

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Discovery

About this Age Group

Young adults are entering adult life amid concerns about the environment, the global economy, and armed conflict around the world. The wired world they inhabit instantly connects them not only to their friends and family, but to news of disaster and destruction. They are immersed in a culture of mass marketing and overconsumption. It may be important to help them reflect on and distinguish between beauty as a faith practice and beauty as seen through the eyes of consumer culture. Is a song beautiful or popular because it has been marketed? Is a body only beautiful when it conforms to consumer culture's standards of thinness, youth, color, health, wealth, and social status? This Exploration is an opportunity to become open to conceptions of beauty that challenge popular culture. Young adults are invited to experiences that connect them to the beautiful holiness in all of life.

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

Read Matthew 6:24–34. How does this passage connect with your life today? What does it say to you about beauty? Read Genesis 28:10–19a. What images stand out for you from this story? How do you think this story might connect with the lives of young adults in your group? As you prepare to lead this session, choose something that seems beautiful to you—a piece of music, a picture, an object, a view from your window, a yoga pose. Give yourself the gift of beauty. Spend time with this beautiful “something.” Think about what the word “beauty” means to you. How is beauty important in your life? How do you think it is important in the lives of your group members?

Prayer: Holy One, help me to let go of distractions so that I notice beauty all around me. Open me to the beauty around me:

*beauty in the natural world,
 beauty in other people,
 beauty in your word,
 beauty in myself,
 and beauty in the young adults of this group.*

Fill me with deep gratitude this day. Amen.

Session Development

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

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 Experiencing Beauty (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Recall a time when you experienced something beautiful. What sensory details—touch, sight, sound, smell, taste—made this experience memorable?

Supplies:

- Bibles for each person
- pens or pencils
- paper

Distribute paper and pencils. Ask people to think of an experience they have had of encountering beauty. It doesn’t matter what experience each chooses, but it should be one the person is willing to share with others. Ask the group to spend a few minutes in silence recalling the experience, and then to write down some of the rich descriptive detail, paying attention to sensory details—colors, feelings, flavors, sounds, sights, and so forth. They might write in sentences, make lists, or draw a mind map as the ideas come to them.

When people are finished, ask each in turn to briefly describe his or her experience. Some may choose to read aloud what they wrote. Pause between each description, and invite others in the group to comment briefly on something they noticed or particularly appreciated in what they just heard.

Ask questions such as the following: *What is it like to experience beauty? How is beauty important in your life? Why do you think experiencing beauty is an important faith practice for Christians?*

Have someone in the group read aloud Matthew 6:24–34. There may be some in your group who are not familiar with the Bible. If necessary, explain how to locate a Bible passage by book, chapter, and verse. Ask what this text says to participants about beauty.

2 To Marvel at Something

Leader preparation: Because people’s reactions to the movie *Eat Pray Love* are very different, it is probably not helpful to debate the merits of the movie. However, whether or not one likes it, the movie poses interesting questions about life. In the movie the protagonist says that she wants to go some place where she can “marvel at something.” What do you think she means? What have you marveled at recently? Locate the trailer to the movie *Eat Pray Love* from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mjay5vgIwt4>, and arrange for equipment to view it.

Option: You might rent the movie and view the opening scenes with the group.

Supplies:

- computer with Internet connection and projector or large screen for viewing
- Bibles

View the trailer to the movie *Eat Pray Love*. Then discuss the questions that follow.

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at least one from “Sending and Serving.” The first activity in each category is designed for “easy preparation” (able to be done with minimal preparation with supplies normally found at the church). Using all nine activities could take 90–120 minutes.

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

- The protagonist in the movie is Liz Gilbert (played by Julia Roberts). Liz says she has “lost her appetite for life.” What do you think she means? Have you ever felt this way?
- Gilbert says she wants to go someplace where she can “marvel at something.” At what have you marveled in your life?
- Do you think one needs to go somewhere out of the ordinary in order to marvel? Why or why not?
- Gilbert’s character goes to a meditation center in India. While there, someone suggests that she needs to clear out the clutter in her mind in order to “let the universe rush in.” What “clutter” in your life keeps you from truly experiencing and appreciating the beauty and wonder of life?

