

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Discovery

About this Setting

The church is a place where people come to spend time in renewal and reflection. They come to express devotion to God. It is also a place to be in public and private conversation with God and God's children about issues that concern us. Our forms of worship offer people of all ages the opportunity to experience the fullness of God and the world in which we live.

Liturgy means "work of the people." In this setting we take time to discover the beauty we can find in the work of worship—the music, arts, and stories we share.

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 to lead worship or to facilitate a worship planning team, pause to picture the place in which you gather with the congregation for worship. Choose one aspect of that space that speaks of beauty to you. Then think of another beautiful place in your life. How can you bring those two together? How might you enable others to think about this?

Prayer: *Gracious and Holy God, in your beautiful world I find myself so engaged in serving others that I often miss the moments you've created for me to notice: the glowing orb of sun as it reaches for the dawning sky, the chirping birds heralding the call of spring's return. As days go sprinting by, God, may I heed your call to consider the lilies. Help me to find you in the hurried pace that is my life, and as I do may I slow down enough to consider not just the lilies, but the whole of the garden in which we live. Amen.*

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Because (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Take a moment to reflect on the beauty of God's love. Post the following line for your group: "We don't love people because they are beautiful. They are beautiful because we love them."

Supplies:

- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- song: "Jesus Loves Me"

Invite people to sing the familiar song "Jesus Loves Me." In 1 John 4:19 we read "We love because God first loved us." Read the statement you posted on newsprint or a whiteboard. Invite conversation on the following questions.

- How do you experience the beauty of another person?
- How do you know you are beautiful in someone's eyes?
- How does feeling loved make us experience a sense of beauty?
- How does being loved by God make us beautiful?
- How do you define beauty?



2 The Journey

Leader preparation: Prepare to display an image of "Journey of the Magi" by James Tissot. Consider your own faith journey. What gifts have you given to others along the way? What gifts have you received that helped you become more faithful?

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
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projection capability

Invite participants to view carefully the artwork "Journey of the Magi" by Tissot without revealing the title of the piece. Invite the participants to describe what they notice and how it makes them feel. How would they title this artwork?

Have the group consider the artwork again. Engage the participants in conversation using the following questions.

- Where do you find beauty in this art?
- The Magi brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh as they went to discover the newborn king. As you look back on your encounters with Jesus, what have you discovered? What gifts do you bring?
- What do you find beautiful about the metaphor of going on a journey?
- What do you think children would notice most about this painting? What do you think they find most captivating about the story of the Magi seeking Jesus?
- Do you think children understand beauty as adults do? Why or why not? What can you bring to your faith journey if you see it anew as though you were a child?

3 Considering Beauty around Us

Leader preparation: Reflect on the symbolism of the lily in Christianity. Where do you find beauty in addition to the passage in Matthew 6:24–34? How do you relate to this poem? As part of your preparation be intentional about making time to “neither toil nor spin”?

Supplies:

- Bible
- poem: “Consider the Lilies of the Field” by Christina Rossetti, http://www.poetry-archive.com/r/consider_the_lilies_of_the_field.html

If your setting is near the outdoors or if you have a room with a nice view, sit so that participants can enjoy the outdoors. Read Matthew 6:24–34. Then invite someone to read the poem aloud. Give the group a moment to reflect on what the poet is suggesting. Then engage in discussion about these questions.

- How does this poem relate to the idea of God’s creation?
- What do you see outside your window that mirrors the words of the poem?
- What might your church group do to acknowledge and reflect on the beauty in the creation where you are?
- What do you notice about your surroundings that you did not before hearing the poem?
- When have you failed to see beauty in your own life?
- What practices help you be awake to beauty?

Option: Take photos of your surrounding neighborhood and create a slide show to view during worship as you read the poem.

Discerning & Deciding Activities

4 Surely the Presence (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: If you wish to close this activity with music, view some clips of the song “Surely the Presence,” such as at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=88AvG85WXcQ&feature=related>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LjiwAsjTdmU&feature=related>; or <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iD2Q-S1tI0Y&feature=related>.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- (optional) hymn: “Surely the Presence of the Lord,” by Lanny Wolfe (tune: Wolfe)
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projection capability

Ask volunteers to read Genesis 28:10–19a. Use the following paragraphs as a starter for a homily.

Where do we find God? We can find God wherever we look. We can see God in the faces surrounding us in the pews. We meet God in the people rushing past us. God is found in the heavens and in the miracle of the plants taking root and nourishing us with food. God traveled with the Magi as they journeyed to meet their newborn king.

Jacob was running for his life. His own brother sought to kill him. With only a rock for a pillow, Jacob slept. There he dreamed of angels ascending and descending on a ladder to heaven. In the dream God told this outcast that he, Jacob, would inherit the land on which he lay. Jacob's offspring would be countless. Furthermore, his children would bless the entire earth.

Ask participants what they would do in response to such a glorious promise. How would they mark it? Scripture tells us that Jacob recognized the experience as "awesome." He built a pillar from the stone that had been his pillow and poured oil over it, setting it apart as sacred. What tears have learners shed into their pillows? What journey are they on? When have they felt like an outcast, homeless and alone?

Remind the group to listen for God's voice. Mark the ordinary "stones" of their lives as beautiful. Ask them to believe that God is with them and can bring beauty out of their lives.

Option: Listen to or view the song "Surely the Presence," and reflect on times when God's presence has been real.

5 Looking East and Beyond

Leader preparation: Preview the YouTube clip of "Looking East," sung by Jackson Browne. Consider the lyrics. Observe how people use beauty for good and for evil. How have you seen beauty used well or misused, both in and out of church? Is beauty equal to power? Does power make us feel beautiful? Consider the religious figures in your faith tradition that acted out of power and beauty.

Supplies:

- computer with Internet access
- song: "Looking East," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKIByUdDEgQ>; lyrics <http://www.jacksonbrowne.com/discography/album/looking-east/lyrics#song1>
- Bibles

Play the YouTube video of "Looking East." Then read Psalm 121. The psalmist lifts his eyes to the hills. Invite the group to discuss where and how participants discover God. Some images in the song and in the psalm suggest that beauty eludes us. Sometimes the sun does not shine. Sometimes we feel discouraged. Ask:

- Where is God when God is most needed?
- How can you tell?

Invite participants to share experiences and discoveries of where and when they have found God in discouraging times. What sorts of beauty inspire them?

6 Growing in Faith

Leader preparation: Preview the YouTube video to familiarize yourself with “Inch by Inch: The Garden Song.” This is a good song to use with children and a multigenerational group.

Fill small cups about half full of dirt. If different types of seeds are to be used, place them in small dishes with the packets next to the corresponding dishes.

Supplies:

- “Inch by Inch: The Garden Song” by David Mallett <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u90qRE2F7CM&feature=related>; lyrics: <http://www.gardenofsong.com/gardensng.html>
- computer with Internet access and screen
- small cups filled with soil (or peat pots)
- flower or vegetable seeds
- pitcher of water
- markers
- (optional) popsicle sticks

This activity could be used as a participatory activity in a church service. Perhaps it could be used as an adjunct to a Bible study activity or as the start of a church garden. It could be a good metaphor for growing into a new habit and used as the start of a Lenten series.

Invite participants to view and/or sing “Inch by Inch: The Garden Song.” Then they may select seeds to plant. They will press the seeds into the soil and gently water them. (People may wish to write the name of the plant on a popsicle stick and place the stick in the soil.)

Offer the following blessing: *Gracious God, we gather in your name to grow in faith and count our blessings. You entrust this earth to our care. May we prove to be worthy stewards. Help us discover the faith of the mustard seed coming alive in these tiny seedlings. May the tender green sprouts grow into mature plants just as we hope to grow in our faith and serve you with more dedication. Amen.*

If this activity is used as part of a church service, the plants can be sent home with the participants. They may also be placed on a tray and set in a designated place to be tended by the participants. If the plants are left at church, you may wish to post a schedule for their care.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Beauty Defined (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Post several sheets of newsprint all around the room. To prevent markers from bleeding through, you may want to double the paper.

If you wish to use the optional aspect of this activity, you could go to <http://www.wordle.net/> to explore some of the word clouds that people have made. “Wordle” is a site that allows you to set words in different colors and designs. You can print your wordle clouds. When you have observed other people’s wordle clouds, go to <http://www.wordle.net/create>. You could start by placing a favorite prayer or passage of scripture (preferably one that addresses the topic of beauty) in the wordle text box.

