON DALEY-HARRIS

*Illustrated by*  
CHERYL "RAS" THUESDAY



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**JUST  
LOVE**  
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MINNEAPOLIS

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# INTRODUCING THE JUST LOVE STORY BIBLE

In this bold and inspiring new storybook Bible for children, Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis and Rev. Dr. Shannon Daley-Harris join a long line of sacred storytellers and question-askers. For thousands of years, people have told stories, sung songs, asked hard questions, and shared experiences to learn about God and how to live as God's people. The big message of the Bible is that God loves us and created us to love God and each other, to do justice, and to love kindness. In *The Just Love Story Bible*, children and families are invited to open their imaginations; take hold of their belovedness; and understand that all people on earth deserve to be loved and to have dignity, equality, and justice.

This isn't a book of answers but an invitation to ask important questions. Through retellings of thoughtfully selected Bible stories, *The Just Love Story Bible* presents a way for children to hear how others have also had questions about God, and the answers they discovered; to have their own ideas and ponder their own experiences; and to keep on wondering.

#### The Just Love Story Bible includes:

- Fifty-two Bible stories: Twenty-six from the Old Testament and twenty-six from the New Testament.
- Bold, striking illustrations created by Cheryl "Ras" Thuesday, depicting gorgeous scenes and biblical characters in various shades of brown.
- Cultural, religious, and historical context to help kids learn about the experiences of people in ancient times.
- Exploration of genre and biblical storytelling styles in words kids can understand.

#### PLEASE ENJOY THIS PREVIEW OF THE JUST LOVE STORY BIBLE

Find out more and pre-order from your favorite bookseller at:

[JUSTLOVESTORYBIBLE.COM](https://www.justlovestorybible.com)

**AVAILABLE FEBRUARY 25, 2025**

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# CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	10
---------------------	----

## OLD TESTAMENT STORIES

<b>Part 1: The Beginning of Love</b>	16
--------------------------------------	----

Creating Stories	<i>Genesis 1 and 2</i>	20
God's Promises	<i>Genesis 12; 15; 21</i>	26
A Fractured Family Finds Forgiveness	<i>Genesis 37; 39–50</i>	30

<b>Part 2: A Freedom Movement</b>	36
-----------------------------------	----

Enslavement	<i>Exodus 1:6–14</i>	40
Courageous Midwives	<i>Exodus 1:15–21</i>	44
Moses, Miriam, and Two Mothers	<i>Exodus 2:1–10</i>	48
Movements Take Teamwork	<i>Exodus 3; 6:28–12</i>	52
Escaping Slavery and Singing Songs of Freedom	<i>Exodus 12:33–51; 14:13–30; 15</i>	58
What Is It?	<i>Exodus 16</i>	62

<b>Part 3: Daring to Dream a Just, Loving Community</b>	66
---	----

Love God and Love People	<i>Exodus 20</i>	72
Being Holy Like God	<i>Leviticus 19</i>	76
Sisters Demand Justice	<i>Number 27:1–11</i>	80
Remember	<i>Deuteronomy 5–6, 15. 31, 34</i>	84

<b>Part 4: God's People Stand Up for Each Other</b>	88
---	----

Standing Up for Your Family	<i>Ruth</i>	92
Standing Up for a Beloved Friend	<i>1 Samuel 18–20</i>	96
Standing Up for the Community	<i>1 Kings 3; 6; 8</i>	100
Standing with your Family and your Neighbors	<i>2 Kings 4:1–7</i>	104
Standing Up for Yourself and for Your People	<i>Esther</i>	108

<b>Part 5: Songs for the Movement</b>	112
---------------------------------------	-----

Righteous Anger and Real Grief	<i>Lament Psalms</i>	116
Revolutionary Joy	<i>Praise Psalms</i>	120

<b>Part 6: Speaking Out for Justice</b>	124
---	-----

Warnings and Promises	<i>Isaiah</i>	128
I'm Just a Kid!	<i>Jeremiah</i>	132
Three Things God Wants	<i>Micah</i>	136
When Speaking Up is Hard	<i>Jonah</i>	140
Daughters and Sons are Prophets	<i>Joel</i>	144
God's Dream Is Not Impossible!	<i>Zechariah</i>	148

