

# Experiencing Beauty



## Exploration: Discovery

### About this Age Group

To discover is to know in a new way or uncover what was never known before. The miraculous thing about the gospel is that it is ancient yet ever new. What makes it new is the discovery by individuals about how it relates to their lives here and now, in our unique twenty-first century circumstances! Adults understandably grow weary of worn-out biblical interpretations that seemingly have nothing to do with them or their needs. But plug age-old scripture into new understanding and observe someone's faith truly light up with relevance and gratitude.

### About this Exploration

Experiencing beauty connects us with God in ways beyond our understanding. It grounds us and startles us awake with the reality of the divine all around and within us. Beauty is not perfection or flawlessness but reality and vulnerability, brokenness and transformation. When we open ourselves to the Holy, we discover beauty everywhere, from the endless reaches of the universe to the intricacy of the atom. We find awe and wonder in all of life—the "Ah!" that takes our breath away and moves us toward connection with the whole of creation—and we grow in our understanding of the ways in which God loves and treasures us.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:  
**Genesis 28:10–19a**  
**Matthew 6:24–34**

## Leader Preparation

Only by carefully attending to our own challenges and obstacles can we be free to discover where God is leading us and what God is prompting us to say or do. New directions are revealed as we earnestly embark on the path of discovery, revelation, and a willingness to follow the prompts of the Spirit. Engage in daily prayer and journaling to better ascertain what in your life needs tending, completing, and letting go. This will empower you and those you lead to new heights of discovery and depths of spiritual understanding.

Prayer: *Holy One, help me to let go of distractions so that I notice beauty all around me. Open me to the beauty around me in the natural world, in other people, in your Word, in myself, and in the adults of this group. Fill me with deep gratitude this day. Amen.*

## Session Development

For each session leaders may choose from nine activities that help learners engage the practice of faith. It is best to select at least one activity from “Exploring and Engaging,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving.” The first activity in each category is designed for “easy preparation” (able to be done with minimal preparation with supplies normally found at the church). Using all nine activities could take 90–120 minutes.

## Exploring & Engaging Activities

### 1 Soul Retreat (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Read Genesis 28:10–19a. In your mind picture a stream flowing over rock and earth, with banks of strong and majestic trees sheltering nearby. Now picture a stairway leading up to God. Breathe deeply three cycles of inhalation and exhalation. Say to yourself, “Surely the Lord is in this place . . .” several times over the course of a minute. Open your eyes. Say a prayer something like this: *God of strength and beauty, I am your creation. I want to rise up and live in your wisdom and love. Let your Spirit hold sway in all areas of my life. I surrender to your powerful and tender care. Amen.*

**Supplies:**

- Bibles
- paper and pens or pencils

To be strong in your faith is to save yourself much heartache and needless suffering in life. But our strength, like muscles developed from physical effort, comes by following spiritual principles and being honest with ourselves. This activity is a meditation on Jacob’s ladder, along with the beauty surrounding it. Invite learners to close their eyes. Read Genesis 28:10–19a, and observe a few moments of silence. Ask participants to reflect on the activities and settings of the previous week. Then repeat several times the phrase “Surely the Lord is in this place . . .”

Ask the group to open their eyes and jot down places where they have: (a) been aware of God’s presence, or (b) want to be aware of God’s presence. Invite sharing. What could this passage say to you in your life? Where do you need this kind of inspiration and guidance? Invite participants to share their insights.

End with a prayer such as: *God, we are your creation. We want to discover your holy guidance and peace. Let your Spirit hold sway in all areas of our lives. We surrender ourselves to your powerful and tender care. Amen.*

### 2 The High Road

**Leader preparation:** Think about communication. Think about times you have regretted what you have said. Now think of a time someone said something hurtful to you. Take three deep breaths. Ask God to come into your mind and heart. Say a prayer similar to this: *God, I know you know what is in my heart. I know you require me to be kind and truthful. Give me resources and guidance to be able to do both in all my interactions with others. Amen.*

**Supplies:**

- Bibles
- paper
- pens or pencils

Read Proverbs 15:1–2: “A soft answer turns away wrath. But a harsh word stirs up anger. The tongue of the wise uses knowledge rightly. But the mouth of fools pours forth foolishness” (NKJV). We live in a culture of harsh communication. Reality shows, politicians currying favor with their “base,” and the world of YouTube all give endless demonstration of a world of careless speaking that creates enmity and fear. As Christians, however, we are called to speak in ways that create beauty, harmony, justice, and peace. This is an exercise to practice ways

- To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose three activities, using one activity from each category.
- To plan a session of 45–60 minutes, choose four or five activities, using at least one activity from each category.

of communicating honestly, while leaving intact relationships and our values as followers of Christ.

Ask learners to write a list of harsh communications, such as “I hate you,” “You’re not welcome here,” “Get out!” and so forth. Then write corresponding ways to communicate the underlying feelings without attack. Examples might include: “I’m sorry to hear that,” “We’ll talk later,” or “No problem. Call me when you feel better.” Don’t forget to consider humor! Tell those participating that this “high road” way of speaking must be practiced to become natural.

Use this or a similar prayer: *God of Beauty in all things, help us to speak in ways that reflect your beauty and peace. Bless our communications in the coming days, so that we might learn new ways to be in the world, and thereby create worlds that reflect your holy realm. Amen.*

### 3 Sacred Listening

**Leader preparation:** Relax and watch the YouTube video “In the Bulb There Is a Flower.” Affirm the beauty in your life: I have time for beauty. Beauty is all around me. I tune into and allow beauty to touch my life.

#### Supplies:

- hymn: “In the Bulb There Is a Flower” by Natalie Sleeth (tune: Promise), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkWYubdnc7o>
- computer with Internet access
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- (optional) viewing screen

In a world of endless activity and rushing, we forget to slow down, and sometimes we even have trouble slowing down. Our motors are running so that even when we do slow down, it can provide little or no relief. This is an invitation to slow down, relax, and identify the need for sacred listening in our lives. Play the YouTube video of the hymn “In the Bulb There Is a Flower.” Invite participants to watch and/or simply close their eyes and listen. Afterward, remain silent for a minute or so. Invite participants to complete the sentence “Beauty is . . .” List their words on newsprint or a whiteboard. Go around the group two or three times. Encourage the group to notice and take time to enjoy the kinds of beauty named in the circle in the coming week.

## Discerning & Deciding Activities

### 4 Seek Ye First (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Read Matthew 6:24–34. Ask yourself, “What do I worry about?” Make a list, and then pray for comfort and peace.

#### Supplies:

- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- (optional) hymn: “Seek Ye First” by Karen Lafferty (tune: Seek Ye First), <http://www.hymnal.net/hymn.php/ns/120>

All of us fall into the trap of worry. In a society that seems to worship youth and outer beauty, we need to be reminded of what is true beauty. True beauty comes from within, in our spirits, our attitudes, our wisdom, and our faith. When we

worry too much about our looks, our diets, our appearance, and our image, the beauty of life eludes us, including our own beauty. This moves us farther away from the beauty of our own souls and from the experience of God.

Putting God's realm first helps put these other things in proper perspective. They receive the attention they deserve but do not eclipse the beauty that is around and within us. Gather participants in a circle. Ask for one-word responses to these questions: What do people worry about or stress out about? What is the source of that worry or stress? Go around the circle two or three times. Write responses on newsprint or a whiteboard.

Read Matthew 6:24–34 together. Now ask people to name phrases or words they could repeat whenever they are tempted to worry. Some possibilities are: I am created in the image of God. I place my worries about food in God's hands. I eat according to the will of God. God's peace is deep within me. Distribute paper and pens and invite each person to write an affirmation he or she can post at home in a visible place as a reminder.

*Option:* Listen to and sing the hymn "Seek Ye First." For some people a musical phrase is a better reminder than a written memo.

Use this or a similar prayer: *Dear God, together we are stronger than when we are alone. Thank you for this time together. Thank you for those who call upon your name and your strength today. Bless us as we rededicate ourselves to a life where your realm is first in our lives, giving us joy and freedom for the future. Amen.*



### 5 Rest in God

**Leader preparation:** Read Matthew 6:24–34. Imagine that Jesus is in the room with you. What worries might you confide? Give these problems to the highest Counselor for processing and release. Make copies of "Prayer Words," Attachment: Activity 5. Cut apart the words and put each set in an envelope. Prepare an envelope for every three people in the group, plus one or two extra envelopes.

#### **Supplies:**

- Bibles
- "Prayer Words," Attachment: Activity 5
- scissors
- envelopes
- glue
- papers

Read Matthew 6:24–34. Divide the group into small groups of three or four, or into pairs. Invite people to experiment with the words in their envelopes to form a meditation or prayer on the topic of worry and release. They may arrange their words on another sheet of paper. The results will have an abstract feel. Invite people to read their creations aloud if they wish.

Ask permission for these prayers to be printed in your church's newsletter or bulletin so that others in the congregation may enjoy their beauty.

