

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Discovery

About this Age Group

Older youth (15–19) are beginning to discover connections between feelings, experiences, and thoughts. While they are still learning to put these integrated experiences into words, they are also discovering and developing language that connects their feelings (about one another, the world around them, and God) to beauty. Their ability and desire to articulate opinions that are distinct from those of their families, adults, authorities, church, and school are growing quickly. For example, their strong opinions about music, clothing, and friendships often clash with those they identify as authority figures. They are full of potential for discovering beauty and translating beauty into the practice of their faith.

The discovery of beauty can also occur in community. For example, many older youth move socially in subgroups through which they define themselves and develop their identities. It is common, though not always the case, for older youth to associate with a specific sport, club, or style such as “goth”; they may identify closely with the people with whom they sit each day in the cafeteria. In order to engage them more deeply in beauty as a faith practice without violating their process of differentiation, help them begin to identify and enjoy what they are already discovering about beauty. This approach may result in natural ways of inviting them to connect those experiences back to God.

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

As you prepare for the following activities, spend time praying. Open your heart and mind to the beauty of God all around you so that you can facilitate authentically. Before beginning these activities, pray for each learner by name. Lift up their names aloud slowly to God, one at a time; envision them being drawn into God’s presence as you say (pray) each name.

Prayer: O God of beauty, help me to believe that these precious young people are beautiful in your eyes just the way they are. Help me to see them as you see them. Open my heart to the amazing possibilities of new life present in each one and in our group together. May I and they discover more beauty than we ever imagined possible; and may we worship you, our Creator, Redeemer, and Friend as we see you in the beauty all around us. 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 “Ex-

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 What Is Beauty? (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: As you prepare to lead this activity, explore your own ideas about beauty. Try to look, listen, smell, feel, and taste beauty in your life: in movies you watch, music you hear, landscapes you drive by, architecture all around you, animals you notice, food you eat, the faces of the people you love, the clothes you wear, and the art you appreciate. In the following discussion, your role is to facilitate the initial discovery of beauty for your group. You will participate with your young people without dominating the conversation. One way to measure the effectiveness of this activity is to ask yourself the following question: Did all the youth seem engaged with this discussion? Ensure that every person has a chance to make more than one comment. Keep in mind that some quieter members of the group may need more time to digest the content before sharing and may need to be specifically invited to make a comment.

Teenagers often surprise us. Even if it appears as though they are not listening, they may be making profound changes internally. In your prayers and in your leadership, be aware that teenagers have great potential to engage, even if it might not look like they are involved.

Before the discussion begins, write the following categories on newsprint or a whiteboard, leaving ample space for note-taking below each category. Add your own categories to the following: Movies, Music, Food, Nature, Buildings/Architecture, Machines, Clothing, Works of Art. The categories should serve as a guide to the discussion, but they are not to be a test of knowledge. If one or more of the categories doesn’t resonate with your group, simply erase it or scratch it out. If your group wants to add additional categories to your already prepared categories, go for it! Older youth are likely to be very open to reflecting on these and other questions.

Supplies:

- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Lead a group discussion about how we define beauty. Ask for examples of beauty in the categories noted on the newsprint or whiteboard. Invite a volunteer to list the group’s answers.

Choose from the questions below, and remind the participants to feel free to name whatever comes to mind.

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ploring 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.

- Describe a scene of beauty from one of your favorite movies.
- Name a movie that you think had a lot of beauty in it.
- Name a song that reminds you of beauty.
- Name a CD that you think has a lot of beautiful music.
- Name some foods that you have seen prepared beautifully. Name at least one food you would describe as tasting beautiful.
- Name beautiful elements of nature.
- Describe a building or another form of architecture you think is beautiful.
- Name anything mechanical that you think has beauty.
- Name a beautiful work of art.

Remember to be patient and give the group time to think and to respond. You may want to add other questions for your group to explore.

Conclude the conversation by asking the group to reflect on the discussion. Invite everyone to offer one word that describes how this activity felt or what came to mind because of this conversation.

What Is Beautiful?

Leader preparation: This activity works well with any number of youth; however, it is written with a group of twelve or larger in mind. If your group is smaller than twelve, you will need to adjust the number of participants in each brainstorming group to fit your particular size. You’ll have to organize the playing cards to make sure you end up with groups that contain three matching cards. Since the activity is about brainstorming, remind the participants that there are no right or wrong answers.

Supplies:

- small scraps of blank paper (at least twenty-five per person, about the size of 3” x 5” cards)
- pens, one for each person in the group
- deck(s) of playing cards, one card per person

Facilitate a three-part brainstorming session that focuses on describing beauty from the participants’ unique perspectives. You will ask them to work first in groups of three, then in groups of six, and then alone. The activity ends with the entire group together making observations about beauty.

In order to split the group into threes, give one card to each person. No one should look at the cards until asked to do so. Make sure each person receives a card as well as a friendly hello from you.

Ask the youth to find two others who have the same number or designation on their cards and sit down together. If the group does not divide neatly into subgroups of three, be prepared to add yourself or another adult leader to a group of two so that every group has three members. Use exactly the number you need, and then fill in the groups who don’t have three members with late-comers. Before the brainstorming begins, pass out a pen to each person along with twenty to twenty-five scraps of blank paper per person.

Part 1: While the youth are gathered in triplets, ask them to think about anything beautiful they have seen in the last few days. Give them a few examples (such as a sunset, a sunrise, a painting, a photograph, a flower, their cat, and so forth). Assure them that there are no wrong answers during brainstorming. You are simply gathering ideas about what your group experiences as beautiful.

Have each person take five pieces of paper and write one item per scrap of paper. Then all will place their papers face up on the floor in the middle of the group. Instruct the individuals in each group to come up with their own ideas, but ask them also to talk about the ideas within the triplet groups as they place the papers on the floor.

Part 2: Continue the brainstorming by combining two groups of three into groups of six. Each triplet is asked to join with another triplet, pulling all the scraps of paper together and sitting in a circle on the floor around the papers. Once the new groups of six are formed, ask everyone to think about anything beautiful they have heard or smelled in the last few days. Give them a few examples (for example, a song, a flower, a bird singing, a baby laughing, and so forth). Again assure them that there are no wrong answers. Have them each take five more pieces of paper and write one item per piece of paper. Then they will place the papers on the floor in the middle of the group and talk about their choices.

Part 3: Ask each group to sit in silence for two minutes for this part of the activity. Each person should quietly look at all the pieces of paper on the floor and pick the one that seems to be the most beautiful. If some youth come up with a new idea that seems in the moment to be the most beautiful thing they can imagine right now, ask them to write that on a new scrap of paper.

Part 4: After all have chosen the thing that seems most beautiful to them, engage in a discussion with the entire group. Ask people to state their choices. If you have time, invite people to explain their choices.

Beauty Q & A

Leader preparation: Think about how beauty affects you. How does your awareness of beauty change your reactions to the world around you? How would you describe the influence that beauty has had on your life? In what ways has the pursuit of beauty hurt you? How has it enabled you to live your faith more effectively? In what ways has your experience of beauty helped you to worship God more lovingly? Reflect on both the negative and positive impact that beauty can have.

Supplies:

- pens
- slips of paper
- two small tables
- two different baseball hats

Place two small tables at the front of the room. Put a baseball hat on each table. Ask the participants to write questions (one per slip of paper) they might like to ask of Beauty. If beauty could talk, what would they want to ask him or her? Offer a few examples to get the participants thinking, such as: Why do some people pursue beauty in the form of anti-aging creams, or expensive clothing, or the perfect hairstyle? Why does a beautiful sunset make my heart leap? Why does some music make me want to stop what I'm doing and listen to it? Why are some cars more beautiful than others? Who gets to determine what is really beautiful?

After people have had time to write down a few questions, invite them to place their questions in the baseball hats. The baseball hat on the right represents questions that might make beauty seem hurtful or damaging or bad; the baseball hat on the left represents questions that might make beauty seem helpful or loving or good. Ask for a volunteer to read aloud the questions from the left baseball hat and a different volunteer to read the questions aloud from the right baseball hat.

After all the questions have been read, have people stand and move to the baseball hat that holds the questions with the most interest for them. Now the people in each group will discuss why they chose that hat. Monitor carefully how many young people are at each hat. You may wish to go to the hat that has the least number of participants, and guide that conversation if necessary.

To conclude this activity, bring the group together to summarize their conversations and briefly discuss the ways beauty can impact human beings for good or bad.

Pray: *Dear God, please help each one of us to experience beauty this week. Show us the beauty of your world and the beauty that resides in people. Amen.*

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Bring It On: Preach It (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Matthew 6:24–34, and reflect with God about what beauty you discover in the Sermon on the Mount. During this activity pay close attention to individuals in your group in case any of them appear uncomfortable reading aloud. Be careful never to shame a young person for shyness, unwillingness, or inability to read aloud in the group.

Supplies:

- “Matthew 6:24–34 from *The Message*,” Attachment: Activity 4

Matthew 6:24–34 contains a portion of Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount. For this activity your group will eventually read the passage like a sermon. Begin by asking your youth to read the entire passage silently to themselves. Allow enough time for those who read slowly by asking the participants to close their eyes after they have finished reading. There is no hurry! The activity is done best when it is not rushed or hurried along.

After you see that everyone’s eyes are closed, invite people to open their eyes, stand, and get ready to preach this sermon as a group. Split into two groups; the “even” group will stand facing the participants in group two, which will be considered the “odd” group. The even group will read aloud the even-numbered verses, and the odd group will read aloud, or “preach,” the odd-numbered verses. The two groups will preach the sermon back and forth, beginning with verse 24 on the even side and verse 25 on the odd side.

You may want to do a practice run first so that the group can work on the timing of the sermon. During the practice sermon, you can serve as a coordinator, but during the real sermon, you will stand back and let the group preach unaided by your leadership. This activity allows your group to read and hear the passage three times in three different ways.

After the final delivery of the sermon, offer your group a hearty “Amen!” You can invite them to applaud one another for a job well done. Then ask the participants to sit down as you facilitate a discussion based on the following questions.

- What do you find beautiful in this sermon?
- What does God have to do with beauty?
- How does God create beauty?

- In what ways could this sermon motivate a person to find beauty in the world?
- How can the discovery of beauty lead us to worship God?

5 Scavenger Hunt

Leader preparation: Gather several magazines that contain plenty of advertisements. Try for a variety of target audiences and subject matter. Aim to provide a minimum of five magazines per person in your group, and make certain that you do not have to return the magazines to the donors. You may want to advertise in your church newsletter, website, or Sunday bulletin three to five weeks in advance for donations of magazines. Write on the newsprint or whiteboard some categories that reflect various experiences of beauty. See below for examples.

Supplies:

- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- magazines, at least one per participant
- scissors, at least one pair for each group of five participants
- poster board, one per group of five participants
- glue sticks, one per group of five participants

Begin by asking each person to choose one or two magazines. Divide the group into small groups to create collages. Look through the magazines for pictures, words, and images that reflect something about the categories you listed on the newsprint or whiteboard. Suggested categories for the scavenger hunt include the following. Feel free to add other categories that fit your group.

- experiencing beauty in nature
- experiencing beauty in music
- experiencing beauty in people
- experiencing beautiful food
- experiencing beauty in smells
- experiencing beautiful machines
- experiencing beautiful dreams

Ask the small groups to arrange the pictures they've clipped into the categories you listed on the newsprint or whiteboard. Then ask the groups to glue their findings onto the poster board in a creative way, maintaining the categories.

After everyone has finished, discuss the results. Hang your group's posters.



6 The Adventure

Leader preparation: Spend time reflecting on Tissot's "Journey of the Magi." As you look at the art and ponder its beauty, ask yourself the questions you will ask the group. Thoughtfully consider what you see and how it makes you feel. Pray that God will give you insight into the ways your group members might feel and what they might see. Write on newsprint or a whiteboard the six questions that guide the discussion below. You may want to add a question or two of your own as well.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Journey of the Magi” by James Tissot, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1004323110?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=37962&store_id=1401
- markers and newsprint or white board
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projection capability

Lead a group discussion about this piece of art. Ask people to imagine themselves inside the piece of art, on the adventure with this caravan through the desert. Invite your participants to envision themselves and their group of friends traveling slowly toward something as yet unknown, but potentially mysterious, exciting, and beautiful. If they were on an adventure seeking something or someone who was full of beauty, where would they find themselves in this piece of artwork?

Ask people to decide where they can best imagine themselves fitting into this band of travelers. Once people have determined where in the caravan they see themselves, split the group into three sections: those who find themselves near the back of the caravan or perhaps out of sight, not yet on the adventure; those who find themselves somewhere near the middle; and those who find themselves in the front of the caravan.

After everyone is in a group, continue the discussion by asking the following questions.

- What helped you decide to place yourself on this part of the journey?
- What do you anticipate might be ahead?
- How might you feel if you really were on the adventure with those you see in the painting?
- What danger might lie ahead?
- What excitement might lie ahead?
- What beauty might lie ahead?

After the groups have had time to discuss “Journey of the Magi,” call everyone back together. Ask once again: *What beauty do you imagine might be waiting up ahead for the caravan? What kind of dream might the caravan be following?*

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Lectio Divina (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Genesis 28:10–19a aloud. Think for a moment about what you envision when you read the story of Jacob’s dream. Read the passage again slowly and aloud. Pause for about a minute, and then read it a third time silently. Pray, asking God to reveal to you the beauty and wonder of the dream. If you wish, write down your impressions, feelings, or insights about the passage of scripture.

Supplies:

- Bible
- pens, one per participant
- paper

Invite your group to sit quietly and comfortably scattered throughout the meeting space, if possible, an arm’s length distance from others. Prepare the group

for a meditative reading of a story from the Bible. Explain that everyone will be asked to respond in three different ways to three separate readings of the same story. Before you begin to read, ask the participants to sit quietly, take five deep, slow breaths, and silently ask God to speak to them individually and as a group.

You might want to pray aloud on behalf of the group or have one of the participants say a short prayer before you begin what has been traditionally referred to as *lectio divina*. This approach to scripture invites God to speak to each person through the words, the beauty, and the wonder of a specific text. Offer the instructions that follow before you begin as well as in between each reading.

During the first reading invite the group to settle into the story. During the first reading, most people need to settle down and begin the process of being receptive to God's Holy Spirit.