# NEW TESTAMENT STORIES

<b>Part 7: Birthing a Revolution</b>		154	<b>Part 9: A Week of Holy Conflict</b>		230
Waiting for Liberation and Hope	<i>Prequel to the Gospels</i>	158	Palm Parade: Love and Anger Collide	<i>Matthew 21:1-17</i>	234
Birthing a Movement	<i>Luke 1:1-36</i>	162	Passover: Remembering Liberation	<i>Matthew 26:17-35; Luke 22:7-23, 33-34; John 16:31-33</i>	238
A Surprising Baby	<i>Matthew 1:18-24; Luke 2:1-20</i>	168	A Rebel and a King	<i>Matthew 26:36-75;</i>	242
Beyond Our Wildest Dreams	<i>Matthew 2</i>	174	Jesus is Crucified	<i>Matthew 27:11-31; Mark 15:1-20; Luke 22:39-70</i>	248
<b>Part 8: A Movement of Love</b>		178	<b>Part 10: The Power of Hope</b>		252
Preparing the Way for Love	<i>Matthew 3</i>	182	Jesus Is Not in the Tomb	<i>Matthew 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-18</i>	256
The Good News of Love	<i>Luke 4; Mark 1:29-31</i>	186	Life After Death	<i>Luke 24:13-35</i>	260
Misfits on a Mission	<i>Matthew 9:9-13; Mark 1:14-19; Luke 8:1-3; John 1:43-51</i>	190	Jesus Lives in Us!	<i>Matthew 28:16-20; Luke 24:33-49; John 21:1-14</i>	264
More than Enough for All	<i>John 6:1-14</i>	194	<b>Part 11: The Movement Continues</b>		268
The Greatest Commandment	<i>Mark 12:28-34</i>	198	The Power to Become the Church	<i>Acts 2</i>	272
How Blessed We Are!	<i>Matthew 5</i>	200	Inseparable!	<i>Acts 9:1-19; Romans 8:37-39</i>	276
Loving your Enemies	<i>Matthew 5:13-43</i>	204	Everywhere Love Is, God Is!	<i>Acts 9:32-43; 16:13-15; 1 John 4:13-21</i>	280
Love Lessons from Jesus, a Samaritan, and a King	<i>Luke 10:25-37; Matthew 25:31-46</i>	208	Can You See God's Dream?	<i>Revelation 21</i>	284
Lessons on Being First	<i>Mark 10:13-16; 35-45; Matthew 20:1-16</i>	214	<b>Acknowledgements</b>		290
Being Both Mary and Martha	<i>Luke 10:38-42</i>	218	<b>About the Authors and Illustrator</b>		291
A Revolutionary Prayer	<i>Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:1-4</i>	222			
Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, Lost Son	<i>Luke 15</i>	226			



Late at night, circled around a crackling fire, they told stories of how they imagined the world began. Two of those stories are in the book of Genesis. They aren't the explanations of scientists, but of storytellers pondering not just *how* the world came into being but *why*. And they wondered who God is and what it means to be human. Many years later, scientists would discover more information and answers about the "how," but even today God invites us to revel in the big questions: why we are here, and the mystery of God's love—a love so big and everlasting that it existed before the world even came into being, a love so big and everlasting that it will never end. So, imagine you are sitting in the glow of a blazing fire thousands of years ago and hearing this story about how the world came to be:





In the beginning, when God began to create, earth had no shape and darkness was everywhere. With a rush of wind, God's spirit swirled in the darkness: *Let there be light!* God called the light Day and the dark Night. And God saw that it was good. That was the first day.

On the second day, God said, *Let there be sky!*

On the third day, God said, *Let the land be separate from the waters; call them Earth and Seas!* God said, *Let the earth grow plants!* And God saw that it was good.

On the fourth day, God said, *Let there be stars and sun and moon!* And God saw that it was good.

On the fifth day, God said, *Let the waters bring forth swarms of creatures, and let birds fly in the sky!* God saw that they were good and blessed them, saying, *Have babies and fill the earth.*

On the sixth day, God said, *Let the earth bring forth creatures of every kind, animals that run and walk and crawl and creep!* And God saw that it was good.

God said, *Let us make humankind in our image,*

*according to our likeness, and let them care for all the creatures of the earth! So God created humankind in God's image. God blessed them and said, Create families and take care of this wonderful world! God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good.*

On the seventh day, God rested.

That's how the first storyteller's version goes. As the fire burns lower, imagine a second voice piping up, "I like that—God thinking everything God made is very good. I heard a different story about how it happened."

The second storyteller scoops up a handful of dust from the ground and begins to tell her version as the embers of the fire glow. "In the day that God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth . . ."