## 6 Walk in Beauty

**Leader preparation:** Preview Brooke Medicine Eagle’s “Walk in Beauty” on YouTube.

**Supplies:**

- “Walk in Beauty,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ym1EtneNJVc>
- computer with Internet access
- (optional) viewing screen
- (optional) rhythm instruments such as egg shakers and tambourines

There are rhythms in our bodies and souls waiting to be enjoyed, lying dormant to be activated. When we move and dance we receive glimpses of beauty and primal truths placed in us by God. This video not only shows visual beauty, but gives those who can move their bodies a chance to go inward to a place of connection with the rhythms and beauty of the universe. Form a circle with participants who wish to move. Let those who might not want to move in the circle to be seated inside the circle. Place the computer in view inside the circle. While the video plays, let those in the circle walk slowly and rhythmically around the circle. Let those inside the circle play instruments in time to the music. End in a prayer such as: *God of Beauty and Wisdom, you created the majestic earth and all that’s in it. You created us as your people and graciously share the earth and its bounty with us. May we know ourselves as part of creation. May we walk in beauty, with great care for ourselves, our earth, and one another. Amen.*

## Sending & Serving Activities

## 7 Gift Wishes (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Read Genesis 28:10–19a, the passage about Jacob’s ladder. In one column make a list of people who are beautiful to you. Try for at least ten names. In another column beside the first one write a blessing for each person, such as: courage, prosperity, healing, and so forth. Put your hand over the list, take three deep cleansing breaths, and ask God to bless each one.

**Supplies:**

- Bibles
- paper
- pens or pencils
- scissors

Ask someone to read Genesis 28:10–19a. Invite those present to make a list of people who are beautiful to them. Encourage them to identify at least ten names. Then ask them to think of a blessing for each one. Have participants create a gift tag for each person named and to write a blessing on each tag. Invite people to share their lists. Now, have people put their hands on the lists they have created while you pray this or a similar prayer: *Dear God, the people on this list are beautiful to us. Bless them with these and other gifts of the Spirit. In days to come, show us how to demonstrate our love in ways that touch them and make them feel the beauty of your presence in their lives. Amen.*

## 8 Resurrection Process

**Leader preparation:** Take a clump of modeling clay and fashion a cross or something else about your faith that you find beautiful or that moves you. Think about stories, scripture, or people that the icon you have made reminds you of. Hold it in your hand and say this or a similar prayer: *Dear God, we are the Easter people. We are followers of your wonderful cross. Bless me as I strive to let go of what needs releasing and walk confidently into what requires my gifts and my ministry. Amen.*

**Supplies:**

- modeling clay
- paper and pens or pencils

The cross symbolizes the Christian faith and walk. Other symbols may touch believers as much as or more than the cross. These symbols enliven our faith and help us think about its relevance in our lives today. The cross, a towel, a fish, a dove, and the bread and cup are all personal and communal doorways to the paradox of life and death, right here and now. When we die to the old, we step into the new, ready or not, happily or reluctantly. People sometimes fear change. At times we all cling to the past. To die to the old takes courage and a willingness to act. It also takes letting go of the ego and the need to know everything or be right about everything.

Invite participants to take a clump of clay. Have them hold that clay for a few moments, eyes closed. Then, with eyes open, they should mold a symbol that has great meaning and beauty for them. Take time to let each one share with the group his or her creation and its significance. Is there any new insight or direction anyone has gained in this exercise? Anything they need to let go of? Share that, too.



## 9 Looking Closely

**Leader preparation:** Study the artwork “Red Canna” by Georgia O’Keefe. What details do you notice? Where do you find similar beauty in your surroundings? Where would you go to look for this kind of beauty? Pray: *God, this world is filled with beauty. Give me the ability to notice and enjoy it. Amen.*

**Supplies:**

- artwork: “Red Canna” by Georgia O’Keefe, <http://www.art.com/products/p10032683-sa-i674918/georgia-okeeffe-red-canna.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&ui=4FA2E7AB9F664A828CD2028E434AEDC4>
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projector

Display the artwork “Red Canna” by Georgia O’Keefe. This artist reduced flowers to their basic elements. She then magnified them so that we could see them in marvelous detail. Ask the group to look at the print for a few moments and then to share what aspects of it they had to look closely to appreciate.

### Reflect

It takes courage to be who we really are. Determine to discover the beauty in ordinary living, in all your relationships, and within yourself. In what ways did you and the group discover beauty where you may have missed it before? After this session, how might the participants define beauty?

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Attachment: Activity 5

Prayer Words

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need

# Experiencing Beauty



## Exploration: Scripture

### About this Age Group

Human beings, perhaps without even knowing it, crave beauty in their lives. Hurrying, fruitless pursuits, destructive habits, and fatigue all block out beauty and its capacity to lift the heart to a place of peace and gratitude. This Exploration is designed to provide intentional practices geared toward addressing the blocks to beauty, as well as the recovery of beauty in our daily lives.

### About this Exploration

Scripture is infused with beauty, evident in the Bible's rich images, stories, and ideas; its call to justice and right relationship with all creation; and its poetic, grace-filled language. As we interact with Scripture, we discover new ways to sense the wonder, beauty, and goodness of God. We experience God's Spirit, and we are moved to worship.



BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

**Nehemiah 8**  
**Luke 9:28–36**

**Leader Preparation**

Begin your preparation by taking three deep, cleansing breaths. Tune into yourself, your body, and your thoughts. Notice what is there: pain? sorrow? joy? concern? an incomplete task that weighs you down? Then give those things to God. Say this or a similar prayer as an entry into relationship and power.

*Prayer: In this moment I surrender my burdens, my worries, and my thoughts to you, God of beauty and of peace. I cover myself with your grace and wisdom. I breathe in the beauty of your presence. Amen.*

**Session Development**

For each session leaders may choose from nine activities that help learners engage the practice of faith. It is best to select at least one activity from “Exploring and Engaging,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving.” The first activity in each category is designed for “easy preparation” (able to be done with minimal preparation with supplies normally found at the church). Using all nine activities could take 90–120 minutes.

- To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose three activities, using one activity from each category.

Exploring & Engaging Activities



**1 Let it Shine (Easy Preparation)**

**Leader preparation:** Read Luke 9:28–26. The story of the Transfiguration is mysterious and beautiful. We, too, can shine with Christ’s love and peace. Worry, jealousy, resentment, and bad habits are just a few examples of barriers that block our light. Consider just one you might have, and ask God to remove it. As you prepare for your group, use this or a similar prayer: *Holy One, I praise you for your grace, your majesty, and your faithfulness. I want to shine with your love as Jesus did. Take away this barrier, so that I might love and serve to full capacity. All of my life I will draw sustenance from your Holy Word and the beauty that you give endlessly and always. Cover me with your loving kindness. Fill me with your light! Amen.*

**Supplies:**

- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Have someone read aloud Luke 9:28–36. The text says that Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep. Ask the group what weighs them or someone they know down. To help the group get started, suggest some barriers, such as worry, jealousy, and resentment. List their ideas on newsprint or a whiteboard.

Invite pairs of participants to act out one of the barriers. For instance, if they chose the barrier “worry,” identify a specific situation of worry. How might one’s body language depict worry? Perhaps that would be an issue of employment or health or family. Then switch to actions that portray the opposite. If they depict worry, what would peace look like? How might one’s body language depict peace? After a few moments, ask people to stand in a posture that most portrayed beauty for them.

Close in prayer: *God, The story of the Transfiguration is a mighty example of what is possible when we love wholly and completely. Give us courage and strength to give up our barriers to you, removing the darkness in our souls, revealing the beauty of light you have placed in each of us. Amen.*



**2 Beloved Community**

**Leader preparation:** The term “the Beloved Community” was first coined in the early days of the twentieth century by the philosopher-theologian Josiah Royce, who founded the Fellowship of Reconciliation. However, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., also a member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, popularized the term and invested it with a deeper meaning, which captured the imagination of people of good will all over the world. King’s interpretation is taken to mean people living and working in equality and harmony. This is the scene we find in Nehemiah 8: God’s people gathered to hear the law of Moses, in reverence and receptivity. We hear the loving instruction from those in the pastoral role, for those present to cease weeping, to eat and drink in celebration and gratitude, and to share with those “who have nothing prepared.” One can see the roots of our church tradition in these passages. It is a beautiful vision of God’s realm, where all are safe, respected, and provided for.

- To plan a session of 45–60 minutes, choose four or five activities, using at least one activity from each category.

### Supplies:

- Bibles
- artwork: “Guatemala: Procession” by Betty LaDuke, [https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/15822304?VIEW\\_PRODUCT=true&product\\_id=15626&store\\_id=1401](https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/15822304?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=15626&store_id=1401)
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projection capability

Ask volunteers to read aloud Nehemiah 8. Invite people to comment on what stood out to them about this community. What was their response to scripture? What might it have been like to be in the crowd as the law was read? To be a leader? To be one of the people explaining the scriptures to people?

Display the artwork “Guatemala: Procession” by Betty LaDuke. Ask: What do you notice first about this painting? What sections of it attract you most? About what are you curious? What mood does the art convey? LaDuke depicts Christ in the middle of the piece, riding on a donkey. LaDuke notes that in the village of Chichicastenango, Guatemala, in the weeks leading up to Christmas, there are processions in which people carry statues of Christ.

If the group were to paint an image of the gathered community in Nehemiah 8, what would they want it to look like? How could they convey the emotions conveyed in this text?

### **3** Moved by What?

**Leader preparation:** Read Nehemiah 8. Think about being moved to worship by God’s power. What values are consistent with this kind of worship? Kindness? Service? Stewardship? Tenderness? In what ways could you implement these values into your daily life? What is missing in your life that reflects these values?