Supplies:

- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- Bible
- paper
- pencils, colored pencils, markers
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projection capability

Invite participants to brainstorm words that make them think of beauty and to write those words on a piece of paper. Then read a passage from the Bible of your choice that evokes beauty, such as 1 Peter 3:3–4 or Ecclesiastes 3:11.

After you've read the passage or passages, invite participants to share their words with the group. In addition to their words you might contribute some of these: attraction, attractiveness, balance, belle, dazzler, dream, equilibrium, euphony, eye-opener, harmony, loveliness, lovely, order, paragon, proportion, stunner, sweetness, symmetry. Distribute colored pencils or markers in a variety of colors, and invite people to creatively display their words on the newsprint to create a mural of beautiful words. They may want to decorate their words or use pictures and symbols.

Option: Go to www.wordle.net/create and ask participants to call out words from their lists. Avoid repeating words if you can. After you have as many words as you want, press the button that says "go." Make the creation even more beautiful by changing the font, the shape of the cloud, and the color. Print the finished wordle for everyone.

8 Please Don't Hate the Daisies!

Leader preparation: Watch the clip below from the movie *Harold and Maude*.

Supplies:

- computer with Internet access
- video: from *Harold and Maude*, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h0FX_ROcNV4

Share the video with your group. Invite conversation by posing these or similar questions:

- What makes you beautiful to another?
- What qualities do you prize in yourself?
- What do you offer to your church community? How do you remember to value your own and others' contributions?
- What would life be like without your best friend? What is unique about this person?
- What have you learned from these questions?

9 Discovering Natural Wonders

Leader preparation: Read the poem “Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood” by William Wordsworth.

Supplies:

- poem: “Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood” by William Wordsworth, <http://www.bartleby.com/145/ww331.html>
- hymn: “For the Beauty of the Earth” by Folliot S. Pierpoint (tune: either Dix or John Rutter): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHIfrLNYUGw> (John Rutter); <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/f/b/fbeauty.htm> (Dix)

You can share this poem at the beginning or end of a Bible study or as the starting point for a discussion on discovering beauty. Suggest to participants that faith is a journey. It can be understood as a natural part of life, just like many of the natural elements to which Wordsworth refers. Some of the references in the poem include celestial light, meadow, brook, and mountains. Invite participants to consider some parallels to stories in the Bible. *What are some of the most beautiful settings for biblical stories? What do the heroes and heroines learn? How are we like them? In what ways does beauty have an effect on what they learn? How does it affect your learning?*

Following the Church Year

As you change the paraments and banners in the sanctuary from church season to church season, carefully examine the fabric to ensure that it is clean and fresh and that the colors are still bright and brilliant. If not, consider what might need to be done to update or change them so that the visual presence of the worship space glorifies God through its beauty. Perhaps it might be time to organize a banner committee to design and make new banners or paraments.

Music appeals to people in different ways. As you move through the church seasons, try to introduce some new music to the congregation. Let them hear the beauty of classical as well as contemporary music. Learn new music from a variety of cultures.

In what ways do you notice God’s presence in your life? Perhaps you could keep a journal or start a simple list. How do you remind yourself of God’s presence? Where on your faith journey have you discovered or shared beauty? Consider yourself to be part of the Magi. Join with others on this discovery of faith and beauty. The shepherds and the Magi discovered someone and something life-changing. You might too.

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Scripture

About this Setting

As Christians we draw on the Bible for images of beauty. We read the stories of men and women and reflect on their courageous and inspiring actions. The Bible guides us as we try to understand the beauty in our own world. When our faith increases through wrestling with a text, there is beauty. When we pass on the teachings of the psalmists or share a proverb, we have engaged in the work of creating beauty.

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:

Micah 6:1-8
Amos 5:18-24

Leader Preparation

Read the Bible focus passages. As you read, focus on the beauty in the text. How do arguments and power struggles keep us from experiencing beauty? What does an invitation to those who are seen as less important do for the corporate worship experience? What encouragement do you need to experience God's beauty? What encouragement can you give? How will encouraging others to lead change the way you experience beauty?

Prayer: *Gracious and merciful God, your presence in my life is always strong when I encounter you in the stories of the Bible. I rejoice in the heavens you establish over me. I see your love reflected in the sun on the waters and the wind in the burning bush. You are ever present as I am guided by your wisdom. Be with me and those I shepherd as we discern your Spirit in the stories of this holy book. Make us doers of your words. Help us to shine your light in dark corners. Let us bring your love into the weary world and be joyful in the time we are given to do so. As we read, we follow you, our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.*

Exploring & Engaging Activities

 **1 Act Out the Story (Easy Preparation)**

Leader preparation: Movement aids memory. As your group enacts Nehemiah 8, look for the ways this passage can inspire and encourage.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

As you or someone else reads Nehemiah 8, ask people to identify the various groups of people involved in the story. List their ideas on newsprint or whiteboard. Now ask for volunteers to act out the roles of the various characters in the narrative as you read Nehemiah 8 again.

Follow up with a discussion. What did people notice about the story that they hadn't prior to acting it out? How did the actors feel as they portrayed the characters? What most stood out to those who were observing? What parts of the story seemed beautiful?

 **2 Fire and Flower**

Leader preparation: Read Exodus 3:1-15, paying particular attention to verses 12-15. Think about ways to decorate the space with red fabric and red candles.

Supplies:

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

Display the artwork "Red Canna." Allow time for participants to study the art, looking at the whole and then studying the detail. Do not rush their observation. Then read Exodus 3:1-15. Invite comments and observation. Some questions to ponder might include these:

- How does faith come to us?
- Red is found in flower and flame. Does faith unfold like the flower, or is it revealed in an instant, like the flames that catch when a fire ignites, or can it be both?
- Describe an experience of faith unfolding.
- Describe examples of faith on fire.
- How does the beauty of the color red relate to your faith?
- Consider the beauty of the flames. How is it like the beauty found in faithful devotion?

Share the following or a similar prayer: *Merciful Creator, Awe-inspiring One, as we come to you today we give you thanks for the colors that permeate our world. Reds and oranges brighten our days and heighten our senses. We find your voice in the stirring of the winds as the leaves of the burning bush beckon and call "Here I AM." We want to answer your call, and yet as the flames flicker we wonder, and we delay. Make us hearers of your word. Let us feel the fire of faith that Moses felt. Amen.*

③ Look Toward the Heavens

Leader preparation: Listen to the song “Over My Head,” which is an African American traditional song. If you are able, go outside and look at cloud formations. Think about what is actually overhead. Do you see shapes? What comes to mind when you listen to the hymn in connection with the clouds? Ponder how God appears to you.

Supplies:

- computer with Internet access
- song: “Over My Head,” African American traditional, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q2DLSXYxp6Q&feature=related>
- Bibles
- pictures of clouds
- projector

If you use this activity as a sermon starter, you could project pictures of clouds as you deliver your message. A Bible study or discussion group could also use pictures or look out a window. Alternatively, if you are in a group setting, and the day is not unpleasant, everyone could go outside and look up toward the heavens.

Play the song “Over My Head.” As you listen or sing, ask people to ponder the ways that the visible world (such as the sky) reminds us of invisible spiritual realities (such as God’s powerful presence).

The following scriptures connect images of clouds or the sky to God’s presence. Perhaps they will offer more food for thought.

- Exodus 19:9 (NIV) “The Lord said to Moses, ‘I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you.’ Then Moses told the Lord what the people had said.”
- Exodus 19:16 (NIV) “On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled.”
- Psalm 18:9 (NIV) “He parted the heavens and came down; dark clouds were under his feet.”
- Psalm 97:2 (NIV) “Clouds and thick darkness surround him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.”
- Daniel 7:13 (NIV) “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence.”
- Matthew 24:30 (NIV) “At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory.”
- Matthew 26:64 (NIV) “Yes, it is as you say,” Jesus replied. “But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.”
- Mark 13:26 (NIV) “At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.”
- Mark 14:62 (NIV) “I am,” said Jesus. “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.”
- Luke 21:27 (NIV) “At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.”

Use the following questions to provoke thought:

- In what ways do these images portray the beauty of God? the power of God?
- When you look at clouds, what beautiful images come to mind that suggest God to you?
- Is the beauty in these images also connected to power?