When she finishes, she looks around the circle and asks, "Now it's your turn. How do you think it all began? Why do you think we are here?"

# STANDING UP FOR YOURSELF AND FOR YOUR PEOPLE

ESTHER

Unlike King Solomon, the Persian king Ahasuerus was quite foolish.

Thankfully, two courageous and wise women stood up to him.

Once, King Ahasuerus threw a huge party that lasted almost half a year! Only men were allowed, and it was a rowdy, noisy scene. King Ahasuerus ordered his wife, Queen Vashti, to put on her crown and come to the party to parade in front of all the men so they could stare at her and comment on her appearance.



Queen Vashti said no.

The king, drunk with power and wine, was furious. One adviser said, “She embarrassed you and insulted us by not doing what we said! All the other women will follow her example and stand up to their husbands too. You should banish her!” And the king did.

Queen Vashti was sent away from the king. She no longer wore a crown, but she held her head high. Her dignity and strength were more important than any title.

Later, King Ahasuerus married another woman, named Esther. Esther was Jewish, a different ethnicity than the king and his leaders. Esther had been raised by her uncle Mordecai, who told her to keep secret the fact that they were Jews.

The king had an important helper named Haman, who was very full of himself. He ordered everyone to bow to him.



Mordecai would not bow to Haman. Haman was furious. He found out that Mordecai was Jewish and plotted to have all the Jewish people killed. Haman got the king to issue a decree approving this evil plan.

Mordecai and all the Jews heard the decree and mourned, weeping and lamenting. Queen Esther sent her helper, Hathach, to find out what was happening. Mordecai gave Hathach a copy of the decree and asked them to show it to Queen Esther so she could go to the king and beg him not to allow the Jewish people to be destroyed.

When Hathach reported back to Queen Esther, she said to them, “The king could have me killed if I go to ask him a favor without him calling for me first.”

Mordecai sent Hathach with a message to Esther, encouraging her to be brave: “If you are silent, you might die anyway since you are Jewish too. Maybe you became queen for such a time as this.”

Queen Esther swallowed hard. And then she thought about the best way to help. She wrote a message to Mordecai about her plan to save their people, adding bravely, “And if I die, I die.”

Esther stood where the king would spot her. He asked her what favor she wanted. She asked to have dinner with just the king and Haman. During dinner, the king asked again, “Esther, what can I do for you? I will do anything, even give you half my kingdom!”

Esther took a deep breath and bravely said, “Your Majesty, if it pleases you, save my life and the lives of my people. For we are about to be killed.”

The king roared, “Who would kill you and your people? Where is he?”

Queen Esther told the truth: “It is Haman.”

Right then and there, the king put an end to Haman’s plot to destroy the Jewish people. Because Queen Esther acted wisely and courageously, even a foolish king could do the right thing.





# WHEN SPEAKING UP IS HARD

J O N A H

**H**ave you ever heard of a fish story? It's when someone starts with a true story—say, they caught a little minnow—and by the tenth time they've told it, it sounds like they caught a great white shark! It makes for a more exciting and memorable story. Our fish story is about Jonah. Lots of different people told this story and added to it. This story about Jonah is made-up, but the story is in the Bible because there are still true things we can learn about God and ourselves from it. Here's how it goes.

God's word came to Jonah, telling him to go to a big city named Nineveh and speak out against it. The people in Nineveh were not acting in a just or loving way. Speaking out to Nineveh sounded scary, especially since the Ninevites were considered terrible enemies of the Israelites.

Jonah hightailed it out of there and got on a ship, trying to run away from God!

Before he got very far, a big storm at sea threatened to destroy the ship. All the sailors panicked and started throwing things overboard to keep the ship from sinking.

Jonah just snoozed down belowdecks. The captain shook him. "Get up! Ask your God to help us!"

Jonah thought the storm was his fault for trying to run away from God, so he told the sailors to throw him into the sea so the storm would stop. The sailors didn't want to . . . but they were desperate for the storm to stop, so they did.

The story goes that God sent a large fish to swallow Jonah without hurting him, and for three days and nights Jonah prayed in the fish's belly. You'd think that was the worst part, right? Nope!



After the fish vomited Jonah onto dry land, God’s word came to Jonah, telling him again to go to Nineveh and proclaim God’s message. All that trouble, and the assignment was still the same.

So, finally, Jonah did. “Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown!” he yelled.

And the people—who he thought were the enemy—believed him! Everyone from the oldest grandparents to the newest babies, kings and kids, and even the animals (sound a little fishy?) put on scratchy clothes called sackcloth to show how sorry they were and determined to change their ways.