Allow for at least 90 seconds of silence before you move into the second reading. Ask the group to stand quietly before you read the story again. This time read more slowly and deliberately, asking the participants to listen for the beauty and wonder in the story and for a word or phrase that jumps out to them.

During the third reading the group remains standing. If people have not yet naturally closed their eyes, ask them to do so. Invite them to listen for God's voice in the wonder of the story.

After you read the story the third time, encourage people to take five deep breaths, after which they can open their eyes and sit down quietly. Invite them to write down any impressions, feelings, or insights they had about Jacob's dream. What did they feel and think as they listened to the scripture?

To end this activity, ask volunteers if they would like to share their thoughts, impressions, or feelings with the group. Be certain to listen carefully to what each one says and offer affirmation. You may need to share first and offer what your experience was like before the group members are ready to share.



8 Finish the Sentence

Leader preparation: Use Attachment: Activity 8, which contains unfinished sentences, as the focus for this activity. Cut the unfinished sentences into strips of paper, one unfinished sentence per strip. Fold the strips in half twice, and put all of them into a container to pass around. If you have a group that is larger than twelve people, double or triple the number of unfinished sentences by using the same ones twice or three times. Consider adding some of your own unfinished sentences. The more sentence starters your group has, the more lively the activity will be.

You can include in your strips three to six that say "pass," which gives your participants a break. You can also include three to six strips of paper that say, "Choose for yourself an unfinished sentence that has already been answered by someone else." This instruction will give your participants an opportunity to address a topic that previously captured their attention. You can also include a few strips of paper that say, "Choose an unfinished sentence that has already been answered, and assign it to the leader of the group." This gives the group a chance to get to know you better. Encourage your group not to use one-word answers, but rather to finish the sentences and even add more than a sentence to their responses.

Supplies:

- “Unfinished Sentences,” Attachment: Activity 8, cut into strips and folded
- container

Organize your group into a circle, preferably sitting on the floor close to one another. Begin the activity by choosing from the container one folded question. Before passing the container to the person on your right, read aloud the question and answer rather quickly. Then pass the container to another person in the group, and repeat the process. There are no right or wrong answers. Helpful principles of discussion are: Be yourself. Be honest. Be respectful. Try to go around the circle at least twice so that everyone answers at least two questions.

9 Show Me the Beauty

Leader preparation: Our sense of beauty and our experience of beauty are influenced by a wide variety of factors: our upbringing, families, schools, neighborhoods, friendship circles, churches, and personal encounters with God. This activity encourages teenagers to go out into the world and look for beauty intentionally. Be sure that this activity stays within the safe spaces guidelines of your faith community.

Supplies:

- sketch pads
- pencils
- (optional) digital cameras in place of sketch pads and pencils

Split your group into smaller groups and make sure each small group has at least one sketch pad and pencil. Set clear parameters on the time for the activity and the physical boundaries.

Each small group must stay together and capture at least twelve drawings or pictures that everyone in the group can agree upon as beautiful. If group members cannot come to consensus about a certain potential picture or photo, they should not include it in their selection of twelve. Encourage the youth to listen carefully to the others in their group as they each explain why they think a certain picture or photo would contain beauty. Invite them to negotiate so that all of them have a say in what the group agrees is beautiful. Once the time is up, the small groups return to the beginning point and exchange drawings or cameras (or phones with photographing capabilities) with the other groups to witness what the others discovered was beautiful.

After everyone has had a chance to look at and talk about the drawings or photos, pull the group together and discuss the following questions.

- What new experiences of beauty have you had?
- In what new ways have you recognized God in those experiences?
- How can we as a group and as individuals take these experiences of beauty back into our communities of faith, families, or schools?

Reflect

Spend time reflecting on your group and your shared experience of beauty so far. What do people seem to have discovered about beauty that surprised you? What have you discovered about your own experience of beauty because of these older youth? How have they helped you to engage with beauty in fresh ways? What changes can you make in the ethos of the group to enable more experiences of beauty? What changes can you make in the way you facilitate the group for future activities? Pause for a few moments, and pray that God will work in your life and in theirs.

Attachment: Activity 4

Matthew 6:24–34

from *The Message*

24 “You can’t worship two gods at once. Loving one god, you’ll end up hating the other. Adoration of one feeds contempt for the other. You can’t worship God and Money both.

25 “If you decide for God, living a life of God-worship, it follows that you don’t fuss about what’s on the table at mealtimes or whether the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There is far more to your life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body.

26 Look at the birds, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, careless in the care of God. And you count far more to him than birds.

27 “Has anyone by fussing in front of the mirror ever gotten taller by so much as an inch?

28 All this time and money wasted on fashion—do you think it makes that much difference? Instead of looking at the fashions, walk out into the fields and look at the wildflowers. They never primp or shop, 29 but have you ever seen color and design quite like it? The ten best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them.

30 “If God gives such attention to the appearance of wildflowers—most of which are never even seen—don’t you think he’ll attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you?

31 What I’m trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with *getting*, so you can respond to God’s *giving*.

32 People who don’t know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works.

33 Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don’t worry about missing out. You’ll find all your everyday human concerns will be met.

34 “Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don’t get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.

Peterson, E. H. (2002). *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Matt. 6:24--34). Colorado Springs: NavPress. Peterson, E. H. (2002). Scripture taken from *The Message*. Copyright 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.

Attachment: Activity 8

Unfinished Sentences

The most beautiful animal I have ever seen was . . .

The most beautiful piece of music I have ever heard was . . .

The most beautiful car I have ever seen was . . .

The last time I stopped to notice a beautiful sunset or sunrise was as . . .

A beautiful scene I saw in nature was . . .

I think of God as beautiful because . . .

I would describe God as . . .

The difference between what I experience as beauty and
what the adults I know experience as beauty is . . .

The church does the following that might be considered beautiful . . .

My group of friends does the following that might be considered beautiful . . .

I think ugly is/is not the opposite of beautiful because . . .

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder” means that . . .

I remember a moment when I felt like my breath had been taken away by
something beautiful, and that moment was . . .

Pass!

Choose for yourself a question that has already been answered
by someone else.

Choose an unfinished sentence that has already been answered, and assign it
to the leader of your group.

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Exploration: Scripture

About this Age Group

Many older youth are not comfortable with the Bible, even though they may have participated in Sunday school, youth group, church camps, and other religious activities for many years. This generation of older teenagers, while generally intrigued by and interested in spiritual things, tends toward biblical illiteracy. A lack of personal knowledge and positive experience with the Bible can be a source of embarrassment, shame, and even fear. Be sensitive to the power of these feelings. Positive interaction with the Bible has the potential to connect older youth to God more personally for the rest of their lives.

About this Exploration

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

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Luke 9:28–36
Nehemiah 8

Leader Preparation

Scripture plays a foundational role in the practices associated with following Jesus and worshiping God. Full of mystery and wonder, the Bible is an amazing place for us to experience beauty and be drawn toward a more integrated, ongoing worship of God. Listen with an open heart and mind for the voice of God in the Bible stories. Listen also for the still-speaking voice of God in the hopes, dreams, and hurts of your older youth. Embrace scripture as a powerful way to know and worship God more fully, to learn what it means to love your teenagers, and to find more beauty in God’s world.

Prayer: Holy and loving God, help me to enjoy the scriptures as a gift from you. May my reading and study transform me as well as the young people you have entrusted to me. May we have willing, open hearts as together we search for you. Amen.

Session Development

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

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 Falling Asleep (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Luke 9:28–36 aloud to yourself twice. Notice that Peter and the others became drowsy and fell asleep right in the middle of this magnificent experience with Jesus. Notice also that in spite of how awkward this situation might have felt to Peter, James, and John, Jesus does not correct or shame them for their sleepiness. Try to recall a time in your life when you fell asleep or dozed off or perhaps were otherwise distracted right smack in the middle of a beautiful experience. Prepare yourself to talk about this memory with your group.

Supplies:

- Bibles, one per participant

Ask your group to turn in the Bible to Luke 9:28–36. If you have a set of Bibles for the group, consider announcing the page number. Read Luke 9:28–36 aloud while others listen and follow along. Read the verses a second time, asking the group to notice the three people who were with Jesus that day: Peter, John, and James.

Discuss the following questions:

- What could have made Peter and his friends so tired that they fell asleep?
- What might the disciples have been thinking when they finally woke up to see Jesus covered in light while standing with two ancient prophets, Moses and Elijah?
- Why do you think Peter suggested building three shelters for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah?
- In what different ways have you reacted to scripture (perhaps were energized, amazed, challenged, bored, confused, curious)?
- Describe a time when you fell asleep in church or while someone was praying or at a symphony concert or otherwise missed out on a beautiful experience.
- What in this story makes you curious about Jesus?

2 Speechless

Leader preparation: Make copies of the attachment, which is Luke 9:28–36 from *The Message*. Read the passage, and pray for God’s help in connecting the experience of beauty to this story in the Bible. Reflect also on what part of this story feels and looks like a moment of worship for Peter, John, and James.

Supplies:

- “Luke 9:28–36,” Attachment: Activity 2, for each participant
- pen or pencil for each participant
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Hand out a pen or pencil and a copy of the attachment to each participant. Invite everyone to try a Bible experiment with you. Ask people to read the story silently to themselves, and then to circle words that represent beauty to them. (Keep in mind that some people read more slowly than others.)

After everyone has finished reading the story, ask the group members to tell you what words they circled. As they offer their answers, thank them, and write the words they say on the newsprint or whiteboard. You may end up writing some

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- 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.
- words more than once. If it has not already been mentioned, write “speechless” on the board. Begin a group conversation about what you see, using these or similar questions:
- Which words did we select most?
 - What about those words made us think of beauty?
 - What about (. . .) causes some of us to think of beauty? (Ask this question a few times, filling in the blank with words on the board, one at a time.)
 - What about the word “speechless” might connect with beauty?
 - Why does this experience of Jesus and of beauty make the three disciples speechless near the end of the story?
 - Have you ever felt speechless when asked to share a personal spiritual experience or explain what a passage of scripture means to you?

③ Beauty and Terror on the Mountain

Leader preparation: You have the opportunity to learn a lot about your group members through this activity. Pay careful attention to how and why they respond to the individual statements used to frame this activity. Listen attentively to how they talk about their experiences of beauty, Jesus, prayer, and worship. Clear the meeting room so that there is plenty of space to move in the middle.

Supplies:

- Bible

Invite everyone to sit on the floor in a circle with a few inches of space between each person. People will need to have room to move around and shift their positions in response to the following statements. You will read a list of potentially beautiful experiences and ask each person in the group to show a personal response by taking on one of four body positions. If people totally disagree with the statement, they will stay seated on the floor! If they are unwilling to commit to a response, they will kneel on both knees. If they are slightly unsure, but they want to agree that the statement would be an experience of beauty for them, they will stand up with their feet flat on the floor and their hands at their sides pointed downward. If they totally agree that a statement you read would be an experience of beauty for them, they will stand up with their feet flat on the ground and their hands raised above their heads. You will read one statement at a time, and wait for group members to respond by taking one of the four positions.

Move from one question to the next without asking people to return to their starting positions. Encourage your group members to be as honest as possible, since this activity is not a test. Also remind them that it’s okay for people to take a different position on the questions.

- I sometimes feel beauty when I walk into church.
- I have felt beauty while standing on a hill or mountain.
- I have experienced beauty in scripture passages.
- I experience beauty when someone talks about Jesus.
- I feel beauty when I hear certain songs.
- I have experienced beauty when praying alone or together with someone.
- I have felt beauty when I looked at the night sky.
- I have felt beauty when seeing a wild animal in nature.
- I feel beauty during Christmas time or Easter time.
- Sometimes beauty makes me want to worship God.

After all ten statements have been read and the group has responded, invite everyone to sit together on the floor for a short discussion. Ask people which statements they responded to with the most certainty and why. Ask them also which statements they felt the least reaction to and why.

Read Luke 9:28–36 to the group. Remind them that in this story Peter, John, and James have a unique experience of beauty that leaves them speechless and in awe. The story ends with a voice from the cloud saying, “This is my son, my chosen one; listen to him.” Encourage the youth to be on the lookout for beauty in the week to come.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Question the Bible (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Nehemiah 8. Reflect on any questions you may have. Keep these reflections close to your heart as you pray and prepare for your group to arrive. Ask God to give you wisdom.

Supplies:

- Bibles for each participant
- paper
- pens

Divide the group into subgroups of three to five people. Ask people to find Nehemiah 8. Direct the participants to the page number in the Bible (if you have a set of Bibles for the whole group), and give them ample time to find Nehemiah chapter 8. Once people have located the passage, ask them to read it in their small groups and then to come up with at least five questions about the passage. They will write down the questions.

Spend the rest of your time together discussing the story as a whole group. Encourage the group members to work together to discuss answers to their questions. Your role is to keep the discussion moving along so that every group has a chance to ask and discuss its five questions. Try to avoid answering the questions. Encourage as much participation from the youth as possible. Aim to create a safe environment for everyone to ask questions and reflect on the story honestly. Your secondary role is to keep the atmosphere fun. Keep in mind that you are not trying to find the right answers; you are simply helping the group engage positively with the story.



5 The Joy of God Is Our Strength

Leader preparation: Read Nehemiah 8 from *The Message*. Read the passage a second time from a different Bible translation, for example, the NRSV. Two different readings will give you a broader understanding of the story.

For this activity you will facilitate the reenacting of the story by the youth. Come to the meeting with lots of positive energy, enthusiasm, and a willingness to take a risk with the group; they will probably surprise you! Your excitement will give them permission to jump in with energy. Your participants will trust you if your interest is authentic.

The supplies listed below are intended to provide the group with a few props to engage their imaginations. You may have more ideas for other visual aids or

theater-style props. The more imaginative, tangible items you provide, the more likely the group will be drawn into this activity.

Supplies:

- “Nehemiah 8, Attachment: Activity 4
- a big book that looks like an ancient Bible
- tree branches, palm branches, leafy branches
- a wooden platform for a speaker/preacher/teacher to stand on (optional)

Split the group in half. Try to make sure you have some creative and outspoken young people on both teams. Set out the props. Hand out copies of Nehemiah 8 to the participants. Ask people to read the story within their groups and begin to brainstorm how they could reenact the story. Ask one group to reenact verses 1–10 and the other verses 11–18.