### Supplies:

- Bibles

Being moved to worship is an overwhelming and holy experience. Think of times you may have been thus moved. Ask someone to read aloud Nehemiah 8, and then ask everyone to form two circles. Ask those in each circle to create a visual “tableau” to communicate the scene. Have each group display its tableau for the other group. *What would a tableau of scripture reading during a service in your congregation look like? Why might the two tableaus be so different?*

## Discerning & Deciding Activities



### **4** Gift of Listening (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Read Ecclesiastes 3:1–13. Close your eyes and meditate on this scripture. What time is it in your life? What might God be telling you to change or to let go of? Breathe deeply, and let your body completely relax. Go to God in prayer: *You say there is a time for everything under heaven. You say I am your child. Help me discern what is next for me in my life, and then give me the grace to follow your instructions. Amen.*

### Supplies:

- Bibles

Richard Foster, author of the classic book *Celebration of Discipline*, says “We desperately need the help that can come through listening to one another. We do not need to be trained psychoanalysts to be trained listeners. The most important requirements are compassion and patience” (p.138, “Service”). This activity is a give-and-take process of reading and listening. Have the participants work in pairs. One reads half the Ecclesiastes scripture. The other responds with what it means to them. What might God be calling them to do or say or be? Then the partners switch roles. Mention the importance of listening with heart and total attention. Encourage all to act on what they might have discerned in the process.

### 5 Sorting the Issues

**Leader preparation:** Read Matthew 6:24–34. Write down all your worries in the areas of life that concern you the most: finances, relationships, health, creativity, time management, family, and so forth. Place your hand on the list and say the Serenity Prayer: *God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things that I can, and wisdom to know the difference. Amen.*

**Supplies:**

- Bibles
- paper
- pens or pencils
- scissors
- basket or bowl

There’s an old saying: If you’re going to worry, why pray? If you’re going to pray, why worry? Being free from worry is a beautiful thing. Prayer gives our worries structure and boundaries. It also lifts up our worries to a higher power, gives us relief to think freely and/or strategically, and allows us freedom to practice trusting God. In scripture we are instructed not to worry by the one whom we follow and adore. This exercise puts structure to worrying and empowers participants to be intentional about those things that concern them in their lives.

Distribute paper and pens or pencils. Instruct all to make columns of areas of their lives that worry them, such as finances, health, relationships, and so on. Now, ask someone to read Matthew 6:24–34. Then instruct participants to fill in those columns with the things that cause them worry. Put checkmarks next to the things that require action or that need attention. If anyone gets “stuck,” invite that person to use the group for ideas and support. When all have completed their lists and checked those things needing action, cut out the remaining items and put them in a basket or bowl. Celebrate having given God those things that simply require faith. Encourage one another to act on the rest. Repeat the Serenity Prayer at the end.

### 6 Beautiful Mind

**Leader preparation:** Read Luke 9:28–36. Sit meditatively for three minutes, imagining yourself present during the Transfiguration. Feel Christ’s love and spirit within you.

**Supplies:**

- Bibles
- comfortable chairs

In his book *Lord, Teach Us to Pray*, Scottish preacher Alexander Whyte refers to “the divine offices and the splendid services of the Christian imagination” (Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, p. 25, “Meditation”). This lovely exercise is designed

to provide the opportunity to draw closer to Christ's presence through the power of our imaginations.

Have everyone get comfortable, sitting straight with legs crossed or feet on the floor. An open posture releases stress and invites the beauty of Spirit to enter in. (If you like, preface the meditation with the little song "Into My Heart": "Into my heart, into my heart. Come into my heart, Lord Jesus. Come in today, come in to stay, Come into my heart, Lord Jesus.")

Read Luke 9:28–36. Ask people to picture themselves at the Transfiguration scene. Invite silent or voiced responses to the following sentence stems:

- I see . . .
- I feel . . .
- The beauty of Christ is like . . .

## Sending & Serving Activities

### 7 Speaking Beauty (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Think on the power of words. Think on Jesus as the Word Incarnate. Breathe deeply and pray: *God, you created the world through your word. Bless me with insight and understanding about the power of my words. Show me how to create a brighter world through the words I choose to speak. Amen.*

**Supplies:**

- Bibles

Many times in the Bible we are taught the power of words. Words from the mouth of God created the entire world. In James 3:6 we are told that the tongue is the most destructive member of the body. That means it is the most powerful.

Ask participants to think of the different "worlds" they live in, such as work, neighborhood, family, church. Are these settings satisfying? Is there conflict? Ask the group to consider how they speak in relation to these "worlds." What words do they use?

Ask people to pair up. One participant says a word that is negative, and the other counters with a word that creates beauty. Examples are exclude/invite, judgment/forgiveness, and violence/tenderness.

Share insights, if desired. Invite everyone to experiment with new words in the upcoming week.

Close in a prayer such as this: *God, you created the world through your word. Bless us all with insight and understanding about the power of words. Embrace us, your children, in your world of creation, so we too might create brighter worlds, through the words we choose to speak. Amen.*

## 8 Blooming

**Leader preparation:** Watch the YouTube video of “In the Bulb There Is a Flower” (tune: Promise).

Consider items in your life that are worrisome or in the early stages of fretfulness. These items require faith, patience, and perhaps vision as well. Think about the video and what faith might bring to these issues that have yet to yield the fullness of beauty. Settle into your chair, take a deep, cleansing breath, and pray: *Thank you, God, for the beauty that is inherent in flowers and in all situations that are blessed by you. Give me vision, patience, and faith that sees beyond what is currently showing. Amen.*

**Supplies:**

- hymn: “In the Bulb There Is a Flower” by Natalie Sleeth (tune: Promise), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkWYubdnc7o>
- computer with Internet access
- Bibles

Read Nehemiah 8 after asking people to listen for the changes the Israelites’ experience. What did they learn? What shifting emotions did they experience? What new practices did they adopt? What beauty did they enjoy?

Invite people to view “In the Bulb There Is a Flower” and ponder the changes they need to make or are hoping for in their lives.

Prayer: *Thank you, O God, for the examples of beauty around us, for the way things unfold into a surprising work of art and color. We know you have not left any of us out. We affirm our faith in your goodness, your power, and the beauty that awaits us, in these and all other circumstances. In faith we pray, Amen.*

## 9 The Law of Christ

**Leader preparation:** Think of times you have felt burdened with sorrow or inner conflict of some kind. Think of the friends and loved ones who have helped you through those times. Friendship and sharing one another’s burdens is indeed a beautiful aspect of our faith. In the service that is extended to you, the law of Christ mentioned in Galatians 6:2 is fulfilled. This “law of Christ” is the law of love, the “royal law” referred to in James 2:8. Think of at least three people who might benefit from this law, coming from you.

**Supplies:**

- Bibles

“Who needs me?” might be a good place to start with this activity. The law of love spoken of in Galatians and James is the law of bearing one another’s burdens. Talk a bit about the “law of Christ.” How have people’s lives been changed by this law? What are the feelings brought about by being able to share our burdens? Have participants shout out the feelings.

Now, instruct them to design an equation (burdens + sharing = joy?) that demonstrates this law. This equation does not have to be perfect. There could be more than one equation. Engaging in the process makes the beauty of this law shine through. Complete with a prayer such as: *God, your law of love has saved us all more than once. Make us bringers of your royal law, the law of Christ, by bearing one another’s burdens. Send us out with pure hearts and a willingness to serve, thereby fulfilling your law and embodying your love. Amen.*

### Reflect

When read in the shelter and comfort of community, the Bible can transform lives and make a world of light and love. Remember the gospel in one word is “love.” Love your neighbor as yourself, for God is love. Whenever we take the time to reflect on these words (“beautiful words, wonderful words of life”), we create a world of beauty that gives glory to our creator, and to us, the children of God.

# Experiencing Beauty



## Exploration: Discipleship

### About this Age Group

In the dictionary the word “disciple” has many related words: “adherent” (sticking to), “student”, “fan”, “follower”, “pupil”, and “believer”. “Disciple” is an old word, one that has relevance mainly in relation to those early twelve Jesus chose to carry his message, and also to the seventy that he sent out in Luke 10. But the word refers to all of us who are drawn to and inspired by the Way of Christ, the Way of love, inclusion, forgiveness, justice, and peace. It is not an easy way; that is why we speak of the “joys and costs” of discipleship. It is, however, worth it. And those who glimpse its beauty and value understand the reference to a “treasure hidden in a field” (Matthew 13:44). To follow Christ is to dare to become who we truly are.

### About this Exploration

As disciples, we seek to live as Jesus lived, awake to God’s ongoing invitation to sacred relationship. This awareness helps us to discover beauty throughout our journey of discipleship, in both whole and broken places. We open ourselves to the possibility of restoration and renewal, both individually and in community. We connect with God as complete persons—with bodies, minds, hearts, and spirits. We learn to trust our physical senses as entry points into boundless worlds of beauty; they are signposts by which we discover the Holy in the ever changing creation around and within us. As we engage the Spirit through beauty, God opens us to an entire world of sacred opportunity and pulls us gently, powerfully, toward transformation.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:  
**Exodus 35:20–29**  
**Acts 9:17–20**

## Leader Preparation

What are the different roles you play in life? No doubt there are several, such as parent, child, sibling, employee, volunteer, provider, nurturer, teacher, student, and so on. If you seek to follow Christ, add disciple to that list. What are the characteristics of a true disciple? Faithfulness? Honesty? Stewardship? Write a few of your own thoughts and meditate on the words. Without judgment or self-invalidation, highlight or underline those you would like to work on.

