

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Discovery

About this Age Group

One gift of practicing faith in community is the opportunity to grow alongside people of different ages. Each participant, from the youngest child to the eldest adult, offers a unique perspective. Be sure to create space for discovery and to appreciate each contribution as a gift to the whole group.

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

Whether we are asleep or awake, God is with us, and God’s beauty surrounds us. Read the focus passages for this Exploration. Consider taking a small plate or other flat container and making a small tower of stones on it. This simple structure is reminiscent of Jacob’s altar, built to mark God’s presence in the scripture. Pour some oil over the stones, and set them on your dining table or another visible place to remind you of God’s presence as you prepare to lead these activities. If time allows, take a walk. Notice God’s handiwork in nature. Recall Matthew 6:24–34. Conclude your time with your own prayer or the following one.

Prayer: *Surely, God, you are with me in my sleeping and in my waking. Let me walk with you always. Guide me as I journey with [name of each person in your group]. Help us awaken to your beautiful handiwork. Let our lives add to that beauty so that your love might be visible to all the earth. 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 Show and Tell (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: This activity can take place inside your church or outside on the grounds or in a park. If you will lead the activity in the church, arrange access to the sanctuary and narthex for your group. In this and all activities remember to follow any safe space policies adopted by your congregation.

Supplies: None

Gather the group, and welcome everyone to the discovery of experiencing beauty. Explain that God’s beauty is all around us in big and small things, in sunlight and shadow, in people and in nature. Invite the group to break into teams of two or three so that an older participant is paired with younger ones.

If you are leading this activity in the church, invite the teams to walk together around the narthex and sanctuary. Let each person look for beauty and choose one thing, place, or person that is beautiful to him or her in the space. Let team members share with the others why each choice is beautiful. After all have had a chance to share, come back together in a circle, and let people name the items they chose as being beautiful.

2 Climbing Jacob’s Ladder

Leader preparation: Read Genesis 28:10–19a. This activity allows scripture to come alive in a dramatic way. You will need to gather the supplies ahead of time.

Supplies:

- Bible
- a large, flat stone
- small stones (one for each participant)
- permanent markers

Show the learners where the story is found in the Bible. Tell the story of Jacob to the group, focusing on Jacob’s blessing and his decision to mark the ground as a holy place. Invite someone to play Jacob and to lie down. Invite all who wish to play angels to mime climbing a ladder.

Read the scripture aloud dramatically. At the end of the activity, give each participant a stone to take home. Each person may draw a simple picture or write a word on a stone as a reminder of God’s presence.

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 Beauty in Diversity

Leader preparation: Locate an assortment of plants and/or flowers to bring to your group. Alternatively, find images of them. In this activity you and the participants will have a chance to consider beauty in diverse colors and shapes.

Supplies:

- Bible
- assortment of various flowers or plants (or images of them)

Gather the group and read Matthew 6:24–34. Explain that in this passage Jesus is teaching his disciples about God’s care for all creatures. He invites the disciples to consider objects in the natural world as examples of God’s handiwork and beauty. When we see the care God takes with things such as plants, we can trust God to care for us also.

In this activity, the group will take time to “consider the lilies” by literally looking at different kinds of flowers. Give participants time to look carefully and then share what they notice about the shapes, colors, and scents. Some discussion starters include:

- What colors or shapes do you see?
- What is similar and different about the flowers?
- Which one is most beautiful to you? Why?

Let participants choose one flower to hold and examine closely. Ask what parts they see.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Turning Our Worries Over to God (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: This activity may take place inside or outside. You may meet in a formal worship space such as a chapel or sanctuary, or in an informal place such as under a tree or around a picnic table. In this activity participants will name worries, turn them over to God, and experience the beauty of prayer and scripture.

Supplies:

- Bible
- slips of paper
- pens or pencils, one for each participant

Invite participants to name joyful or beautiful events in their lives. Explain that everyone experiences all kinds of events and emotions. Some are joyful, and some are beautiful. Some are ordinary, and some may cause us to worry or be sad.

Read Matthew 6:25–34 with the group. Ask participants to name the things God made in creation. Jesus wants his followers to know that worry can get in the way of remembering that God is always with us and will always care for us. Invite participants to think quietly about something or someone they have worried about. Ask them to write about their worries or sketch a symbol of them on pieces of paper. Then encourage people to lift up their pieces of paper. Those who are comfortable may name their worries aloud.



5 Consider the Cannas

Leader preparation: Study the artwork “Red Canna,” and reflect on the questions given in the activity description. Cover up the name of the museum and the artist with a piece of paper so that your group can concentrate on the image itself. It is important to validate all answers. Be intentional, and do not rush. This exercise is about noticing and making meaning for one’s self. All the answers contribute to a greater understanding of the work.

Supplies:

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

Invite the group to view the artwork “Red Canna” by Georgia O’Keefe. Ask people to put all their senses to work silently. Ask them to think about how what they see might feel, taste, smell, or sound. Engage them in conversation about the picture using the following questions.

- What is the image about?
- Name two details from the picture. What colors, shapes, or objects do you see in the picture?
- What feelings does the picture evoke in you?
- How do you relate to the picture? Do you see yourself in the picture? Where? How?
- What meaning do you think the picture has?
- How or where in the picture do you experience beauty?

Tell the group that the title of the work is “Red Canna,” which is the name of a specific flower, and it was painted by Georgia O’Keefe. The artist did not intend her work to be religious. However, when people look at the world through the lens of faith, a simple flower may remind them of God or an aspect of faithful living. Ask what elements in the picture remind participants of a scripture passage or a life of faith. *Do any elements of the print indicate religious content?*

Invite volunteers to take turns reading Mathew 6:24–34 aloud to the group. Afterward, ask them if there were parts of the picture that correspond to the words or images in scripture.

6 In the Bulb There Is a Flower

Leader preparation: Singing hymns is a central part of Christian discipleship. In our hymns we hear the story of our faith and are inspired to respond as disciples. Obtain the lyrics for “In the Bulb There Is a Flower.” Watch the YouTube video of the song. Set up the computer and viewing equipment ahead of time to be sure it works.

Supplies:

- computer with Internet access
- (optional) digital projector
- hymn: “In the Bulb There Is a Flower” by Natalie Sleeth (tune: Promise); YouTube video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkWYubdnc7o>; lyrics, <http://www.hymnlyrics.org/lyrics/in-the-bulb-there-is-a-flower.html>
- (optional) a tulip bulb
- (optional) time lapse video of a yellow narcissus, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LIsVJqYk-7M>

Describe how some flowers such as tulips begin as bulbs in the ground. If you have a bulb, show it to the group. Explain how with water, soil, and sun, a bulb opens, puts down roots, and pushes upward to become a flower. Invite the group members to curl up like a bulb as much as they are physically able and then to jump up like a flower.

Watch the YouTube video of the hymn. Invite the group to reflect on the images in the video. Ask everyone to share the feelings that are evoked by the video.

Read the lyrics, and invite all to sing along with the YouTube video. Conclude by standing in a circle and giving people a chance to pray for whatever they wish. End the prayer time by giving thanks: *Thank you, God, for the beauty in the world and for the chance to show that beauty to the world through our lives. Amen.*

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Paired Poets (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: The acrostic is just one form of poetry. Feel free to use another form such as haiku or cinquain, depending on the age of your participants. More information about poetry and sample poems for experienced poets and adults can be found at <http://www.poets.org/page.php/prmID/197> and for children or beginning poets at <http://ettcweb.lr.k12.nj.us/forms/newpoem.htm>.

Supplies:

- lined wide- or college-ruled paper, one or two sheets per team of two
- ballpoint pens or pencils, one per participant
- blank 8 ½" x 11" paper in white or pastel colors
- colored markers or crayons

Divide the group into teams of two. Try to pair an older participant with a younger one. Explain that the team will work together to create an acrostic poem for the word "beauty." An acrostic poem has the word printed vertically down the left side of the page. Each line of the poem begins with the letter on that line. In this acrostic, the first line of the poem will begin with B, the next with E, the next with A, and so on. When the team has written a rough draft of a poem on the lined paper, they may transfer it to a blank piece of paper and decorate the page with colored markers or crayons.

Invite the teams to read their poems to the group. Consider posting the poems on your church's website, Facebook page, or blog with permission of the creators. You may also wish to use the poems as bulletin inserts or print them in the church newsletter.

Conclude with a prayer such as this: *God, we give you thanks for the gift of language. May our words always be ones of loving kindness. Thank you for the beauty of poetry. Help our lives to be poems in praise of you. Amen.*

8 Filled with Beauty

Leader preparation: Take a moment to imagine what kinds of objects inspire beauty for you. Think about your different senses, and choose items that delight each one.

Supplies:

- box filled with a flower, orange, crayons, a scarf, or other similar objects that may be used to experience beauty
- vase or basket
- tissue paper

Before you begin, place in a box several common objects that can be used to experience beauty. Some suggestions are a flower, an orange, a box of crayons, a picture of a pet, or a colorful scarf.

Remind people that we can experience beauty in many ways. We can see beauty. We can feel a beautiful feeling. We can make something beautiful. One at a time, begin passing around one object from the box. Invite group members to name a way they can experience beauty with that object. Pass around more items when more or different responses are needed. Remind participants to speak only when holding the object.

Every time someone names a way to experience beauty, that person may crumple up a piece of tissue paper and place it in the vase or basket. The game ends when the container is full.

9 Molded Beauty

Leader preparation: Take a few moments before your group meets to mold your own piece of clay. Close your eyes. Welcome joy. Mold the clay until it feels right in your hand.

Centering prayer: *O God, our Creator, when you molded the first humans from clay, your heart filled with delight. Thank you for seeing wonder in me. Open my heart to your presence and mold me in your way. Amen.*

Supplies:

- modeling clay

Give some modeling clay to each learner. Invite the learners to think of an aspect of nature they consider to be beautiful. Each person will fashion that item from clay. Ask people to share their creations and say why they chose them.

Distribute more clay. This time people will fashion a beautiful man-made object and share their creations with one another.

Distribute clay again. Finally, ask people to craft something that they associate with God or faith (perhaps a Bible, a cross, a pair of hands, and so on). Invite people to share their objects with one another. Point out that while people see beauty in different places or things, we all can give thanks for the beauty that surrounds us.

Reflect

What did you notice about this group? Are children of different ages mixing well together? When people are willing to open themselves to others of varying experiences, we can find remarkable beauty together. Your role as facilitator of this group carries immeasurable value.

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Scripture

About this Age Group

Multiage participants come with a variety of experiences of scripture. Some may be encountering the Bible for the first time. Others will have a lifetime of memories of favorite passages and stories. Some participants may just be learning to read; for others sight might be a barrier to the text. Providing Bibles in large type and some meant for younger children as well as pairing more experienced readers with those just learning to read will help everyone experience beauty in the words and stories.