Explain to the teams that they will have two chances to show their talents. The first opportunity will be as a dress rehearsal. During this first time through the passage, you should act as a kind of a director. After both teams have finished the dress rehearsals, give them a few more minutes in their teams to adapt their parts. Then treat the reading of the passage as a real reenactment of Nehemiah 8. Ask the team that is not reading/performing to watch and respond as the crowd might have responded to Nehemiah and Ezra. Immediately following the reenactment, facilitate a brief conversation about the story.

- What was it like to reenact the story?
- What might the people in the story have been feeling?
- What did you learn about this ancient story by pretending to be a character in it?
- What about this story strikes you as beautiful?
- How might the people have experienced the joy of God as their strength?
- How might the joy of God be our strength?



6 Power, Beauty, and Awe

Leader preparation: Study the print “Navaro Rapids.” What do you see, and what do you feel as you linger with the art?

Supplies:

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

Display the painting in the room. Give your group plenty of time to linger with it. Invite the participants to simply view the painting with an open mind for 90 seconds of silence. Assure them that you will watch the time. End the 90 seconds of silence by offering the following prayer: *Loving, powerful God, you are full of beauty and love. We want to know you better. Help us connect to the beauty and awe of creation. Amen.*

After the prayer, lead a discussion based on the following questions. For the first three questions, ask your group to give one-word answers. Provide everyone with the opportunity to share a one-word answer before moving to the next question. People may prefer to pass. You, as leader, may also give a one-word answer to these questions:

- In one word, what are you feeling when you look at this painting?
- In one word, what was the first thought that went through your mind when you saw “Navaro Rapids”?
- In one word, what part of the painting keeps catching your eye?

The next series of questions does not require one-word answers. Without dominating the conversation, you also should add your own thoughts. Encourage the participants to share more detailed answers to the following:

- If you could jump safely into this painting, where would we see you? What would you be doing?
- If you were to connect this painting to the Bible, what might it remind you of?
- If you were the artist of this painting, and you wanted to add something to it that would make it more beautiful or more representative of worshipping God, what would you try to add? Why?

Sending & Serving Activities

7 How Long Did They Wait to Tell the Story? (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Luke 9:28–36. In this passage three disciples are invited by Jesus to come and pray. As the story progresses we notice that they are actually bystanders, observing a very important, beautiful moment in the life and ministry of Jesus. In the middle of this magnificent scene, the disciples fell asleep. As the story ends, the three disciples are alone with Jesus. The Bible records that they didn’t tell anyone what they had seen until long afterward. Reflect on how this experience might have influenced the development of these disciples’ lives. Ask God to help you see how this story might also affect your future life and ministry.

Supplies:

- Bibles, one for each participant
- pens for each participant
- paper

Hand out Bibles, pens, and papers to each young person. Ask for a volunteer to read aloud Luke 9:28–36. Wait patiently for everyone to find the passage in the Bible. After the passage is read, begin a discussion using your own or the following questions. Save plenty of time for the last two questions, which should be answered by everyone in written form on the paper provided.

- In your own words, describe what Peter, John, and James saw on the mountain.
- How might the disciples have felt during this scene on the mountain? Scared? Amazed? Embarrassed that they fell asleep? Proud to be with Jesus?
- If their heart rates could have been measured, how high do you think they would have been? Why?
- Why do you think the disciples fell asleep?
- Why do you think the disciples waited such a long time to tell anyone else what happened that day?

- When the disciples did start to tell people what happened that day, how do you imagine people responded?
- On your own journey of faith, do you consider yourself a distant bystander (watching Jesus from afar), a slightly interested observer (close to what's happening with Jesus, but not very involved), or an eager follower of Jesus (right in the thick of things, even if you might fall asleep occasionally)?
- Write a brief description of where you want to be on your faith journey. You do not have to share this with anyone. It is a way for you to think about what you want in your relationship with God.

8 Post-it

Leader preparation: Read Nehemiah 8 and Luke 9:28–36 in preparation for this brainstorming extravaganza with your group. Say a prayer asking God's Spirit to infuse the group's experience with beauty, wonder, and fun. After gathering the necessary supplies, tape at least 20 feet of butcher paper to the wall at a level where the shortest people can reach it easily. Taping the butcher paper or newsprint lengthwise across the wall(s) creates plenty of space for everyone to be involved. Across the top of the paper, write six categories using six different marker colors: "God is . . . ; Jesus is . . . ; Scripture is . . . ; Beauty is . . . ; Worship as a way of life is . . . ; Our church is . . ."

Take care not to let the ink from the markers bleed onto the wall. If it is not possible to tape the butcher paper to the wall, this activity can be executed with the butcher paper on the floor. If you and your group members are regular FaceBook users, you could make this activity feel like a giant FaceBook page.

Supplies:

- many different kinds of sticky notes, a minimum of fifteen to twenty per person
- pens for each participant
- newsprint or butcher paper, enough to cover a wall
- markers in six different colors
- Bible

Begin by handing out sticky notes to everyone along with pens. Slowly read Nehemiah 8 and then Luke 9:28–36. Ask the participants to close their eyes while they listen carefully to the two stories. (If in the process of this activity, anyone asks you to read the passage(s) again, that would be fantastic!)

After the readings, invite the participants to jot down their reactions on sticky notes, using the categories listed on the butcher paper as their guide. Give them further permission to be creative; assure them that there are no right or wrong answers. Invite the participants to work alone if they prefer, or to work with a partner or in groups of three.

Ask them to write an idea on at least ten post-it notes. They can then proceed to post their thoughts about God, Jesus, scripture, beauty, worship, and church on the appropriate place on the butcher paper. Encourage the youth to read the postings of the others in the group. Give them additional time to write and post more notes after they have posted their first ten ideas.

Before the session ends, ask for six volunteers to read the postings aloud. Assign each volunteer to one category. Remind the group that these comments represent the group's thoughts and feelings. Everyone's thoughts are welcome.

Offer a short prayer to bring the activity to a close: *God, this is us. This is us with you. Thank you that you love us just as we are. Thank you that you are at work in each of our lives. In Jesus' name. Amen.*



9 What Were They Thinking?

Leader preparation: Read Luke 9:28–36. Notice that there is limited dialogue in this story. The disciples make one awkward comment about building three shelters for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Later a voice from heaven makes an important declaration about Jesus. Other than these two lines, there is no talking on the mountain that day, at least none that is recorded in scripture. Prepare your heart by spending time in silent meditation imagining what could have taken place in the minds of the main characters in the passage. Invite God to give you wisdom.

Supplies:

- Bibles, one per participant
- pens
- 11" x 14" paper for each participant
- "Dialogue on the Mountain," Attachment: Activity 9
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Distribute the cartoon. Explain that sometimes in cartoons, movies, or stories an inner dialogue occurs that we do not hear or read. Hand out Bibles, pens, and papers to each young person.

Ask for a volunteer to read aloud the passage in Luke 9:28–36. Wait patiently for everyone to find the passage in the Bible. After the passage is read, invite the youth to use their imaginations to create the unspoken dialogue that might have happened that day. Set the context by reminding the group about the two lines of dialogue that did occur. Peter made one awkward comment about building three shelters for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Later a voice from heaven made an important declaration about Jesus.

Invite individuals to write dialogue in the dialogue bubbles above the heads of the characters. Next, ask everyone to swap papers and read others' work. Encourage people to share what comments might be in dialogue bubbles above their own heads if a cartoon were being drawn of their reactions to this story.

Reflect

In what ways has your experience of the Bible been changed by leading these activities? In what ways has the faith of your participants grown? In what ways have they begun to notice or be inspired by beauty?

Pray for your group and for your leadership: *God, thank you for these amazing young people. Please help us all to seek you in the beauty of this world and in the Bible. Inspire us to love the world around us. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

Attachment: Activity 2

Luke 9:28–36
(from *The Message*)

About eight days after saying this, he climbed the mountain to pray, taking Peter, John, and James along. While he was in prayer, the appearance of his face changed and his clothes became blinding white. At once two men were there talking with him. They turned out to be Moses and Elijah—and what a glorious appearance they made! They talked over his exodus, the one Jesus was about to complete in Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, Peter and those with him were slumped over in sleep. When they came to, rubbing their eyes, they saw Jesus in his glory and the two men standing with him. When Moses and Elijah had left, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, this is a great moment! Let’s build three memorials: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He blurted this out without thinking.

While he was babbling on like this, a light-radiant cloud enveloped them. As they found themselves buried in the cloud, they became deeply aware of God. Then there was a voice out of the cloud: “This is my Son, the Chosen! Listen to him.” When the sound of the voice died away, they saw Jesus there alone. They were speechless. And they continued speechless, said not one thing to anyone during those days of what they had seen.

Peterson, E. H. (2002). *The Message : The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Neh. 8:1–18). Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress. Peterson, E. H. (2002). Scripture taken from *The Message*. Copyright 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.

Attachment: Activity 5

Nehemiah 8
(from *The Message*)

By the time the seventh month arrived, the People of Israel were settled in their towns. Then all the people gathered as one person in the town square in front of the Water Gate and asked the scholar Ezra to bring the Book of The Revelation of Moses that God had commanded for Israel.

So Ezra the priest brought The Revelation to the congregation, which was made up of both men and women—everyone capable of understanding. It was the first day of the seventh month. He read it facing the town square at the Water Gate from early dawn until noon in the hearing of the men and women, all who could understand it. And all the people listened—they were all ears—to the Book of The Revelation.

The scholar Ezra stood on a wooden platform constructed for the occasion. He was flanked on the right by Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiyah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah, and on the left by Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam.

Ezra opened the book. Every eye was on him (he was standing on the raised platform) and as he opened the book everyone stood. Then Ezra praised God, the great God, and all the people responded, “Oh Yes! Yes!” with hands raised high. And then they fell to their knees in worship of God, their faces to the ground.

Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, and Pelaiah, all Levites, explained The Revelation while people stood, listening respectfully. They translated the Book of The Revelation of God so the people could understand it and then explained the reading.

Nehemiah the governor, along with Ezra the priest and scholar and the Levites who were teaching the people, said to all the people, “This day is holy to God, your God. Don’t weep and carry on.” They said this because all the people were weeping as they heard the words of The Revelation.

He continued, “Go home and prepare a feast, holiday food and drink; and share it with those who don’t have anything: This day is holy to God. Don’t feel bad. The joy of God is your strength!”

The Levites calmed the people, “Quiet now. This is a holy day. Don’t be upset.”

So the people went off to feast, eating and drinking and including the poor in a great celebration. Now they got it; they understood the reading that had been given to them.

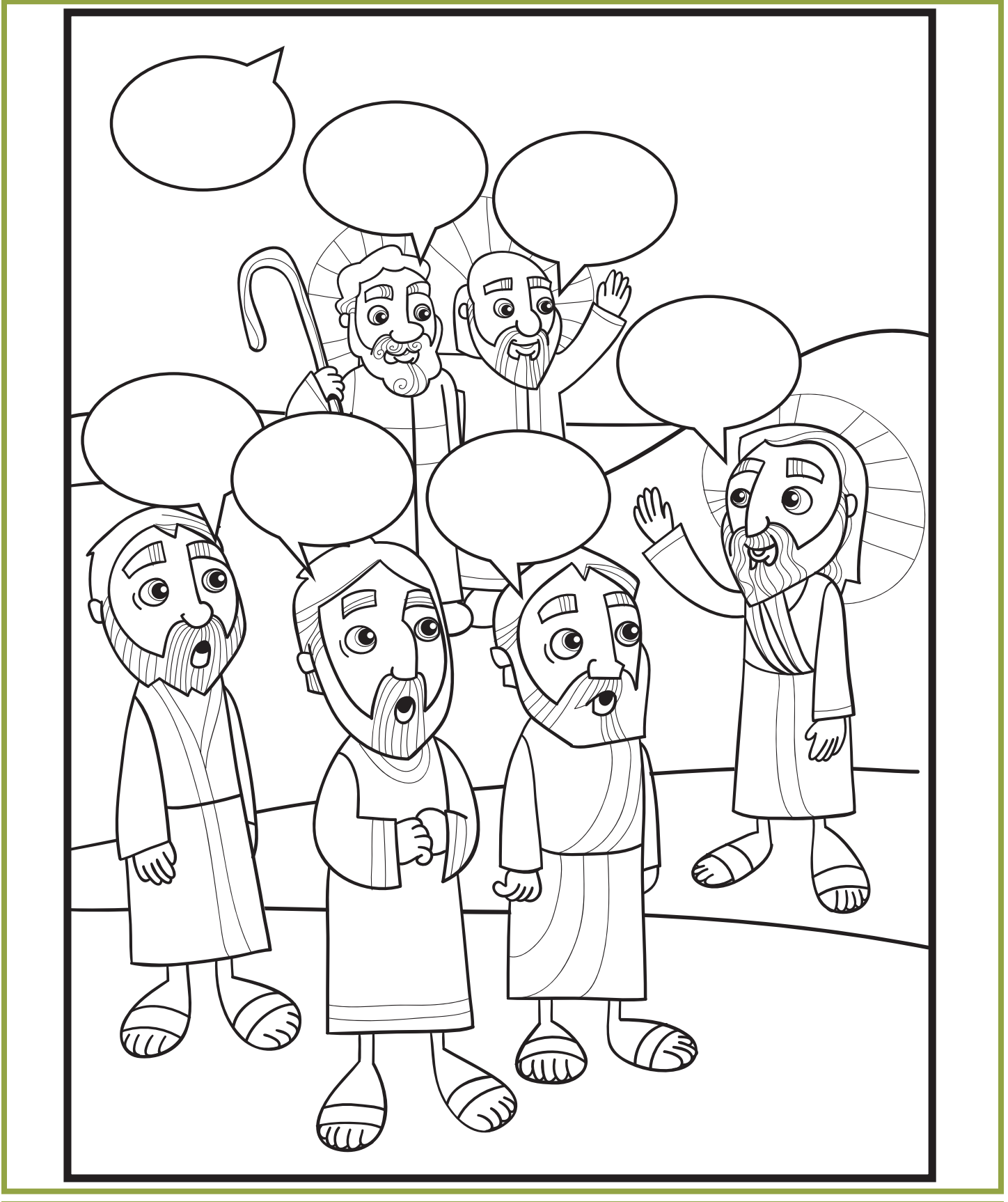
On the second day of the month the family heads of all the people, the priests, and the Levites gathered around Ezra the scholar to get a deeper understanding of the words of The Revelation. They found written in The Revelation that God commanded through Moses that the People of Israel are to live in booths during the festival of the seventh month. So they published this decree and had it posted in all their cities and in Jerusalem: “Go into the hills and collect olive branches, pine branches, myrtle branches, palm branches, and any other leafy branches to make booths, as it is written.”