*Prayer: God of perfection and mercy, look on me with your favor and compassion. Show me ways to grow in my faith and live my life as one who shines with your light in ordinary but beautiful ways. Thank you. Amen.*

## Session Development

For each session leaders may choose from nine activities that help learners engage the practice of faith. It is best to select at least one activity from “Exploring and Engaging,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving.” The first activity in each category

## Exploring & Engaging Activities



### 1 An Offering (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Beauty, like love, takes countless forms. Center yourself in quietness. Allow your body to completely relax. Direct your imagination toward the gifts of beauty you enjoy and that you have to offer. Go wide in your consideration: from the blue sky above to the love you have for others. Give thanks to God for all these gifts, and then say a prayer such as this one:

*Prayer: Dear God, Author of All Beauty, I offer my thanks for the gifts you have given me to enjoy and to share. All creation sings of your glory, your goodness, and your love. Fill me with the ability to appreciate and communicate the immeasurable bounty of your creativity. Thank you, too, God, for creating me and everyone who will be attending this session. Amen.*

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- (optional) drum or large pot or can for drumming

You are meditating on and creating beauty in this exercise. You are also creating a possible performance piece for worship. Read Exodus 35:20–29. Note that “everyone who was willing and whose heart moved them” offered up material gifts of beauty for the tent of meeting. As a community, they created an “offering” to God.

Invite the group to make an offering of spiritual gifts. If you choose, a volunteer can slowly play a drum as participant steps up and completes the phrase, “In beauty I offer my \_\_\_\_\_.” Try to move in a way that demonstrates the gift. Examples are bowing for forgiveness, twirling for creativity, or lifted arms for devotion. DO NOT HURRY. Invite participants to use their imaginations to envision what they can offer in the circle. This activity is designed to give thanks for, but also to *create* beauty, as God created all of us.

### 2 Light of the World

**Leader preparation:** We often speak of light in worship. We sing the words from Psalm 119: Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path (Psalm 119:105 KJV). This activity puts those words into a living, physical movement and activity. Bring a bag of tea lights with matches or a candle lighting wand. Sit quietly as you think of the Trinity: Creator, Christ, Holy Spirit.

**Supplies:**

- tea lights
- matches or lighter
- (optional) song: “Thy Word Is a Light Unto My Path,” Amy Grant and Michael W. Smith, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ig8dO3VVayw&feature=related>

We use many words to describe God. We in the church (whether or not we think about these things) are Trinitarians. We say God is “three in one,” God is Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit, or Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Have everyone sit in silence. It is important not to become conversational or casual as you engage these meditative thoughts. Creating a mood of reverence, say



is designed for “easy preparation” (able to be done with minimal preparation with supplies normally found at the church). Using all nine activities could take 90–120 minutes.

- To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose three activities, using one activity from each category.
- To plan a session of 45–60 minutes, choose four or five activities, using at least one activity from each category.

the word “Creator.” All who would like to may say a word that comes to mind and then light a tea light candle. Next, say the word “Christ.” Repeat the lighting and naming activity. Last, say the word Holy Spirit. Again, follow the word/candle ritual.

Contemplate the rich tradition of disciples who have come before you. Light another tea light. Invite people to name disciples of Christ whose lives have inspired them. Pause for a few moments of silence. When the candles are lit and the space is full of light, repeat the following or a similar prayer:

*Prayer: God, you have told us we are the light of the world. Help us to breathe in the light of who you are, so that we, through our faith and discipline, might fulfill our mission to share that light with others. Let the beauty of your love shine in everything we think and do. Amen.*

### 3 New Eyes

**Leader preparation:** If possible, during the day or a few days prior to this exercise, spend time outdoors. If it’s warm and you can do it, sit quietly and breathe in the surrounding sights and sounds. Meditate on the beauty around you and notice the progression of time in its unfettered majesty and peace. Feel yourself to be part of all of it. Relax your body into a posture of peace and receptivity. Close with a deep breath and prayer of thanks.

*Prayer: God, I give you thanks for the miracle of creation. I thank you, too, that you have created me to be a part of all that is. Bless me with your presence as I continue with my day. Amen.*

#### **Supplies:**

- Bible
- space to walk indoors or outside

Invite participants to do a meditative moving exercise on creation. Read Acts 9:17–20, noting that Paul sees with “new eyes” after his encounter with Christ. Walk around in silence, being open to God in all you see around you. Especially encourage all to see one another in this meditation on creation.

After three or four minutes, stop the movement and form a circle. Invite each participant to complete this sentence: As a disciple with new eyes, I see the beauty of \_\_\_\_\_. Encourage participants to practice seeing with new eyes in the days to come.

## Discerning & Deciding Activities

### 4 Following Jesus (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Think of all the areas of your life: spirituality, health and fitness, finances, and so on. Recognize that God wants to be a part of every area of your life. God cannot be compartmentalized, and neither can we. God is Spirit and therefore penetrates all aspects of our hopes and dreams and ordinary activities. Meditate on the areas in your life you would like Jesus to revive.

#### **Supplies:**

- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- paper
- pens

We speak somewhat casually about following Christ, sometimes without thinking deeply about what it means in terms of lifestyle and changes that we might need to make. In this exercise, the “rubber meets the road.” We get real about those areas of life the light of Christ has not been invited to shine on.

First, ask participants to identify different areas of life. Write those on the newsprint or whiteboard. Be as specific with these areas as possible. Name both personal and private areas as well as public areas. Then ask participants to choose just one area in which they feel they are not following Jesus. What might the Spirit be telling them to do or stop doing in this area? Draw the outline of a stoplight on the paper. What might God want them to start doing? People may draw a path on their papers that represent this choice.

They may write their thoughts on their papers. Invite volunteers to share their insights and any commitments they would like to make about this exercise. Assure them that sharing is entirely voluntary and that those who are privileged to be witnesses are in sacred, confidential space.



### 5 Journey of Promise

**Leader preparation:** Take time to view the artwork “Journey of the Magi” by James Tissot. Now, think about your own faith journey. Say a prayer to focus, such as: *God who calls me and everyone with hearts to listen, guide me in this exercise so that we all might more clearly discern our calling, as well as our destination. Then, with courage and commitment, may we decide to follow. Amen.*

**Supplies:**

- artwork: “Journey of the Magi” by James Tissot, [https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1004323110?VIEW\\_PRODUCT=true&product\\_id=37962&store\\_id=1401](https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1004323110?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=37962&store_id=1401)
- Bible
- blank sheets of paper
- regular and colored pencils

Invite all to look deeply at the artwork “Journey of the Magi.” Then review Exodus 35:20–29. Consider that the people in Exodus were on a journey out of bondage to the land God promised. The Magi were on a journey to visit the Christ child and thereby fulfill the promise of salvation. As a community of Christ followers, we, too, are on a journey to live out God’s love. There are obstacles and challenges. There is great beauty and adventure. All of these are part of the journey.

Invite all to draw a simple map, indicating “You Are Here,” and continuing through terrain to what he or she believes God has promised, and placing a star or other symbol of beauty at the destination. Have each one mark that, and then fill in the journey with various stops of beauty and challenge. If there is time, invite all to tell of their journeys. Alternatively, let each one share with a partner for two minutes each.

### 6 Over My Head

**Leader preparation:** View the YouTube video “Over My Head,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q2DLSXYp6Q&feature=related>. Read the scene from Acts 9:17–20. How beautiful that God uses Ananias as a conduit for healing the mighty and powerful Saul. Somewhere “over the heads” of both Saul and Ananias were instructions God had for each of them. Further, how beautiful was the surrender and courage that both of them exhibited by following those instructions without

knowing the outcome of their actions beforehand. Similarly, over our heads are perhaps instructions as well. Sit quietly and say a prayer such as this: *Mysterious God, over my head, inside my being, you are guiding, instructing and strengthening me for a task. Help me to tune into your wisdom and beauty, so that I might follow you to a situation or another sojourner in need of healing and blessing. Amen.*

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- song: “Over My Head” African American traditional (tune: Over My Head), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q2DLSXYxp6Q&feature=related>
- computer with Internet access

God uses us in ways we may not be able to foresee or understand. This is what faith is all about. Ananias resisted God’s instructions to visit Saul, but clearly he was important to the mission. God knows our potential. Over our heads, inside our being, God is calling us, guiding and assuring us that we are able. Ask someone to read Acts 9:17–20. Then watch the YouTube video of “Over My Head.” Ask participants to make pairs and share briefly about a time when someone unlikely helped them see things differently. Now have each one share for one minute what God might be sending them to do or say, for the purposes of healing and transformation in the life of another.

Close in prayer: *Mysterious God, over our heads, inside our beings, you are guiding and strengthening us for a task. Help us to tune into your wisdom and beauty, so that we might follow you to a situation or another sojourner in need of healing and blessing. Amen.*

## Sending & Serving Activities

### 7 Beautiful Offerings (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** We read in Exodus 35:20–29 that the community brought all it had to fulfill the “work of God through Moses.” We, too, make beautiful offerings, not just with things, but also with small acts of loving-kindness. Close your eyes and meditate on these things for a couple of moments. Give thanks in prayer:

**Supplies:**

- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- object to pass around

In Richard Foster’s classic book *Celebration of Discipline*, he says, “In the realm of the spirit we soon discover that the real issues are found in the tiny, insignificant corners of life.” The little things that beg for our love and attention are obscured by our desire to do something “really big.” This is a trick of the world, a trick that must be discovered and outsmarted.

For this activity ask people for categories that represent ways we can show care—such as food, rest, comfort, understanding, forgiveness, and welcome. As these categories spark ideas, have people share examples they have experienced. Each person who speaks can hold a readily available object, such as a Bible or a candle. Once someone’s comments spark another person’s ideas, the object will be passed on as a symbol of caring deeds effecting change.

Invite people to consider what they might do for others in the coming week. Encourage players to do anonymously at least one act of kindness per day this week. Ask them to then notice how it feels to do that.