When God saw that the people were truly sorry and wanted to start living the right way, with love and justice, God forgave them.

And guess what? That made Jonah mad! He had told the people they were in big trouble with God, and now they weren’t anymore. He was upset that God didn’t punish the Ninevites. So Jonah sat outside and sulked day after day.

Finally, God had enough of Jonah’s pouting and worrying more about what he thought was *fair* than about God’s love for other people. *Jonah! Shouldn’t I care about all of these people who were so confused about what is right?*

God’s love and mercy are big enough for everyone.





# BIRTHING A MOVEMENT

LUKE 1

God can be full of surprises. When the people were waiting for the Messiah, God surprised two women with unexpected pregnancies. And those babies grew up to be super important in the movement for love and justice.

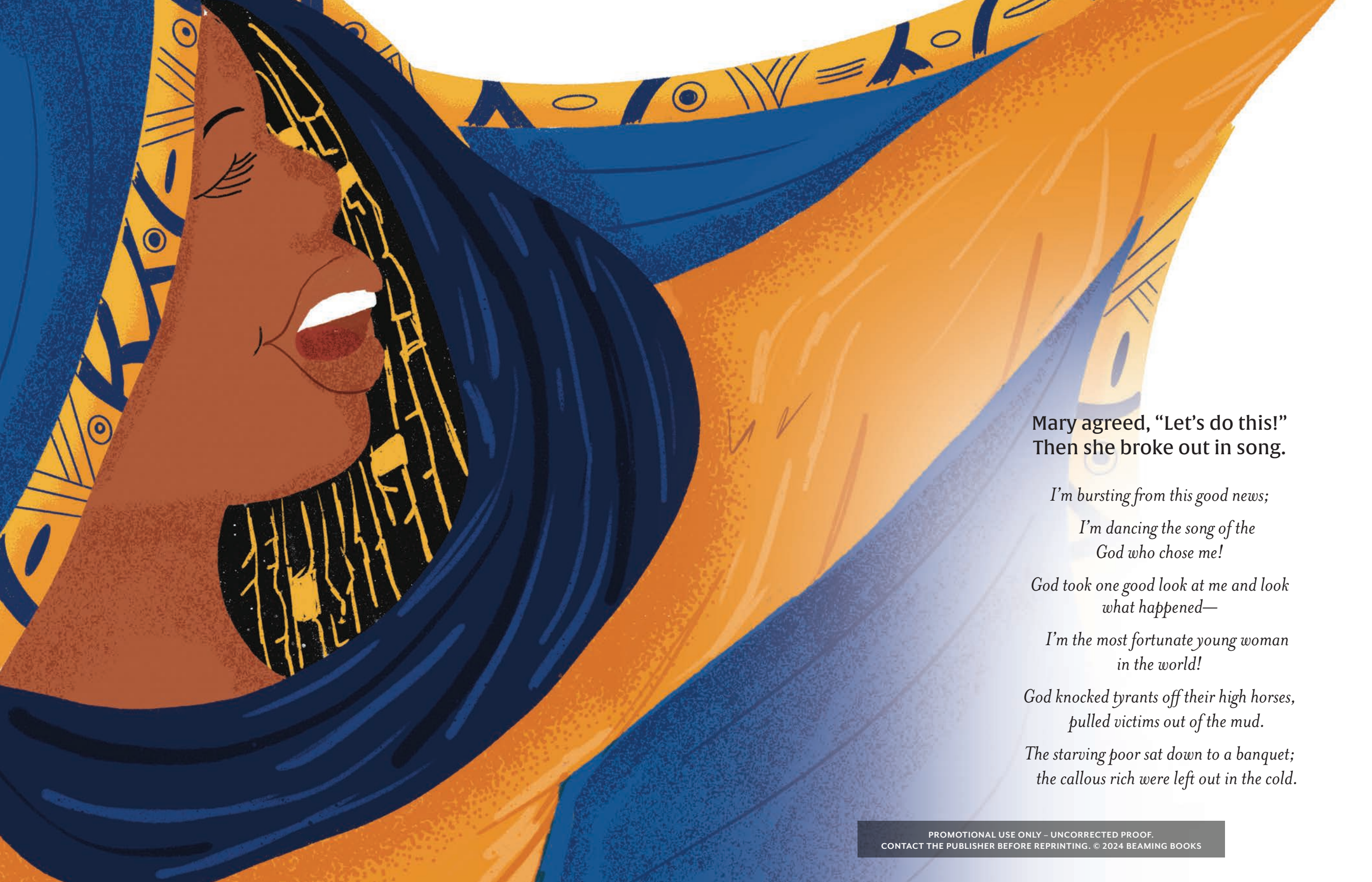
An older woman named Elizabeth was married to a priest named Zechariah. They wanted a child so badly but were too old to have one. Or so they thought.