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

Our faith ultimately rests in a God that we do not see face to face. We can read about how faithful people understood God and God’s work in scripture. At the end of this Exploration participants may feel encouraged to continue a faith practice of reading scripture regularly or be excited to begin such a practice.

Read Nehemiah 8, carefully taking time to visualize the scene. Imagine yourself among the crowd of men and women listening to scripture being read aloud. Imagine how it would feel to hear the scripture and to know that the laws of God were given to you to follow as a gift of love from God. How would you feel if you were one of the people who could not understand the words, but received help from the Levite priests? In this Exploration everyone will have a chance to work together to feel the beauty of scripture. Like the Israelites you may all be moved to worship joyfully.

Reflect on which biblical passages and stories seem most beautiful to you and why. Conclude your preparation time with this prayer or one of your own.

Prayer: Great and wondrous God, thank you for the words of scripture—the words that are at once beautiful and strong, those that are easy to understand and those that are difficult. Send your Holy Spirit upon me and all who will experience scripture in

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Open Sesame! (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: The beauty of scripture is most evident when the Bible is open and read and experienced regularly. This activity gives all participants experience finding passages in the Bible and understanding how the Bible is organized. If your group is older and well acquainted with the Bible basics, you may adapt this activity by having everyone locate less well-known verses or books. Answer the questions for yourself so you will have an answer key to share with the group.

Supplies:

- Bibles, one for every pair
- blank pieces of paper
- pencils

Gather the group around tables and pass out Bibles and the other supplies. Ask the group to break into teams of two or three. Explain that in order to experience the beauty of scripture, one has to know how to use a Bible. Teams will work together to find answers to questions you will ask. When a team knows the answer, someone should raise a hand, call out “gospel,” and give the answer when called on. Here are sample questions to ask:

- How many books are in the Bible?
- What are the two main sections of the Bible called?
- What is the first book of Hebrew Scripture or the Old Testament called?
- What are the first four books of the New Testament called?
- What is the last book of the New Testament called?
- Where is the book of Psalms?
- Where are the stories of Jesus found?

Demonstrate how to find scripture passages by book, chapter, and verse. Then give each team an assignment to find a particular passage, such as Genesis 1:1–5, Psalm 23, Micah 6:8, Matthew 6:9–15, Luke 2:8–12, and Romans 12:9–21. When the teams find their verses, have them read the texts aloud to one another and talk about what it means within their team. After each member has had a chance to talk, invite a member of each team to read its scripture aloud.

Conclude the activity by asking everyone to locate Nehemiah 8. Read it as a group, with each team reading a few verses and so on until the whole story is read. Talk about the story, and save time for any questions the group might have about scripture. If you are unsure of the answers, be honest. Note the question and the person who asked. Find out the answer, and be ready to share with the group in the next session. Remind everyone that it is good to ask questions of scripture.

our group. Give us open hearts to receive your calling in the words written so long ago. May our exploration be a blessing to you and help us to proclaim your love more fully in the 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.

② Transfigured By God

Leader preparation: Read the story of Jesus’ transfiguration in Luke 9:28–36 in a translation used by your community. Read it again from *The Message*, written by Eugene Peterson. In this activity participants will experience hearing scripture in different translations. They will also, and more importantly, be invited to imagine the scene and to ponder how they are transfigured by prayer and their relationship with God in Christ. Practice reading the text aloud from each translation so that you are ready to share with the group. You can find different translations, including *The Message*, at the Bible Gateway website: <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/>.

Supplies:

- Bible
- a copy of *The Message* or a Bible with a different translation. Some examples of translations include King James Version (KJV), New International Version (NIV), New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Da Jesus Book (Hawaiian dialect), and Contemporary English Version (CEV). If you do not have another translation in your church library, consider making use of the public library or asking participants if they own one to share.

Invite everyone to find a comfortable place to sit. Explain that you will share an important story from the life of Jesus. Ask everyone who is comfortable to close their eyes and listen to the words. Read in a relaxed pace so that each person can absorb the words. Observe a minute of silence so that people may think about what they heard. Next, read the story again and ask people to listen for a word or phrase that captures their imaginations in some way or evokes feeling in them. At the end of the reading invite them to call out their words or phrases in a round robin fashion.

You might ask:

- What was Jesus doing when his face and clothes were changed?
- What is the meaning of the change?
- What was Peter’s reaction?
- How does prayer change you? Or, when you pray, have you experienced a change in yourself or how you understand God?

Next invite participants to listen to the story again in at least one other Bible translation. Ask: *What did you notice this time in the story?* There is beauty in the words of the story and the way a story is told by different people. God can speak to us through many different perspectives.

③ Every Bible Tells a Story

Leader preparation: Ahead of time ask participants to bring their family Bibles or a Bible that has meaning to them, such as one they received in confirmation or as a baptism gift. Explain that they will be invited to share the story of their Bible with the group. Be similarly prepared to bring a Bible that is special to you or a family member and to tell its story. Not everyone may have a Bible. Be prepared to share yours if you have one or to invite other members of your congregation to be guests at your session to share their stories. If you are able to do so, this might be a good time to present Bibles to members of your group as a gift from your congregation. If there is a historic Bible in your church, bring it to display. Find out the story of that Bible.

Supplies:

- Bibles belonging to group members

Gather the group in a seated circle. Explain that not only do the words of scripture contain beauty in the stories they tell us about God and Jesus, but the books themselves are beautiful and have their own stories. Start the show and tell by presenting your Bible to the group. You may want to talk about how it has beauty to you because of who gave it to you or the circumstances in which you received it. If your family Bible contains a record of births and deaths, share this with the group. Show how the Bible has been shared by many people and talk about how we are all called to share scripture. Pass around the Bible so all may see it. Continue to the next person and so on until everyone has had a chance to share.

Discerning & Deciding Activities

4 Story Swap (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Make note of some of your favorite Bible passages. Be prepared to share these with the group in case people are shy about speaking or reading. One way to feel the beauty of scripture is to hear it read aloud. This activity gives all participants a chance to be readers and hearers of the text. Be prepared to read scripture aloud for younger children.

Supplies:

- Bibles (if possible, provide at least one larger print Bible, one with regular sized print, and a children's Bible to meet the reading and comprehension abilities of your group)

Gather the group in comfortable chairs in a circle. Explain that storytelling is an old art and that today everyone will have a chance to share a favorite Bible verse or story with the group. After three people have shared, you may wish to take a stretch break, and then continue until everyone who would like to has made a contribution. Be prepared to suggest some Bible stories for those who are shy or who have no familiarity with the Bible. Some stories that might be familiar include the birth of Jesus (Luke), Noah and the flood (Genesis), Psalm 23, baby Moses in the basket (Exodus 2), and the stories of creation (Genesis).

Invite learners to tell why the story or verse they chose is a favorite. Share reactions to the stories. Ask which stories were new to the group and whether a favorite passage appealed to them in a new way. Alternatively, you may wish to share the passages associated with the practice of experiencing beauty. Participants can take turns reading the scriptures aloud and talking about how the scripture passage helps us experience beauty. Invite participants to share scripture aloud with at least one other person each week of this Exploration and beyond.

Prayer: God, we give thanks for the beauty of scripture and its power to uplift our lives when we share it with one another. Amen.



5 Mother and Child

Leader preparation: Study the artwork “Caresse Maternelle (Mother and Child)” by Mary Stevenson Cassatt, and reflect on the questions given below. Remember that there are no right or wrong answers to these questions.

Supplies:

- Bible
- 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

Lead a discussion about the painting using the following questions.

- What is the image about?
- What story might this painting prompt?
- What words describe the mood of the picture?
- What feelings does the picture evoke in you?
- How do you relate to the picture? Do you see yourself in the picture? Where? How?
- Who in your family comforts you the most?

When everyone has had a chance to participate, explain that it was not painted as religious picture, but that it can be a way for the group to think about scripture. Ask the following questions to the group.

- How is God named in scripture?
- If you imagined what God looked like, how would you describe God?

Referring to God as “he” or “Father” are just two of the many ways scripture describes God. Share two images: Psalm 23 (shepherd) and Matthew 13 (a sower). God is pictured as a woman and a mother in scripture as well. Share examples such as Genesis 1:26–27, in which both men and women are in the image of God. You may also wish to share Psalm 131, Luke 13:34, and Isaiah 49:14–15. Part of the beauty of scripture is the diversity of ways it portrays God and shows people being faithful to God.

Offer this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for being a beautiful mystery. We give thanks for the names or images that have been lifted up even as we know our human words can never fully describe you. Thank you for being known to us in the person of Jesus Christ and in the people around us. Amen.*

6 Transfiguration in Nature

Leader preparation: Jesus is transfigured by prayer in Luke 9:28–36. This concept of transfiguration may be challenging for younger members of your group. It may even be difficult for the adults! This project allows participants to experience transfiguration of an ordinary object into beautiful art. You will need a sunny day and about an hour to do this activity if you choose to use construction paper. You may wish to begin a session with this activity, and then come back to it at the closing. If you use light-sensitive paper (also called sun print paper), available at a craft store, you may be able to complete this activity in 15 minutes. In either case, you will need to gather the supplies ahead of time and be set up before the group arrives.

Supplies:

- Bible
- 9" x 12" blue and/or green construction paper
- natural objects such as leaves, feathers, flat rocks, sea shells, flower petals—enough for each person to choose two or three objects
- (optional) a sheet of light sensitive paper for each person (4" x 4" approximately); a shallow pan with water; clothes pins or other hangers

Have the participants find the story of the transfiguration of Jesus in Luke 9:28–36. After you tell this story, talk about what an amazing event that must have been both for Jesus and Peter to experience. Invite participants to define transfiguration. Next have everyone think about transfiguration in nature where one creature changes radically in shape (tadpole to frog, caterpillar to butterfly). What other transformations might they see in nature (leaves falling off trees in the winter, reemerging in spring, and changing colors as summer ends; bulbs growing into flowers, an acorn growing into a tree)? Invite them to use the power of the sun to transform an ordinary object into beautiful art.

Place objects on top of the construction paper, and place it in full sun for at least one hour. The silhouettes of the objects will be cast on the paper. (If you are using light-sensitive paper, lay the paper in the sun for about five minutes, remove the objects, and dip the paper in water to set the images. Then hang up the papers with clothespins to dry indoors.) If you do not have a full hour or full sunlight, consider other transformations you might use to signify transfiguration. For example, show pictures of a caterpillar transforming into a butterfly. Finish by thinking about how we, too, are sons and daughters of God and can be transformed by the practice of experiencing beauty.

Sending & Serving Activities

7 Words into Worship (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: In Nehemiah 8, the people who hear scripture read aloud are instructed to have no fear and not to mourn or weep, but to rejoice. In this activity, your group will hear you read that story and then create a fun worship atmosphere. If you do not have access to these supplies, simply create a joyful mood for the singing of the song.