So the people went out, brought in branches, and made themselves booths on their roofs, courtyards, the courtyards of The Temple of God, the Water Gate plaza, and the Ephraim Gate plaza. The entire congregation that had come back from exile made booths and lived in them. The People of Israel hadn’t done this from the time of Joshua son of Nun until that very day—a terrific day! Great joy!

Ezra read from the Book of The Revelation of God each day, from the first to the last day—they celebrated the feast for seven days. On the eighth day they held a solemn assembly in accordance with the decree.

Peterson, E. H. (2002). *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Neh. 8:1–18). Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress. Peterson, E. H. (2002). Scripture taken from *The Message*. Copyright 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.

Attachment: Activity 9



Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Discipleship

About this Age Group

Older youth, for better and for worse, are good followers. They often look for someone important to follow. Since discipleship is about following, we have a unique opportunity to engage older youth in the process of learning to follow Jesus both as individuals and in Christian community together. The challenge we face with teenagers is helping them begin to make lasting decisions about their faith. Experiencing beauty as a faith practice is a wonderful doorway through which this age group can enter enthusiastically into the life of the Spirit. They are eager to encounter God in mystery and in brokenness, and concretely through their senses.

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

Leader Preparation

Following Jesus is at the heart of the Christian faith. Young people learn to follow Jesus by watching carefully and trying to emulate key adults who serve as role models. These adults (such as teachers, coaches, pastors, youth group leaders) carry the weight of a sacred trust. The adults who are most likely to be followed by teenagers on the way with Jesus are those who invest intentionally in healthy, appropriate relationships. Being available, authentic, and fully present to them is crucial for laying a solid relational foundation. If you are alert to the needs, questions, and ideas of the youth, and if you are eager to learn with them, teenagers will surprise you in delightful ways.

Prayer: God, sometimes I feel ready, and sometimes I feel intimidated. There are moments when your work in the lives of older youth brings me great joy, and other moments when I'm just not sure what you might want me to do or say. Help me, God, to love them well. Please give me a large dose of patience, a strong sense of confidence, and a deep willingness to learn with and from them. Make us your faithful followers as we explore what it means to keep our hearts, minds, souls, and bodies open to your beauty. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 Attitude of Gratitude (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Reflect on the forms of prayer that are most comfortable for you and the ones that are less comfortable. Begin a list in your mind of some things for which you are most grateful. Name those things aloud to God.

Supplies:

- pens, one per person
- 8 ½" x 11" lined paper for everyone

Hand out pens and paper to everyone in the group, keeping extra paper and pens on hand for people who arrive late. Explain that communication with God is a one of the key activities of a disciple, a follower of Jesus. Communication goes both ways. We talk to God, and God talks to us. We listen to what the Spirit says, and we speak to the Spirit. We learn to talk to Jesus, and we try to listen to Jesus. Sometimes we call this activity prayer, and it can take on diverse forms. Many of our prayers are about asking for things from God. Today, we'll try to use words of thanksgiving.

Invite participants to make three separate lists on their papers. These lists will be private. Then you will use those lists as the basis for praying together. Provide plenty of time for the participants to create their lists.

The first list is five things they love about God. Allow people to have a few moments to think and write. The second list is five things they believe God has given to them or done for them. The third list is five things they experienced from God as beautiful this past week.

Once people have completed their lists, invite the group to pray aloud three different times, with short breaks in between, using the gratitude lists. Tell the participants that they do not have to name all the items on their lists. Ask them to mention only the items they feel comfortable naming. You go first to set the pace and begin each of three short prayer exercises.

Open in prayer: *Dear God, we feel grateful to you. Our lists are all different, and we want to read them to you as a form of group prayers. After you have said this portion of the prayer, then read your lists aloud to God by saying: "God I thank you for . . ."*

Repeat this prayer format two more times. For the second prayer exercise, you can begin with: "Holy Spirit, we are also grateful for the many things you have given to us and done for us. Thank you for . . ." For the third and final prayer exercise, begin with these words: "Jesus, we experienced your beauty all around us this past week. For example, I feel grateful for the beauty I experienced in . . ."

Remind your group that you do not need to be concerned if the prayers seem unpolished, disjointed, or awkward. God can sort them out just fine. God enjoys hearing the sound of our voices. God is particularly pleased to hear us offering prayers of thanksgiving. Once the prayers end, offer up a big, hearty amen. Thank everyone for participating in this prayer.

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 Our Beginnings with God

Leader preparation: Read the story from Acts 9:1–20, the beginning of Saul’s journey of following Jesus. His was a radical transformation from persecuting those who followed Jesus to becoming a person who desperately wanted to follow Jesus. Not all of our stories are this dramatic, but Saul’s story helps us to understand the beauty of deciding to follow Jesus. Reflect on your own journey of faith, and try to remember what prompted you to begin your life as a disciple. Was it a dramatic event like Saul’s? Was it more gradual? Did your experience of beginning to follow Jesus begin when you were a teenager? Is it beginning now? Ask God to help you be fully present with your group as you explore together the beauty and the mystery of discipleship.

Supplies:

- “Acts 9:1–20,” Attachment: Activity 2
- pens, one for each participant
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Read the story aloud, or ask a volunteer to do so. Ask people to underline or circle on the attachment one aspect of the story that seems beautiful to them. Then focus on verses 17–20. Ask the following three questions about the story, and have the youth write their answers.

- What was shocking about Saul’s beginning to following Jesus?
- When do you first remember wanting to follow Jesus? (It is important that you as the leader are also responding to these questions. Your contributions will serve as further invitation for the group to participate in the conversation.)
- At this point in your journey with God, if you were Saul, would you be more likely to want to persecute those who follow Christ, or would you be more likely to want to join in and follow Christ? Why?

To finish, ask for volunteers to share one aspect of the story that seemed beautiful to them. It would be ideal for you to go first in reading your response to that question.

3 Our Song of Grateful Praise

Leader preparation: If you are not comfortable singing, recruit a musician to help. As an experience of worship, sing or recite aloud all four verses of the hymn “For the Beauty of the Earth.” Imagine yourself standing with God as you do. Try to imagine God’s delight as you worship. Ask God to empower you to be receptive to the Spirit in your private time of worship and in your time with the group. Ask God to give you a big dose of confidence. Teenagers respond well to confident leaders. They are usually more willing to engage in unique activities that are explained with joy and eagerness.

Supplies:

- hymn: “For the Beauty of the Earth” by Folliot S. Pierpoint (tune: Dix), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mHOMXiOKEDQ>
- computer with Internet access
- (optional) hymnals

As the group arrives, hand out the hymnals that include “For the Beauty of the Earth,” if available. Ask small groups to experiment with reciting a verse in a creative way. Encourage them to imagine that the hymn is going to be made into a YouTube video. What images would they choose to accompany the words?

Invite the groups to read their verses. Then watch the YouTube video of “For the Beauty of the Earth.” Encourage people’s responses to the video.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Ball Toss (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Think about the ways that you have grown more beautiful in your faith and in following Jesus. What is it like for you to feel both broken and beautiful at the same time? A discussion is the centerpiece of this activity. As you prepare to facilitate, ask God to help you be authentic with your group. Pray also that the group would feel safe enough to participate in the discussion honestly. Create group guidelines for this and other conversations. For example: 1. Be honest; 2. Be real; 3. Be respectful. Write down the rules so the group can see them. Create an environment where one person talks at a time and no one interrupts anyone else.

Supplies:

- (optional) a small, soft ball

You may wish to take a few moments to outline group guidelines. If you wish, use a small, soft ball to help guide the conversation. The only one speaking is the person holding the ball. When someone wants to answer a question or make a comment, that person raises a hand. The previous speaker will gently toss the ball to someone whose hand is raised or back to you if no one’s hand is raised. This practice helps the group monitor the pace of the conversation and invites everyone to participate. Alternatively, you could ask the group to toss around an imaginary ball.

Briefly explain that being a follower of Christ is practiced both in the church and outside the church. It can be practiced with other people who are trying also to be disciples. Sometimes following Christ is practiced alone. Discipleship is not about performing, and it is not about being perfect. Discuss together the following questions after you have established and agreed upon your group guidelines.

- What does it mean that the church is beautiful?
- Have you experienced the church as broken?
- How might our church become more beautiful?
- What could it mean that a disciple of Jesus is beautiful?



5 Mother and Child; God and Me

Leader preparation: Spend time reflecting on the artwork. As you look at the art and ponder its beauty, ask yourself the questions you will ask the group. Write on newsprint or a whiteboard the five questions that guide the following discussion. You may want to add a question or two of your own as well.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Caresse Maternelle (Mother and Child)” by Mary Stevenson Cassatt, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1004323110?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=37961&store_id=1401
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projection capabilities

Lead a group discussion about this piece of art. Begin by asking participants to describe what they see in the upper right-hand corner of the painting, just above the mother's head. Continue by inviting them to imagine what it feels like for the child to be in the arms of the mother. Ask the group to describe what is beautiful in the painting. Encourage people to talk about the color and the emotion of the painting.

Split the group into three subgroups for a more imaginative exploration of the painting. Suggest that people imagine a third character in the painting, just outside their view, reaching his or her hands into the painting toward the mother and child. Assign each subgroup one of the characters in the painting: the mother, the child, or the imaginary person on the outside. Continue the discussion by asking each group to answer the following questions.

- What is beautiful about this painting?
- What is beautiful about your assigned character?
- What might your character be feeling?
- What would you be feeling if you were the character in the painting that was assigned to your group?
- How is following Jesus sometimes like crawling up into a loving mother's lap?

After the subgroups have had time to discuss the art, bring the group back together and follow up by asking once again: *How might following Jesus sometimes be like crawling up into a loving mother's lap?*

6 Something God Can Alone See

Leader preparation: Read the lyrics for the hymn "In the Bulb There Is a Flower," paying careful attention to the words. Listen to one of the many YouTube renditions of the song, such as <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkWYubdnc7o>.

Reflect on the words, asking God to reveal to you a few things in the world that "God alone can see." Ponder some of the things in the world that God might want you to see—things that you might lack the vision to see yet. In advance of this activity, obtain the equipment necessary to show YouTube videos to your group. Practice setting up and using all the equipment prior to the session.

Supplies:

- hymn: "In the Bulb There Is a Flower" by Natalie Sleeth (tune: Promise), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkWYubdnc7o>
- colored sticky notes, enough for each participant to have at least ten
- pens or pencils for each participant
- large, blank wall or large newsprint taped to a wall
- computer with Internet access and projection capabilities

Watch the video "In the Bulb There Is a Flower," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkWYubdnc7o>. Watch it a second time, and invite people to sing along.

Use these reflection questions to stimulate discussion:

- Name some examples of a mystery or a victory that remains unresolved until its season.
- Give examples of some things that, unless human beings pay really careful attention, only God can see.
- How does following Jesus help us through difficult times?

After discussing the questions, invite all to write or draw on their sticky notes anything they have witnessed that felt awe-inspiring, beautiful, or grace-filled, one item per sticky note. Offer a few examples from your own life or from the hymn. For example:

- hidden in a bulb is a flower
- dawn comes out of darkness
- resurrection and new life come out of death
- hidden in winter are specific signs of spring, like the first flower that rises up in March
- the pain of childbirth results in the new life of a baby
- the sadness of losing a relationship eventually leads to a new discovery of relationship
- tears turn into joy

Ask participants to write a few of their own responses on sticky notes and place the papers on the wall. Then give the group a chance to read everyone's responses.

Pray: God, help us all to look for and see some of the things that you alone can see. Give us new vision and faith to trust that you are at work even when life feels sad, or dark, or lonely. Amen.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 An Unseen Guest (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Exodus 35:20–29. Use all your senses to imagine what the scene may have looked like, felt like, sounded like, smelled like, or tasted like.

Supplies:

- chairs (preferably, but not necessarily, folding chairs)
- extra chair for an unseen guest
- Bibles

Make a large circle, if possible, and have participants sit in chairs. Leave one chair empty in the circle. Do not explain the reason for the empty chair until later in the activity. Hand a Bible to every person, and ask people to locate Exodus 35:20–29. Ask for three volunteers who would be willing to read the story aloud for the group. Have the story read three times by the three volunteers, one person at a time.

The first volunteer reads the passage standing up while the rest of the group remains seated. The second volunteer reads the passage while the group listens with closed eyes. The third volunteer stands in the center of the circle and reads the passage while the group members kneel in front of their chairs. Immediately following the third reading, say a prayer such as: *Holy One, we bow before you in worship. We are willing to be with you, to love you, to follow you. Our hearts are also broken, and we need your love to see us through. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

After the prayer, ask people to return to sitting in their chairs. When everyone is seated, quietly place the empty chair in the middle of the circle. Ask the group to respond to the following questions:

- What postures do you find natural when you pray?
- If Jesus was sitting in the room in this chair in our circle, what do you think he might have been feeling while he watched us read and worship?
- What parts of your week do you want to bring to God now?
- What talents can you offer God?

8 Everything New

Leader preparation: Watch the three-minute YouTube video “Everything New.” Reflect on what in the video is beautiful and how that beauty might be connected to being a disciple. Pray that God would give you wisdom and also ask God to help you more thoroughly love the young people in your group.

Supplies:

- computer with Internet access and projection capability
- a screen or an empty white wall
- YouTube video “Everything New,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TqjGZeEk-0I>

Note that being a disciple includes caring about the world around us. It also includes serving the people in our lives. After introducing these ideas, watch the YouTube video together. The young artist who made this film, holywiseman07, lives in Denver and works for Lego, where he makes animated films for the international Lego company. You may want to watch the video several times in order to discover the artistic beauty portrayed. Begin the conversation by asking a few of the following questions:

- How do you see the beauty of God’s love for the world in the film?
- What about God and the world do you think the artist was trying to portray?
- How can we be a part of loving and caring for the world God made?
- How can our group be more inviting and welcoming so that others can hear about God’s love?
- What about the title “Everything New” intrigues you? Or what about the title leads you toward God’s love?
- What about the film inspires you to follow Jesus more faithfully?