One day a messenger from God—the angel Gabriel—surprised Zechariah with an announcement: “Elizabeth is going to have a baby! He will be named John, and he will help people find their way to God.” This news left Zechariah speechless! He didn’t believe this would happen. But soon, sure enough, Elizabeth was pregnant.

Six months later, Gabriel went on another visit. This time he went to see a young woman named Mary. She happened to be Elizabeth’s cousin. Gabriel said, “God has a surprise for you. You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and name him Jesus. He will be great, and will rule over God’s people forever, with love.”

Mary was surprised. “How can this be?” she said. She didn’t think she could become pregnant—not yet.

Gabriel explained, “The power of the Holy Spirit will come over you, and you will become pregnant. Your relative Elizabeth is pregnant right now, even though she thought she was too old to have a baby. See? Nothing is impossible with God.”



Mary agreed, “Let’s do this!”  
Then she broke out in song.

*I’m bursting from this good news;*

*I’m dancing the song of the  
God who chose me!*

*God took one good look at me and look  
what happened—*

*I’m the most fortunate young woman  
in the world!*

*God knocked tyrants off their high horses,  
pulled victims out of the mud.*

*The starving poor sat down to a banquet;  
the callous rich were left out in the cold.*

That Gabriel was busy, bringing news of babies and their names. God was busy, putting in place a plan for two women—Elizabeth and Mary—to give birth to two leaders—John and Jesus. These two women, their men Zechariah and Joseph and their communities were raising a movement of love and justice, in which their sons would be leaders.

Here is another surprise. Children can be leaders in this movement of love and justice. Every time you love on your family and friends; every time you are kind to strangers; every time you are good to your body—you are part of this movement too. It's how you love God with everything and love your neighbor as yourself. Love, period. That's what this movement is all about.





# HOW BLESSED WE ARE!

MATTHEW 5

Jesus cast a wide net of love wherever he went. He called people to follow him, gathering a movement of love and justice. He taught in the synagogue. He taught from a boat, his voice floating over the water. He healed people in the houses of his followers. And as we saw earlier, he fed the crowds gathered on a hillside, multiplying the generous offering of a boy with two loaves of bread and five fish.

One day, Jesus climbed up a slope overlooking a lake called the Sea of Galilee, and the people followed him. He sat while they gathered on the soft grass, laying down clothes and blankets they had brought to keep themselves dry. He waited while families got their little ones comfortable, and munched on the dates, olives, and bread they'd brought tied up in bundles of cloth. They were happy to make a day of this—listening, learning, visiting with one another. Jesus waited, then stood and took a deep breath. Then he started to teach. He talked about some of the things he'd said before, while others were new thoughts. He offered a message on this mount, and those gathered were mesmerized. They listened as the sun moved across the sky and the air grew cool.

Here are some of the things they remembered Jesus saying:

“You are blessed when you feel sad inside. Even in your sadness, you’ll notice God is there.

“You are blessed when you lose what is most precious to you. God will embrace you and hold you close.

“You are blessed when you feel content with who you are and what you have. That’s the moment you find yourself the proud owner of everything that can’t be bought.

“You are blessed when you are hungry and thirsty for justice. God’s justice is the best food and drink there is!

“You are blessed when you care for others. You will also be cared for in the most wonderful way.

“You are blessed when your heart and mind make you feel good inside. You will more easily see God in the outside world.

“You are blessed when you don’t fight or compete with others. You will discover just how much you belong in God’s family.

“You are blessed when people are mean to you because you are doing God’s work in the world. You’ll know then you are on the right path to God’s reign.”

Jesus also said, “You can count yourself blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you. God’s radical love can make some people uncomfortable. You can shout for joy, because even though they don’t like it, God does.” Sometimes, when we speak up for others or do the kind or just thing, it makes other people upset. Some people call this getting into “good trouble.”

When you get into good trouble, welcome to the movement!