Supplies:

- Bible
- song: "The B-I-B-L-E," <http://sundayschoolsources.com/songs.htm#BIBLE>
- (optional) construction paper of various colors (at least 11" x 17")
- (optional) a stapler or scotch tape
- (optional) colored markers or crayons
- (optional) stickers and glitter glue

Have the participants find Nehemiah 8 in their Bibles, and then tell the story. Ask: *What did the priests tell the people to do after they heard the words of scripture?* (not to mourn, but to worship). Ask people to talk about what brings them joy in worship (singing, praying, communion). Explain that God enjoys the beauty of the sounds of joyful worship. Invite the group to make party hats if you have access to the craft supplies listed in the optional section. If you are to have a worship party, you will need funny hats!

When everyone is finished, don the hats and sing “The B-I-B-L-E” several times. Here are the lyrics: “The B-I-B-L-E, yes, that’s the book for me, I stand alone on the word of God, the B-I-B-L-E.” You can sing in different ways, such as only having the youth sing or only the adults, or boys, or girls. Encourage all to crouch down as they are able, and when they sing the words “I stand alone . . .” to jump up into a standing position.

Close with prayer: *God, we give thanks for the joy of scripture, community, and laughter. Amen.*

8 Picturing Scripture

Leader preparation: Gather discarded magazines. Another option is to take photographs that can be viewed together. Remember that many cell phones have excellent cameras. The idea is to take inspiration from scripture and to find images that support or illuminate the scripture in nature or the world around them. The pictures will then be put into a slide show to show the diversity of ways people found scripture in the world. If you choose this option, arrange to borrow enough cameras so that teams of participants each have one. This practice of translating the beauty of scripture from the page to images engenders a habit of seeing God in all things.

Supplies:

- Bible
- magazines, particularly ones like *National Geographic*, *Nature*, or outdoor travel magazines
- scissors
- tape or glue sticks
- 8 ½" x 11" or larger blank paper
- (optional) digital cameras, at least one for every two or three people in your group
- (optional) a computer that can read digital photo memory cards or the appropriate cable for uploading them and digital projector for displaying the images
- (optional) snacks and juice and water to drink, or sack lunches

Read aloud Psalm 8. Invite participants to find images in the magazines that connect to this passage. They may then create a collage of these images.

If you choose the photography option, encourage all to capture images with their cameras that connect to the scripture passage. The images may be representations of the ones depicted in the text, or they may evoke the feeling of the passage (such as awe in the face of God’s majesty). Gather and share the collages or photos with one another.

Option: Create a PowerPoint presentation of the images to be used in worship while reading Psalm 8.

9 Post Card Scripture

Leader preparation: In this activity your group will literally send the beauty of scripture out into the world. Preselect some short uplifting verses, such as John 3:16, Psalm 119:105, John 8:12, or Psalm 46:1. As an option, find the names of people in your community who live away by choice (such as those in college) or because of other circumstances (such as being home-bound, on military duty, in the hospital, or in prison).

Supplies:

- Bibles, at least one for every two people
- white card stock paper cut in the size of a postcard, or blank postcards
- colored fine-point markers
- (optional) a variety of nature stickers
- (optional) a postage stamp for each card
- (optional) addresses of persons unable to come to church, such as home-bound members, college students, people in the hospital or in prison

Gather your group at tables with the supplies and the Bibles. Instruct the group to break into teams of two, with older and younger people paired together. Explain that part of the beauty of scripture is in sharing it with others. Invite participants to make postcards to send scripture to some special people.

Invite the teams to take time to pray for the people who will receive their cards. Next, have them pick a favorite scripture passage and copy it onto the message portion of the postcard. They may wish to write a short greeting of encouragement to the intended receiver. On the opposite side of the card, invite the team to draw a picture related to their scripture or of any beautiful thing they chose, or use stickers. The picture does not have to be of a real object; they might like to draw a pattern or shapes. Youngest participants may be encouraged to simply scribble.

When everyone is done, invite the groups to share their creations. If you are able, affix stamps on the cards, print the addresses of recipients, and mail the cards.

Reflect

The scripture passages for this session all relate in some way to beauty, whether or not the word “beauty” is used directly in the text. Reflect on the way each one relates to experiencing beauty. You may wish to do this reflection with your group with each pair of focus passages as you begin a particular Exploration. You may wish also to think about which passage or story is most beautiful or meaningful to you at this stage in your life. Consider developing a practice of regular reading, reflection, and discussion of scripture in a way that works for you. Notice any changes in how you relate to others and to God as a result of a deepening experience of scripture in your life.

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Discipleship

About this Age Group

Jesus called all who would follow to be his disciples. He included children in his ministry. By working together, all ages can deepen their relationship with Jesus. Older participants will feel valued as they share wisdom from their faith journeys. Younger participants will bring new perspectives to discipleship and will benefit from knowing adults who live lives of faith. The beauty of connection to one another and God becomes real in this Exploration.

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, 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

A particular beauty of Jesus' ministry was his focus on relationships. He ministered with a disparate group of disciples. He connected with people from all economic settings and forged relationships across ethnic lines. At a time when women and children were property, he included them in his ministry. Jesus gave freely of himself to the people he encountered. Think about the relationships you have formed through your life. Who taught you about faith and informed your journey? Think both of people known personally to you and those you know of through history, scripture, and contemporary life. Read the Bible focus passages.

The Exodus text is a beautiful example of men and women working together and giving their most beautiful objects to God. Ponder what it means to consider our lives as the most beautiful gift we can give in service to God and one another. The Acts text invites us to learn to see relationships in a new way as Paul moves from being a brutal bully to a loving passionate advocate for Christ. Christ leads Paul's transformation using Ananias as his hands on earth. Our way of relating as Christians can have a powerful effect in transforming our churches, schools, and neighborhoods from places of isolation to places of fellowship and compassion. Conclude your reflection time with a prayer of your own or this one:

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 What Would You Give God? (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Exodus 35:20–29 aloud a few times. You will facilitate a conversation about using one's talents and committing one's life to God.

Supplies:

- Bible

A beautiful aspect of Jesus' ministry is his example of right relationships with God and one another. Through our fellowship, worship, and service we make the beauty of our relationship visible to the world. Read Exodus 35:20–29 with the group. Explain that the text shows how one group of faithful people made its relationship to God visible. Read slowly so that people can absorb the text.

Break into small teams and have each team talk about the following questions:

- Who gave beautiful objects to decorate the temple?
- What words describe how they worked?
- How did the people give their gifts? Were there strings attached?
- What else did you notice in the text?
- Describe any beautiful art work you have seen that relates to our faith in God (stained glass windows, the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, hymns, musical compositions, liturgical dances).

After all teams have had a chance to talk together, return to the large group, and invite participants to share their reflections. Then talk together about how important it is to use our God-given talents to honor or give glory to God. Move from a discussion of giving time and talent to God to thinking about Christ, who gave his very life to the glory of God. *How might we give our lives to God? What would that look like? Whom would we help? How would we live similarly and differently?*

2 Getting To Know You

Leader preparation: In this activity your group will practice getting to know one another using more than just visual cues to describe one another. Christ Jesus calls us not to be divided by across social barriers.

Supplies:

- Bible
- sticky notes or blank 3" x 5" cards, one for each participant
- pens or pencils, one for each participant

Gather in a circle. Explain that Jesus spent time with people who were different from himself. He cared for people regardless of their occupation or situation in life. An important part of Christian discipleship is meeting together to encourage one another in faith. Play a getting-to-know-you game to practice Christian friendship as part of discipleship. Distribute a sticky note or blank 3" x 5" card and a pen or pencil to each person. Have people turn to someone they don't know well. Exchange the peace of Christ with one another. (One person says, "The peace of Christ be with you always." The other responds, "And also with you.") Then have each person in a pair take turns responding to the following statements.

Experiencing Beauty

Prayer: *Jesus, thank you for your amazing ministry. You showed us how to live with God and one another. Help us always to reach out to one another in love. Teach us to mend broken relationships so that your Way may continue to inspire faith and hope in our 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.

- Name something you find beautiful in God’s creation.
- Name one fruit of the Spirit you want to practice (for example, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and so forth).
- Name someone whom you feel blessed to know, or who inspires you in your faith journey.

People may write their answers on the sticky notes. Finally, have each person ask his or her partner: What is your given first name? What is your favorite pastime? Note these answers on the sticky notes or cards as well.

Gather in a circle and have the team partners introduce one another by reading off their faith name. For example, by stringing the answers into a name, someone might say: Everyone, this is my friend [River Peace Ruby Bridges] who is also called [insert the person’s given name here] and who enjoys [hobby or pastime].

Conclude by encouraging comments about what it was like to get to know people at a faith level first before learning other facts about them.

③ In the Bulb There Is a Flower

Leader preparation: Familiarize yourself with the lyrics of the hymn “In the Bulb There Is a Flower.” The words evoke the mystery of creation and the wonder of life transformed by following Christ. You may wish to ask for the assistance of a piano player or choir director or help from a member of your group who has musical talents. You may wish to arrange for your group to share their singing in worship.

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
- (optional) a piano, pianist, and sheet music for the hymn

Share the lyrics of the whole song with the group. Listen to the hymn being played. Say each verse aloud, and have the participants practice saying the words aloud in unison. Next, try singing each verse. Lead a discussion based on some of the following questions:

- Describe something you have waited for (a holiday, a birthday, a wedding) and how it felt to wait.
- What do you imagine it is like to be an adult?
- Define the word “mystery.”
- What are some mysteries people see in their lives?

Conclude with this or a similar prayer: *God, thank you for helping us to slow down and experience the mysteries of life all around us. Amen.*

Discerning & Deciding Activities

**4 Following in Jesus' Footsteps (Easy Preparation)**

Leader preparation: This activity is based on the game "Follow the Leader." Select one person as the leader. All others will imitate the motions of the leader. In this version, the leader will portray some of Jesus' actions, and participants will imitate his work in healing, teaching, praying, and eating with others. Physically performing these activities builds muscle memory and prepares one to do likewise in the world.

Supplies: None

Ask the group if anyone has ever played "Follow the Leader." If yes, have a volunteer explain the game to the rest of the group (one person performs motions, and everyone copies the leader). Explain that Jesus calls us to follow him in loving God and others. He performed specific actions to show us how to do this. These actions include, but are not limited to, praying, teaching, healing, eating, and listening to people who were both alike and different from himself.

You may wish to ask the group to name some actions, or give them the preceding list. Pick a participant to act the part of Jesus and one to be a person interacting with Jesus. Call out the name of one of Jesus' actions, and have the participant playing Jesus act out the motions. All the rest of the participants should follow "Jesus" and copy the motion. Then choose another person to play the role of Jesus and yet another person to be the person being helped by Jesus. Repeat the process until all actions have been performed. Be sure to let female and male participants and people of different ages play Jesus. Talk about what it felt like to receive help or teaching and what it felt like to follow Jesus and do what he did.