9 God Knows Your Name

Leader preparation: In advance of this activity ask people to bring a photo of themselves. Any photo will do provided that their face is visible in the picture. (You may want to consider an e-mail blast, newsletter announcement, or website or FaceBook posting for reminders.) Bring a photo of yourself as well. The photos will be the centerpiece of this activity; there may, however, be participants who do not have a printed photo. There are several alternatives that can replace photos. For example, a person’s full name written with a marker on a piece of paper or cloth would also work well.

Write in very large print on one large piece of poster board these words: “I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands (Isaiah 49:15–16).” Hang this poster board on a wall in a visible spot in the room where you meet. Also hang the blank poster board next to the Isaiah 49:15–16 poster board.

Supplies:

- photos of all participants
- tape
- two large pieces of poster board
- markers

Explain to the group that understanding how much God loves each one of us is the best starting point in our journeys of following Jesus. Understanding and experiencing how much God loves you can also be helpful as we try to help others follow Jesus. Say that someone once suggested the following mental image as a way to show how much God loves us: If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it.

Invite participants to look carefully at their individual photos. Ask them to study the person in the picture and think about what they see: the hair, the eyes, the face, the mouth, and so forth. God knows the names of every one of us today. When you look at your photo, you may see things you don't like. When God looks at your photo, God sees someone that God deeply loves. We can learn to love God when we realize how much God loves us. We can learn to follow Jesus more fully when we understand and experience how much Christ loves us.

Have the youth sit looking at their photos for a few more moments. Remind them that the photo is a snapshot of a beautiful person who has a story that Jesus wants to be very involved with. God's love for us is what connects our stories to God's story. Our love for God is what makes the connection more and more real to us and more and more visible to the world around us.

Hand out pieces of tape and invite the participants to attach their photos to "God's imaginary refrigerator," the second piece of poster board you attached to the wall.

Invite them into this sacred exercise one person at a time, not all at once. Before they begin going to the imaginary poster board, stand near the posters on the wall. As each person comes up and tapes his or her photo to the poster board, speak/read the words from Isaiah 49 to each one. Use each person's name. For example, "God says to you, Jim, I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands."

If your group is larger than twenty people, this experience may take a long time. Consider having two leaders stand at the posters while two youth at a time come up to place their photos on God's imaginary refrigerator wall.

Reflect

Reflect on what it was like for you to join in on the activities today. What do you think the older youth experienced that might have been helpful to them in their quest to be disciples?

Attachment: Activity 2

Acts 9:1–20
from *The Message*

¹⁻² All this time Saul was breathing down the necks of the Master’s disciples, out for the kill. He went to the Chief Priest and got arrest warrants to take to the meeting places in Damascus so that if he found anyone there belonging to the Way, whether men or women, he could arrest them and bring them to Jerusalem.

³⁻⁴ He set off. When he got to the outskirts of Damascus, he was suddenly dazed by a blinding flash of light. As he fell to the ground, he heard a voice: “Saul, Saul, why are you out to get me?”

⁵⁻⁶ He said, “Who are you, Master?”

“I am Jesus, the One you’re hunting down. I want you to get up and enter the city. In the city you’ll be told what to do next.”

⁷⁻⁹ His companions stood there dumbstruck—they could hear the sound, but couldn’t see anyone—while Saul, picking himself up off the ground, found himself stone-blind. They had to take him by the hand and lead him into Damascus. He continued blind for three days. He ate nothing, drank nothing.

¹⁰ There was a disciple in Damascus by the name of Ananias. The Master spoke to him in a vision: “Ananias.”

“Yes, Master?” he answered.

¹¹⁻¹² “Get up and go over to Straight Avenue. Ask at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus. His name is Saul. He’s there praying. He has just had a dream in which he saw a man named Ananias enter the house and lay hands on him so he could see again.”

¹³⁻¹⁴ Ananias protested, “Master, you can’t be serious. Everybody’s talking about this man and the terrible things he’s been doing, his reign of terror against your people in Jerusalem! And now he’s shown up here with papers from the Chief Priest that give him license to do the same to us.”

¹⁵⁻¹⁶ But the Master said, “Don’t argue. Go! I have picked him as my personal representative to non-Jews and kings and Jews. And now I’m about to show him what he’s in for—the hard suffering that goes with this job.”

¹⁷⁻¹⁹ So Ananias went and found the house, placed his hands on blind Saul, and said, “Brother Saul, the Master sent me, the same Jesus you saw on your way here. He sent me so you could see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” No sooner were the words out of his mouth than something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes—he could see again! He got to his feet, was baptized, and sat down with them to a hearty meal.

¹⁹⁻²¹ Saul spent a few days getting acquainted with the Damascus disciples, but then went right to work, wasting no time, preaching in the meeting places that this Jesus was the Son of God. They were caught off guard by this and, not at all sure they could trust him, they kept saying, “Isn’t this the man who wreaked havoc in Jerusalem among the believers? And didn’t he come here to do the same thing—arrest us and drag us off to jail in Jerusalem for sentencing by the high priests?”

Peterson, E. H. (2002). *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Neh. 8:1–18). Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress. Peterson, E. H. (2002). Scripture taken from *The Message*. Copyright 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Christian Tradition

About this Age Group

Young people have a wide variety of reactions to tradition. Tradition can feel old-fashioned to them, as though it belongs in an era with their grandparents. It can seem outdated and irrelevant to their world. On the other hand, ancient traditions can also have a stabilizing effect in the lives of teenagers. What is important to them is whether a tradition comes to life or feels stale and lifeless. Their experience of tradition has the potential to be life-giving. They have positive perspectives and plenty of energy that can help the church find fresh ways of learning from the rich history of Christian tradition. If we welcome them in accessible ways into what is ancient and beautiful, their presence will serve to shape a dynamic, hopeful future for Christ-followers and for the world we are called to love.

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

The potential for experiencing beauty within Christian tradition is vast. The possibility that beauty could lead young people into worship can be thrilling. Prepare yourself to be awed by God's work in the lives of your group and in your own life. We will draw from two thousand years of tradition and look more deeply into the beauty of the world God created. You are about to introduce your youth to ancient prayers that may come to life. You will invite the group into ancient ways of being with God that might allow you to witness more resurrection that you can yet imagine.

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, ancient and future One, come and resurrect us. Reveal to me and to the teenagers in my life just how amazing you are. Help us to practice what those before us practiced in order to follow you joyfully and faithfully. I am eager to go down this path into the past. Please use tradition to move us into a more hopeful future. Amen.

Session Development

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

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 How Majestic Is God's Name! (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Pray that God would reveal to you the vastness of God's majesty in all the earth. Ask God to help you open your heart and your mind to the possibilities of helping your group engage with God.

Supplies:

- Bibles

Hand out Bibles as people gather, and have the participants find Psalm 8. Then invite them to stand in the middle of the room, close to one another, with their backs to one another and facing outward. They do not need to be in a circle, but no one should be facing anyone else. Begin by inviting everyone to read Psalm 8 silently. Allow for extra time so that those who read more slowly or thoughtfully have plenty of time.

Ask them to do a second reading of Psalm 8 aloud as a group, but in a whisper so that they can barely hear one another reading. Encourage them to listen carefully to the words.

Next, ask the group to read the psalm one more time, beginning in a whisper, but making a slow crescendo into a loud chorus of voices. During this third reading, also ask the group to turn slowly inward toward the rest of the group; by the end of this reading, the participants will be facing one another.

After this dramatic reading, pose these or similar questions:

- What did it feel like to declare the majesty of God together?
- What other words similar to "majestic" can describe God?
- According to Psalm 8, what is there about people that becomes an expression of God's majesty?
- According to Psalm 8, what is there about the earth that becomes an expression of God's majesty?
- According to Psalm 8, what is there about the sky that becomes an expression of God's majesty?
- What do you feel is majestic about God?

Read Psalm 8 expressively one more time.



2 What Christians Believe

Leader preparation: The Apostles' Creed was developed between the second and ninth centuries. It is the most popular Christian creed used in worship around the world. Its central doctrines are those of the trinity and God the Creator. It has been called the "creed of creeds." Legend has it that the apostles wrote this creed on the tenth day after Christ's ascension into heaven. The earliest written version of the creed comes from around 215 CE. The current form is first found in writings from around 542 CE. Read the Apostles' Creed prayerfully. It represents a summary of some of the most common traditional Christian beliefs. Make a copy of the attachment for each participant in your group.

Experiencing Beauty

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 from each category.

Supplies:

- “The Apostle’s Creed,” Attachment: Activity 2
- pen or pencil for each participant

Give each person a pen or pencil and a copy of the Apostle’s Creed. Ask people to read the creed silently. After everyone has had time to read the statement, offer the group a bit of history connected to this creed. The statement represents some of the most common traditional Christian beliefs summarized in a short statement.

Ask people to place a star beside words or phrases that they found beautiful. They may place a question mark beside anything they find difficult to believe. Have them place a check mark beside parts they agree with, circle sections that got their attention, and place a smiley face beside sections that cause them to feel grateful.

Guide a discussion based on the reflection questions at the bottom of the attachment.



3 The Shield of St. Patrick

Leader preparation: One of the most ancient Christian prayers is attributed to St. Patrick, a missionary to Ireland. Read the Shield of St. Patrick prayerfully to yourself. It sounds more like a poem than a prayer, and therefore feels more powerful when read aloud. Take your time. Let the prayer speak to you.

The prayer originated sometime in the late 4th or early 5th century. Patrick is thought to have been enslaved by the very people with whom he eventually shared the good news about God’s love and the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. St. Patrick is believed to have had a ministry of conversation that included ongoing prayer and spiritual companionship or spiritual friendship with the people he served. This prayer, attributed to Patrick, written around 433 CE, focuses on the closeness, protection, and love of the Holy Trinity. Practice reading the poem aloud several times prior to your meeting.

Make copies of the attachment. Cut the prayer into eighteen segments. Hand out the fragments to the group participants so that the lines of the prayer are scattered throughout your group. Everyone should have at least one fragment. The fragments are numbered 1 to 18 so that the prayer can be read in order. If your group is smaller than eighteen, some participants will read more than one fragment. If your group is larger than eighteen, you will need to make extra copies of some of the lines so that everyone is able to participate. Make full copies of the whole prayer for each participant as well.

Supplies:

- “The Shield of St. Patrick,” Attachment: Activity 3a, cut into strips
- “The Shield of St. Patrick,” Attachment: Activity 3b
- (optional) hymn: “I Bind My Heart This Tide,” by Lauchlan MacLean Watt (tune: St. Quentin), <http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/i/b/i/ibimhett.htm>

Begin the activity by handing out the whole prayer to everyone, Attachment: Activity 3b. Read the prayer aloud as though it were a poem. Then hand out the strips so that everyone one has at least one fragment to read. Give time for participants to review their individual fragments and ask any questions. Encourage

them to work together to come up with actions to accompany the phrases.

Invite everyone to line up in numerical order according to the assigned lines. Read the prayer aloud together in order. What actions or phrases do they find particularly beautiful?

Option: Listen to the hymn “I Bind My Heart This Tide.” While this hymn is not particularly based on St. Patrick’s prayer, some of the lyrics are very similar to the prayer.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Lectio Divina (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read aloud John 12:1–8. Think for a moment about what you envision when you read the story of Jesus being anointed with beautiful, costly perfume. Read the passage again slowly and aloud, pausing for about a minute, and then read it a third time silently. Pray, asking God to reveal to you the beauty and wonder of this woman’s gesture. Write your impressions in a journal or on a piece of paper.

Supplies:

- Bible
- pens for each participant
- one piece of paper for each participant

Invite your group to sit quietly and comfortably. Ask people to arrange themselves at least a full arm’s-length from every other person in the room. Prepare the group for a meditative reading of a story from the Bible. Explain that they’ll be asked to respond in three different ways to three separate readings of the same story. Before you begin to read, ask the participants to sit quietly, take five deep, slow breaths, and silently ask God to speak to each of them. You might want to pray aloud on behalf of the group or have one of the participants say a short prayer before you begin what has been traditionally referred to as the ancient practice of lectio divina.

This type of reading invites God to speak to each person through the words, the beauty, and the wonder of a specific portion of scripture. Offer the instructions before you begin, as well as in between each reading.

During the first reading of John 12:1–8, simply read and invite the group to settle into the story. During the first reading, most people need to settle down and begin the process of being receptive to God’s Spirit. Allow for at least 90 seconds of silence before you move into the second reading.

During the second reading of the same text, ask the group to stand up quietly before you read the story again. This time read it more slowly and deliberately, asking the participants to listen for a word or phrase that jumps out to them. Again allow for at least 90 seconds of silence before you move into the third reading.

During the third reading, the group remains standing. If people have not yet naturally closed their eyes, ask them to do so and wait quietly while you prepare to read the story one last time. Invite them to listen for God’s voice in the story.

After you read the story the third time, encourage them to take five more deep breaths, after which they can open their eyes and sit down quietly.

Encourage all to write on their piece of paper any impressions, feelings, or insights they had as they listened to the story. Invite any who are willing to share their thoughts with the group. Affirm each person's response.



5 Window to My Soul

Leader preparation: View the painting "Wind from the Sea." What do you notice?

Supplies:

- 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>
- colored pencils
- sketch pads or enough paper for everyone to have about ten sheets of paper

Give your group plenty of time to linger with this painting. Begin with two minutes of silence. Assure people that you will watch the time so that it does not go on too long. Let them also know that they will know when the time of silence is over because you will say a short prayer at the end. End the time of silence by offering the following prayer, or a prayer of your own.

Prayer: Gentle God, our Creator, Redeemer, and Friend, we want to know you better. Help us to discover your work in our lives through the beauty of this painting. Show us the ancient movement of your Spirit in the wind we see blowing through the open window. For centuries your Holy Spirit has moved in the soul of humanity. Please meet us in this moment of beauty and help us to worship you. Amen.

After the prayer, take a deep breath and ask your group to sketch a few drawings in response to the painting. You may want to use the following instructions or create your own. As an option, invite the youth to offer some questions about this work of art, its beauty, its power to lead us into worshiping God, and so on.

For the first two instructions, ask the group to draw pictures of whatever comes to mind without thinking too much about what they are drawing. Remind them that they will not be graded or judged on the quality of their drawings.