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Top Three (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: This activity lends itself well to a Bible study for adults or children ages ten and older. It could also be an intergenerational activity.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- paper
- pencils or pens

Ask volunteers to read Exodus 20:1–17. Invite the participants to choose a partner or to form small groups of three to four people. Pose these or similar questions for discussion.

- Which commandment do you find to be particularly beautiful? Why? Invite people to offer explanations.
- Give an example of ways each commandment is beautiful. Can the groups come to consensus about why the commandments are beautiful?

No doubt opinions will vary, but some reactions may include the following.

- The first three commandments are most beautiful because they speak of God and our relationship with God.
- Honoring parents is beautiful as it sets the beginnings of our most fundamental relationships in life.
- The commandment to rest is beautiful because it reminds us to focus on God.

5 Say It with Flowers

Leader preparation: Ask congregants ahead of time to bring a flower to this gathering. You might want to use this activity as a send-off for members who will be leaving or a welcome for new members.

Supplies:

- flowers
- vase with water
- Bible
- hymn: “In the Bulb there is a Flower” by Natalie Sleeth (tune: Promise), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkWYubdnc7o>
- computer with Internet access and projection screen

Create a bouquet in a vase with the flowers the participants bring as they gather. Then invite people to take a flower other than one they brought as they listen to “In the Bulb There Is a Flower.” (Alternatively, you can divide the flowers into

two equal amounts and pass the bunches around until each person has taken a flower.)

Read Luke 9:28–36. Ask people to note the transformation Jesus experienced. How did the disciples react? What transitions are mentioned in the song? Invite people to reflect on beautiful transformations they have experienced, both large and small.

6 Shine the Light

Leader preparation: Listen to the uplifting song by Van Morrison. There are two links provided; each video focuses on different images, one on humans and one on nature. This song lends itself nicely to the passage from Luke 9:28–36.

You can use this activity either as a prelude to a message based on the passage in Luke or as a Bible study discussion.

Supplies:

- computer with Internet access and projection capability
- song: “Whenever God Shines His Light,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bEFSuMzzjs> (with images of flowers and nature scenes) or http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qj4R2YXv_AE&NR=1 (pictures of babies); lyrics <http://www.metrolyrics.com/whenever-god-shines-his-light-on-me-lyrics-van-morrison.html>

Read Luke 9:28–36. Play one of the versions of the song “Whenever God Shines His Light” from YouTube. Consider including the following themes or questions.

- Where do you find God’s light shining?
- How do you connect beauty with God?
- The singer asks that God open his eyes to the light. When have you felt that you saw God’s beauty? How would you describe that experience?
- If you were to create a video for this song, what images would you use?

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Voice of Approval (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Luke 9:28–36. Then use the story in the activity description as a sermon-starter or a discussion-starter.

Supplies:

- Bible

Read Luke 9:28–36. At Jesus’ Transfiguration a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” A similar message accompanied Jesus’ baptism, after which he was driven out to the wilderness. Why is it that that sense of accomplishment—of pleasing our parent or boss or making someone happy, including ourselves—doesn’t seem to last very long? Sometimes it seems that we have too many moments where, instead of seeing the light or being on top of the mountain, it feels as though we are, like Jesus was, driven out into the wilderness.

Many of us appreciate the solitary soul-work that is a part of the journey into the wilderness. We need time apart to learn and grow and renew. But the wilderness can be fierce and lonely. It can feel as though we are cast out of community until we figure out that where we’ve been informs the journey and helps us deepen

our connection to each other and to our understanding of who we are as faithful people.

Invite people to answer the following questions.

- In what ways does scripture bring comfort to us in times of desert trial?
- Describe a time when you felt affirmed by God. Perhaps this was at your baptism, when you accepted a new job, when you made a difficult decision, when you nurtured your children, when you volunteered at church or a social service agency, when you took a vacation and time for recreation.



8 What Remains?

Leader preparation: Read the poem by Rabbi Harold Schulweis on Attachment: Activity 8. Consider the various ways in which people in your setting are able and limited. When we face our limitations and realize that for whatever reason we may not overcome a limitation, the work of succeeding “in spite of” begins.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- “Playing with Three Strings,” Attachment: Activity 8
- (optional) vase of flowers

Invite someone to read Nehemiah 8. Share the reading about Yitzhak Perlman. Consider the following questions as a group:

- What made the people weep in Nehemiah?
- What made Yitzhak Perlman not weep or leave the stage when the string on his violin broke?
- How do we keep our faith in challenging times?
- What makes us weep in joyous or stressful times?
- How would you describe the beauty in being strong?
- In what ways has scripture sustained you in times of joy and sorrow?
- How does surrounding yourself with beauty ease the stresses of life?

9 Don't Let the Light Go Out

Leader preparation: Familiarize yourself with the song “Light One Candle” by Peter Yarrow. Read Luke 9:28–36. Consider the image of a person lighting a candle. Remember that light increases as the flame is passed to the unlit candle.

Supplies:

- computer with Internet access and projector
- song: “Light One Candle” by Peter Yarrow, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3yZ1zxtbOJE>
- candles and candleholders (or shallow dish containing sand in which to place candles)
- matches or lighter
- Bible

Set candles in holders (or in a shallow dish that contains sand). Listen to the song “Light One Candle” together and invite people to join in the singing.

Read Luke 9:28–36. If you are using this in the context of worship or a children’s worship, consider a message on light in the darkness or Jesus being the light of the world.

Invite those who wish to light a candle to come forward. Ask them to share brief stories of how faith in Christ has brought light to their lives. Continue until all who wish to participate have done so.

Then share the message that one candle alone is a small light. Show how when one candle lights another, the light increases as the candle takes its light from another. We can learn from observing the light and the beauty of the candles as they stand together. Each candle represents a testimony. Each flame reminds us that we are not alone; rather, we light the way for each other on our faith journeys.

You might use the Chinese proverb, “It is better to try to light a candle than to curse the dark,” or the quote from Father James Keller, “A candle loses nothing by lighting another candle.

Prayer: God of morning and evening, God of light and dark, as we light these candles, may we see the beauty of our congregation reflected in their light. May the candlelight remind us that together we are more than we might be alone. Together we place our faith in you and thank you for the beauty of the flame.

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Following the Church Year

Images of light and shadow are prevalent in this Exploration. The Transfiguration provides a powerful image of light and transformation. Over the course of the liturgical year, think of places in the Bible where you find images of light. What does light indicate? Power? Goodness? Right? Might? Love? What does shadow indicate? Evil? Sadness? Loss? In each of these images, can you find beauty? Why or why not?

Plan for ways to include both light and shadow throughout your services of worship. Introduce people to the comfort and tranquility of dark and the joy and release of light. Remember, however, that some prefer to keep hidden in the dark rather than to be exposed in the light.

Attachment: Activity 8

Playing with Three Strings
by Rabbi M Harold Schulweis

We have seen Yitzhak Perlman
Who walks the stage with braces on both legs,
On two crutches.

He takes his seat, unhinges the clasps of his legs,
Tucking one leg back, extending the other,
Laying down his crutches, placing the violin under his chin.

On one occasion one of his violin strings broke.
The audience grew silent but the violinist did not leave the stage.
He signaled the maestro, and the orchestra began its part.
The violinist played with power and intensity on only three strings.

With three strings, he modulated, changed and
Recomposed the piece in his head
He retuned the strings to get different sounds,
Turned them upward and downward.

The audience screamed delight,
Applauded their appreciation.
Asked later how he had accomplished this feat,
The violinist answered
It is my task to make music with what remains.

A legacy mightier than a concert.
Make music with what remains.
Complete the song left for us to sing,
Transcend the loss,
Play it out with heart, soul, and might
With all remaining strength within us.

Used by permission of Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis, Valley Beth Shalom, Encino, California..

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Discipleship

About this Setting

Discipleship is foundational to our faith. The stories of Jesus and the disciples instruct us about living a faith-filled life. How it plays out over and over through ages, centuries, languages, customs, and traditions may change and enrich us, but the stories of teacher and God, disciples learning, growing, taking faltering but steady steps toward a mature faith that shares and expands are the basis of who we are as Christians.