5 New Ways of Seeing

Leader preparation: Read Acts 9:1–20 and watch the YouTube video clip ahead of time. In addition to the questions given in the activity description, you may wish to compose some of your own. The goal is to practice discipleship and experience the beauty of Christian interactions with one's neighbors.

Supplies:

- Bible
- computer with Internet access and speakers
- digital projector and blank wall or screen
- YouTube video "Get Service," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfeXxkbgCVE&feature=youtu.be>

Read Acts 9:1–20. Talk about how Paul harmed Christians before he experienced the love of Jesus. When he experienced this love through Ananias, a Christian who came to help him even though he had been mean to Christians, Paul discovered a new way of seeing people. He learned to love God through Christ and changed his ways. Watch the video and discuss how seeing people through Christ's eyes might make us behave differently. Ask these or similar questions:

- How are we called to act in our daily lives toward others?
- Has anyone ever felt annoyed like the man in the video?
- In addition to noticing how people are hurting or afraid, what beauty might we see when we look at the world through Christ's eyes?
- Where did you see beauty in the video clip?

Explain that our discipleship is a work in progress. We aspire to be like Christ, but we are all human; we do not always behave well or do the right thing. God forgives us and always invites to accept responsibility for our shortcomings, to name them, and then to stop doing them and practice doing the right things.

Say a prayer of confession together such as this: *Jesus, forgive us when we are not always kind to everyone and when we have short tempers or are impatient and want everything our way. Help us to see the world through your eyes and to be loving. Amen.*

Then read this assurance: Your prayer of confession has been heard by God, and you are forgiven.



6 God's Eyes

Leader preparation: Gather the supplies from the list. Make a sample God's Eye to show the group. Practice reading aloud Exodus 35:20–29. The God's Eyes can decorate your meeting space or sanctuary and can also be used in Activity 9. When finished with these activities, perhaps you might auction them off and use the funds to give as a free will offering for disaster relief or other outreach projects of your community.

Supplies:

- Bible
- two sticks (approximately 12" long) per participant
- balls of yarn in blue, purple, and crimson
- "How to Make a God's Eye," Attachment: Activity 6

Read aloud Exodus 35:20–29 with your group. Invite the group to make beautiful God's Eyes in the colors of yarn/cloth mentioned in scripture. In the spirit of the scripture, divide the group into teams of two, and, as best you can, have the teams be comprised of a female and a male. Mix up the ages. Each participant will help the other to make a God's Eye. See the instructions on Attachment: Activity 6.

See the leader preparation notes for uses for the God's Eyes when everyone has finished.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Making a Faith Family Tree (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: If possible, make your own Faith Family tree ahead of time to share with participants, or make it in the session. The beauty of a living faith is experienced directly as participants reflect on those who have nurtured them on their faith journey.

Supplies:

- 8 ½" x 11" blank paper, at least one sheet per participant
- crayons or colored markers
- pencils or pens

Distribute the supplies, and have your group work in mixed teams of younger and older participants. Ask everyone to use crayons or markers to draw the outline of the roots, trunk, and limbs or branches of a tree. At the roots write the word "Jesus." Explain that Jesus is the root of our faith family tree.

Next, have team members talk to one another about people they know or have heard of who have modeled discipleship to them. What family members, church leaders, historical or contemporary figures, or persons from scripture have inspired them? Write these people's names on the trunk of the tree. At the top of the trunk people will write their own names. Now on the branches people will draw some leaves. Have each teammate include one another's names on the branches. Also write the names of people for whom you want to model Christian faith.

When everyone is done, take time for people to share why they wrote some of the names they did. Close with a prayer such as this: *God, thank you for Christ, who is the root of our faith. May we flourish and nurture others in their Christian walk. Amen.*



8 Friendship Meal

Leader preparation: Christ often ate with people who were quite different from himself. (See Matthew 9:9–13, Mark 6:30–44, Luke 24:28–32, and John 6:1–15.) After his death and resurrection, Jesus' follower, the apostle Paul, wanted to acknowledge differences and unite people in their shared love of Christ.

Bring simple snacks to your group. Ask everyone to pair up with the person they know least well in the group. Share snacks, use the icebreaker attachment, and end with communion. Or, ahead of this activity, arrange for members of your group to invite one other person from the congregation that they do not know well to come to a Friendship Lunch. Over the meal strangers may become friends and experience the beauty of Christian fellowship.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- copies of "Friendship Lunch Icebreaker," Attachment: Activity 8
- (optional) simple snack items such as fruit slices or grapes, crackers, cheese, cookies, water or juice
- (optional) plates, cups, napkins, utensils as needed

Make a copy of the attachment for each participant. Each will interview someone he or she does not know well, or one of the guests. Distribute the attachment before or after the meal to assist conversation and the building of Christian friendships. When all the interviews have been completed, divide into small groups and have each person introduce the person he or she interviewed. As time permits, you may wish to gather in a large circle and have each person name the person he or she interviewed and give one detail from the worksheet about the interviewee. Conclude by reading a scripture passage such as Luke 24:13–35 or John 21:4–17, and give thanks to God for this time of fellowship and connection.

Option: If you have brought snacks or have invited guests, plan time for people to eat together.

 **9 A Worship Parade**

Leader preparation: Study the picture “Guatemala: Procession,” and reflect on the questions given in the activity description. There will be an opportunity to create a procession.

Supplies:

- Bible
- artwork: “Guatemala: Procession” by Betty LaDuke, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1004323110?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=15626&store_id=1401
- (optional) simple rhythm instruments such as maracas, gourd rattles, rain sticks
- (optional) long taper candles
- (optional) matches or a lighter
- (optional) fabric or scarves of various colors
- (optional) hymnals

Invite people to examine the artwork “Guatemala: Procession” by Betty LaDuke. Engage them in conversation about the picture using the following questions.

- What is the image about, or what is the story?
- How do you relate to the picture? Where would you put yourself in the picture?
- What meaning do you think the picture has?
- How do you experience beauty in the picture?
- What is your favorite way to praise God?
- If you were in charge of a worship parade, what things would you include (music, dance, songs, costumes, people, animals)?

Tell the group that the title of the work gives no indication about the specific nature of this procession. Ask what elements in the picture remind learners of a scripture passage or a life of faith. What elements suggest religious content?

Invite volunteers to take turns reading Exodus 35:20–29, Luke 2:1–21, and Luke 19:28–40 to the group. Afterward, ask if any parts of these passages reminded them of the artwork.

Reflect

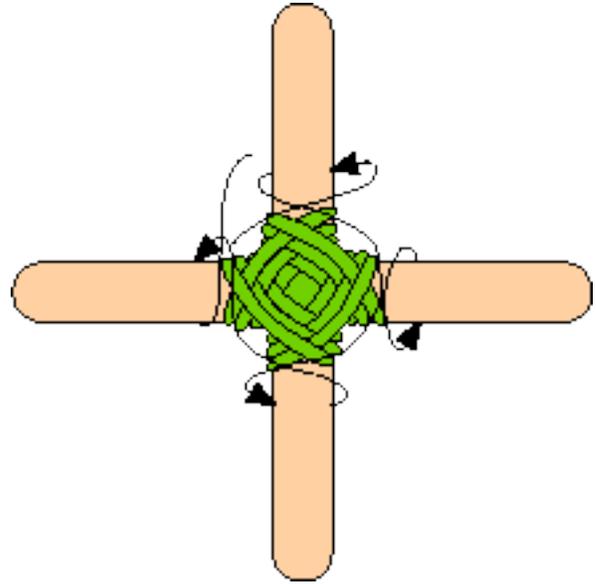
As Christian disciples, we believe in community. Yet we fall short. How might your community learn to foster genuine community? How might you facilitate truth-telling and reconciliation in your community? What barriers to worship exist in your church governance and physical meeting space? How are a variety of people included? Does everybody in your pews look alike? Does artwork or other signage only include people who are similar to the majority of worshipers in your congregation? How might your group use their experiences in this Exploration to address these justice issues?

Invite everyone to create a procession using one of the passages as the setting or inspiration for the procession. Provide the supplies you have brought, such as musical instruments, scarves or fabric, candles, and hymnals.

How to Make a God's Eye

You will need:

- two sticks (approximately 12" long) per participant
- balls of yarn in blue, purple, and crimson



A way to work:

- Tie two sticks together, and then twist the sticks to form a cross shape.
- Take a length of yarn, and weave it over and around either stick.
- Continue weaving the yarn over and around the second stick. The direction you begin with does not matter as long as you continue in the same way. Weave the yarn until you have a diamond shape that is approximately 1" wide around all four sides.
- Cut the yarn. Then tie on another color and repeat the process using all three colors of yarn at least once.
- When you finish with one color, start with another by tying it to the end of the first color and continuing with your weaving.
- Finish by tucking the last end into the woven pattern.

Friendship Lunch Icebreaker

Name of person interviewed:

Person's Favorite Bible story or person:

A place or time the person feels God's presence:

Something the person finds beautiful:

Someone who inspires the person by his or her Christian life (it can be someone in your family, at church, famous or not, living or dead):

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Christian Tradition

About this Age Group

The multiage setting provides fresh ways to approach Christian tradition. Younger participants will discover the roots of faith in age-old practices. Participants will get a chance to open their hearts to new experiences of beauty and wonder in worship.

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

Take a look at a copy of your congregation's worship bulletin. What Christian traditions are present in your weekly service? Prayer? Singing of hymns? Communion? Passing the peace? Consider other traditions you have experienced such as prayer vigils, walking the Stations of the Cross, walking a labyrinth, chanting, or pilgrimages to sacred sites. Which experiences have been most meaningful and beautiful to you? Why?

Read the Bible focus passages for this Exploration. Psalm 8 invites listeners to celebrate God's majesty in creation. It also offers up a great challenge in naming humans as having dominion over all creatures. In John, we read of Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet with rich perfume before the crucifixion. She is chastised by Judas for her act of worship. Jesus defends her action, which encourages us to consider looking at worship in new ways. Think about when or how often your practice of faith, like that of Mary, puts you out of step with popular cultural norms.

Prayer: Majestic God, I give you thanks and praise for all the faithful who have gone before me. Guide me as I lead [insert the names of those in your group] in exploring traditions of worship and creating new traditions for future generations. May all our worship be worthwhile in your sight and make your love visible in the world. In the name of Christ Jesus, I pray. Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Giving Thanks (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: One of the oldest Christian traditions is to give thanks to God when we take communion. Many people practice giving thanks before meals. In this activity you and your group will expand this tradition by beginning a gratitude list. The practice of naming and noticing and giving thanks helps inspire us to notice God in our daily life and opens us to the beauty all around.