- Sketch a drawing about what you noticed when you first looked at this painting.
- Sketch something that indicates the first feeling you experienced when you saw "Wind from the Sea."

The next series of instructions is intended to draw the participants deeper into the painting and help them be more aware of their own responses. Encourage the participants to add more detail to their sketches in response to the following:

- If this painting represented an actual window into your soul, what could we see?
- Sketch a description of how you have experienced the wind of the Holy Spirit in your life.
- Sketch some images that you associate with traditional Christianity.

- If the wind in the painting is meant to be suggestive of the Holy Spirit, how do you think this image compares to traditional images of the Spirit?
- Sketch one more drawing that describes the weather in your soul today.

6 The Jesus Prayer

Leader preparation: The ancient “Jesus Prayer” probably originated from the first century. It is a form of centering prayer; in some traditions it is used as a mantra to aid the follower of Christ in emptying one’s self of anxiety. In its most ancient form, translated into English, the prayer is “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me.” Recited aloud or silently, slowly and deliberately, over and over, the prayer can be powerful for individuals and for groups.

Practice this ancient prayer several times before you engage in this activity with your group. Pray it aloud quietly for about three minutes. It is a special prayer when prayed as you fall asleep. Experiment with the Jesus Prayer in a few different settings. Pay attention to and be aware of how you experience God in the prayer.

To help those youth who are visual learners, write the prayer on newsprint or a whiteboard.

Supplies:

- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Invite the youth to practice one of the most ancient Christian prayers ever prayed. It can be a form of worship or confession. When you practice this prayer, try to imagine yourselves joining with millions of other Christ-followers over the last nearly two thousand years who have humbly said this prayer.

Say the prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me,” aloud, but gently so that your group can hear it. Ask them to repeat the prayer after you. Some learners may be helped by being able to read the prayer from the newsprint or whiteboard.

Repeat the prayer several times. Then change the process a little by making the ending plural: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on us.” Continue to pray the prayer using the repeating call and answer form for a minute or so. Change the format again by going back to the original form: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me.” Then say the prayer in unison. Next, invite the group to continue saying the Jesus Prayer silently with eyes closed.

Try some of the following options:

- Pray the prayer aloud, adding the names of specific people at the end instead of the words of “me” or “us.” For example, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on my sister,” or “Tom,” and so forth.”
- Pray the prayer aloud, but add the names of specific groups or organizations. For example, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on our church . . .”
- Pray the prayer silently as a mantra, adding a different phrase at the end in place of us or me or specific people or organizations. For example, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on our enemies.”

Pay careful attention to how your group responds. Do not use this prayer as drill or a way to command the participants.

Sending & Serving Activities

 7 Mary Anoints Jesus (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read John 12:1–8 carefully. What do you think Mary was trying to say to Jesus in this encounter? Why was Judas so resistant to this act of worship? How did Jesus handle Judas' accusation of this woman?

As you read the story, imagine what it must have been like to be Mary anointing Jesus before his burial. How do you think she felt that day? How do you think Jesus felt? Martha and Lazarus, the sister and brother of Mary, were also at dinner. How do you think they felt as they smelled their home being filled with the beautiful fragrance of the costly perfume?

Prepare yourself for the fact that the discussion may go in a different direction than you plan. The purpose is not to have a perfect discussion. The hope in this activity is that you and the youth can engage in a meaningful conversation about this story. The goal is not to get the facts all lined up, nor is it to agree about the details of the story. Have fun with this one. Allow your own imagination as well as the imaginations of your older youth to be activated by the story.

Supplies:

- Bibles for everyone
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Ask the group to turn in the Bible to John 12:1–8. Remember to give the participants clear instructions about how to find the passage. Request that a volunteer read the passage aloud.

Begin a conversation by asking the group to name all the characters in the story as you write their names on the newsprint or whiteboard. Ask them also to say what they know about the various characters. For example, Judas was one of the followers of Jesus, Mary was the sister to Martha, Lazarus was the one Jesus recently raised from the dead, and so forth. Ask the group to recall as much information as possible about each person in the story. As they answer, write down as much information as you can.

Next, move into deeper observation about the passage. Ask the participants to think about what each character might be feeling and why. Record any feeling words the group suggests by writing them next to the names of the characters: Jesus, Mary, Judas, Lazarus, and Martha. Allow your group to be imaginative. Move the conversation one step deeper by focusing on Mary and the ways that Jesus lovingly protected her and affirmed her actions. Ask a few more questions:

- Why did Jesus welcome her act of worship?
- What about that act was beautiful?
- When have you witnessed someone initiating a beautiful act on behalf of someone else? What made witnessing that act beautiful for you?



8 Improv Prayer

Leader preparation: Bring copies of the paraphrased version of the prayer Jesus taught his followers to pray, which is known as the Lord’s Prayer or the Prayer of Our Savior. Prepare for this activity by praying the prayer aloud as you learned it; then pray a second time aloud using the paraphrased version. Ask God to guide you as you lead your group into a time of improvisational prayer together.

Supplies:

- “The Lord’s Prayer,” Attachment: Activity 8
- pens

Hand out copies of “The Lord’s Prayer” and a pen for everyone in the group. Ask for volunteers who know the Lord’s Prayer from memory to say some of the phrases. (An alternative is to have people call out words they know are in the prayer without any pressure for anyone to know the exact words of the prayer.) Affirm all those who volunteered to recite the prayer, and thank them! Ask a general question, such as *What is beautiful about this very old prayer?*

Then ask for a volunteer to read the paraphrased version of the prayer from *The Message* on the attachment. Ask the youth how they like that version compared to the more traditional version. Allow another few moments for discussion. Then read the version of the prayer from the New Zealand Prayer book and again compare that with the other two versions.

Ask the youth to form groups of three and write their own version of the Lord’s Prayer. Set the stage this way. If Jesus were to walk into their school, and a group gathered around him to hear what he had to say to the students at your school, what might Jesus’ instructions be? Encourage them to follow the general outline of the prayer on the attachment, but to put it into words that are more appropriate for them and their friends.

After each group has completed their prayer, ask that group to pray the prayer aloud together.

9 Prayers for the World

Leader preparation: One of the oldest, most beautiful traditions of the Christian faith is intercessory prayer, praying for the needs of the world. Try this activity as a way of combing tradition with current life. Collect as many current newspapers and news magazines as you can find. Try to obtain at least two different news sources for each person in your group.

Supplies:

- news magazines and newspapers, enough for each participant to have at least two
- scissors
- (optional) poster board and tape

Hand out the newspapers and magazines so that each participant has at least two different news sources. Make available several pairs of scissors for the group to share. Ask everyone to find at least five different problems, crises, or pain in the world that are represented in the news. Challenge them to look for beauty even in the midst of the broken world in which we live. Ask them to look for and cut out articles that represent a need in the world that would benefit from God’s loving intervention.

After everyone has had an opportunity to peruse the news and cut out five different articles, have people share briefly the stories or articles that caught their attention. Finally, ask people to spend a few minutes praying for the people, problems, or concerns.

Invite the participants to pray that God would bring healing and beauty into the problems and pain they have noticed. If they are comfortable praying aloud, ask them to do so. If your group is not comfortable praying aloud, ask them to lift the articles up in the air silently as a way of laying the various needs in the loving arms of God.

Option: Create an intercessory prayer poster by using the different articles and taping them to poster board. In the middle or around the edges you could write the Jesus prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on us.

Reflect

Think back on the activities you did together with your group of older youth. Which activities helped to make some old traditions more personal or more life-giving for your group? In what ways were the youths' responses meaningful for you?

Attachment: Activity 2

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

Reflection questions:

- Which words or phrases got your attention?
- Which words or phrases feel challenging to you?
- In what ways does this creed summarize what you believe about God?
- What else do you believe about God that is not mentioned?
- What in the Apostles' Creed is difficult for you to believe? Why?
- When you read this creed, for what do you feel grateful?
- What questions do you have about the Apostles' Creed?

Attachment: Activity 3a

The Shield of St. Patrick
Attributed to St. Patrick 433 CE (adapted)

(1) I bind unto myself today the strong name of the Trinity, by invocation of the same, the Three in One and One in Three.

(2) I bind this day to me forever: by power of faith, Christ's incarnation,

(3) his baptism in the Jordan River, his death on the cross for my salvation,

(4) his bursting from the spiced tomb, his riding up the heavenly way,

(5) his coming at the day of doom I bind unto myself today.

(6) I bind unto myself today the power of God to hold and lead;

(7) God's eye to watch, God's might to stay, God's ear to harken to my need.

(8) The wisdom of God to teach, God's hand to guide, God's shield to ward,

(9) The word of God to give me speech, God's heavenly host to be my guard.

(10) Christ be with me, Christ within in me,

(11) Christ behind me, Christ before me,

(12) Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me,

(13) Christ beneath me, Christ above me,

(14) Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,

(15) Christ in hearts of all that love me, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

(16) I bind unto myself the name, the strong name of the Trinity, by invocation of the same, the Three in one, and One in Three,

(17) Of whom all nature hath creation, eternal Father, Spirit, Word;

(18) Praise to the God of my salvation; salvation is of Christ the Lord.

Attachment: Activity 3b

The Shield of St. Patrick

I bind unto myself today
the strong name of the Trinity,
by invocation of the same,
the Three in One and One in Three.

I bind this day to me forever:
by power of faith, Christ's incarnation,
his baptism in the Jordan River,
his death on the cross for my salvation,
his bursting from the spiced tomb,
his riding up the heavenly way,
his coming at the day of doom
I bind unto myself today.

I bind unto myself today
the power of God to hold and lead;
God's eye to watch, God's might to stay,
God's ear to harken to my need.
The wisdom of God to teach,
God's hand to guide, God's shield to ward,
The word of God to give me speech,
God's heavenly host to be my guard.

Christ be with me, Christ within in me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

I bind unto myself the name,
the strong name of the Trinity,
by invocation of the same,
the Three in one, and One in Three,
By whom all nature hath creation,
eternal Father, Spirit, Word;
Praise to the God of my salvation;
salvation is of Christ the Lord.

Attachment: Activity 8

The Lord's Prayer
From *The Message* Matthew 6:9–13

Our Great God in heaven,
Reveal who you are.
Set the world right;
Do what's best for us here on earth, like you are already doing right now in Heaven.

Keep us alive with enough food.
Keep forgiving us and help us to forgive people who hurt us and anger us.

Keep us safe from ourselves and from the evil in our world
You're in charge!
You can do anything you want!
You're ablaze in beauty!
Yes. Yes. Yes.

Your are the great and loving King
Your Kingdom is the place where justice and peace and power and glory are now and will be forever more. Amen!

Peterson, E. H. (2002). *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Neh. 8:1–18). Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress. Peterson, E. H. (2002). Scripture taken from *The Message*. Copyright 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.

From the New Zealand Prayer Book

(This version of the prayer directly follows the Lord's Prayer in the Maori language. This is probably the translation from Maori into English.)

Eternal Spirit,
Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver,
Source of all that is and that shall be,
Father and Mother of us all,
Loving God, in whom is heaven:

The hallowing of your name echo through the universe!
The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the world!
Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!
Your Commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth.

With the bread we need for today, feed us.
In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.
In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.
From trials too great to endure, spare us.
From the grip of all that is evil, free us.

For your reign in the glory of the power that is love,
Now and forever. Amen.

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Context and Mission

About this Age Group

Many older youth have access to the world more readily than the generations before them. The World Wide Web allows teenagers to be connected to what is happening all over the globe. If they want to, they can have abundant information about anything on the planet quickly and easily. The challenge with older youth is to help them channel the power of endless information through the grid of their developing faith. Enabling those connections is a privilege for any adult who is willing to jump into the fray of their lives and explore faith closely and personally together with them.

This age group tends to have open hearts, a strong capacity to love others, and a rich sense of the beauty surrounding them. Maximizing these energies within teenagers is not only an exciting challenge but also a great joy.

About this Exploration

The beauty that surrounds us—in our relationships as well as in 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

Prepare to enter a big world with your older youth! They have a lot to teach you, and you have a lot to share with them as you help them integrate their journeys of faith with the rest of their lives. You are about to guide them toward a more full expression of living with an awareness of mission. You are about to see God’s mission unfold in your life and in the world around you. Pray for your group by centering your soul in the God who really does love and adore the whole world.

Prayer: Creator of the worlds, I pause to settle into your presence, to enter the stream of your love and grace, and to seek the beauty of your holiness. Lead me as I give myself to guiding the young people you have entrusted to me. Expand my vision for how your beauty can transform the world. May your name be lifted high as we learn to practice our faith in our community and in the good world you made. In Jesus’ name, 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 Becoming Friends with God (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read 2 Corinthians 5:16–20 from *The Message*, Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of the Bible. Make copies of the passage for your group. Reflect on what it means for you to be a friend of God and for God to be a friend of yours.

Supplies:

- “2 Corinthians 5:16–20,” Attachment: Activity 1
- pens or pencils

Distribute a copy of the attachment and a pen to each participant. Ask the group to read the passage silently and circle all the words that relate to relationships. Then invite the youth to share their words aloud. Divide the group into partners, and have the pairs talk about the following two ideas:

- What does it mean for you to get a fresh start?
- What does it mean for the world to get a fresh start?

Next, ask each pair to join with one other pair, making groups of four. Ask the groups of four to reflect on the following:

- If God has given us the task of telling everyone what God is doing (the last two verses), what have you observed that might be evidence of the good God is doing in the world at large?
- What would it look like if people were to drop their differences with one another and their differences with God?

Next, ask the groups of four to join together with another group of four, creating groups of eight. Ask them to talk about what it could mean to become friends with God. Ask them also to talk about how that might happen.

Save at least five minutes to ask the entire group one final important question for reflection: “Why, do you suppose, is it important for us to become a friend of God prior to helping others become friends with God?”

Invite the participants to share new discoveries or thoughts that arose during the discussion.



2 God’s Mission

Leader preparation: Read Micah 6:8. Christians from a wide variety of faith traditions recognize this sentence as foundational to what it means to be people of faith. In a sense, Micah 6:8 could be called the mission of God for God’s people. God’s mission can be advanced through everyday followers of Christ.

God’s work is accomplished primarily through the people of God as we learn to love and model servant leadership patterned after the way of Jesus. Or, put more simply, God desires that all of us would do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God through this life.