# INTRODUCTION

## IMAGINE THIS: JUST LOVE!

A NOTE FROM REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS

**W**hat does the God of love and justice look like? We don't know. For as long as people have lived on the planet, we've used our imaginations to create an image of God. The earliest people carved pieces of wood shaped like the God in their imaginations. They drew pictures on the walls of caves, and then on paper. There are paintings, photographs, and even movies filled with images of what God might look like. Sometimes it's an old white man with a beard, sometimes a woman with brown skin. Many words have been written about what God might look like—poetry, song lyrics, and words in the Bible: God is like a mother hen; God is a rock; God is a shelter in a storm.

When you close your eyes and picture what God looks like, what do you see? Use your imagination! God is a mystery and can't be seen with our eyes. So, when we pray or meditate or think about God, the image that comes to each of us will be different, and that is because we are all different.

What did Jesus look like? We don't know that for sure either. But we do know that the stories in the Bible were written by and about people living on the continents we now call Africa, Asia, and Europe, in places we know now by names like Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Greece, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. Most of the people who lived there had skin rich and dark like chocolate, cozy brown like cocoa, warm tan like tea, or beige like tea with lots of milk.

Just as people used their imaginations to think about what God looks like, they've done the same for Jesus. Even though Jesus and his people were not from

Europe, over many centuries, many of the people of Europe imagined Jesus with white skin, blue eyes, and blond hair. There are lots of paintings and pictures like that.

We don't know exactly what Jesus looked like because there were no cameras back then. But because Jesus' ancestors were from the Middle East, we know that Jesus looked less like the white, blond, blue-eyed pictures and more like the people who live in the Middle East today. Can you imagine him with skin the color of coffee? With brown hair and brown eyes?

The art in this story Bible shows that Jesus was a person of color, and that those who came before him and those around him were too. It's important to know that in a world in which people of color often don't get treated with the same respect as white people, God's big, beautiful, ancient love story had lots of brown characters in it! The illustrator, whose name is Cheryl Thuesday, used her imagination to create gorgeous pictures of people in the Bible stories, in various shades of brown, to help us imagine something new about God's expansive love and something true about the people in the stories.

We hope The Just Love Story Bible will inspire your imagination. We hope you will notice that all the people you see—no matter their skin tone—are created in the image of God. We hope you will imagine how deep and wide God's love is for all of us. We hope you'll understand that all people on the earth deserve to be loved, to have dignity, equality, and justice. We hope you'll imagine what you can do every day to make that come true.

We especially hope that when you look in the mirror, you will see God's image reflected there. You are awesomely and wonderfully created in the image of the God who loves you very much, all the time, no matter what!

Imagine that! Just love.

*Jacqui*

# GOD'S BIG STORY

A NOTE FROM REV. DR. SHANNON DALEY-HARRIS

**Y**ay! We're so happy that you are holding *The Just Love Story Bible*! Why are we so glad? Because these stories are meant for everyone—and that includes you—whether you've read or heard Bible stories before or this is the very first time; whether there are stories you love and want to hear again or stories that you have big questions about or disagree with.

The great thing about stories from the Bible is that they've been told for thousands of years by all kinds of people in all sorts of places in many different versions . . . because people have always wondered about the great mysteries and most important questions in life, like: How did our world come to be? Are people more than just their bodies—what makes the “me” of me? What is the soul? Is there a source of love that we can't see or touch but that is real and powerful? Why do people have so many different ideas about God, and how can we figure out what is most important? Why do terrible and unjust things happen? What are the best, most loving and fair ways to live with each other? Can we believe in something huge and mysterious and invisible like God and still have questions, doubts, and disagreements? How does God show up in our lives?

Before stories in the Bible were ever written down, they were told aloud, passed on from person to person, from community to community. The way some stories were told changed. People stopped telling some stories and started telling new stories. Over time, the stories were written down. Still later, leaders made decisions about which stories would be considered part of the Bible.

If the Bible hadn't been written down, people might have stopped telling some of the stories in it because they no longer offer a helpful understanding of God. There would have been new stories added, because God is still active in our lives and there are new stories we can tell that show us something true about God.

The big message of the Bible is that God loves us and created us to love God and each other, to do justice, and to love kindness. There are lots and lots of stories that people told, songs they sang, experiences they remembered or heard about, ideas they pondered, history they tried to make sense of as they tried to learn about God and how to live as God's people. For this *Just Love Story Bible*, we picked fifty-two stories that tell the big message of the Bible. These stories invite us to wonder together about the mystery of God and how we can live together with love and justice. This isn't a book of answers but an invitation to ask important questions. It's a way to hear how others have had questions about God, and the answers they discovered; to have your own ideas and ponder your own experiences; and to keep on wondering.