Supplies:

- Bible
- lined 8½" x 11" paper, at least one piece per participant
- pens or pencils, one per participant

Gather your group. Talk about giving thanks as a Christian tradition. Ask people to share their practices of giving thanks, including details about when and how and who participates.

Read Matthew 26:26-29 as an example of Jesus giving thanks. Read Psalm 138 as an example of a faithful person giving thanks for God's love.

Ask your group to stand up and divide into three teams, one for "people," one for "places," and one for "things." Put a piece of paper in the center of each group that reads "people," "places," or "things." Have team members take turns naming a person, place, or thing for which they are thankful. When you clap your hands or say "Thanks be to God," have each team move to one of the other spots and again name at least one item that corresponds to the category for which they are thankful. Repeat until all groups have had a chance to discuss each topic.

Pass out the supplies. Invite participants to start their own gratitude list. They can include thanks for simple or ordinary things such as food or for amazing things such as the birth of a child or sibling, the color of the sky, a favorite pet, anything that strikes them. They may use the items they named in the exercise. Everything is a gift from God. Encourage all to take home their lists and to continue adding things, people, places, events and moments for which they are thankful as a way to remember God at work in their lives and in the world.

2 Anointing Oil

Leader preparation: Anointing with oil is an ancient faith practice predating the birth of Jesus. It is a common practice in some Christian denominations. In this activity your participants will hear scripture about Jesus being anointed with oil and use their sense of touch and smell to connect with the scripture. Each will practice anointing. Engaging the sense of smell and healing touch is another way to experience beauty in the world.

Supplies:

- Bible
- unscented oil
- lemon, peppermint, or vanilla extract
- liquid measuring cup
- small cups or bowls (one for each pair of participants)
- stir sticks or spoons (one for each pair of participants)
- roll of paper towels

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.

Gather your group in a circle. Discuss the practice of anointing with oil, and ask if anyone has experience with this tradition, or talk about how or when your community uses oil in worship or other settings. (Be sensitive to any one with allergies to the scents.)

Read aloud or invite someone in the group to read John 12:1–8. Talk about how Jesus reacts to Mary’s action. Invite the group to gather around a table in pairs. Give a bowl and stir stick or spoon to each team. Fill a measuring cup with unscented oil and pass it to each group, inviting people to pour about $\frac{1}{8}$ cup into their bowl. Then pass around the extracts. Allow each group to smell them, to choose one, and to add a few drops to the oil. Stir the oil. Invite each pair to dip their fingers in the oil and to feel it. They may rub it on their hands. Ask people to describe how it feels. Invite partners to place a small bit of oil in a cross pattern on each other’s palms.

Provide paper towels for drying hands. Invite everyone to stand in a circle and share a prayer or sing a favorite hymn or blessing song from your tradition.

③ Starry, Starry Night

Leader preparation: In a time before electric lights, the night sky was a beautiful and interesting sight. People studied the stars and their movements with the naked eye and eventually with early telescopes. Genesis tells of God creating the stars, and in Psalms God is praised by the psalmist for this creation. In the gospel of Matthew a star guides the wise men or Magi to Jerusalem in search of Jesus.

In this activity you and your learners will spend time contemplating the night sky, appreciating its beauty for itself and as it is written about in scripture. You may either provide pictures of the night sky from the Internet or astronomy books from the library, or you may do this by visiting the website <http://earthsky.org/> tonight. The main point of the exercise is to experience the wonder and beauty of the night sky rather than a detailed astronomy lesson.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- pictures of the night sky from the Internet or library books
- (optional) candles and a lighter, or white Christmas tree lights to provide atmosphere and light in a darkened indoor room

Explain that long before Jesus was born people watched the night sky and wondered about stars and planets. You may wish to arrange for dimmer light or darken the room and use candle light or small white Christmas tree lights to create a feeling of awe and wonder. The night sky is one of the wonders of creation that we may take for granted because we spend so much time indoors with electric lights. Invite everyone to close their eyes and to imagine life before lights when most work would stop once the sun went down and people would eat together and then prepare for sleep. Often, especially in the territory where Jesus was born, people might sleep out under the stars.

Invite people to listen to the account of the creation in Genesis 1:14–19. After a few minutes read Psalm 8, inviting the group to say verse 1 and verse 9 together. Invite people to talk about what they see and what they find beautiful in the night sky. Conclude with a reading of Luke 2:8–20, in which an angel appears to the shepherds at night, and Matthew 2:1–12, in which the magi are lead to find Jesus by a star.

Discerning & Deciding Activities

 4 Nature Walk (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: St. Francis was a Christian who understood that humans are one among the many creatures created by God. Celtic Christians and other aboriginal Christians understand God in connection with the natural world. This influences their prayers, hymns, and settings for worship. You may live in an urban setting in which taking time to explore nature is a treat, or in a rural local where nature is the setting for work but not necessarily for contemplation or reflection. In either case, you may use this activity to create a tradition of observing the wonder of God's created world and for giving thanks for all that you find.

Supplies:

- Bible
- an outdoor place to walk

Gather your group at the starting point for your walk. The length of the journey and time spent can be adjusted depending on the age and physical abilities of participants and or the season or available space. Invite participants to take several deep breaths and to breathe out any concerns. This time will be about noticing creation in big and small details and with as many senses as possible. Invite learners to walk about the space freely or to follow a leader, quietly noticing their surroundings.

After four minutes, pause and ask people to name something they saw, felt, smelled, or heard. Invite everyone to find a comfortable spot to sit, stand, or lie down and look up at the sky as you read Psalm 8. Observe a moment of silence at the end of the reading. Then invite each person to say in turn: *Majestic God, I give thanks for [name of a creature, object in nature, place in nature, and so forth.]* Stand up and return slowly to the starting point in groups of two or three, mixing older and younger aged participants. Allow each member of the team to share what he or she notices.

5 Over My Head

Leader preparation: Singing is an ancient part of Christian discipleship and worship. "Over My Head" is a spiritual originally sung by Africans enslaved in America. In the song one can hear the longing of an enslaved people for Jesus and their faith that God must be somewhere. Eventually this song became part of the African American Civil Rights movement with a minor change in the lyrics to read "over my head, I see freedom in the air." Share the origin of the spiritual with your participants, or reflect more deeply on the origins if this song is already a part of your tradition. Prepare to sing it in voices of celebration and joy. Invite participants to adapt the lyrics to your setting or this faith practice. Some examples of adaptations are given in the activity description. Either call for musicians within the group, or invite someone to play the music live with your group.

Supplies:

- Bible
- song: “Over My Head,” African American traditional (tune: Over My Head), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q2DLSXYxp6Q&feature=related>
- piano and pianist, or computer with Internet access to listen to link
- (optional) musical instruments such as shakers, gourds, tambourines, drums

Tell the story of spirituals as they originated with African slaves in America. Invite the group to learn the lyrics of “Over My Head.” Once the lyrics are learned, invite everyone to sing with joy. Encourage movement and raising of hands in the air when they sing “Over My Head,” holding a hand to an ear when singing “I hear music in the air,” and pointing to their heads when they sing “There must be a God somewhere.”

Invite the group to create new lyrics such as “Under my feet, I feel the good earth, I know there is a God somewhere” or “Next to me is my neighbor, I know there is a God somewhere.” Be creative and enjoy praising God in song. Share Psalm 8 with the group and ask people to name where they see, feel, or hear God or where they feel touched by God in their lives.



6 Journey of the Magi

Leader preparation: In this activity you will invite the group to consider the artwork. The link to Christian tradition is in the contemplative nature of the activity. God calls us to pay attention and do justice, and Jesus calls us to notice and care for the most vulnerable among us. Slowing down and taking time to observe emotions, people, objects, and events in our lives helps strengthen our ability to observe and take action with compassion in the world and to encourage one another to live faithful lives.

Supplies:

- Bible
- 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
- talking stick—a stick decorated with ribbons tied to the end
- computer with Internet access and projection capability

Gather the group together, invite all to stand in a circle, and take time to breathe deeply. Tell the group that they are going to look at a picture and have a chance to talk about what they see. To give everyone a chance to be heard, introduce the talking stick. Explain that only the person holding the stick may speak. The stick is passed around until all have had a turn to speak. Invite everyone to sit down anywhere they like as long as they can see the picture. After a moment of silence, engage the participants in conversation using the following questions:

- What is happening in the picture?
- Where are the people going, and where are they from?
- What feelings does the picture evoke in you?
- Where do you see beauty in this picture?
- How do you relate to the picture? Do you see yourself in the picture? Where? How?

Invite volunteers to take turns reading Matthew 2:1–12 to the group. Ask learners what parts of the scripture might be represented in the artwork. *What elements in*

the story are not seen in the picture? What objects would they take on a journey to look for Jesus? How would they know Jesus if they met him?

Thank everyone for their attention, and tell them that paying attention is a traditional practice. Practicing paying attention opens their eyes to joys, to concerns, to beauty, to brokenness as well as opening their eyes to God's presence among us. Conclude by giving thanks for this time to pay attention together and for the wise men who, by choosing to go home a different way, spared Jesus from King Herod.

Sending & Serving Activities

7 Christian Acts of Extravagant Compassion (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: There is a secular movement sparked by the phrase “practice random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty.” Underlying this statement is the idea of doing good for good's sake and making beauty in the world for beauty's sake. As Christians, we know the extravagant and abundant love of God made flesh in Jesus Christ. God continually seeks relationship with us.

In John 12:1–8, we read that Mary lavishes love and compassion on Jesus when she anoints him with precious oils. This anointing would typically happen after a beloved person died in ancient times. Mary wants to care for Jesus while he is still among the living and to shower him with love and compassion. She understands who Jesus is and what his ministry is about, and she wants to give him praise and honor in the moment. In this activity your group will explore the beauty of being so loved by Jesus and to love Jesus and one's neighbors in return. You and your group will make visible signs of that love to share with others.

Supplies:

- Bible
- blank 8½" x 11" paper
- red markers or crayons
- scissors

Invite your group to find seats and to be comfortable. Read John 12:1–8, emphasizing Mary's gift to Jesus in anointing him before death. Talk about how important it is to show our love to people in our daily lives as well as to take time to express love for God. Ask the group to name ways they show love for Jesus in church, in their work or school lives, and at home.

What would they do to express extravagant love for Jesus today that might equal Mary's action with the costly perfume? What would they do if another Christian told them they were being wasteful in their love offering?

At the end of the conversation invite people to make valentines for Christ and for someone to whom they want to show love. Pass out the markers and paper and scissors so the participants may cut out hearts and decorate them. Post the valentines to Christ on a wall of your gathering place, and keep them up as reminders to show Christ's love. Encourage the group to express love or compassion both to friends and family but also to neighbors both those literally next door and symbolic neighbors such as bus drivers, postal workers, clerks in stores, teachers, and the like.