About this Exploration

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

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

Leader Preparation

Read the Bible focus passages. As you reflect on the Exodus passage, think about times your congregation has been remodeled or refurbished. Did you replace the carpet, paint the walls, hang new banners, build an addition? What kind of dedication service did you have? What gifts did the congregation contribute to the effort? As you think about Saul's transformation, reflect on the members of your congregation. Consider the transformations you have observed: children maturing into young adults; people being baptized, married, or buried; an absent member returning; a healthy person dealing with a deadly disease. How have you helped the congregation see God in the midst of these changes? When have you or someone else in the congregation been in the role of Ananias?

Prayer: Inspiring God, you meet us along the road to Emmaus and walk with us faithfully through blinding light and darkest night. Help me serve you. May I find you in the little children who come to church. God of love and light, God of salvation and redemption, may those who need to hear your words find them in our liturgy. Let us be the Ananias to the wounded. There are no hands and feet but ours. Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 Shades of Gray (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read the discussion questions. Consider your orientation to life. Do you tend to see issues in terms of black and white? Where is there room for gray areas? Some people consider gray to be a dreary color. What beauty can you find in gray?

Supplies:

- paper
- paints, crayons, colored pencils, or other drawing or painting supplies in black, white, and gray

Invite people to consider the topic of discipleship. To what clear-cut moral rules do they hold? What areas seem more gray than black and white? Encourage people to depict their view of discipleship by sketching with the black, white, and gray colors. Perhaps they want to portray someone acting out discipleship or sketch a symbol of discipleship. Abstract drawings are fine, as are realistic scenes or images.

2 Join The Parade!

Leader preparation: Familiarize yourself with the artwork “Guatemala: Procession.” Take or find pictures of church members.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Guatemala: Procession” by Betty LaDuke,
- https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1004323110?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=15626&store_id=1401
- digital camera and printer, or old pictures from church events
- scissors
- glue
- poster board
- magazines

This activity could be part of an adult education hour, an intergenerational activity, or a “welcome back from summer” activity. It is meant to help think about the beauty and diversity of community. Invite participants to look at the artwork, and ask for observations about it.

- What do you see in the community portrayed in “Guatemala Procession”?
- What makes it vibrant?
- What makes your church community vibrant? What elements of worship add beauty to your church?
- What images in this print suggest discipleship to you?

Using the materials provided, invite participants to work in groups or on their own to create their own collaged picture of your church community in the style of “Guatemala Procession.” If you are unable to provide actual pictures from your faith community, invite people to sketch or draw pictures. Stick figures are allowed!

3 Hands to Work and Hearts to God

Leader preparation: The Shakers are credited with the saying “Hands to work, hearts to God.” If you want to learn about the Shakers, view the documentary by Ken Burns at <http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/shakers/>.

This activity uses the saying for a banner or mural that will provide a good visual understanding of putting your hands together. Discipleship requires that everyone lend a hand.

Supplies:

- paper (strong, if possible)
- muslin fabric
- pencils for light tracing
- markers, regular or fabric

Firmly tape the paper or fabric to a wall or table. You will need to make sure it stays flat and fixed to a surface so that members can add their hands to the mural you are making. Make a heart shape with handprints. Start at one end of the heart and ask members to first trace their hands in pencil and then color the outlines of their hands with markers. Ask members to place their hands next to each other so that they touch. (They could place their hands in a spiral from one end of the banner to the other.)

Hang this banner for everyone to see. This activity is a great way to build community, get to know one another, involve generations, and recognize that it takes everyone to make a church. All hands are needed!

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 New Names (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Acts 9:1–6 and Acts 9:17–20. Consider the beauty in Saul’s transformation.

Supplies:

- Bibles

Read Acts 9:1–6. In this passage, Saul gets a chance to understand his actions through Jesus’ eyes. Jesus asks Saul why Saul is persecuting him. Discuss the questions of discipleship that the story raises.

- What emotions might Jesus’ question to Saul have raised in him?
- Up until that question was posed, do you think Saul thought of his actions in this light? Why or why not?
- Saul makes a radical change in his life, reversing his earlier position and even taking on a new name. When have you observed a radical change for the better in people because they decided to follow Jesus?
- Imagine that Saul had a nickname. What might it have been? What name would you give him after he decided to become a disciple of Jesus?

5 Where Two or Three Are Gathered

Leader preparation: Read the following meditation. You can share it as is or customize it to your church setting.

Supplies:

- Bible

Read Acts 9:17–20. Paul’s conversion story was dramatic. He was blinded and led to Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and didn’t eat or drink. Ananias, following direction from a vision, went to where Saul was staying. As he placed his hands on Saul’s eyes, Saul regained his sight. He ate and regained his strength. He visited with disciples, and then he began to preach about Jesus.

We know two names from this story. But there are others who are part of the story. Some people cooked food. Someone’s house provided shelter for Saul. Someone performed Paul’s baptism, and almost certainly others witnessed it.

Each week we worship just as countless others do. We sing and pray and pass the peace of Christ. We hold meetings. We are able to do that because somebody came ahead of us and unlocked the door and turned up the heat or turned on the air-conditioning. Before those folks came, someone else cleaned and set out chairs. Someone printed the bulletin or mowed the lawn.

Much like the headlines, we tend to focus on the major players—celebrities and people who get the leading parts in the plays. But we also need to recognize the people who might make never make the headlines or try out for anything. Where we would be without the folks who set up things? The people who are happy creating beauty for others? Ponder the many ways people act out their discipleship.

6 Prophetic Voices

Leader preparation: Listen to the song “The Sound of Silence” by Simon and Garfunkel. Consider the words in the context of discipleship. Read Exodus 35:20–29. Could graffiti and other artwork be considered as offerings to God?

Supplies:

- computer with Internet access
- song: “The Sound of Silence” by Simon and Garfunkel, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BvsX03LOMhI&feature=related>
- butcher or easel paper
- crayons, colored pencils, or pastels
- (optional) projector

Ask someone to read Exodus 35:20–29. Briefly note the offerings brought by the people.

Play the song “The Sound of Silence.” Note that Simon and Garfunkel wrote about prophetic words being found in unexpected places such as subway walls and tenement halls. Ask whether those lyrics were true in the 1960s. Are they true today?

The people in Exodus bring sacred offerings of gold and jewels and cloth. Point out that we can respond to God with art. Ask people to create a praise graffiti mural. People will choose a word or image that speaks to them of discipleship and beauty (such as the image of a footprint or a cross or the words “follow” or

“faithful.”) They will sketch these on the paper to form a graffiti wall that represents the group’s perspective of discipleship.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Follow Me? (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Think of people whose lives you want to emulate. What makes them attractive to you? What values do they live by?

Supplies: None

Ask your group to divide into pairs and sit in rows so that one row of people faces away from the rest of the group. These people will be given verbal instructions and asked to make the motions being described. The others will be the coaches who are talking their partners through the actions. The object of the game is to see how quickly the listeners are able to complete the motions correctly. Remember, no peeking!

Make a motion, and ask the coaches to observe it. Pretend, for example, that you are casting a fishing line or taking a slap shot or sewing a piece of cloth by hand. Choose an action you think members of your group might know.

Now the coaches will give their instructions to their partners. Once someone copies the motion correctly or guesses what the activity is (by whispering it to a coach), that person may stop. Once the group has finished, demonstrate the activity for all to see. Have everyone copy it.

Repeat the process with the roles reversed: coaches will become listeners and vice versa. Then discuss the difference between following what someone says and emulating someone’s actions. What implications does this simple activity have for discipleship? What beauty did you observe in this process?



8 Help Me See

Leader preparation: Read Acts 9:17–20. Saul’s eyes were blinded after his encounter on the Damascus road. Paradoxically, his spiritual eyes were about to be opened! This exercise invites people to consider parallels between physical and spiritual blindness.

Obtain a copy of the artwork “Guatemala Procession” by Betty LaDuke, or make arrangements to view it.

Supplies:

- black construction paper
- strips of waxed paper
- artwork: “Guatemala Procession” by Betty LaDuke, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1004323110?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=15626&store_id=1401
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projector

Pass out black construction paper and wax paper strips to everyone. Ask all to hold up the black construction paper in front of their eyes. Display the art piece, but ask people to keep the paper in front of their eyes. Invite them to picture a procession. What do they imagine it looks like? How many people are in it? Which way are the people heading? What colors do they “see”?

Now invite people to swap out the construction paper with the wax paper. As they view the artwork through the wax paper, what do they see? How does it differ from what they pictured when their vision was blocked by the black paper?

Now ask people to remove the wax paper. What details do they notice right away? What colors and shapes stand out? How does the artwork differ from their expectations?