You are part of God's big story of love and justice, and you always will be. Your stories matter. Your experiences and ideas and questions matter. You matter. That's why we're so glad you are here.

Just love,

*Shannon*



**JACQUI LEWIS** is the Senior Minister and Public Theologian at Middle Collegiate Church in New York City. For over 30 years, she has used her gifts as author, artist, activist, preacher, and public theologian toward creating an antiracist, gender-affirming, just, safe, fully welcoming society in which everyone has enough. Middle Church is a multiethnic, intergenerational, multifaith rainbow coalition of love, justice, worship, and the arts that believes a life of faith means loving God with all you have, and loving your neighbor as yourself—Just love. Period. To help faith communities build a more just society, Jacqui co-

founded The Middle Project and The Revolutionary Love Conference with her spouse, Rev. John Janka. Now called Freedom Rising, this secular partner to Middle Church co-creates a Freedom Summer School, a Young Adult Leadership Laboratory, a Just Arts camp for teens, the Just Love Families Program, and a national justice conference which has been a destination for thought leaders across sectors, race, and faith for 20-years.

Jacqui holds an M.Div from Princeton Theological Seminary and a Ph D. in Psychology and Religion from Drew University. She has preached at the American Church in Paris and in pulpits around the country including at the Festival of Homiletics, the Wild Goose Festival, and The Children's Defense Fund's Haley Farm. She has shared stages with leaders like Richard Rohr, Brian McLaren, Ruby Sales, Van Jones, and Valarie Kaur and was a featured speaker on the Together national tour with best-selling author, Glennon Doyle. Her writing has been featured in scores of popular and national print publications including chapters in several scholastic books. Jacqui's books include *The Power of Stories*, *Ten Essential Strategies for Becoming a Multiracial Congregation*, *Fierce Love: A Bold Path to Ferocious Courage and Rule-Breaking Kindness That Can Heal the World* and the children's book *You Are So Wonderful*. Jacqui created two television shows, Just Faith (MSNBC) and Chapter & Verse (PBS) and is a frequent guest on national television talking about faith, politics, and art. Her podcast, Love. Period. is produced by the Center for Action and Contemplation. She and John live in New York City. Together, they have a son, daughter-in-law, and two magical little grandchildren who keep them laughing.



**SHANNON DALEY-HARRIS** is the Associate Dean of Auburn Theological Seminary, overseeing leadership development programming and resources supporting Auburn's mission to inspire and strengthen leaders from the pulpit to the public square to build community, bridge divides, pursue justice, and heal the world. Previously, she was the director of Just Love Families and worked with Middle Church to develop its Just Love Families initiative to equip parents and other caregivers across the country with resources, approaches, and coaching to use the power of story to nurture a justice- and love-centered faith in their children.