8 Gratitude Graffiti

Leader preparation: Post a large piece of butcher paper or several pieces of chart paper to form a banner.

Supplies:

- Bible
- butcher paper
- pencils, markers, colored pencils
- sticky tack or tape

Read John 12:1–8. Note that Mary was so overcome with thankfulness that she poured perfume on Jesus’ feet and wiped them with her hair. The group has the opportunity now to create a paper of “graffiti” that expresses thanks to God in an unconventional format. Post the butcher paper, and encourage all to add symbols, words, or pictures to express their gratitude to God. Then stand back and enjoy the product. *How is this format beautiful? How is the process of working together lovely?*

9 For the Beauty of the Earth

Leader preparation: The hymn “For the Beauty of the Earth” ties together the themes of Christian tradition and experiencing beauty. If singing is not your gift, you may wish to invite someone with singing ability to lead this activity. In addition, you may wish to invite people to provide accompaniment for the singing.

Supplies:

- hymn: “For the Beauty of the Earth” by Follitt S. Pierpoint (tune: Dix), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mHOMXiOKEDQ>
- piano and pianist, or recording of the hymn tune and a music player, or computer with Internet access

Gather together near the piano or around the music player so that all can hear the tune. Remind everyone that singing hymns is one of the oldest practices of the Christian faith. The words of the hymns are carefully chosen by the writers to tell the story of our faith and our relationship to God. Next lead the group verse by verse to learn the words to “For the Beauty of the Earth.”

After speaking the words aloud once, pause to listen to the tune. Next, learn to sing each verse with the music. If you can, teach the words without giving anyone a printout of the lyrics. Just have them repeat it after you. This way everyone can see one another and won’t be looking down at the paper. You may then wish to sing it by breaking into parts, with the left side singing one verse and the right another, or only the children or only the adults.

Reflect

What traditions of the Christian faith are part of your community’s worship life? Which are most meaningful to you? How do you experience beauty in practicing these traditions? What Christian traditions do you practice in your personal life? What new traditions or faith practices have you created in your home for yourself or your family? If experiencing beauty is a tradition, how would you practice it?

Have each person name other things, events, people, or places that make him or her feel like singing a hymn of gratitude. How else might the learners show God gratitude (with prayer, dance, painting, helping, caring, and so forth)? Conclude by having everyone sing all together.

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Context and Mission

About this Age Group

“For everything there is a season,” says the writer of Ecclesiastes. Experiencing beauty in context and mission is a way to discover beauty outside one’s own setting. Participants of all ages will have the opportunity to consider beauty in acts of compassion performed with and alongside partners in mission. Working cooperatively, we demonstrate the beauty of relationships and make God’s love visible to others.

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

Context and mission often involves working with broken systems and institutions; we may encounter people who are hurting as a result of poverty, neglect, or disaster. Experiencing beauty in the midst of brokenness takes practice. Yet we can choose attitudes of compassion and cooperation and find moments of peace in the midst of conflict.

Read Ecclesiastes 3:1–13. Consider your own experience in light of the seasons described in scripture. Imagine you are in a terrible storm or conflict either literally or metaphorically. On whom do you call for help in such times? How does God send aid? Is it a neighbor's kindness? A child's embrace? The appearance of a rainbow in the sky? When have you been that neighbor to someone else?

Read 2 Corinthians 5:16–20. You will help your group begin to practice finding beauty in the midst of broken times and places. Seemingly simple practices such as passing the peace in calm times prepare one to be peace for others in times of difficulty.

In mission we go not just to serve and be givers of aid. Often the intended recipients have more to give us and teach us about beauty and grace than we can know. Take time to be open this week to asking for help as you go about your normal routines. Think about these experiences and name times when you

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Ambassadors for Christ (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read 2 Corinthians 5:16–20. Think about what it means to have been given the ministry of reconciliation and to be an ambassador for Christ. What does it mean to be made new in Christ? What does it mean that Christ does not count trespasses against the people who committed them? Remember that through Christ we are forgiven. Nevertheless, we must still face the consequences of our actions and make amends with our victims. Victims need not forgive and forget, especially in the case of abuse. We can turn from wrongdoing, which separates us from God and our fellow human beings, and take responsibility for our actions. These choices are part of reconciliation.

Supplies:

- Bible
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Read aloud 2 Corinthians 5:16–20. Ask people to work in pairs or small groups. Have the pairs think of a situation that would allow someone to be an ambassador for Christ. How can their actions or words show God's love? Encourage people to think of situations that relate to their lives. For instance, a person being an ambassador for Christ might give comfort to a new student in her or his class, invite a neighbor to lunch, or help serve soup in a soup kitchen. Brainstorm some activities that show caring, kindness, and compassion, and act them out.

Repeat this process with a focus on reconciliation. Ask learners some ways they know to show anger appropriately and what to do if they hurt someone's feelings or have their feelings hurt by others. *What are peaceful ways to address conflict?* Have groups create brief skits and act them out for the group.

2 Beauty in Reconciliation

Leader preparation: Make the puzzles ahead of time, and cut up the pieces. You will need one puzzle for every two or three group members. To make the puzzles, find pictures of conflict (children having a school yard argument, adults arguing, scenes of war, or civil rights protests) from magazines or newspapers, and glue them onto the card stock, leaving about a 2" square box empty in the center. When the glue is dry, cut up the puzzle, making between ten and twenty pieces, depending on the age of your participants.

If you have access to a computer and printer, you could search Google images for pictures of conflict. Save them, and then arrange them in a word document, leaving a center square blank. Print the document on card stock, and then proceed to cut it out as described above.

If your group is mostly younger children, make puzzles with fewer pieces. Store the puzzles in separate bags or envelopes. Remove the center piece from each puzzle, and put these in a separate bag labeled "The Missing Piece."

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noted beauty in asking and receiving help.

Conclude your preparations with a prayer of your own or the following one.

Prayer: *God, my help in all seasons, I thank you for your presence in times of peace and times of war. I am grateful too for your presence in the in-between times. Help me to be an ambassador for Christ in all situations, reflecting your presence in the 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.

Supplies:

- Bible
- card stock 8 ½” x 11”, one piece for each puzzle
- scissors
- images of reconciliation, either from magazines, newspapers, or the Internet
- sandwich bags, envelopes, or other containers to store the pieces of each puzzle

Gather the group and explain that they will have an opportunity to see beauty in reconciliation. Talk about the meaning of the word reconciliation, especially as it relates to our relationship with God. Read 2 Corinthians 5:16–20 to the group. Invite people to name people, places, or events that need God’s healing reconciliation. Offer a prayer for God’s presence to be felt in these situations.

Divide the group into teams of two or three. Give each team a puzzle to work together. When groups are finished, talk about what Jesus might do to bring peace to the situation. What could they do as an ambassador of Christ to help heal the situation? Invite the groups take a piece from the missing piece bag, record their answers on it, and place it in the center of their puzzles.



③ What Season Is It?

Leader preparation: In this activity, you will invite the group to consider the artwork “Wind from the Sea.” The link to context and mission is in the contemplative nature of the activity. God calls us to pay attention and do justice, and Jesus calls us to notice and care for the most vulnerable among us. Slowing down and taking time to observe emotions, people, objects, and events in our lives helps strengthen our ability to observe and take action with compassion when injustice occurs. Often, as we slow down and notice details, beauty emerges below the surface of our lives.

Supplies:

- Bible
- 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>
- (optional) talking stick—a stick decorated with ribbons tied to the end
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projection capability

Gather the group to stand in a circle, and take time to breathe deeply. Tell all that they are going to look at a picture and have a chance to talk about what they see. If you wish, introduce the talking stick. Explain that only the person holding the stick may speak. The stick is passed around until all have had a turn to speak. Invite everyone to look at the picture and put all their senses to work silently. After a moment of silence, engage the participants in conversation using the following questions.

- What do you think the image is about; what is the story?
- Name details from the picture that stand out to you.
- What colors, shapes, or objects do you see in the picture?
- What feelings does the picture evoke in you?

Read Ecclesiastes 3:1–13 to the group. Invite everyone to reflect on how this work of art might reflect the scripture text. Use the following questions if helpful.

- What season or time might be represented by the picture?
- Where is God in this picture?
- What beauty might you see outside the window? In the room?
- What might you be called to do in mission in this landscape?

Thank people for their attention, and tell them that paying attention is the first step in mission. Paying attention opens their eyes to joys, concerns, and places to take action as well as helping them to notice God's presence and beauty among us.

Discerning & Deciding Activities

4 Illustrating the Seasons (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Your learners will work directly with scripture to illustrate Ecclesiastes 3:1–8. The purpose of the activity is to help people consider what season they find themselves in. Knowing one's own context or season can help one connect honestly with others.

Note that the paired groupings in the text are extremes, such as a time to be born and a time to die. Many of your participants may be in the middle of seasons. There are no right or wrong answers or right or wrong seasons.

Supplies:

- Bible
- 8½" x 11" blank sheets of paper or card stock, one piece per participant
- colored markers or crayons
- (optional) construction paper in various colors and/or old magazines, scissors, glue sticks

Invite people to gather around a table with art supplies in the middle. Have the group sit so that younger participants are mixed with older ones. Remind the learners that God is with everyone in all situations. In Ecclesiastes we hear about how there is a time for everything in life.

Read Ecclesiastes 3:1–8 to the group. Invite each team to pick one of the pairs of seasons and to use art supplies to illustrate them. As they finish, they may wish to talk about what seasons they find themselves in. Encourage people to talk about the beauty to be found in each season, even the difficult ones.

When every team is finished, gather together. Invite pairs to share their creations.

5 Prayers for Reconciliation

Leader preparation: Not everyone is able to travel out of his or her community to participate in direct mission work. However, an equally important part of working in mission and for reconciliation is the practice of prayer. It can be a powerful and beautiful experience to commit to praying for persons on a mission project, or to pray for positive movement on both sides of a difficult situation.

Ahead of time, scan the newspaper or local news or Internet news service for areas of conflict in your community, the nation, and the world. Bring these events to the session, and invite participants to name their own areas in need of reconciliation.

Supplies:

- world map
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- fine point marker for the map
- scrap paper
- pencils
- Bible

Place the map where all participants can see it. Read 2 Corinthians 5:16–20, and talk about reconciliation. Describe some of the areas in your immediate community, the nation, or the world that are experiencing conflict. Invite participants to name other areas. As places and events are named, have one member of the group list them on the newsprint or whiteboard and another member circle the areas on the map. When you have listed several places or events, pause and invite everyone to pray. Lead a group prayer such as this one: *God of all times and all people, we lift up [insert the names of places and people mentioned] to your loving care. Help the people and leaders on all sides to cease fighting and live in peace. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.*

Next, distribute paper and pencils and invite everyone to write down one conflict. Have them take home these papers and pray throughout the week for both sides in the conflict to find a way to reconcile. If possible, have the group report back on the experience.