Read aloud Acts 9:17–20. Encourage people to comment on parallels they see between the activity and Saul’s experience.

9 Simple Beauty

Leader preparation: Listen to the song and consider the words. You could play this video for your Bible study group.

Supplies:

- computer with Internet access
- projector if needed
- song: “Beauty of Simplicity,” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8zKh3mpIvIU&feature=player_embedded

Listen to the song “Beauty of Simplicity.” As the group is able and willing, join in singing the chorus. You might display the words on the screen. The text is simple. Lead a discussion based on the following questions:

- How does the repetition in this song speak to you of the rhythms of discipleship?
- The pictures in the song reflect the beauty found all around us. Is beauty simple or complex?
- How do you experience the Holy Spirit?
- What are some of the simplest acts you perform during a regular day? How can you become more conscious of yourself as a disciple during even these ordinary times?

Following the Church Year

St. Benedict talked about practicing the presence of God. The Benedictines are some of the earliest monks who sought to offer hospitality to others. In what simple ways does your church encourage people to practice discipleship? How can you encourage members to practice remembering the presence of God in their everyday lives? How do devotional practices create beauty? Perhaps you would like to form a group that focuses on discipleship.

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Christian Tradition

About this Setting

Tradition is the heart of this Exploration. The earliest Christian liturgies included chant. Many of us are familiar with the phrase "With a song in your heart." Music is a vital part of church. Balancing old favorites with what others consider to be newer, less well-known hymns or praise music can be a challenge for some. For others, guitars and rock music on Sunday are part of church. We accompany one another as we journey together and hold sacred our Christian tradition. Blending and merging traditions helps us create new ones.

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

Read Psalm 8 and John 12:1–8, focusing on ways to connect with God’s beauty. Imagine a scene of beauty where children and adults of all different backgrounds are worshipping and praising God together. Imagine phrases such as “that’s not appropriate for worship” being absent from every time of worship. Imagine being able to bound around the worship area with an excitement and an expectation of something wonderful arriving. How will encouraging others to search for and see beauty help you worship together?

Prayer: *Holy God, as I prepare for worship I pray to feel the presence of religious forebears whose teachings and sacrifices enrich my life today. Make me a care-full listener that I might respond to those who need me to hear their concerns. Help me to stand as a witness to injustice, poverty, and inequality the way that Jesus did with gentleness, yet with strength. May I find the words that need to be said, and yet may I not say more than is required. At day’s end may the sleep I find give me strength for tomorrow’s journey. Amen.*

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Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Fashioned by God (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Psalm 8. It depicts people as fashioned by a majestic God and as set apart in creation, crowned with glory and honor. Consider the roles you fill. How do these responsibilities reflect the glory of God?

Supplies:

- Bibles

Invite the group to read Psalm 8 together, one half reading the even-numbered verses and the other half reading the odd-numbered ones. Briefly discuss the ways that humans are depicted in Psalm 8.

Ask people to pair up. Invite them to discuss their various roles in life. Each pair will reflect on the various important roles they fill. One person will ask the other, “Who are you?” The responder will answer by naming a personal quality or role. (For example, “I am a daughter. I am a lawyer. I am organized.”) Encourage people to name at least five “beautiful” aspects of themselves. (For example, “I am a loved child of God; I am a loyal friend.”)

Partners will alternate asking each other questions.



2 Daughters and Sons

Leader preparation: Watch the video of Judy Collins singing the song “Sons Of” by Jacques Brel, translated by Blau and Shuman.

Supplies:

- computer with Internet access and projector
- song: “Sons Of” by Jacques Brel, sung by Judy Collins, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B1HQdjt85wU&feature=related>
- 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

Display the artwork and play the song “Sons Of” from the YouTube link. Invite comments on the connection between the print and the song. *What themes do they share? How are they different?*

Consider the traditions your faith community maintains to celebrate children and parents. In what ways have these traditions changed over the years? *What beauty do you find in them? When have you experienced the church as a caring parent, as depicted in the print?*

Offer the following or a similar prayer: *Mother Father God, God of sleepless nights, of newborn cries and lullabies, God of baby ways and endless days that somehow turn toddlers into sons and daughters right before our eyes! Make us worthy of these precious children . . . They are the future, God, and yet they offer us a glimpse of who we once were if only we would pay attention to that childlike self inside of us, that waits, that clamors still to get out. O God of amazing graces, let us be surprised by your beautiful gift to us; this Life, this Holy treasure that renders us speechless, this allotted time we have to live. Let us be mindful of these precious children, God. They look to us, they count on us, and wherever they may be you are there. We are there. Let us be your hands and feet, your*

words, your teachings, the embodiment of gracious spirit in this restless world. We pray that we may be mothers and fathers to those who need your loving touch. May we offer half as much as we receive from you. Amen.

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③ Praying Out Loud

Leader preparation: Select several prayers or calls to worship that your community holds dear. They are probably the prayers you use most frequently. Check out your congregation hymnal for prayers. Also, look through old bulletins to find prayers.

Supplies:

- prayers important to your church setting
- prayer books or copies of prayers for bulletin

“Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective” (James 5:16).

Invite members of the congregation to provide prayers that are special to them. These may be bedtime prayers, morning prayers, mealtime prayers, or childhood prayers. Have them describe some of their family traditions of prayer.

In addition to the prayers they provide, select several others used in worship. These might include the Prayer of Jesus, the doxology, the Gloria Patri, or a repeated benediction. Other familiar prayers to consider are the Serenity Prayer, the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi, or the traditional Irish blessing. After you’ve chosen three or four prayers, you are ready to begin. Rotate the prayers into your bulletin or newsletter so those who been away or are unable to attend can participate. Include an explanation of what is happening. Share the prayer project in a newsletter, or post it on your church website.

Ask your whole community to pray the weekly prayer together at prayer time in church. Commit to do so together for however long a prayer stays in rotation. Encourage people to set a time during each day when they pray the prayer at home.

The act of focusing on a prayer together reminds members of the promise we make to our past, present, and future as God’s faithful people. There is beauty in the unspoken connections we create by silently holding one another in thought and prayer. Although a week or more may pass before church members see one another, the community remains tightly knit when praying for one another. If you wish, commit to praying for someone or something together as well. Then leave results in God’s hands.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



④ A Prayer for You! (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: As you prepare for communion, think about the words “This is my body, broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” Read the following brief reflection. If you are the one who serves communion, this message is for you and for your congregation. If you are a lay leader preparing

communion, this message is for you, too. Thank you for your work on behalf of all who receive communion. If you are reading this guide to learn and grow, this message is for you as well.

Supplies: None

Read the following reflection as a sermon-starter.

We come together on Communion Sunday to eat and drink in remembrance of our Savior. We hold this tradition as one of the most precious in our faith. It is a ritual open to each of us. We learn of the beauty in being broken and the beauty in sacrifice. If I serve only one of you, food becomes about hunger and the life, and the communion ritual seems to lose its meaning. If I drink all the wine, there is none for you. If only some of you eat the bread, choosing not to share with everyone, there may be none for me. Jesus fed thousands on very little and miraculously turned water into wine. When we are gathered in his name, the act of eating becomes holy.

At each communion we remember. We reenact not just the story of the Last Supper, but the story of our own religious history and the stories of those sitting next to us in the pews. As we remember, we preserve and restore the reasons for our faith. We become one, as in Second person plural You. This is my body, broken for YOU. May it always be so. Amen.

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5 Hymn Sing

Leader preparation: Singing together is a cherished Christian tradition. St. Augustine said that when one sings, one prays twice. In your church bulletin and perhaps during church by way of a clip board or sign-up sheet, ask for congregational input on favorite hymns and/or praise songs at your church. When you have a list, choose three to six, depending on the length and structure of your service. You could choose to have an all-music service. Or, you could choose fewer hymns and offer background information on each one. There are resources available that can assist you in preparing a message around the stories of particular hymn writers.

Another way to approach this type of service and involve laity would be to ask for members who've suggested certain hymns to share what a hymn means to them and how it has helped them on their faith journey. Then, at your service, SING!

Supplies:

- hymnals of your choice
- (optional) background information on hymns, see Hymnody, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hymn>
- (optional) pictures of your congregation from the past

After you have chosen the hymns and decided how you want to construct the service, consider displaying pictures of your congregation from the past, particularly of people singing.