### 8 Chain of Saints

**Leader preparation:** Jesus was the ultimate teacher. Since that radiant moment found in the Transfiguration in Luke, generations of believers have shared the imprint of Jesus on their lives with others by their example and commitment. Think of the most influential people you have known in your Christian walk. A teacher? Your own mother or father? A grandparent? What attributes did these people demonstrate and share? Think of a story that reflects these attributes. Relax and close your eyes to picture the person or persons that have come to mind. Thank them, and bless them (whether or not they are still living).

**Supplies:**

- uniform strips of paper approximately 2" x 3"
- pens or pencils
- stapler

It is a real gift of service to listen to the stories and particularly to the memories others have of ones they have loved and been loved by. Hand out the strips of paper. Invite the participants to close their eyes and call to mind the person or persons most influential in their Christian walk. Then have them write the names of these saints on their papers.

Give each the opportunity to share some small story or description of the person(s) who came to mind. Acknowledge that we all know Jesus, at least in part, because of knowing someone who demonstrated the qualities of faithfulness, kindness, wisdom, and humility that Jesus showed in the gospels. Collect the strips of paper, and ask someone to staple them together in a "chain of saints." Form a loop with one strip and fasten the ends. Then loop the next strip through this first one and fasten the ends. Continue creating the "chain of saints" using all the strips. Hang it somewhere visible, as a beautiful reminder of the blessing of knowing them.

*Prayer: God of the Ages, thank you for these saints we have recalled in our memories and stories today. Let your Holy Spirit bless us with the attributes they demonstrated so well for us, so that we might in turn demonstrate the same qualities of Christ to those around us in our own lives. Amen.*

### 9 Love Wins

**Leader preparation:** Imagine your life without the gift of love. How paltry and barren every day would be without the gift we crave and seem to be designed to give. Think of times you have been angry and decided to choose the high road of forgiveness and expressing God's love instead of the desire for revenge or pay-back. Think of those you love and appreciate now in your life. Breathe deeply and close your eyes. See golden sunlight shine on all those you love and all those you have difficulty loving. Ask God to make you more generous in your ability to show that love while feeling the joy of having a life of love.

**Supplies:**

- a half dozen or so items that represent either love or lovelessness, such as shawl, Bible, ring, piece of fruit
- picture of someone smiling or frowning
- headlines from a recent newspaper

“There is no surprise more magical than the surprise of being loved. It is God’s finger on humankind’s shoulder” (Charles Morgan, *Quote Garden*, 2011). Read this quote to those gathered. Ask them to shout out words that describe what life might be like without love (for example, depressing, cold, lonely, meaningless).

Call their attention to the items you have brought. In what ways might these items represent a call for love? Let each one select an item and imagine a scenario in which they might offer the beauty of discipleship. These are examples of love winning. This is the Way of Christ. Invite all to focus in the coming days on the phrase “Love wins,” and then act correspondingly as a disciple devoted to spreading the beauty of Christ.

### Reflect

To be a disciple of Christ is to choose life (the resurrection) in each and every situation. It is also to live a life of challenge, growth, and joy. We need one another, however, to validate, make real, and expand this journey of creation and adventure. Give thanks for community, for Christ, and for love in all its forms!

# Experiencing Beauty



## Exploration: Christian Tradition

### About this Age Group

Many adults are soothed and comforted by the faith traditions of their churches. Others may find that certain traditions no longer speak to them or light up their faith as they once did. The key to an enlivening tradition is how it is experienced. Faithful sharing is helpful, as is finding new ways to make the tradition relevant and meaningful. These activities are designed to stimulate interaction, deep thought, and renewed appreciation for what may be familiar but explored and conducted with a new approach.

### About this Exploration

For centuries, followers of Christian tradition have sought ways to connect with God. Layers of song, prayers, spoken word, and silent searching have characterized the heart of the community of faith in its longing for this connection. The ways we worship and live out our daily lives reflect these traditions, sometimes without our even knowing it. At times, traditions are left behind for generations and then rediscovered in new, relevant, and powerful ways. This exploration seeks to examine, appreciate, and perhaps revive some of our traditions and thereby bless and empower a faith that is rooted in today's world and experience.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

**Psalm 8**  
**John 12:1-8**

**Leader Preparation**

What traditions do you love? Why? Are there some that no longer touch, move, and inspire you? How could they be refreshed to stimulate a faithful response? Talk about these things with someone who shares your faith. Make notes for yourself, so your faith is a bit brighter. Allow yourself to be moved by those things you love and see newly.

Prayer: *God of yesterday and today, fill me with a spirit of faithfulness and renewed hope. Bless me with insight, peace, and new eyes and ears of receptivity to your grace so that I might pass along some new possibility to those whose faith needs refreshing. Thank you, Amen.*

**Session Development**

For each session leaders may choose from nine activities that help learners engage the practice of faith. It is best to select at least one activity from “Exploring and Engaging,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving.” The first activity in each category is designed for “easy preparation” (able to be done with minimal preparation with supplies normally found at the church). Using all nine activities could

- To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose three activities, using one activity from each category.

Exploring & Engaging Activities



**1 Bulletin Beauty (Easy Preparation):**

**Leader preparation:** Go through a selected bulletin on a recent Sunday. Look deeply at the prayers, songs, liturgy, and sermon topic. Put your hand on the bulletin and ask God to make it “come alive” for you. Distinguish several meanings that may be “hidden in plain sight.” Make notes and ask yourself, “What is beautiful about these words/scripture/motions of the service?” Let yourself be moved by the entire theme of that worship service.

**Supplies:**

- bulletins
- pens and highlighters

Christian liturgy, or patterns of worship, are rooted in tradition and history. Our services are designed to guide worshipers’ thoughts and action in the direction of the sacred, to give us a taste of holiness, and to inspire all to live a life that is pleasing to God. Ideally, we are revived in worship, “cleansed” of the weight of the world, and ready to live anew in God’s service and joy.

Worship contains parts that appeal to different tastes and inclinations of those present. As people have different learning styles, children of God respond differently to various aspects of worship. Access to the beauty of worship and the experience of the holy is provided by music, silence, preaching of the word, movement, art, or other practices such as hymn singing, passing the peace, offering, or communion. When we worship wholeheartedly we catch glimpses of the beauty of God’s presence, and our faith is deepened. We are strengthened then to go out in the world, to serve, to love, and to be the vessels of God’s beauty we are created to be.

Invite participants to “go deep” into one of the worship services. This is a time to ask questions, make comments, and explore some things we sometimes do without thinking. Ask: *What is your favorite part of the service? What about that appeals to you or speaks to you? Where in the service do you have difficulty being connected? Why? What part of the service calls to mind a memory or a longing? What parts of the service seem to you to be irrelevant, repetitious, or particularly valuable?* Discuss and acknowledge each person’s contribution. End in prayer, acknowledging the many ways we experience beauty in worship and giving thanks for all those involved in a worship service: the pastor, the music director, the choir, lay leaders, acolytes, and those who attend.

**2 Acting Out**

**Leader preparation:** Read Psalm 8. Meditate on the beauty described therein. Breathe deeply and relax into this prayer: *God of all creation, thank you for the beauty of the earth, the beauty of human beings, and the beauty of your Holy Word. Let your Spirit breathe on me with peace and insight, grace and wisdom, so that I might walk worthy in the beauty of this time together and during my whole life. Amen.*

**Supplies:**

- (optional) drum

It’s so easy to read through the Psalms without stopping to let their beauty sink in. When we read scripture together, especially beautiful words of praise, we connect not only with one another in the present, but with worshipers who gathered

- To plan a session of 45–60 minutes, choose four or five activities, using at least one activity from each category.

in times past, singing, dancing, praising God in spirit and truth.

Divide Psalm 8 into three parts, with corresponding groups to create meaningful movement and rhythm in response to each section. If you choose to have a drum, let one person play out a rhythm for the movement. Select another individual to read the psalm slowly. See what you create together. End with a prayer, such as: *God of all beauty, thank you for the beauty of the Psalms, the beauty of those who worship you, and the beauty of your Holy Word. Fill us with your spirit of creation and beauty as we go our separate ways. Amen.*

### 3 Singing Our Lives

**Leader preparation:** Select five hymns that your community sings fairly often. Write hymn titles and page numbers on small pieces of paper. Read the hymns to yourself, noting some of the passages most beautiful to you. Ask yourself: How do these words connect to our faith lives? What does this mean in a context of beauty to me? Who or what does it remind me of? How do these words touch me, with regard to my relationships or my everyday life?

**Supplies:**

- hymnals
- slips of paper on which are written hymn titles and numbers
- container
- (optional) keyboard and accompanist

The psalms instruct us at least eighteen times to sing praises to God. Nowhere does it say you must sing perfectly or even on pitch. Christians have much to sing and pray about! The good news of God’s love and redemption is so wonderful that not to sing would render less than powerful the essence of our faith. Many people are timid, thinking, “I’m not a good singer.” Perhaps they have been told not to sing. That’s why we sing together, to make a joyful noise, regardless of our natural talent or our musical training. This Exploration is about allowing the spirit to enter into the worship space. Encourage one another to hold back nothing in this activity, to let our light shine with words, music, and a passion for God’s grace.

Place the slips of paper (containing hymn titles and numbers) in a container. Have someone pick a paper from the bowl or basket. Ask people to look up the hymns and study the words for a few minutes. Invite participants to select particularly beautiful phrases and share how the words touch them. Then ask for a volunteer to lead the group in singing the hymn. Create a climate of encouragement and enthusiasm by having everyone support those leading. “No holding back” is the name of this game! Let laughter, love, and support for each leader bring all present to a new height of singing joy. Repeat the process, asking another volunteer to choose a paper.