6 Who Are Our Neighbors? A Walkabout

Leader preparation: Arrange with your group ahead of time to wear comfortable walking shoes and appropriate outdoor clothing for walking outside. If you have many young children, be sure to arrange for parent participation or help from adults to ensure safety on the walk. Your group will be reflecting on the area in which you meet and looking for beauty in the neighborhood.

Supplies:

- Bible
- (optional) a digital camera or other means to record the trip

Gather in the foyer or narthex of your worship space. Read Jesus' instruction in Matthew 10:5–13 as he sends out the disciples. In this passage he wants them to concentrate on people in their own community. The emphasis is on service and freely giving God's love to those they meet, just as it has been freely given to them.

Read Matthew 22:36–40. Talk about how Jesus does not give specific examples of neighbors; a neighbor can be someone living next door to us or anyone we meet.

Explain that the group is going on a walking trip to discover the neighborhood around the church. Have everyone be on the lookout for signs of beauty. Discuss some of the following questions either while walking or upon your return.

- Who lives nearby?
- What jobs might they do?
- What kinds of houses do they live in?
- What businesses are in the area?
- What needs does the community have?
- How can the group participate with neighborhood residents to create beauty?

Sending & Serving Activities

 7 **Passing the Peace (Easy Preparation)**

Leader preparation: Passing the peace in worship is one of the oldest Christian traditions. It originates with the apostle Paul, who in his letters encourages the Romans (Romans 16:16), the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 16:20 and 2 Corinthians 13:12), and the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 5:26) to greet one another with a holy kiss. The kiss, given as a symbol of love freely given by God in Christ, gradually evolved into words and shaking hands. Know your community's tradition about passing the peace. If this practice is a regular part of worship, you may wish to bring copies of your worship bulletin for the group to examine. If not, provide the historical information provided above.

Supplies:

- (optional) copies of your worship bulletin if passing the peace is part of your service

Gather in your meeting space, and take time to explain the history of passing the peace using the leader notes above. If your congregation practices this tradition, talk about when it happens in the service. Have a conversation about peace in the everyday context and in the Christian context. Ask these or similar questions:

- How would you define peace?
- Where do you need peace in your life?
- Where in the world is there a need for peace?
- Respond to the idea that peace in everyday terms means the absence of something such as conflict, noise, war, or other chaotic items or events. Peace in terms of Christ means the presence of a loving God.

Have the group form a circle and offer prayers for all the places and people mentioned that are in need of peace. Invite each person to stand as able and turn to the neighbor on the left. One person extends a hand and says, "The peace of Christ be with you." The person receiving the peace shakes the hand of the giver and replies, "And also with you."

When each person has greeted a neighbor on either side, have people walk around and randomly greet other members by passing the peace. Take a few moments to ask people about the experience. Encourage them to practice passing the peace with their Christian friends and to look for Christ in everyone they greet, both in and out of church.

8 Context Blessings

Leader preparation: Locate sticky notes to use to share blessings with one another.

Supplies:

- sticky notes
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- pens, pencils, crayons

Invite people to list the various physical places where they commonly spend time (work, car, home, office, soccer practice, and so on.) Be sure to hear from all ages in the group. Write these places on various pieces of newsprint. If people wish, they can share some of the challenges and joys of these various settings. How might they need the support of this faith community?

Now offer people sticky notes and pencils. Have them draw a picture or write a note of blessing for others in the group. The notes will be placed on the appropriate piece of newsprint. For example, a note of blessing for a student might go on the “school” newsprint. Once all have finished, others may be invited to choose one or two notes to take with them as encouragement for the coming week.



9 Stone Soup

Leader preparation: Meal-sharing has been an important part of Christian mission from the earliest days of the Christian community recorded in Acts 2:41–42 and Acts 6:1–6.

You will share the scripture stories listed above as well as the folk tale “Stone Soup” with your group. Plug in the crock pot and have the broth already beginning to heat before you begin the activity. You may use any ingredients that you have on hand for the soup. To speed the cooking, you might pre-cook the harder ingredients such as carrots, turnips, potatoes, and so forth. Use canned beans instead of uncooked beans.

Supplies:

- Bible
- crock pot
- small clean stone
- chicken stock or vegetable stock
- a carrot and a piece of celery, pre-sliced and in separate bags
- thin spaghetti noodles pre-broken or cut into small pieces
- salt and pepper
- a ladle
- bowl and spoons or cups for the soup
- “Stone Soup,” Attachment: Activity 9

Read the following passages with your group: Acts 2:41–42, Acts 6:1–6, and Luke 5:27–32, in which Jesus eats with diverse people. Reference Mark 6:30–44, which tells of when five thousand people are fed by Jesus with five loaves and two fishes. Note that in Jesus’ day, people of different social classes, genders, and nationalities did not eat together. To share a meal can be a radical act!

Reflect

How can you be an ambassador for Christ each day? Are there times and seasons in your life when it is easier to be an ambassador than others? What do you do to draw closer to Christ? When and where do you see Christ in other people? What can you do to simplify your life in order to make more room for experiencing the beauty that comes from relationships with other believers and also with any neighbor God brings your way? For whom do you find it difficult to pray? Consider praying for that person daily, and notice if this changes your understanding of that person’s situation.

Consider with your group who is present at typical meals. Ask when they have eaten with someone they did not know well. Ask them to share about their favorite meals.

Then tell the story of stone soup, Attachment: Activity 9. Invite a participant to carefully drop a clean stone into the broth. As each item is added to the pot in the story, invite a participant to add ingredients to your soup. When you have finished reading, ask the group to name similarities between the story and the story of the feeding of the five thousand.

Consider serving the soup when the noodles are soft. Offer a simple blessing such as this: *Amazing God, thanks for this good soup to fill our stomachs and nourishing conversation to enrich our souls. Help us look for opportunities to share food and encouragement with others. Amen.*

Stone Soup

A lone traveler comes to a poor village carrying nothing more than an empty cooking pot. He's hungry and asks for a bit of food. The people in the village don't want to share any of their food with him. They are afraid they don't have enough for themselves, let alone a stranger. The traveler then asks where he might get some water. The villagers point him to the local stream. He goes to the stream and fills his pot with water.

He goes back to the middle of the village with his pot full of water. He builds a fire, places the pot over the fire, and drops a large stone in the pot.

One of the villagers becomes curious and asks what the stranger is doing. He answers, "I am making stone soup. It tastes wonderful, but it could use a bit of flavor." The villager says, "I have a small carrot I can give you." "Great," says the stranger, and adds the carrot to the pot.

Another villager comes by and asks what the stranger is doing. Again he answers, "I am making stone soup. It tastes wonderful, but it could use a bit of flavor." The villager says, "I have a small potato I can give you." "Great," says the stranger, and adds the potato to the pot.

More villagers come by and hear the story of the soup. Each one is willing to bring one more ingredient: a turnip, a tomato, a handful of beans, a cup of rice, a piece of garlic, a bit of salt and pepper.

Finally, the soup has cooked. And all the villagers shared a delicious pot of soup.

(There are many versions of this folk tale, including ethnic versions from China, France, Hungary, Portugal, and other Northern European countries.)

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Future and Vision

About this Age Group

Multiage participants will have different understandings about the concept of time and the future. They will also have varied levels of experience with the beauty of creation and relationships. It will be important to create a cooperative spirit of inquiry and sharing among all participants as they open themselves to explore creation and to imagine life in God's realm.

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

This Exploration invites everyone, including the leader, to be open to imagining God’s realm. Take time to walk in nature and observe the plants, animals, and water life near where you live. Look at the sky at night and in the daytime. Consider the wonder of this creation we call earth, and imagine God’s realm by reading Genesis 1–2:3 and Revelation 21:2–5 and 22:1–5.

While God gives dominion to humankind over the other creatures, in a conversation with Job in Job 38:1–11 God also reminds us that we are not God, nor are we greater than other creatures. Consider your interactions with the created world. Conclude your reflection time with the following prayer or one of your own.

Prayer: Majestic Creator, I give you thanks for the wonders you have made. Thank you for land and sky and sea and all the creatures—even me. Help me to be a humble servant caring for your creation. Open my mind to imagine your realm and to share the wonder of it with my group. 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

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 How Majestic Is It? (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Job 38:1–11 several times aloud so that you can read it dramatically. In this passage God reminds Job of Job’s status as a creature and of God’s majesty. You will dramatize this scripture with your group.

Supplies:

- Bibles

Greet your group, and invite all to sit comfortably around the room. Explain that since the beginning of time humans have acted as if they were equal to God or knew better than God how to live on the earth. Sometimes they have done harmful things to themselves or fellow creatures because of this attitude. Ask the group to name such instances (for example, war, killing animals until they are extinct, polluting the world). Now invite them to imagine God’s reaction to humans and their upstart ways.

Job was not an upstart per se. He was just an ordinary man of faith who questioned God. These verses are part of God’s answer. God reminds Job and us about the beauty in creation. Read aloud Job 38:1–11. Invite your group to answer “Not I, God” to each of God’s questions and to respond to each naming of another wonder of creation with the words, “How majestic, God!”

Discuss together what beauty is found in this passage, and how knowing a powerful, creative God affects our ability to face the future with hope.



2 The Beauty of the Sea

Leader preparation: You may wish to obtain a DVD or YouTube clip of undersea life, such as <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AmAba5l0cW8&feature=relate>. Gather the supplies, and make templates in the shape of sea life creatures so that your participants can use them as guides. Ahead of time tape up the blue craft paper for your undersea mural, and have the rest of the supplies ready on a worktable for your group.

Supplies:

- Bible
- big piece of blue craft paper (about 3’ x 6’)
- “Templates of Sea Life,” Attachment: Activity 2
- scissors
- colored construction paper
- (optional) computer with Internet access and a projector to show Internet images and clips

Read Genesis 1:1–23 followed by Job 38:1–11. Ask people to share their experiences with an ocean or lake. What did it look, feel, smell, taste, and sound like? Ask if anyone has ever seen sea creatures or interacted with them.

Invite the group to cut out sea creature shapes using their own designs or the templates on Attachment: Activity 2. On each one, they may draw a picture of something beautiful in the world God created. They may also sketch images of beauty that they hope for in the future. Add these shapes to the blue craft paper to create an underwater mural.

Experiencing Beauty

MULTIAGE

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.

3 Imagining God’s Realm

Leader preparation: Practice reading Revelation 21:1–5 aloud. Your group will act out the animals and characters to accompany this text.