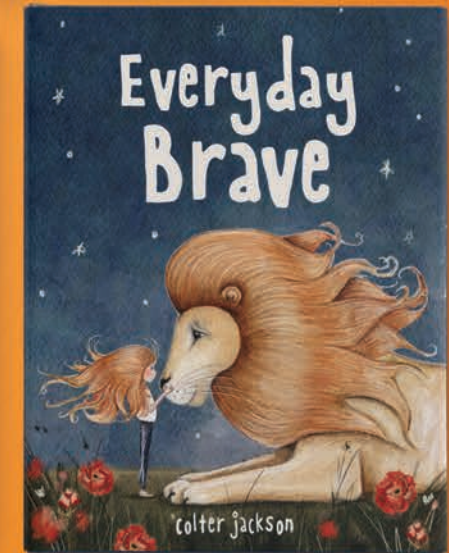
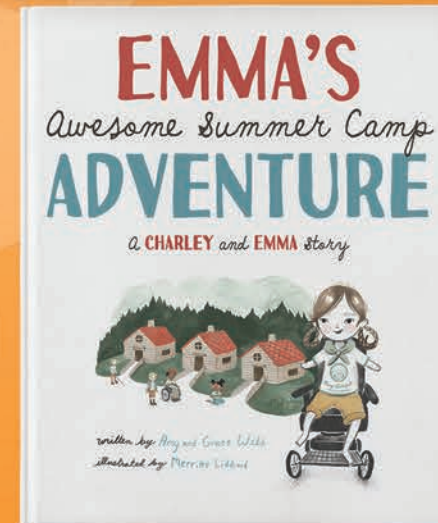
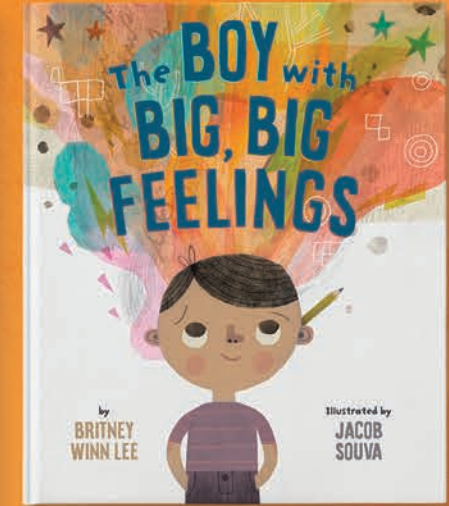
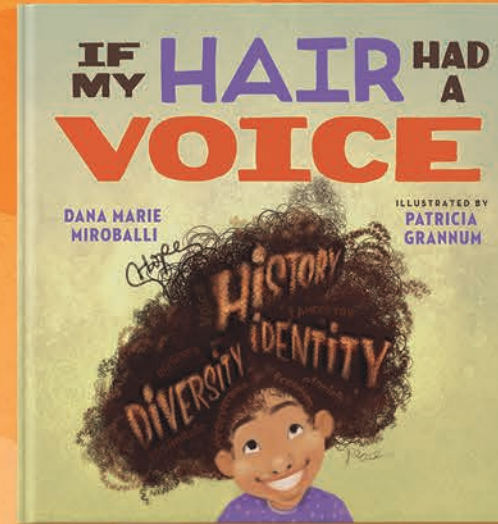
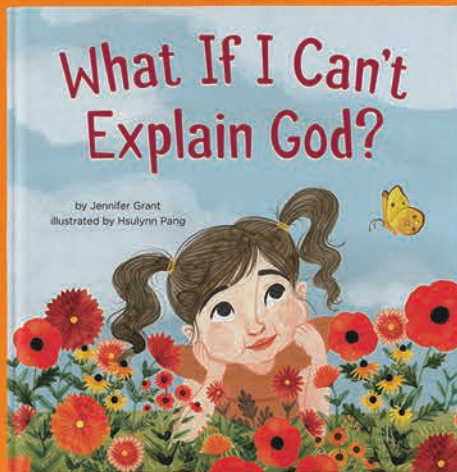
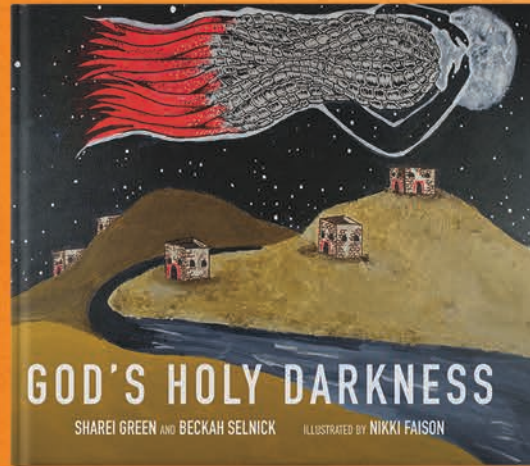
Shannon served for over three decades with the Children's Defense Fund including creating and directing CDF's Proctor Institute for Child Advocacy Ministry and National Observance of Children's Sabbaths. She collaborated with denominations and religious organizations from the national to the local level engage their members in effective programs and policy advocacy to create positive change with and for marginalized children and families. Shannon is also the author of *Hope for the Future: Answering God's Call to Justice for Our Children* and numerous other publications. An ordained minister of word and sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), she holds an M.Div. from Wesley Theological Seminary and a D.Min. from Drew Theological School. Shannon lives in Princeton, New Jersey with her husband Sam, and is the mother of two young adults, Micah and Sophie.



**CHERYL "RAS" THUESDAY** is an illustrator originally from South London, England. At an early age, she moved with her family to the United States and settled in a small town in New Jersey. Later, she attended the School of Visual Arts in New York City, where she learned to marry fine arts with commercial artistry. Her Caribbean and Asian heritage influences her color choices throughout her illustrations. She has created artwork for various companies and publications including the New York Times, NPR, Adobe, and others. She has illustrated several picture books including *Kind Like Marsha*, *Willis Watson is A Wannabe*, and the forthcoming *Edie for Equality*. Cheryl lives in the Tri-State area.

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