*Note:* Many hymns are pitched too high for untrained voices. Therefore, it is helpful to sing without accompaniment. End with a prayer of thanks for the writers of the hymns, for the tradition of singing, and for all the saints who have sung and lived these words.



## Discerning &amp; Deciding Activities

 4 Extravagant Gift (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** According to Christian tradition we are all responsible for encouraging, comforting, and building up one another. Read John 12:1–8e. Focus on the extravagant gift of perfume and the Mary’s gift of using it to anoint the feet of Jesus. Think of a time someone was similarly extravagant with you, with a literal gift, a compliment, or gracious gesture. Say a prayer of thanks.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- (optional) box wrapped like a gift

Read aloud John 12:1–8. Ask if anyone has received what he or she would call an extravagant gift, material or otherwise. How did that person respond? Ask if any have looked down on such a display of extravagance, as though it were wasteful or inappropriate. If you have a wrapped gift box, pass it around the circle as people complete the following sentences. If not, simply take turns sharing answers.

The first time around, have each participant complete this sentence: “I give the gift of \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_.” On the next time around, each should complete this sentence: “I’d like the gift of \_\_\_\_\_ in my life.”

## 5 Wordless Love

**Leader preparation:** Take time to relax. If you are able, listen to some soothing music. Simply be in the presence of God’s love.

**Supplies:**

- CD of restful music and a player
- chairs in a circle
- Bible

Silence is an ancient spiritual tradition, practiced frequently in retreats and monasteries and in special religious communities. But there is no reason we cannot engage this spiritual discipline as a faith community anywhere. Human beings are inundated with sound and noise in today’s world. There is the sound of traffic, technology, talking, and loud music. Some restaurants and stores have such loud music, there’s no chance of being heard without shouting! When we talk constantly, we can miss the chance for real connection. We can even avoid closeness as a result of all that talking. God especially can seem far away when there is no space between words. This is a time for silence.

Read John 12:1–8. Invite participants to mime an act similar to the one found in the scripture. Have everyone sit in a circle. Turn on low volume the music you selected. Give the group verbal (or written) instructions to take turns walking around the circle, greeting each person in some way that has no words. Encourage eye contact. There may be handshakes, hugs, or simple smiles. The idea is to get past the superficial and become comfortable in a world of silent beauty. When all have finished, take a few minutes for each one to share his or her experience.

## 6 Imagine

**Leader preparation:** Tear out and bring to the gathering beautiful and inspiring pictures of nature and people found in various magazines or newspapers. Bring poster board or an artist's notebook of large sheets of paper. You all will be making a group collage of what's possible in a vital and supportive church. The collage should show examples of lives well lived, according to your faith and your values, not just material wealth, although that isn't prohibited. The idea is for people to think deeply about the purpose and vision of koinonia, the true "common unity" of Christ's mission on earth. Participants can bring pictures as well.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- pictures from magazines
- scissors
- glue sticks
- two-sided tape
- poster board

*Tikkun Olam* is a phrase from the Jewish tradition meaning, "To heal or repair the world." Christians have the same mandate in creating God's realm here on earth. This activity echoes the ancient tradition to "build up the church" and establish community ("common unity") through a shared vision. We need to live out our faith in ways that are beautiful and meaningful and that bring joy to the world (as Jesus did!). Closeness, encouragement, hope, and abundance are all part of the traditional dream of koinonia, or true partnership, in fulfilling the beauty and tradition of the church.

Make sure there are plenty of pictures to go around. Give out glue sticks, scissors, and magazines. Invite participants to "think big," or go beyond what they think is possible. Remind them of all of the beautiful world described in Psalm 8, as well as Matthew 19:26: "With God all things are possible." Invite all to contribute to the group collage. When you are finished, let each describe the collage and express his or her vision for the church.

## Sending & Serving Activities

## 7 Beautiful Steward (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Think about times you have been generous and then were surprised by the blessing that ensued. Think of a time when someone has been generous with you. How surprised were you? How did you express your gratitude? This is an exercise designed to strengthen our "giving muscle." The expensive nard used in John 12:1-8 was used for burial. Instead, Mary used it while her Lord was still alive. She gave generously, holding nothing back.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- slips of paper
- (optional) offering container used for worship
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

It's funny how conventional it is to think you have to have much in order to give. In John 12:1-8 we see that the heart of the giver is of much greater value than wealth. Read this passage aloud. What is Jesus saying here? One thing is for

sure: he encouraged generosity, humility, and service. Ask participants to think about where their money goes. Then instruct them to think about what charitable organization or need moves them and seems to “call their name.” You may give examples, such as the mission of the church, hunger relief, homelessness, literacy, or mentoring.

Give out slips of paper and pens or pencils. Ask people to jot down names of organizations or causes, including your congregation, that they believe in. On other papers they will name ways people can support these causes. Finally, they may write ways they’ve been blessed by various ministries. Pass around a container to collect the papers after people have shared. Have people take turns drawing out the slips of paper and reading them. On newsprint or whiteboard make three columns: Names, Support, and Blessings. As the papers are read, write the idea in the appropriate column.

### 8 Anointed

**Leader preparation:** Read John 12:1–8. Imagine yourself in this scene. What would you be thinking? Wondering? Feeling?

**Supplies:**

- Bibles
- props suited to the story, such as perfume bottle, towel

Anointing one another is an ancient Christian tradition. John 12:1–8 contains the story of Jesus being anointed by Mary. Her act was controversial. The nard she used was expensive. Some thought her extravagance was wasteful. She wiped Jesus’ feet with her hair, which was unseemly. Yet Jesus praised Mary.

Set a chair out on which people will imagine Jesus sitting. Ask for a volunteer to play Mary and another to play Judas. As you read the passage, these actors will mime the story. All others will imagine themselves as witnesses to the scene. At several points in the reading, stop and ask people to say what they think various characters are thinking. For example, pause and say the character’s name. People will respond with a brief statement in that person’s words. How did acting out the story reveal nuances of beauty?

### 9 Beautiful Steward

**Leader preparation:** Read Psalm 8. Consider all the beautiful things mentioned in the scripture and all the beautiful things for which you are the steward and caretaker. Consider ways that you might more genuinely fulfill the post at which God has placed humanity, in the words of the psalmist: “a little lower than the angels . . . rulers of the works of your hands.”

Find images or cut out shapes of home, church, nature, people, a city, and money. Put these in a large basket or bowl. Also make a few “wild cards” with question marks on them.

**Supplies:**

- Bibles
- several cut-outs or pictures each of home, church, nature, a city, people, and money
- basket or bowl
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

At the heart of our faith is the tradition of good stewardship. We are called to care for the earth, our homes, our finances, and our bodies. We are called to be responsible for our church, its members, and its resources.

Have someone read aloud the psalm, and then point to someone who will pick a cut-out from the bowl. After showing the cut-out, invite participants to name ways to be good stewards with that item. Ask a scribe to record on newsprint or a whiteboard what is said. Do this as much as time allows. Let each one pick a cut-out, take it home, and write on it reminders of how he or she intends to improve his or her stewardship in this area of life.

### Reflect

The miracle of the good news is that it never grows old. Regardless of a tradition's longevity, the open heart of the believer determines the newness of the experience. Sharing God's love and witnessing to our faith make all things new. Practice new ways to love one another; explore bold new avenues of service. Hold nothing back and see evidence of grace all around you!

# Experiencing Beauty



## Exploration: Context and Mission

### About this Age Group

Most Christian adults are keenly aware of the need for mission for the church, a purpose for the community, and an “other-directed” focus for one’s individual life. There is “something stirring” inside that calls for attention, connection, and living out one’s beliefs. “Giving back” is a fundamental theme in the social context in which most of us grew up. When groups are alive with a shared purpose, laughing, helping, and working side by side, there is an unmistakable beauty that shines through. Bodies can be tired, but hearts are glad. God is smiling inside the soul of one who gives selflessly to God’s people in need. Step back. Look deeply. See the beauty and smile along.

### About this Exploration

The beauty that surrounds us—in our relationships as well as the gifts of creation—points us to God. When we actively engage with our faith, we open ourselves to seeing beauty everywhere, in an ever widening context. As we awaken to a new appreciation for the divine, we are better equipped to reflect beauty ourselves and join with others to experience the grace and glory of God.

**BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:**  
**Ecclesiastes 3:1–13**  
**2 Corinthians 5:16–20**

## Leader Preparation

In a context of love, with the idea of God’s realm in your mind, it becomes obvious that all the children of the world need the comfort and care of Christ. You could say that we, being children ourselves (children of God), need that same comfort and care. Breathe deeply and allow a sense of that comfort and care to cover yourself.

*Prayer: God of mercy and kindness, make me a light to your people. Show me the way to inspire myself and others to generously and joyfully bring your light and love to a hurting world. Amen.*

## Session Development

For each session leaders may choose from nine activities that help learners engage the practice of faith. It is best to select at least one activity from “Exploring and Engaging,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving.” The first activity in each category is designed for “easy preparation” (able to be done with minimal preparation with supplies normally found at the church). Using all nine activities could take 90–120 minutes.

- To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose three activities, using one activity from each category.
- To plan a session of 45–60 minutes, choose four or five activities, using at least one activity from each category.

## Exploring & Engaging Activities

### 1 See the Beauty (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Gaze into a mirror. Look beyond your judgments and the desire to “fix” yourself. Look deeply and see the person that God created, that God loves, the person with whom God desires a relationship.

**Supplies:**

- markers
- newsprint or whiteboard

Often we are tempted to leave the subjects of mission, leadership, and “big thinking” to those we see as powerful, smart, and qualified. To quote the Hopi elders, “We are the ones we have been waiting for.” We are the ones. The Bible is rife with examples of God calling those who thought of themselves as not up to the task of responding to the call of service and mission. The main components of this simple activity are seeing our own beauty, our own worthiness, and beyond that, the power of God to empower us to do anything.