Supplies:

- Bible

Read Revelation 21:1–5. Say that this scripture gives us a word picture of what God’s realm might be like. Divide the group into teams of three or four and have each team devise a skit where unlikely animals or people interact together peacefully. For instance, they might show a cat playing with mice, a lion sleeping with lambs, or a human carefully taking a spider outside rather than killing it. Once the teams have had time to create a scene, come back together and have each team act out a scene.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Cloud Watch (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Practice reading Genesis 1–2:3 aloud. If you are not able to go outside, you may want to create an environment for wonder inside.

Supplies:

- Bible
- access to window with a view of the sky, or an outdoor location
- a shallow baking dish
- a container of water
- blue food coloring

Read aloud Genesis 1–2:3. Read Job 38:1–11, in which God notes the majesty of creation. Arrange for the group to go outside for a brief while to view the sky. Where do they see beauty in it? Does the sight of the heavens make them feel insignificant or heighten their sense of being an important part of creation? How does the majesty of creation affect their hopes for the future?

In addition to watching clouds, invite the group to experiment with seeing shapes in colored water. Pour water into a shallow baking dish that is at least ½” deep. Squirt in a drop or two of blue food coloring. Invite participants to watch the color swirl and to name what they see. Ask people to share some of their favorite activities that relate to the sky. Conclude by giving thanks for the beauty of the heavens.

5 Navaro Rapids



Leader preparation: Study the art “Navaro Rapids” and reflect on the questions given in the activity description.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Navaro Rapids” by Andro Hiroshigi, <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>
- Bible
- (optional) an outdoor space to meet
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projection capability

Invite participants to sit anywhere they like as long as they can see the artwork “Navaro Rapids.” Ask them to put all their senses to work silently. Engage them in conversation about the picture using the following questions.

- What is happening in the picture?
- Name two details from the picture. What colors, shapes, or objects do you see?
- What feelings does the picture evoke in you?
- Where do you see beauty in this picture?
- Where do you see peace or danger in the picture?

Ask the group what elements in the picture remind them of a scripture passage or a life of faith, or otherwise might indicate religious content. Invite volunteers to take turns reading Genesis 7:11–21, 8:1–5, and 9:8–17 (the story of Noah and the flood) to the group. Afterward, ask them if there were parts of these passages that could take place in the picture. Next share Mark 4:35–41 with the group and again have them consider if there are parts of the passage that they can see in the picture. *How does the story of Jesus calming the storm bring us courage? How can this story help us not be afraid of the future?*

6 For The Beauty of the Earth

Leader preparation: Check your congregation’s hymnal for the hymn “For the Beauty of the Earth.” If it is not in your hymnal, look up a YouTube video online. (See the supply list for one suggestion.) Arrange for someone to accompany your singing, or locate a music player on which to play the music. Familiarize yourself with the tune and words, and be prepared to lead singing.

Supplies:

- hymn: “For The Beauty of the Earth” by Folliot S. Pierpoint (tune: Dix), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mHOMXiOKEDO>
- musician for accompaniment, or computer with Internet access

Gather your group at the piano or in the room where you have access to a music player or computer. Explain that singing hymns is a central part of Christian discipleship. In our hymns we hear the story of our faith and we hear ways in which we are called to respond as disciples of Christ. We also sing about the wonder and power of God, which is present now and in the future. Share the lyrics of “For the Beauty of the Earth.” Then invite discussion using the following prompts.

- Ask participants to name a time when they gave thanks to God or asked for God to help them.
- How is the passage of time shown in the lyrics?
- What connections between life and God are described in the lyrics?
- What other parts of creation or human relationships are not specifically mentioned in the lyrics that the group would like to lift up with thanksgiving?
- How does the beauty of creation help us trust in God for the future?

Sing the song together.

Option: Create a new verse to represent gratitude for all God will do in the future to guide your group.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Tree of Life Cutouts (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Gather the supplies, and practice reading Genesis 2:1–9 and Revelation 22:1–5 aloud so you can read them smoothly to the group.

Supplies:

- Bible
- construction paper in multiple colors, at least one piece per person
- scissors, one pair per team
- fine-point markers, one per team

Read Revelation 22:1–5. Think about the images in the scripture. The group will work with the idea of a tree whose leaves might heal nations. Invite the participants to work in teams. Fold a piece of construction paper in half vertically. With black marker on one half draw the outline of a tree trunk and branches. Cut out the outline, being careful not to cut the folded side. Open the cutout, and there will be a tree. Cut leaf shapes from a variety of colors of construction paper. On each leaf write a word of hope for the future, such as peace, harmony, no more war.

8 Sculpt the Future

Leader preparation: To make your own play dough, mix 2 cups flour, 1 cup salt, 1 cup water, and 1 tablespoon cooking oil. Knead the dough, and add a few drops of food coloring to each batch to create colored dough. Store in an airtight container.

Supplies:

- modeling dough or clay in various colors, either purchased or homemade
- a large poster board on which you have written “The New Jerusalem”

Arrange for your group to sit at tables. Provide dough in various colors for all to use. Read Revelation 21:2–5 out loud. Invite the group to use the clay to sculpt their vision of God’s realm. *What would the buildings look like in such a city? the plants? the people? the animals?* As people sculpt parts of the city, have them place their creations on the poster board. Near the end of your time together, have participants name what they added to the city.

Ask learners to name ways they already see the realm of God in today’s world and places that are still waiting for beauty to be created.

9 Dance of Life

Leader preparation: Arrange for someone to play accompaniment and, if possible, for someone to sing “For the Beauty of the Earth” or “In the Bulb There Is a Flower” to accompany your group’s liturgical dance. Be thinking about actions or movements that can convey the words and feeling of the hymn. Liturgical dance is a way of embodying scripture or prayer. It does not require previous dance experience or a particular body type. Persons in wheel chairs and walkers can easily participate. The point is movement to music, which is done as prayer to and praise of God.

Supplies:

- music player or pianist for accompaniment
- colorful scarves
- music for “For the Beauty of the Earth” by Folliot S. Pierpoint (tune: Dix), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mHOMXiOKEDQ> or “In the Bulb There Is a Flower” by Natalie Sleeth (tune: Promise), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkWYubdnc7o>
- paper
- pen

Invite people to be open to trying liturgical dance as a way to worship God using their bodies. Go over the hymn to which they will create a dance. You may wish to sing the lyrics through as a group a couple of times. Have the group divide into teams. Give each team 10 minutes to create movements that will convey the meaning and feeling of a section of the hymn. Reconvene as a group, and have each team teach the others their moves. Practice until the group can perform together smoothly.

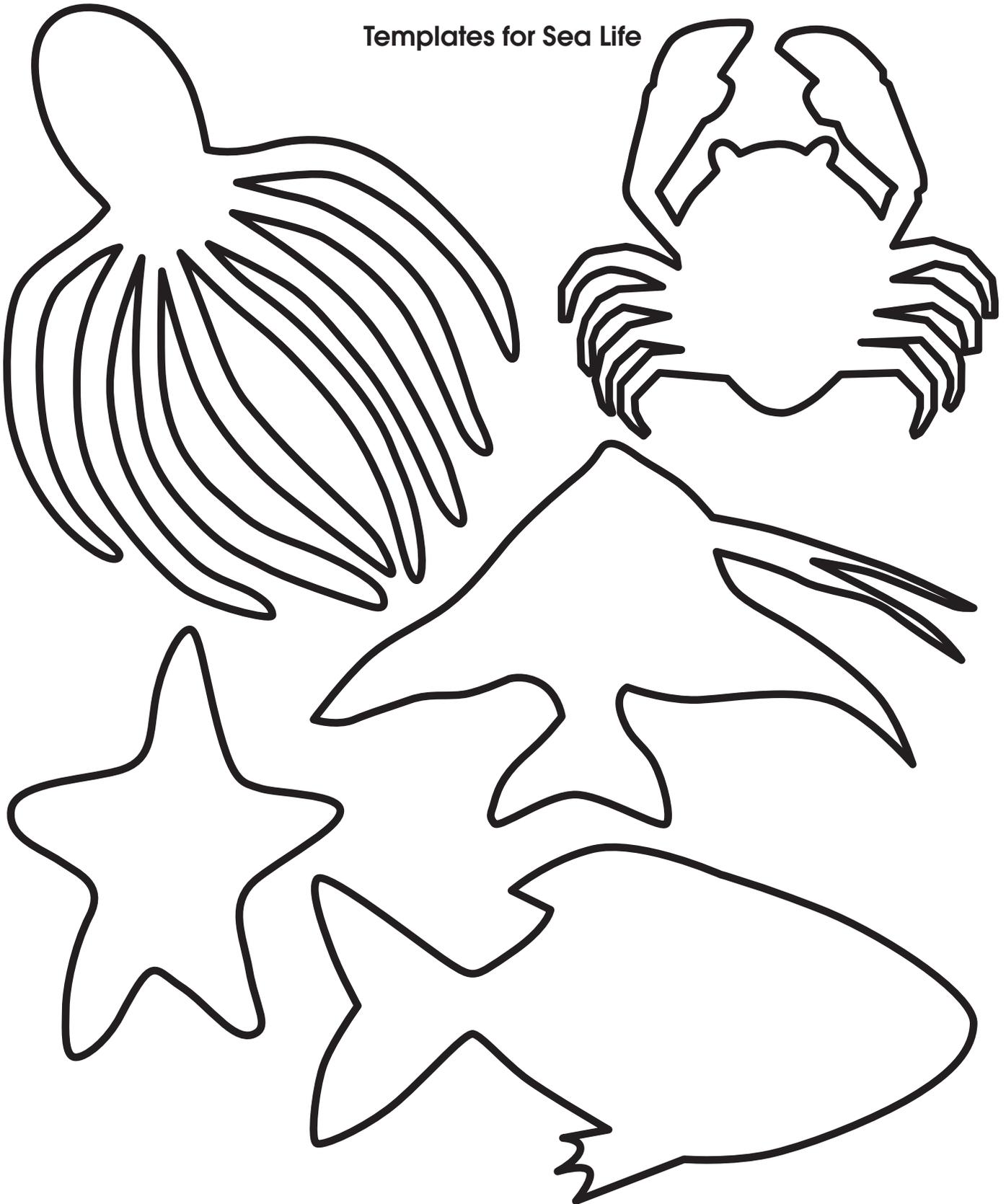
Reflect

Walking gently on the earth is a faith practice and a way to honor the beauty all around you in creation. Do you practice walking gently by leaving no trace when you are in the woods or other natural environment? In addition to refraining from littering and other pollution, do you also make it a practice to clean up litter left by others? Doing so is a way to preserve beauty for other people in the future and to ensure the environment is safe for other creatures again both now and in the future.

How else you might be a steward of this earth and help bring God’s realm of healing to a suffering world? Who or what is suffering in your immediate area? How can you help be part of a solution or enlist your faith community to respond? How can these actions increase the experience of beauty for yourself and others both now and in the future?

Attachment: Activity 2

Templates for Sea Life



Templates for Sea Life