Write the three main statements of this verse in large letters on newsprint or a whiteboard: Do Justice. Love Kindness. Walk humbly with God.

Experiencing Beauty

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:

- dictionaries
- “Micah 6:8,” Attachment: Activity 2
- markers and newsprint or white board

Hand out the copies of Micah 6:8. After you read aloud the passage in at least two different translations, invite the group to talk about the impact of the passage.

Encourage the participants to choose which of the three directives they think holds the most meaning for them today. Divide the group into three subgroups, and assign each subgroup to one of the three directives. Each subgroup will work through the following tasks:

- Memorize the statement.
- Look up in a dictionary any words that do not make sense. For example, justice might be a word the subgroup wants to look up.
- Prepare to explain your line in everyday language.
- Talk about how the world would be a more beautiful place if more people were willing to practice doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God.
- Offer at least one example of how individuals in your group could learn to practice this particular line in real life.

After the subgroups have had time to interact, invite them to act out an example of how their particular part of the verse could be lived out in real life. To end the activity, have the three groups say their segments of scripture aloud: “Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with God.”



3 Going into the World

Leader preparation: As you look at “Guatemala: Procession” and ponder its beauty, ask yourself the questions you will ask the group. Write on newsprint or a whiteboard the following questions to guide the discussion. You may want to add questions of your own as well.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Guatemala: Procession” by Betty LaDuke, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1004323110?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=15626&store_id=1401
- markers and newsprint or white board
- (optional) a computer with Internet access and projection capability

Display the artwork “Guatemala: Procession.” Invite your participants to describe the beauty, the people, and the movement they see. Ask them to imagine they have to offer their descriptions to a person who is blind. Continue the discussion by answering the following questions:

- What is beautiful about this painting?
- What is mysterious about the painting?
- Who do you imagine are the people in the painting?
- What about the color draws you in?
- Jesus is in the center of the painting; how would you describe the posture of the people on either side of Jesus?
- Why are some of the people turned away? Why are some of them looking at Jesus?
- How have you experienced other people’s reactions to Jesus?

Discerning & Deciding Activities

**4 Where Are We? Where Is God? (Easy Preparation)**

Leader preparation: The word “context” can be described as integrating all the factors that make up the immediate world in which a person lives along with the broader world in which we find ourselves. These factors include our physical, emotional, and spiritual surroundings; our concrete, immediate circumstances; and the many relationships we encounter. Context can be as complicated as the World Wide Web and as simple as the ground on which we walk.

For older youth, much of their context is defined by relationships. Forming a clear understanding of our context gives us the ability to determine the meaning and value of the events happening around us and of the relationships in which we participate. Think about your own context. Consider where God fits into it.

Supplies:

- pens for each participant
- variety of colored pencils
- paper, at least three sheets per participant

Distribute pens and several sheets of paper to each participant. Explain the importance of context. Talk about the fact that there are parts of our context over which we have control, and other parts we do not control. In both instances we can learn to control our reactions to our context, and we can learn to look for God in the middle of our everyday lives and our moment-by-moment context. Ask the participants to use one sheet of paper to draw a series of small symbols representing the parts of their context over which they have little or no control, such as school, their parents, their home, and so forth. Invite them to fill the sheet of paper with symbols, drawings, or pictures of the things they perceive they have no control over. Remind them that there are no right or wrong answers.

On a different sheet of paper have them write brief phrases using words to describe the things they think they do have control over. For example, how much of their homework they do, who their friends are, behaviors related to how they love people, how they take care of their stuff, how they use their time, their hobbies, how they care for the world around them, who they dislike, whether they trust God, some of their opinions, and so forth.

Next, invite the group to look at both papers and think about where they see God in their lives. Invite them to discuss how they notice God, where they notice God, where they welcome God, where they wish God would stay away. Ask them to use the colored pencils to circle words or pictures from their drawings and lists of words that represent places where they can identify God in their contexts. Ask them how they might be able to notice God more in the context of their everyday lives. Remind them that God is present everywhere in their lives and that God loves them no matter what. Remind them also that God is able and ready to show us more, as soon as we are ready and willing to see more. Share a few of the specific ways you see God at work in their lives and in their contexts.

5 What Time Is It?

Leader preparation: Read Ecclesiastes 3:1–13 and reflect on what time it is. In other words, what makes the early twenty-first century different from past centuries? What makes the decade in which you live now different from when you were a teenager? String a long rope across the front of the room so that the rope is suspended in the air approximately four feet off the ground.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- 3" x 5" cards, a few per participant
- pens
- rope
- tape or clothespins

Hand out Bibles, and ask people to find Ecclesiastes 3:1–13. Ask people to jot down on note cards one word or phrase that comes to mind as they heard the “a time to” phrases (“being born,” “dying,” dancing,” going to war,” and so forth). Read the passage aloud together as a group. Attach those cards to a rope that is strung across the room. Ask people which card relates to their lives now. Which relates to their community, church, or country?

Ask the participants to imagine Christ in the room with you. If Christ were trying to help the group understand the current time and bring encouragement, what might he say?

Invite participants to finish the following sentence as accurately and honestly as they can: “I think Christ would say that right now [fill in today’s date] is the time for During this time, I need”



6 Where Are We Going?

Leader preparation: Human beings are constantly in a state of flux, deciding who we are and where we are going. The context of our lives is always shifting. Read the case study about Janelle, and reflect on what you might have had in common with her when you were a teenager. What similarities did you have to her life and context? Write the discussion questions on newsprint or a whiteboard, and cover them.

Supplies:

- “Case Study: Janelle,” Attachment: Activity 6
- markers and newsprint or white board

Hand out a copy of the case study to everyone. Split the group into smaller subgroups of three to five people. Ask the groups to read the case study together and then talk about the ways their stories connect with Janelle’s story. How are they similar or different?

Direct everyone’s attention to the questions on the newsprint or white board. Invite the groups to discuss the answers. The discussion questions could include the following:

- At the beginning of the summer, what were Janelle’s fears?
- How did she handle her fears?
- In what ways do you relate to her story?
- What was it like for her when she was living for the moment?

- After rereading the sentence from Ecclesiastes 3:11, share what you think it means that God planted eternity in the hearts of human beings.
- Describe what happened for Janelle after she encountered this portion of the Bible.
- What about her story helps you?
- Describe where you think you are going in life right now.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Mission Impossible (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: In advance of this activity, give some thought to what it would be like for you to live a life of beauty.

Supplies: None

We recognize that there are times in life when beauty seems far away (such as during a crisis or natural disaster, or under an oppressive government). Explain to the group that during such times we might have questions, and ask them how we can interject beauty into seemingly impossible situations. Discuss how we can be part of transforming a situation by intentionally bringing about unexpected beauty.

Split the group into smaller groups, and give each group two of the following hypothetical situations. Ask each group to discuss how to interject beauty into these contexts.

- A flood destroys your neighbor's basement.
- Your grandmother's best friend dies of old age.
- A hail storm destroys your neighbor's front yard and the outside of the house.
- A tsunami hits a small island nation on the other side of the planet, destroying most of the crops, many homes, and more than half the livestock.
- A student from your school who happens to be a bully loses his baby brother to cancer.
- One of your teachers is in a car accident and ends up in the hospital.
- One of your parents or grandparents develops migraine headaches that are so painful they interfere with work.
- A favorite pet that has been very important to your best friend's family dies.

Challenge the group to look for at least one way to bring beauty to people around them this week.

8 Over My Head

Leader preparation: In advance of this activity, obtain the equipment necessary to show a YouTube video to your group. Practice setting up and using all the equipment. If possible, acquire some simple percussion instruments like hand drums or shakers. Try to borrow enough percussion instruments so that everyone can play an instrument. If you are not comfortable singing aloud, recruit a musician (perhaps a guitarist, pianist, or organist) to help with this activity. Practice by singing aloud all four verses of the African American traditional song “Over My Head.” Watch the YouTube rendition of the song.

Supplies:

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

Hand out hymnals and the extra percussion instruments if you have them. Encourage people to get comfortable with their rhythm instruments. Watch the video together. Then ask the group to join in by playing the instruments and singing along.

Ask people to name some places they go in a typical week. Finally, ask the group to sing the song by substituting the names of these places for the words in the song like so: “At my job I hear music in the air.” Sing these new verses together.

9 Stories of God

Leader preparation: Read 2 Corinthians 5:16–20. Reflect on what it means for you to be entrusted with the beautiful message of reconciliation. What would it feel like for you to be an ambassador for Christ? How do you think your older youth feel about being called ambassadors for Christ? We are invited to participate in God’s beautiful work in the world.

Check out one or both of the following websites in preparation for this activity. Prepare yourself to tell a story from one of the following sites: <http://www.freethechildren.com/aboutus/history/> or <http://www.invisiblechildren.com>.

If you have time, you might wish to show one of the videos from one of the sites.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- stories of youth who made a difference: <http://www.freethechildren.com/aboutus/history/> and <http://www.invisiblechildren.com>
- computer with Internet access and projection capability

Give everyone a Bible, and explain how to find the passage. After everyone has located the passage, read 2 Corinthians 5:16–20 to your group. Ask them what it means to them that God has entrusted them with the message of reconciliation. Ask them to describe what it feels like for the Bible to call us ambassadors for Christ.

Remind them that being reconciled simply means to be brought back into a good and loving relationship with God. The work of reconciling is not something we have to do; it is something that God has already done and that God still does on behalf of the world. Those who follow after Christ have the simple privilege of telling the story of God's love for everyone and living out that story in the context of everyday life. And yet, we are invited to participate actively with God's loving work in the world.

Share with your group one clear, compelling example of a young person or a group of young people whose actions are based on a faith perspective. Use one of the two website links to offer a story of reconciliation led by a young person.

Reflect

What have you learned about context and mission as a result of these activities? How have you seen growth in your participants? What would you name as beautiful about your group of older youth?

Attachment: Activity 1

2 Corinthians 5:16–20
(from *The Message*)

16 Because of this decision we don't evaluate people by what they have or how they look. We looked at the Messiah that way once and got it all wrong, as you know. We certainly don't look at him that way anymore.

17 Now we look inside, and what we see is that anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; a new life burgeons! Look at it!

18 All this comes from the God who settled the relationship between us and him, and then called us to settle our relationships with each other.

19 God put the world square with himself through the Messiah, giving the world a fresh start by offering forgiveness of sins. God has given us the task of telling everyone what he is doing.

20 We're Christ's representatives. God uses us to persuade men and women to drop their differences and enter into God's work of making things right between them. We're speaking for Christ himself now: Become friends with God; he's already a friend with you.¹

1. Peterson, E. H. (2002). *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (2 Cor. 5:15–20). Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress. Scripture taken from *The Message*. Copyright 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.

Attachment: Activity 2

Micah 6:8

New Revised Standard Version

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to **do justice**, and to **love kindness**,
and to **walk humbly with your God**?

English Standard Version

He has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to **do justice**, and to **love kindness**,
and to **walk humbly with your God**?

The Message

But he's already made it plain how to live, what to do,
what God is looking for in men and women.
It's quite simple: **Do what is fair and just to your neighbor,**
be compassionate and loyal in your love,
And don't take yourself too seriously—
take God seriously.

Try this:

Memorize your segment: Do Justice or Love Kindness or Walk humbly with God. Look up in a dictionary any words that do not make sense.

Prepare to explain your part of the verse in everyday language.

How would the world be a more beautiful place if more people were willing to practice doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God?

Offer at least one example of how you could learn to live or do or practice your part of the verse in real life.

Attachment: Activity 6

Case Study: Janelle

When I graduated from high school, I was popular and successful academically. I had pretty much everything going for me. During the summer before my freshman year in college, however, everything changed for me. My parents got divorced. I started to get really scared about going away to a college where I didn't know very many people. Most of my friends were either not going to college, or they were going to different colleges, far away from me. I started to realize I would have to start over.

I decided to spend the summer living it up, doing whatever I wanted to do. Partying, drinking, even smoking a little pot all became big parts of my life. For awhile I liked it. But soon, I began to feel exhausted and even a little depressed. I was living for the moment, and the moment wasn't lasting all that long.

One day I was desperately flipping through an old Bible wishing I could figure things out, wishing I could pray a prayer that would make everything OK, wishing my parents would get back together. I somehow found the book of Ecclesiastes. The whole book really spoke to me. Here was a person I could identify with. The person who wrote this was living for the moment, just like me. And he felt empty, too. One sentence in that book really helped me.

“God has made everything suitable for its time; moreover God has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” (Ecclesiastes 3:11 NRSV)

My entire summer up to that point had been consumed with chasing pleasure and totally forgetting about God and how much God loves me. That sentence in the Bible might sound odd to you, but it actually made me feel better and it made me begin to realize who I wanted to be and where I was going; not just literally where I was going to college, but where I was going in life!

After reading Ecclesiastes, I began to realize how futile it is to strive after material possessions, selfish pleasures, money, fame, sex, and popularity. They are all fleeting. Once they go away, happiness goes with them. But if I could learn to follow God and God's ways, and if I could learn to trust Jesus and follow in the way of Jesus, nothing could take away that love and that happiness.

That's my story!

Janelle
Age 18

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Future and Vision

About this Age Group or Setting

For older youth, thinking about the future can be overwhelming. Questions about the future can cause them to fear the unknown. They are beginning to reflect on what life will be like away from their families, churches, and all that is familiar to them. Spoken and unspoken questions pop up all over the landscape of their lives: Where will I go after high school? What will I do with my life? Whom will I fall in love with? How will I find a way to be different from my family?

On the other hand, older youth also experience excitement about what lies ahead. Teenagers are often filled with beautiful dreams of amazing potential. We can help them experience the beauty of God's world, and therefore the beauty of God, by coaching them as they practice their faith. Faith-catalyzing encounters facilitated by safe, loving adults are important to youth's faith formation.

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

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 The Lord and Job (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Job 38:1–11. What do you feel as you read this passage? Why do you think God might be asking Job this series of questions?

Supplies:

- Bibles
- pens
- paper

Ask the group to find Job 38:1–11. Job can be a difficult portion of the Bible to find. You may want to invite your youth to find the table of contents in their Bibles and look for the page number for Job. Explain that Job is in the Old Testament.