Draw the outline of a mirror on easel paper. Ask everyone to gaze around the circle and to imagine that they are seeing everyone present through the eyes of God. Gently encourage participants to press through awkwardness to see the beauty, worthiness, and power in the group—to see the difference their actions, empowered by God’s Spirit, can make in the world. After two minutes, invite people to complete this sentence: I see . . . (for example, joy, competence). Write the words in the middle of the mirror outline.

### 2 Match Game

**Leader preparation:** Make five large cards with the following words: Addiction, Elder Care, Orphans, Hunger, and Poverty. Make four smaller cards for each one of the larger ones: for Addiction: spiritual support, across all boundaries, loss of confidence, new life; for Elder Care: connects us with the past, vulnerable, shares wisdom, sometimes lonely; for Orphans: become like one of these, suffers abuse and neglect, little blessings, vulnerable; for Hunger: running on empty, causes other problems, happy faces, everyone invited; and for Poverty: little or nothing, crime often ensues, life of dignity, microloans.

**Supplies:**

- large and small cards prepared as described above
- chairs in a circle
- basket or bowl

This exercise is a meditative walking/matching game. Place the large cards face up on chairs, with a few chairs in between. Mix up the smaller cards in a basket or bowl. Give a few to each person. Instruct all to walk silently around the circle, placing the smaller cards on the same chair as the larger ones according to how they believe they match. There’s no “right” way to place the cards. When all the cards have been placed, invite everyone to sit, and talk briefly about the process. How did they decide where to place the small cards? Was there more than one large card that someone felt matched a small card? Was there more than one small card that matched a large card?

### 3 What's Important?

**Leader preparation:** Make a list of all the things that concern you in the world. Start with your own community; expand to include natural disasters, people unfairly imprisoned, hunger, overpopulation, cancer, and any other issue that comes to mind. If there are special missions sponsored by your church, add those to the list, too.

**Supplies:**

- paper
- pens or pencils

“Learn the lesson that, if you are to do the work of a prophet, what you need is not a scepter, but a hoe” (Bernard of Clairvaux [Quote Garden, 2011]). We are called as followers of Christ to serve all without discrimination or hesitation. It is easy to become overwhelmed and as a result do little or nothing. There is also the risk of burnout, becoming stressed in an attempt to “do it all.” This is an ordering process to prioritize the missions that speak to you. Ask your participants to make the same list of things that are of concern, which you outlined in the leadership preparation. Challenge everyone to order a new list of five or six ways to contribute that emphasize their gifts. Can they build a website, organize, clean, pray, bake, rake? Invite all to use this list when considering their plan for the year ahead.

## Discerning & Deciding Activities

### 4 Fruit Salad (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** In Galatians 5:22–23 we read about these wonderful fruits of the Spirit: love, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, goodness, gentleness, patience, and self-control. Which ones seem clear and present in your life? Which ones could use some polishing? Make a “note to self” of something you will act on this week.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- (optional) plastic fruit, package of fruit snacks, soft ball, or beanbag

Invite all to read Galatians 5:22–23. The fruits of the Spirit are essential ingredients for mission. Sitting or standing in a circle, toss the piece of plastic fruit, fruit snack, soft ball, or beanbag to a participant, along with the name of a spiritual fruit. Say his or her name, and then toss quickly. Example: “Dave, peace,” and then toss. Dave then briefly describes an example of peace in his life, or where he might need more peace. If you do not have an object to toss, simply call one another’s names to take turns.

Dave then calls the name of another participant and a spiritual fruit (for example, “patience”) and tosses the object to that person. He or she similarly describes an example and then tosses the packet/piece to another. When people receive the object and say something about that spiritual fruit in their lives (the presence or lack of it in their lives), they toss it to another person, repeating the pattern. Watch the fruit fly, and recommit to growing this fruit together:

### 5 Who's My Neighbor?

**Leader preparation:** Cut out pictures of people from a variety of different cultures, lifestyles, and economic settings. Write a brief description for each picture, and then glue both onto a 3" x 5" card. Look at each card and see God in the eyes of each person. Place all cards in a basket or bowl.

**Supplies:**

- cards with pictures
- basket or bowl

Some of us live in fairly small worlds. We go to the same stores, eat at the same restaurants, and socialize with the same friends. We can forget about the existence of others, their needs, and our commonalities. Talk a little with your group about isolation versus connectedness. Ask them where they go, what they do during the week, and how often they interact with those unlike them in dress, religion, or culture. Now, pass around the bowl, asking each one to pick a card and hold it up for others to see. Instruct each one to create a story that presents the person pictured in a beautiful light.

### 6 Cooking with Faith

**Leader preparation:** Faith is a wonderful source of nourishment. Here are a few of faith's ingredients: kindness, forgiveness, generosity, hard work, laughter, and love. You can come up with your own list of ingredients and put them on cards to distribute to participants. Their task will be to create the recipes for a beautiful life.

**Supplies:**

- cards with "scripture ingredients"
- markers and large sheets of newsprint

This activity encourages us to create contexts of beauty and possibility. Let participants name various difficult situations in life, such as being deep in debt; dealing with illness, grief, and despair; relationship trouble; and so forth.

Break into groups of three. Determine what situation each group will take. Tape the newsprint onto the walls, and send each group to a page with the assignment of creating a recipe with beautiful words of our faith such as: 1 cup kindness, 2 cups generosity, 3 tablespoons prayer, and so forth. Walk around and encourage and support, giving suggestions if needed. When people are done, have a little "cooking show," where they present their "gourmet" recipes, with enthusiasm!

## Sending & Serving Activities



### 7 Anonymous U. (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Think of acts of kindness that you could perform anonymously. What ones would delight the recipients? What ones would delight you?

**Supplies:**

- paper or index cards
- pens



Mother Teresa said we need not do great things in the world, only small things with great love. In his classic book *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster says: “Nothing disciplines the inordinate desires of the flesh like service, and nothing transforms the desires of the flesh like serving in hiddenness” (p. 130).

Ask participants to recall a time when they did something or someone did something for them anonymously. Ask them to recall being surprised, grateful, or overjoyed at someone’s generosity. Distribute paper or index cards and invite everyone to write three or four things they might do this week for someone anonymously, such as pay for someone’s toll or coffee, clean a room, or pick up litter. Then ask someone to “shuffle” the cards and another one to pass them out. Encourage people to determine to do at least one of those things this week for another person anonymously.

### 8 Salt and Light

**Leader preparation:** Think of a good meal you’ve enjoyed. What made it flavorful? Now think of how to “spice up” the places where you live and work. How can you bring beauty to them?

**Supplies:**

- hymn: “Over My Head.” African American traditional (tune: Over My Head), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q2DLSXYxp6Q&feature=related>
- (optional) computer with Internet access and/or hymnals

Sing the song “Over My Head.” View a version on YouTube if possible. Ask people to name places they regularly go during a week. Have them pair up and act out silently some ways that they can bring beauty to those contexts.

Gather participants together again. Have them name the places where they want to notice God “over their heads.” On what contexts did they reflect? Play the video or sing the song again. This time, people will take turns silently acting out the ways they want to bring beauty during the coming weeks.



### 9 What Time Is It?

**Leader preparation:** Read Ecclesiastes 3:1–13. Meditate on what “time” it is for you in your life. In the grand scheme of your life, and in the area of making a difference through service, what’s next . . . for you? Without thinking too much, write down areas of concern that tug on your heart, things that personally call your name.

**Supplies:**

- Bibles
- artwork: “Navaro Rapids” by Ando Hiroshige, <http://www.art.com/products/p10023130-sa-i802528/ando-hiroshige-navaro-rapids-c1855.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=ab4fda6b36f84ed3b285828650303e96&searchstring=navaro+rapids>
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projection capability

Read Ecclesiastes 3:1–13, asking people to listen for the opposites mentioned in the passage. Display “Navaro Rapids” by Ando Hiroshige. What words describe the turbulence in this print? Ask people to reflect on what seems chaotic about

their lives or the world. Name these aloud. Now ask people to picture Christ in the scene somehow. Also ask them to picture people doing good. How might these additions change the scene? What is one example they can give about a turbulent situation being transformed by God's love?

### Reflect

It does not take a lot of time to make a gesture or to make a difference. But it might take everything you've got to have the world become one that reflects the realm of God. The good news is that's what we're supposed to spend our time on. So acknowledge yourself for the great things you have already done. And thank God for the ways you will make a difference in the future.

# Experiencing Beauty



## Exploration: Future and Vision

### About this Age Group

It's easy to imagine a bright future as a child. With experience and disappointment, however, it can become harder for adults. God calls us into a future that is different from the past, if we are willing to go. The cross is all about a willingness to let go of the past and step into the unknown with trust, faithfulness, and the openness of a child. Experience does not have to jade us; it can make us wise, but still hopeful. Life can be an adventure instead of the "same things over and over."

### About this Exploration

As we engage with God, we grow in our capacity to understand God's work. Yet the beauty of God's handiwork is all around us in creation if we open ourselves to experience it. We often move from the traditional understanding of what it means for someone or something to be beautiful to a deeper awareness of the divine in all that has been created. In Future and Vision, we explore the beauty of the cosmos, the earth beneath our feet, and the sea below. As we marvel at God's handiwork in worship, we dare to imagine the wonders of God's realm, both now and in the future.

**BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:**  
**Job 38:1-11**  
**Revelation 21:2-5**

## Leader Preparation

We love to cling to the old and the familiar. This pertains to our surroundings, as well as to patterns of relationships and daily living. But allowing God to change us and move us in different directions can be exciting, if a bit unsettling and sometimes downright scary. That is why we have our faith. That is why we have one another. Only with courage and a sense of adventure will the future be something new and wonderful, in community and as individuals. Trust in God and let the ride begin!

*Prayer: God of the ages, you are always doing a new thing. Stir in me a willingness to not know and a willingness to be surprised and challenged. I hereby let go of the past and open my mind and my heart to a new future of freedom, joy, and self-expression, for myself, for my community, and for you! Thank you, God! Amen.*

## Session Development

For each session leaders may choose from nine activities that help learners engage the practice of faith. It is best to select at least one activity from “Exploring and Engaging,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving.” The first activity in each category is designed for “easy preparation” (able to be done with minimal preparation

## Exploring & Engaging Activities

### 1 When I Grow Up (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** What would you like to do and be that you have not acknowledged to anyone? What talents have you yet to explore? What difference do you want to make with the rest of your life? Write it all down, even if it seems silly. Don’t worry about the details now. Your job is to stretch your notions about what’s possible.

**Supplies:**

- pens or pencils
- paper

Imagination and memory can diminish with disuse. Ask participants: What did you want to be when you were little? What might you want to do if money or time or age were of no concern? Remind the participants that this is not a time to be “reasonable.” You are unstopping the creative flow of the future!

Invite all to close their eyes. Instruct them: *Now, think about things you’ve always wanted to do. Open your eyes. Write them down. Close your eyes again. Think about things you’ve always wanted to be. Open your eyes. Write them down. Close your eyes again. Ask God what God wants you to do and be. Open your eyes. Write down those things.* Invite volunteers to share if they wish.

### 2 Wonderful World

**Leader preparation:** Arrange for the group to hear a recording of Louis Armstrong’s song “What a Wonderful World.” Arrange chairs in a comfortable circle.

**Supplies:**

- CD player or iPod and speakers, or computer with Internet access
- recording of Louis Armstrong’s song “Wonderful World,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVG80vqVfSA>
- Bible

This activity is a charge, not only to imagine a wonderful world, but to look at the differences between the mood of the song and the reality of the world we live in. Invite people to get comfortable and listen to the entire song, possibly with eyes closed. When the song is over, ask listeners to each say one word that resonates with her or him after listening, such as beauty, abundance, peace, joy, and so forth. Now, have people think of situations in the world that decidedly do not reflect those ideals. Pause for a minute or so. Listen to the song again prayerfully, asking God to grant you hope and vision of how these situations might be transformed. Close by reading Revelation 21:2-5.

## Experiencing Beauty

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with supplies normally found at the church). Using all nine activities could take 90–120 minutes.

- To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose three activities, using one activity from each category.
- To plan a session of 45–60 minutes, choose four or five activities, using at least one activity from each category.



### 3 Spirit Wind

**Leader preparation:** View the artwork and read the passage. How are they similar? What themes do they hold in common? Imagine God’s Spirit gently filling the room you are in. Rest in this peace.

**Supplies:**

- Bibles
- artwork: “Wind from the Sea” by Andrew Wyeth, <http://www.art.com/products/p15524076-sa-i3804653/andrew-wyeth-wind-from-the-sea.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=dfff3132492f45b38c1f69b8ff1b86c1&searchstring=wind+from+the+sea>
- Bibles
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projection capability

Read Revelation 21:2–5. View the artwork “Wind from the Sea” by Andrew Wyeth. Ask people to ponder the following questions and share their responses.

- What pictures came to mind as you listened to the scripture passage?
- What words come to mind as you view the art?
- If God’s Spirit is compared to a breeze, what fresh movement do you detect in your life?
- What do you anticipate will happen next as you look at the scene in the art?
- Suppose you could look through a window into the future. For what do you hope?

## Discerning & Deciding Activities



### 4 Beautiful Bride (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Read Revelation 21:1–5. As the church, we are that beautiful bride. Think about your church and your community and all the different and valuable jobs that are done, with and without reward or recognition. Write down some if you like. This exercise is designed to acknowledge others and to assist people with distinguishing the beautiful gifts that they have. It is also to encourage them to develop and share their gifts with greater boldness and satisfaction.

**Supplies:**

- Bibles
- paper
- pens or pencils
- colored pencils or markers
- (optional) cardboard “tags”

Gather in a circle. Ask volunteers to read Revelation 21:1–5. Have a discussion about gifts participants admire, both inside and outside the group. Now, let each one go around the group and say to the others: “I see \_\_\_\_\_ that is beautiful in you.” When those on the receiving end hear their gifts of beauty being acknowledged, they can write them on paper. Go around the circle several times.

Afterward, invite people to share. What surprised them at the beauty that was pointed out? What do they have to add? What new beginning might God be call-

ing them to embrace? What new path might they see before them? Now pass around paper and writing utensils (or tags if you have some). Let each person create his or her own tag, reflecting the input that others have given. Invite those who wish to do so to make promises that are consistent with their new discoveries of beauty.

### 5 Life Beauty

**Leader preparation:** Take time to read the hymn “For the Beauty of the Earth.” After each verse, write some reflection of related beauty in your own life. For example, the first two verses are about nature and its unparalleled beauty. Write a memory or a thought about experiences you may have had in nature. Follow suit with the third and fourth verse, vis-a-vis relationships, family, and your faith journey.

**Supplies:**

- hymnals, or computer with Internet access and projector
- paper
- pens or pencils
- hymn: “For the Beauty of the Earth” by Folliot S. Pierson (tune: Dix), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mHQMxiOKEDQ>

Sing the hymn either from hymnals or as accompanied by a YouTube video. Ask the group to imagine that they are directing a video that will combine this music with images. What images will they choose? Why? Ask people to be as specific as they can. What colors would they want to see? Would they use images of nature, people, animals? Would they use still-life images or movements?

Pray in closing: *God, the earth and our lives are teeming with the beauty of your blessings and your presence. Show us, in the coming week, how we may respond with gratitude, to make life even more beautiful for those around us and ourselves. Amen.*

### 6 All the Ways

**Leader preparation:** John Wesley, founder of Methodism, said: “Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, for all the people you can, for as long as ever you can.”

**Supplies:**

- dominos

Read the John Wesley quote. Ask a volunteer to name one simple act of beauty that a person could do first thing in the morning. Set a domino on its end on a table or the floor. Then, taking turns, invite participants to name other simple acts of kindness or goodness that could be inspired by that act in a chain reaction. For example, the first act might be that a man makes coffee for his wife. The second could be that the woman hugs her eldest daughter. Then what might the daughter do? Once people have named a number of actions, set the dominos in motion. Challenge people to make the future beautiful by sharing Christ’s love in simple, daily acts.

## Sending &amp; Serving Activities

 7 Facing Forward (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** What concerns you about the future for yourself? Your loved one? The church? The world? Hold your hands palms down as you think of these worries. Then gently turn your hands palms up as a symbol of releasing these cares to God.

**Supplies:**

- Bible

Ask people to form a line. They will all face one direction. For a moment, ask them to think of the fears people may have about the future. People who wish to may speak these aloud.

Now ask people to turn in the opposite direction—to face forward. Read Revelation 21:2–5. As people listen, they will consider the ways the passage might offer hope. Invite people to say aloud words or phrases that can bring hope as we contemplate the future.

 8 Out of the Storm

**Leader preparation:** Study the artwork “Navaro Rapids” by Ando Hiroshige. Read Job 38:1–11. Where in your life are you in suffering, confusion, or doubt? Give it to God in prayer.

**Supplies:**

- Bibles
- artwork: “Navaro Rapids” by Ando Hiroshige, <http://www.art.com/products/p10023130-sa-i802528/ando-hiroshige-navaro-rapids-c1855.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=ab4fda6b36f84ed3b285828650303e96&searchstring=navaro+rapids>
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projector

Faith picks up where our abilities trail off. In certain situations, there seem to be no easy answers. This is true for conflict, for habits, for physical or emotional struggles that persist. In the middle of the storm, God is there. In the middle of our pain, God is there. We just need to let God be God, and that involves acknowledging our weaknesses. Invite everyone to study the painting by Ando Hiroshige. Ask volunteers to take turns reading Job 38:1–11. Ask for comments on the painting as it relates to the scripture. Form a group circle and let each complete the sentence: “God is with me when I . . .”



### 9 Holding the Future

**Leader preparation:** Study the beautiful painting “Caresse Maternelle (Mother and Child)” by Mary Stevenson Cassatt. Ponder the ways you have become who you are because of the nurturing presence of another.

**Supplies:**

- artwork: “Caresse Maternelle (Mother and Child)” by Mary Stevenson Cassatt, [https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1004323110?VIEW\\_PRODUCT=true&product\\_id=37961&store\\_id=1401](https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1004323110?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=37961&store_id=1401)
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projection capability

Ask all to view the artwork. What is beautiful about the presentation of this scene? What jumps immediately to their eyes? What did they have to look more closely to see?

Now imagine that this child continues to experience steady care from her mother. What qualities might grace her? How might her character be beautifully shaped? After people have shared, have them each reflect on one person who has nurtured his or her faith. How has each participant become more beautiful as a result? Who is one person whom each group member wants to nurture in return? What is one way to convey care to that person? In this way, we bring beauty to the future.

## Reflect

The future can be different from the past but not without creative visioning and bold action. God gave us the church so we can work together with joy and abundant blessing as bonus by-products. Keep focused on a bright future, while being good stewards of the present. Miracles will ensue!