6 Anointing

Leader preparation: Read John 12:1–8. Either locate some anointing oil, or fill a bowl with some water.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- (optional) anointing oil or bowl of water

Ask for volunteers to read John 12:1–8. One person may read the part of Judas, another the part of Jesus, and someone else the narration. Ponder some of the following questions, either as the basis for a meditation or in a small-group discussion:

- Mary’s act was outrageously generous and personal. Nard was costly. The scent of the perfume filled the room. When have you observed an act of devotion so lovely that its effects lingered like expensive perfume?
- Anointing is an ancient Christian tradition. We anoint people to pray for them and to set them apart for special tasks. Jesus receives this gift. When have you received the prayer and support of the gathered faith community? For what are you praying? How would you like to be set apart to do God’s will?

Option: If you are in a small group, take turns dipping a finger into oil or water and making a simple cross on the hand of the person next to you. Alternatively, invite people to receive anointing oil as part of a worship service.

Sending & Serving Activities

7 Be Still (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Psalm 46:10 instructs, “Be still and know that I am God.” In John 12:1–8 Jesus sits patiently as Mary cares for him. He does not focus on what lies ahead. He lives in the moment, knowing that trying days are coming. If we can practice inviting the presence of God into our lives, then we, too, might live with more peace.

The tradition of prayerful silence is a remedy for our overstressed lives. Praying Psalm 46:10 in the following way may help both leader and congregants focus on the beauty of the here and now. Practice saying it as follows, and then teach it during prayer time or in a study group.

Supplies:

- Bibles

Read aloud Psalm 46:10 prayerfully and quietly. Invite people to sit comfortably with eyes closed. They will repeat each line after you and then pause for a few minutes of silence.

Be still and know that I am God.
 Be still and know that I am.
 Be still and know.
 Be still.
 Be.

Repeat this meditation once more.



8 Church Record

Leader preparation: Consider this project as part of a church membership class, confirmation project, or a wider intergenerational church activity. Whether you are serving a long or short pastorate, whether you are a lay leader or a music director, determine who keeps the records of your worship.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- If someone new had to step in to lead, could he or she do so easily? What records or resources would be of help?
- What are some of your congregation's most loved traditions, music, art, and stories? Who holds them? What is the beauty in them that makes them beloved? Who has recorded them? How are they kept?

If and how you decide to keep these sacred records will be an individual matter. View the print "Caresse Maternelle (Mother and Child)" by Mary Stevenson Cassatt. Remember that just as a mother holds her baby close, she cannot keep her baby safe forever. In other words, it is helpful to churches to have a record book or memory book of standard songs, hymns, prayers, and so on. Such records can ease transitions and provide valuable information about the faith community.

Consider this to be an activity that will bring members closer together and help them understand their mission and context. Record-keeping need not be considered dull. Whoever keeps the records of the church also holds the collective memory, and therefore the beauty treasured by many.

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
- notebook or scrapbook
- copies of prayers
- copies or lists of hymns and numbers from the hymnals
- other important documents, such as a covenant statement or statement of faith or charter
- (optional) items people want to contribute to the project

This activity might be the function of a board or council, but could also be an occasion for celebration of history and reminiscing. It could be done at meetings that are social in nature alongside a potluck or other event with food. Notice the enjoyment there is in creating a time of ritual for others and leaving a beautiful record in written and picture form for current and future members of the community. Traditions are found in every faith, and people count on them. Creating this book with others also creates a strong bond among those who participate.

If people have gathered items, invite them to set them out. Encourage people to work together to create a memorial for the faith community. Children could color pictures of their favorite church traditions. Adults could produce a scrapbook or mural. Enjoy this time together.



9 Mother and Child

Leader preparation: Locate banners or other display materials that your church uses throughout the year. Arrange for them to be displayed.

Supplies:

- tables
- 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
- banners or display materials used throughout the church year, such as nativity sets
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projection capability

Consider the possibility of an intergenerational event. Invite people to view the ornaments, banners, and other displays used throughout your church year. Ask the children and youth to share what they enjoy about the traditions. *Which ones are especially rich for long-term members of the congregation? Why?* View the print “Caresse Maternelle (Mother and Child).” How is participants’ relationship to the faith community like family connections? What is a new tradition people might like to institute?

Encourage people to mingle and chat as they enjoy the beauty of the traditional elements of your church year.

Following the Church Year

Consider keeping a church calendar of all the activities that occur over the course of the year. Accurate records help ensure the success of your beautiful and beloved traditions and make it easy for someone else to step up to fill the shoes of a predecessor. If treasured recipes are part of a tradition, make sure to have a copy. Write down what worked, what didn’t, what expenses weren’t anticipated and so on. Record-keeping may not seem like an important tradition, but it is a great way to commemorate the activities of your faith community.

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Context and Mission

About this Setting

From the earliest passages in Genesis, we read of a creative God. We are made in the image of God, so God wants us to be creative, too. In context and mission, we are invited to innovate, bringing beauty about in ritual, art, story, and song. As we find beauty in the good and challenging times, we are challenged to offer beauty to others.

About this Exploration

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

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

Leader Preparation

Read the Bible Focus Passages, focusing on what they say or imply about experiencing beauty. What is it about worship that feels beautiful to you? Would you have that same response if you were in a different setting, such as a grand cathedral in Europe or in an African village place of worship or in a house church in China? In what ways does your context reflect the beauty of the global church? How would Christians in a setting different from yours see your church as a place of mission, both to give and to receive gifts of beauty from others?

Prayer: Merciful, Holy, Renewing God, in serving your people, may I serve you. May I remember that there is a time for everything under the sun. In the work of your Church there is a time for building up the body of Christ. Together my congregation and I go out among the people to feed the hungry, to provide care to those in need, to offer assistance as you would have us. We find you walking with us. We long to bring assurance and to share the blessings we have received because you love us. There is also a time when we tend to the wounded spirits of those who are broken from disease, from hunger, from illness, from loss of home, or job or family members. Lord Jesus, make me worthy to attend to those in need of your spirit. Help me to be a bringer of peace where there is unrest, release where thoughts of rancor hold my people in their

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 Turn, Turn, Turn! (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Ecclesiastes 3:1–13, and watch the following version of the song “Turn, Turn, Turn,” sung by the Byrds. Consider the words of Ecclesiastes as put to music.

Supplies:

- computer and Internet access
- song: “Turn, Turn, Turn” by The Byrds, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WB6jhbtDUZE&NR=1>

Invite congregants to react to the images and the words of the timeless message of Ecclesiastes. If you are in a small group setting, encourage participants to respond by sharing what they found most moving, most beautiful, or most profound about this video.

If you are using the video as a sermon starter, reflect on the “times” various members of the congregation are experiencing. What do they need? How can the faith community support them and bring beauty?

Close with this or a similar prayer: *God of evening and morning, God of light and dark, thank you for the beauty of this earth that is our home and for the promise of your heaven, our home yet to come. We pray that our work today will be worthy in your sight. God of joy and sorrow, God of labor and rest, we pray that we may be your force for love today. Let us work for your good and shine your light. May all know peace in this worn and worried world. May forgiveness reign and discomfort cease. Amen.*

2 Spring Ahead

Leader preparation: Ecclesiastes 3:1–13 speaks of paradox. There is a time for everything. Ponder what “seasons” your individual members are experiencing: childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle age, senior years, and so forth. What season is the faith community in? What season are you in? What beauty have you witnessed in each season of your life?

Supplies:

- computer with Internet access

Lead a group discussion based on the following quotation from the musical *The Fantasticks* by Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt: “There is a curious paradox that no one can explain: who understands the secrets of the reaping of the grain? Who understands why spring is born out of winter’s laboring pain, or why we all must die a bit before we grow again?”

Use the following questions to lead a discussion or as prompts for a sermon.

- How do you respond to the idea that we must “die” a bit in order to grow?
- What changes must take place for growth to occur?
- How does the metaphor of growing relate to our faith?
- What is the natural result of spiritual growth? How does it compare to the process of sowing, reaping, and reseeded?

sway. At day's end may I find my rest in you. Amen.