Ask the group to count the number of questions God asks Job, and write that number on the top of their papers. You will get a variety of answers from six to fourteen, depending on how literally people interpret the questions. Ask people to choose the question that intrigues them the most, and write that question on their papers.

Divide the group into subgroups of three or four, and have them share the questions they wrote on their papers. Ask them to explain why those questions intrigued them and also to share within their small groups one question they imagine God might want to ask them.

Explain that God spoke to Job from a whirlwind or a mighty storm. God did not answer Job’s many questions. Those questions, while they might have been important, were not at the heart of the issue. Instead, God used Job’s ignorance of creation to reveal God’s power, majesty, and beauty. Perhaps God wanted Job and us to appreciate the mystery of creation as a way to better know and love God.

Invite people to carry their papers with them for the next few days, taking notice of the glory of God in creation. Ask them to write down what they see and hear and feel and smell in creation. Challenge them to say short prayers of worship to God during the next few days.

2 My Vision of the Future

Leader preparation: When you think about the future, what do you see? In what ways do you perceive the world to be getting better? In what ways do you perceive the world to be getting worse? What do you imagine when you think about your own future? The church’s? Where do you see yourself in the future? Reflect and pray before facilitating this activity.

Prior to the meeting, write on newsprint or a whiteboard: “My Vision of the Future,” along with the following five incomplete sentences:

- The future of our world is . . .
- My future feels . . .
- God’s future seems . . .
- My role in God’s future might be . . .
- Our church’s part in God’s could be . . .

Leader Preparation

Center your mind and your heart on God, asking God to ground your thoughts on the beauty of Christ’s love. The concept of becoming is very important. In other words, our faith journeys are not about being perfect or doing everything exactly right. They are not about striving to eventually reach a state of perfection or about knowing all the right answers. Rather, our faith is always being practiced; each day we are becoming more of the person God intended. Growth happens by God’s grace. God is patient with us. In your role as leader, facilitator, and coach, you are a pilgrim guide for these older youth.

Prayer: Guide me, God. Help me to trust you with my future. Show me how patient and loving you really are. Make me aware of the beauty around me, including the beauty in me and the young people you have put into my life. 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

Experiencing Beauty

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:

- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- pens
- paper

As the participants enter the room, greet them by name and say: “Welcome, beautiful child of God. You are God’s beloved daughter/son, and I’m glad you’re here!” Ask people to reflect silently on the statements you wrote on the newsprint or whiteboard. Then ask them to begin to formulate in their imaginations how they want to finish the sentences.

Give out pens and paper. Invite the youth to write their responses to each of the five unfinished sentences. Save time for the youth to share at least one of their completed sentences with the group. Ask people to share the sentence that came the most quickly into their imaginations and/or the one that was most difficult to finish. Share one of your completed sentences as well.

Option: Write each incomplete sentence on a separate sheet of newsprint, and post these around the room. Have the youth add their statements to the newsprint, graffiti style.

End this activity with a prayer such as: *Loving God, give us vision to see the future you wish for all of us. Give us hope that you are at work in our lives and in our world. May we help to bring good in the world. Amen.*

③ Finally! God Answers

Leader preparation: Watch the three-minute YouTube dramatic reading of Job 38:1–11 from *The Message*, which can be located at the link listed under Supplies. Reflect on what in the video is beautiful and how that beauty might be connected to being a disciple of Jesus. Pray that God would give you wisdom, and also ask God to help you more thoroughly love the young people in your group.

Supplies:

- computer with Internet access and projection capability
- video: “Job 38,” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lb_LyxHzaQc

Following Christ and discovering God’s goodness include caring about creation. After introducing Job 38, watch the three-minute YouTube video together. Explain that the goal is to discover God’s questions to Job in a fresh way and to discuss the artistic beauty portrayed in the video and the Bible passage. Pose a few of the following questions:

- How do you see the beauty of God’s love for the world in the questions God asked of Job?
- Describe what you remember about creation and the Creator from the video.
- How might the majesty of creation guide our thoughts about the future?
- What about God’s questions to Job inspires you to follow Jesus more faithfully?

Discerning & Deciding Activities

 4 A New Heaven and a New Earth (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: If you have time, read Revelation 21:2–5. Imagine what this vision looked like to John. What do you think “making all things new” is all about? When you envision this future hope, what words encourage you the most?

Supplies:

- Bibles
- crayons, colored markers, colored pencils
- newsprint or butcher paper
- tape or sticky tack

The goal of this activity is to discover hope for the future. Hand out Bibles to everyone. After everyone in the group has had time to find Revelation 21:2–5, read the passage aloud together as a group.

Encourage people to create an artistic rendition of the words, symbols, and images from the passage. Allow for plenty of time to engage in this creation, making it clear that no one will be judged by his or her artistic abilities. Challenge the group to fill up as much of the paper as possible.

To end the activity, ask each person to comment on the drawing. *What hope does this passage provide?*

 5 Future Church

Leader preparation: The following poem from a new church in Denver, Colorado, is actually a statement representing the philosophy of the church. You can check out the website for more information: <http://www.highlandchurch-denver.org/>. Notice how you relate to each phrase. Do you think it is possible to experience church in the way that this statement reads? What kind of vision do you have for the future of Christ’s church? Can you imagine a church where everyone feels welcomed and loved in tangible ways? What is attractive to you about such a church? Do you have unchurched friends or family members who might be drawn to this kind of faith community? Write the untitled poem on newsprint or a white board, and make copies of Attachment: Activity 5, “Future Church Case Study,” for each participant. The attachment includes the poem and the discussion questions.

Married, divorced, or single here, it’s one family that mingles here.
 Conservative or liberal here, we’ve all gotta’ give a little here.
 Big or small here, there’s room for us all here.
 Doubt or believe here, we all can receive here.
 Gay or straight here, there’s no hate here.
 Woman or man here, everyone can hear.
 Whatever your race here, for all of us grace here.
 In imitation of the love Almighty God has for each of us and all of us,
 Let us live and love without labels.

— Rev. Mark Tidd (used with permission of the author)

Supplies:

- markers and white board or chalkboard
- slips of blank paper, or blank 3" x 5" cards
- pens
- "Future Church Case Study," Attachment: Activity 5

Explain that this poem is read every week at the beginning of the worship service at a new church in Denver. This faith community is trying to create space for everyone. In order to remind their community and as a declaration to new people and visitors, one of the pastors at this church recites or reads this poem every week during worship. The poem does not have a title.

Invite your group to create a title. Divide the group into small groups of four or five participants. Ask each small group to read the poem a few times aloud, and then discuss the poem using the following questions:

- How does this poem make you feel?
- How do you think this poem might make a visitor to this church feel?
- What do you appreciate most about this poem?
- What is missing from this poem?

After the small group discussions, challenge each group to come up with a title for the poem. Let each group present its title to the large group. Then work toward a consensus on the title that seems to fit the best. To end this activity, ask the entire group one final question for reflection: *What do you wish for the future of the church?*



6 Red Canna

Leader preparation: Study the artwork "Red Canna." What do you see and feel as you linger with this painting by Georgia O'Keeffe?

Supplies:

- artwork: "Red Canna," by Georgia O'Keeffe, <http://www.art.com/products/p10032683-sa-i674918/georgia-okeeffe-red-canna.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&ui=4FA2E7AB9F664A828CD2028E434AEDC4>
- timer, digital watch, or cell phone—something to use to time two minutes

Have the painting posted somewhere visible in the meeting room as people enter. Give your group plenty of time to linger with and enjoy this painting. Invite the group to gather around the painting and talk about it.

Begin the conversation by listening. Invite your group to "listen in silence" to the painting. For some, listening to the painting may seem odd, and for others listening to the painting will be a welcome break from the noise of the day. Try to offer this silence confidently so that the group can genuinely engage with the beauty of the print.

Invite the group to look at the painting in silence for at least two minutes. You will need to monitor the time carefully and calmly. After two minutes of silence, quietly invite people to think about what they are experiencing as they linger with the artwork. After another moment, ask a few simple questions, and then invite their responses. Without dominating the conversation, you also can add your own responses and reflections.

- What do you enjoy about the painting “Red Canna”?
- How do the colors affect your imagination?
- If this painting were a message about the future, what might it be saying?
- Describe how this painting might lead you to worship.
- What connection do you feel between the painting and God’s Spirit?

Lead the group in a prayer of silence. Instruct everyone to wait for about one minute, listening to God. Invite everyone to pray a silent prayer to God. After another minute, calmly say: “In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

Sending & Serving Activities

7 Who Holds the Future? (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Pray for your group members by name, one at a time. Ask God to infuse hope about the future into each one and into your heart as well! Label three containers as follows: Fear, Question, and Wish. Divide a sheet of newsprint or a whiteboard into three sections and label each section Fear, Question, or Wish.

Supplies:

- pens
- small slips of paper, at least nine for each person
- three containers, such as bowl, basket, jar, offering tray
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Hand out pens and at least nine slips of paper to everyone. Ask the participants to write their three most challenging fears about the future, one fear per slip of paper. Have the youth fold these and place them in the Fear container. Ask them to write three questions about the future, one question per slip of paper. Have them fold these and place them in the Question container. Let the participants know the comments will be read aloud to the group. Then ask them to write three wishes for the future of the world. Ask the group to fold these and place them in the Wish container.

Read aloud the first question, and then read the responses in the Fear container. These are to be anonymous answers. Write each answer on the newsprint or whiteboard under the Fear column. Repeat this for the other two categories. Then facilitate the group discussion using these or similar questions:

- What do we have in common about our fears, questions, and wishes?
- What can we do to help bring about our wishes for the world?
- What are some helpful ways to handle our fears and questions?
- How does God’s love enable us to face our fears and questions?

End with a prayer such as: *God, help us to be involved in making our wishes and your wishes for the world come true. May we face our fears and questions by trusting you. Help us to believe that you hold us and the whole world in your loving hands. In Jesus’ name, Amen!*

8 Predicting the Future

Leader preparation: Make sure you or one of the other leaders know how to download material from the video cameras onto a computer so that you can watch the YouTube video. In 1964, Arthur C. Clarke, the great twentieth-century science fiction writer, said, “Trying to predict the future is a discouraging and hazardous occupation.” Preview the video clip from the 1964 BBC Horizon Program.

Clarke was nicknamed “the man who saw the future,” and many of his predictions came true. Watch the YouTube video “Arthur C. Clarke: The Man Who Saw the Future.”

Have you ever found yourself wishing you could predict the future or wishing you could know more about your own future? Arthur C. Clarke was a visionary, in part because he dreamed about possibilities for the future. What can you learn from a man like Clarke about the possibilities that lay ahead? Ask for God’s wisdom as you prepare for this activity. Pray that the participants would experience hope as a result of this activity. Write the four questions for the videos on newsprint or a whiteboard.

Supplies:

- computer with Internet access and projection capability
- “Arthur C. Clarke: The Man Who Saw the Future,”
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmX4cqIsyLk&feature=related>
- (optional) 1964 BBC Horizon video clip, http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=246_1319692758
- sketch pads
- pens

Watch the two Arthur C. Clarke video clips. Facilitate a discussion about the future with your group concerning the future:

- What can we be sure of?
- What possibilities lie before us?
- What do you imagine might be beautiful about our future?

Divide the group into small groups. Ask the groups to begin interviewing one another and video record the answers to the following questions:

- Concerning the future, what are your three biggest dreams?
- Concerning the future, what are three of your biggest fears?
- How does following Jesus help you to face your fears and believe in your dreams?
- What about your relationship with Christ gives you hope?

If you are able, download the video predictions onto the computer and watch together as your group offers predictions about the future. If videotaping is not an option for your group, ask the small groups to share with the larger group some of the most interesting answers they collected in their interviews.



9 I Am Making All Things New!

Leader preparation: Read Revelation 21:4–5 from the five versions of the Bible on Attachment: Activity 9. Which version most resonates with you? Why? Read the verses again aloud. How can you find hope for the future in this passage?

Supplies:

- “Revelation 21:4-5,” Attachment: Activity 9
- pens or pencils

Give a copy of the Revelation 21 attachment to everyone. Ask for five volunteers each to read the various translations of the passage aloud, one at a time. As these variations are read, invite the youth to underline the words of hope. Have the participants number the versions according to their favorite, with 1 being the most favorite and 5 being the least favorite. Ask the participants to share with the group which version feels most beautiful to them and why. Ask everyone to share what is beautiful about various translations and why. Ask: “In what ways does this passage bring hope for the future?”

Have the group read the passage together, with each person reading his or her favorite version. How would this sound if each person was speaking a different language? How does that represent hope for the future of the world?

Reflect

The future can be scary and unpredictable, yet we can have hope. How have these activities helped you face the future with more hope? What transformation have you witnessed in your older youth as they participated in these activities?

Attachment: Activity 5

Future Church Case Study

Married, divorced or single here, it's one family that mingles here.
Conservative or liberal here, we've all gotta give a little here.
Big or small here, there's room for us all here.
Doubt or believe here, we all can receive here.
Gay or straight here, there's no hate here
Woman or man here, everyone can hear.
Whatever your race here, for all of us grace here.
In imitation of the love Almighty God has for each of us and all of us,
Let us live and love without labels.¹

Questions

- How do you feel as you hear the words of the poem?
- What might a visitor to the church feel as he or she listens to this poem?
- What do you appreciate most about this poem?
- What is missing from this poem?
- What's your title for the poem?

1. Source: <http://www.highlandchurchdenver.org/>. Permission obtained for the use of this poem by Rev. Mark Tidd, founding pastor at Highlands Church, Denver, Colorado, August 3, 2011.

Attachment: Activity 9

Revelation 21:4–5
Five Versions

The Message (MSG)

He'll wipe every tear from their eyes. Death is gone for good—tears gone, crying gone, pain gone—all the first order of things gone.

The Enthroned continued, "Look! I'm making everything new. Write it all down—each word dependable and accurate."

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

⁴He will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

Mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

For the first things have passed away.

⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true."

Today's New International Version (NIV)

⁴He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

⁵He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

New Living Translation

⁴He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever."

⁵And the one sitting on the throne said, "Look, I am making everything new!" And then he said to me, "Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true."

Contemporary English Version (CEV)

⁴He will wipe all tears from their eyes, and there will be no more death, suffering, crying, or pain. These things of the past are gone forever.

⁵Then the one sitting on the throne said:

I am making everything new. Write down what I have said. My words are true and can be trusted.