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3 Visiting Spoon River

Leader preparation: Familiarize yourself with the section on Lucinda Matlock from the book *Spoon River Anthology* by Edgar Lee Masters: http://spoonriveranthology.net/spoon/river/view/Lucinda_Matlock. You can learn more about Edgar Lee Masters and the *Spoon River Anthology* here: <http://spoonriveranthology.net/spoon/river/>

Supplies:

- computer with Internet access
- link to Lucinda Matlock section from the *Spoon River Anthology*

Read the story of Lucinda Matlock. Then read Ecclesiastes 3:1–13. Lead a discussion based on the following questions:

- Does Lucinda find a purpose to everything under heaven?
- How does Lucinda understand her life? Is she a joyous person?
- How does Lucinda find beauty in living?
- Do you think Lucinda's life is like that of a disciple's?
- Does Lucinda give up on living? How does she create beauty in her life? How do you?
- Where does Lucinda find hope in living? Where do you?

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Reconciliation (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Familiarize yourself with the reading. Consider using it as the basis for a message on the calling we have as Christians to work toward reconciliation. You may wish to insert this reading in a Sunday bulletin to be used as an affirmation of faith or a call to prayer. We are part of God's mission to transform this world into the kind of place God intended and Jesus taught us about. In this way, the church provides beauty and hope for our world.

Supplies:

- Bible
- computer with Internet access and projection capability

Leader: Anyone,

People: anyone at all

Leader: who is in Christ

People: is a new creature—

Leader: a brand new creation.

People: Everything old—

Leader: everything—

People: is passed away.

Leader: Have a look!

People: Everything is new—

Leader: transformed.

People: This gift is from God

Leader: who is reconciled with us

People: through Christ.

Leader: God didn't count our wrongdoing and mistakes against us. In Jesus, God was at work

People: making things right.

Leader: Receive this gift.

People: We reach out and take it.

Leader: Spread the word!

People: Be reconciled to God.

5 One Day More

Leader preparation: Ask yourself what makes your heart sing? What is music to you? What is beauty to you? Familiarize yourself with the play *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder. If you wish, read a synopsis of Act 3. Read a copy of the play, paying particular attention to Act 3: http://books.google.com/books?id=8FAt3uPHs-C&pg=PA120&lpg=PA120&dq=our+town+script&source=bl&ots=pOa1YPc4d1&sig=HKs62G06wg5GfArImixvYGfdtDc&hl=en&ei=UkG8TdTeKKrY0QGD rKzoCg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=4&ved=0CD8Q6AEwAw#v=onepage&q=our%20town%20script&f=false.

Supplies:

- *Our Town*, Act 3 by Thornton Wilder, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eLWewZO6z1w>
- computer with Internet access and projector
- (optional) synopsis of Act 3, http://plays.about.com/od/plays/a/ourTown_3.htm

This activity could be used in a group setting or as a part of a church service. You might wish to watch a section of the clip as part of a sermon. Questions for reflection might be:

- What did the meaning of an “ordinary day” seem like before you heard this story? In what way has it changed?
- How do you find beauty in the ordinary? What works against our noticing beauty?
- If you could live one day over, which day would you choose? Why?
- Thinking of the beauty of simple things, such as the perfume in the gospel reading, what do you hold onto, perhaps unnecessarily? What could you share more generously?

6 The Waters

Leader preparation: View the artwork “Navaro Rapids” by Ando Hiroshige. Review both scripture selections for context and mission, Ecclesiastes 3:1–13 and 2 Corinthians 5:16–20. You could use either scripture for this activity. If you choose the former, you might want to focus on mission in terms of water imagery (for example, baptism, cleansing). If you use the latter, you could focus the discussion on making all things new as written in the passage. What images does this concept evoke? Does the picture bring images of the cleansing and renewing waters of baptism to mind? How are these waters beautiful?

Supplies:

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

Display the print “Navaro Rapids” by Ando Hiroshige. Invite people to consider the following questions as you contemplate the print together.

- How would you describe the seas in this picture: raging or calm? How do you know?

- When the seas in your own life are stormy, where do you look for support?
- Imagine Jesus walking on the water. Where would he be in this artwork?
- When people speak of not stirring the waters or muddying the waters, what do they mean? How does this saying relate to faith?
- Water is associated with baptism and purity. What other religious images are related to water?
- When have you experienced “stormy waters”? What can bring beauty during times of trial?

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Psalm of Gratitude for Disconnected Souls (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: This psalm can be used as a closing prayer. It is appropriate for a service that reflects on the pressures of our modern contexts, with over-worked people who have too many choices and commitments.

Supplies: None

Read the psalm below, either alone or in unison. If it is used as a beginning point for discussion, consider the following questions.

- When do you notice God in your midst?
- When you feel separated from God, how do you re-connect?
- Does finding beauty in nature connect you to God?
- Where else in your world do you find beauty?
- What enables you to slow down and appreciate the beauty that is all around you?

Psalm of Gratitude and Connection

You, O great Creator, are the timeless and generous provider of and for all life.
 I am a consumer, overwhelmed by the great and sensual feast you offer me.
 I seek you everywhere in arts, movies, books, shops of all kinds.
 I cannot get enough, and I can't hold it all in.
 The more I seek, the farther I move from you.
 The more I consume, the greater I hunger for you.
 The pain and folly of my desperation takes me further away,
 Depressing my spirit, breaking my heart in times such as these
 that feed my senses, starve my soul and separate me from you.
 At Day's end you cause the sun to set.
 You light the Sky as color permeates my being—
 Vivid blue, transformative violet, shocking pink and fiery orange.
 You appear to me covering our world with your daily artistic banquet.
 Amazed and thankful I want no longer. I take it in.
 O granter of my days, my heart fills with gratitude to you for
 this moment of stillness, this time of togetherness with you.
 The heavens your glory, the stars my guide. My search ends when I am still.
 My life fills when I look up and find you there, as it was ever. Thanks be.

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8 Count the Ways

Leader preparation: The song “May I Suggest” by Susan Werner invites us to consider the many ways in which beauty permeates our senses and our lives. Werner offers us time to consider the ways our lives are filled with much abundance. Listen to the song.

Supplies:

- song: “May I Suggest” by Susan Werner, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UdPh4MpxwJo>; lyrics <http://www.lyrics.com/artists/lyric/red-molly-lyrics-may-i-suggest>
- computer with Internet access and projector
- paper
- pens or pencils

Use the song as a benediction or the basis of a sermon. It could also be useful as a part of a stewardship campaign. If you prefer to use it in the context of a discussion, invite members of the group to share the ways in which they feel blessed. Ask someone to keep a running list. Consider sharing the list or posting it in church and asking people to add to it. Counting our blessings reminds us of the beauty in loving and being loved.

9 Flourishing

Leader preparation: If you are not familiar with it, learn or ask your music minister to learn the song “In the Bulb There Is a Flower,” by Natalie Sleeth (tune: Promise). You may wish to decorate the altar with flowers, a bag of flower bulbs, apples, a package of seeds, or images of cocoons and butterflies. The song reminds us that in each season of life there is potential for beauty.

One option is to ask people to participate by bringing the altar decorations up to the altar as each item is mentioned in the song. Perhaps children could bring up the elements as the video clip played.

Supplies:

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

Show the YouTube of the song “In the Bulb There Is a Flower.” This hymn is a wonderful way to welcome the change of winter to spring or to celebrate Easter. It could also be used at a baptism or a confirmation as a way of affirming the mission of the church. In each of us there is a possibility to become more beautiful and to flourish. We can nurture one another as we grow and blossom in faith.

Following the Church Year

Review membership rolls from the past several years. Who has been part of the church’s context? Remember the contributions these people have made to your community. Consider a graveyard walk if you have a graveyard nearby or attached to your church. Honor the history of your local church.

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Future and Vision

About this Setting

The future, unknown to us, is a dream. Dreaming allows us to see the future as we hope and pray it might be. In our plans for the future, God accompanies us. We are never alone, even though the future may cause concern or doubt. We can move confidently into the future with God and our faith community. Thanks be to God.

About this Exploration

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

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Job 38:1-11
Revelation 21:2-5

Leader Preparation

The activities for this Exploration make use of artwork and music. Make arrangements to obtain these resources before you begin the session. If there are questions you plan to pose to the group, take time to reflect on those for yourself.

Where do you see yourself in the next few years? What do you hope to accomplish toward fulfilling God's calling in your life? How do you plan to discern this? Creating a bucket list (those things you want to do before you die) helps you step back and take time for things you enjoy in life, to experience beauty in the every day. What would you put on your personal bucket list? What would you put on a bucket list for the church to encourage experiences of beauty?

Prayer: Merciful God, we know you are slow to anger and abounding in love, and yet at times it seems as though the trials of the future cloud our vision and leave us shaken and wondering where you are. Help us to find Job's patience as unsettling times assail us. When changing winds prevail, let us stand with faith unwavering, because we face the future with you never far from sight. Amen.

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Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Postures of Beauty (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Think about when God has shown up for you in unexpected places. Have you sometimes seen God despite challenges or because of challenges?

Supplies: None

Ask people to break into pairs. One person will act as a sculptor and the other will be the "clay." By gently sweeping a hand—without touching him or her—the sculptors will position their partners into postures that represent the first word in the following list: rejoice, sing, life, new, bride, trustworthy. Ask partners to change places before you read the next word.

Read Revelation 21:2-5. Discuss how these postures affect people's experiences of the text. How does this passage shape their expectations for the future?

2 Material World

Leader preparation: *Material World* is a book by Peter Menzel that explores the people of the world and what they own. The subjects of the photographs in *Material World* were all asked to pose with their possessions in or outside their home. Familiarize yourself with the book, or search out images on the website.

Supplies:

- book: *Material World* by Peter Menzel, http://menzelphoto.peripix.com/groupsearch/?searchtxt=Material+World&order=inserit_date&date_how=+%3D+
- computer with Internet access and projector

Lead a discussion based on the following questions:

- What differences do you notice about the families?
- What possessions are common to most families?
- What possessions stood out to you? Why?
- Look at the expressions on the faces of the people. Which faces reflect beauty to you?
- What possessions would you be willing to give up?
- Reflect on the future. If you had to leave your home with only a box full of items, what would you take?



3 God in the Wind

Leader preparation: Read Job 38:1–11. Consider using this passage and the artwork “Wind from the Sea” by Andrew Wyeth as the focus of a sermon.

Supplies:

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

In Job 38:1–11 we read that God comes to Job in a whirlwind. The image in “Wind from the Sea” shows an open window with wind blowing the sheer curtain. Some possible ideas for sermons or discussions are listed below.

- Does the picture show a breeze or a storm coming? In which do you find more beauty? Why?
- Why do you think the colors in the art are muted?
- God is sometimes portrayed in scripture as coming in a wind. God speaks to Job from a whirlwind in Job 38:1. Have you ever felt like God came to you on a “whirlwind” or a “breeze”?
- Has it ever seemed like God needs the whirlwind to get your attention?
- Many of us know the expression “the calm before the storm.” When you look at this print, do you see calm, or do you see storm? When you contemplate the future, do you picture storm or calm?
- Have you observed beauty in a storm, either physically or metaphorically? How have stormy times have strengthened or challenged your faith?

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Prayer for the Future (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read the excerpt from the poem below, and consider the accompanying questions before you present it to your group.

Supplies: None

Read the poem for the group. Invite them to close their eyes and listen for images.

Prayer for the Future

Future God. Take us to beauty. Take us to plenty. Take us to future.

Let it be a time of joy when those who have too much money will share with the farmer who struggles to maintain the land that feeds us.

Let us live to see a time of rejoicing when governments turn their swords into plowshares and spend their wealth on cures and not weapons.

Let us live to see beauty in order and harmony when each person has what she needs and no child goes hungry. . . .

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Lead discussion using the following questions:

- In what ways is beauty connected with order and harmony?
- How do we look to God in a world where some have plenty and others do not have enough?
- What does a beautiful future include for you?
- What does it include for your church?
- How can you start to create one?

5 My Lord Did Trouble Me

Leader preparation: Listen to the song “Did Trouble Me.” How does God trouble you in terms of your personal theology? What do you think about the future of Christianity? How can you use your troubles for good?

Supplies:

- computer with Internet access and projector
- song: “Did Trouble Me” by Susan Werner, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=khD2vpOaghE>; lyrics http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/s/susan_werner/did_trouble_me.html
- small stones
- (optional) vase to hold the stones

Read Job 38:1–11. Play the song “Did Trouble Me” by Susan Werner. Offer the following observations and questions. *The book of Job can challenge us to think about the future, evil, change, and loss. When you heard the song “Did Trouble Me,” what issues came to mind? When we are troubled by current situations or fears for the future, where do we find beauty and solace? How can we receive comfort despite trouble?*

Give each person a small stone to hold in one hand. Ask people to meditate on one “trouble” that concerns them as they think of the future. After a suitable time, invite participants to place the stones on the cloth or in the vase as a symbol of releasing this concern to God.

Pray the following or a similar prayer: *God, we present to you our worries. Take them. Exchange them with your peace. Embolden us as we look to the future, and wrap us in your comfort. Amen.*



6 Behold God

Leader preparation: Prepare to display the artwork. If you were to find a metaphor for your faith experiences, what would it be? Would you describe the Spirit as accompanying you like the wind? Would you speak of a journey?

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>
- 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
- heavy paper or card stock
- colored pencils, pencils, or pastels

Display the two art pieces, ideally at the same time. Ask the group to ponder the

two pieces through the lens of faith. What metaphors or symbols do they see? How is God's leading like the wind? How is their faith story like a journey? Invite people to consider their own faith experiences. What comparisons make sense to them? A birth, a rebirth, a return home, a garden?

Encourage people to draw simple sketches of symbols that connect with their faith experiences. They may take the cards home and set them out as reminders of God's work in their lives.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Promises (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Revelation 21:2–5. Notice the imagery of bride and groom. Think about the weddings you have attended or officiated. What do you find beautiful about wedding vows?

This activity is suited to a group, but could be suggested as an individual exercise in a church newsletter or publication.

Supplies:

- Bible
- paper
- pencils

Ask someone in the group to read Revelation 21:2–5. Focus on the image of the bride and groom. Ask participants to reflect on some of the most beautiful aspects of weddings they have witnessed. What beauty have they noticed in other sorts of commitment ceremonies such as ordinations, reaffirmation of vows, induction into the military, an installation of a public official, the inauguration of a president? Invite people to share one word that comes to mind when they think of beautiful covenants.

If they were going to write a vow to God, similar to a wedding vow, what would they promise? Encourage participants to complete the following sentence starters on paper as they ponder this question:

- I feel confident in promising . . .
- Values I hold to be important in my relationship with God and others are . . .
- A promise I believe God makes to me is . . .
- Looking to the future, I hope . . .

8 Conversations

Leader preparation: Read Job 38:1–11 and Job 42:1–6. View the video noted in Supplies. What words and images stand out to you? How does focusing on the wonder of creation influence your perspective of the future?

Supplies:

- Bibles
- computer with Internet access and projector
- poem "The Creation" by James Weldon Johnson, recited by Wintley Phipps, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C-h4_VPXdoY&feature=related

Read Job 38:1–11. Ask people to reflect quietly on questions they have for God when they ponder the future.

God refers to creation in answer to Job. Listen to Wintley Phipps performing James Weldon Johnson’s classic poem, “The Creation.” Ask people to share the images and words that most affected them.

Read Job 42:1–6. Ask: *How do you respond to Job’s reply? What impact might pondering the wonder of nature have on our views of ourselves and the future?*

9 The Future is Love

Leader preparation: Familiarize yourself with the song “If We Only Have Love” by Jacques Brel.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- computer with Internet access and projector
- link to “If We Only Have Love” by Jacque Brel, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZFiXNBKyk7k&feature=related>; lyrics, <http://www.lyricspond.com/artist-jacques-brel/lyrics-if-we-only-had-love>

Play the song and share the lyrics with your church as part of a service or as a group activity. Read Revelation 21:2–5.

Consider the song in the context of the passage from Revelation. Ask the following questions as preparation for a sermon or as part of a group study.

- What images in this song do you find beautiful?
- How does this song encourage you as you contemplate the future? How does it challenge you?
- What effect does love have on the future according to this song?
- Is love enough to transform us or the world?
- How has God transformed your life? How can the transformed community of faith transform the future?

Give examples of small or large ways in which followers of Jesus have changed the future.

Following the Church Year

Consider designating an area of your church to hold a seasonal or otherwise-themed art display. You might focus the space on Bible passages. In keeping with the theme of future and vision, people could create art or written work on the theme of “Working for a Beautiful Future.” Families could take turns creating the display, as could various groups within the church. A display can serve as an excellent way for newcomers to become acquainted with longstanding members. It can help seasoned church adherents to become better known to one another as well.