Invite someone in the group to read aloud Matthew 26:25–34. (If necessary, help group members become familiar with how to locate a passage by book, chapter, and verse.) Discuss the following questions. How does this passage connect with your life? What worries or concerns prevent you from experiencing the beauty and wonder that life has to offer? What is the underlying message of the Matthew text? How does it compare with the perspective and values of the movie *Eat Pray Love*?

Worry Beads

Leader preparation: Make a list of things that you have been worrying about during this past week. Read Matthew 6:24–34. What wisdom do you find in this passage? What helps you to deal with anxieties or worries? Review instructions for making rolled paper beads from http://www.ehow.com/how_6224826_instructions-rolled-paper-bead-jewelry.html or <http://www.wikihow.com/Make-Paper-Beads>. Gather supplies for bead-making, and make a few sample beads.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- glue sticks, one per person
- scissors, one per person
- glossy magazines, wallpaper scraps, origami paper
- thin dowels, knitting needles, crochet hooks, or meat skewers
- cord for stringing beads
- (optional) Mod Podge® or white glue and brushes

Invite the group to talk about how our worries block us from experiencing beauty in the moment. *When has worrying about some future event prevented you from experiencing joy in the present? What are healthy or positive ways that you deal with worries? What are some negative ways? Have you ever tried to stop thinking about something that is bothering you, only to find that you think about it even more? What did you do then?*

Our minds don’t deal very well in negatives; it is much easier to focus our attention on something than it is not to think about something. Worry beads have recently had a resurgence in popularity. Greek in origin, worry beads are used to reduce stress. Often called “komboloi” beads, worry beads may have come from knotted prayer cords used by Greek Orthodox monks, since the word “komboloi” means “a group of knots.” Research has shown that repetitive tasks, such as threading worry beads through the fingers, does reduce the impact of negative thoughts or experiences and helps create a more positive attitude. Religions all over the world, including various Christian traditions, encourage the use of beads in some form to help people pray or meditate.

Distribute supplies for bead-making, and demonstrate the procedure for making the beads. Invite participants to make and string beads. Suggest they use the beads to help them focus on gratitude for the beauty in their lives. For example, hold the string of beads. Run the beads slowly through your fingers. As you hold each bead, think of something beautiful for which you are grateful. Hold the bead for a moment, and then do the same thing for the next bead.

Suggestion: Use your string of beads daily to say a prayer of gratitude. For example:

bead 1: Holy one, I give thanks for the waters of the earth.

bead 2: Holy one, I give thanks for the moon and the multitude of stars.

bead 3: Holy one, I give thanks for the wind, rain, snow, and sparkling sunlight.

bead 4: Holy one, I give thanks for the creatures of the earth, small and large.

bead 5: Holy one, I give thanks for the green of plants and trees, the life-giving plankton, and the mossy valley.

bead 6: Holy one, I give thanks for human beings, those known to me and those as yet unknown.

bead 7: Holy one, I give thanks for your love revealed in all creation. Amen.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Ladder to Heaven (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Genesis 28:10–19a. This activity requires reading the story three times. With each reading, participants will be asked to reflect on different aspects of the text.

Supplies:

- Bibles, in several different versions if possible
- pens and paper
- markers and whiteboard or newsprint

Explain the context of the text from Genesis 28:10–19a. Jacob tricked his twin brother, Esau, out of a blessing that rightfully belonged to Esau as the oldest son. Having received the blessing from his father, Jacob is on his way to stay with his mother's brother, Laban. Because he is afraid Esau will want to kill him out of anger, Jacob flees for his life, doubtful that he will ever return home.

The story of Jacob's dream at Bethel will be read three times, with each reading focusing on different aspects of the story: first, noticing and paying attention; second, feeling; and third, thinking and questioning. Each time the story is read, focus your attention on the details, textures, and nuances of the story. Pay attention with your mind, your senses, your imagination, and your heart.

Ask someone in the group to read aloud Genesis 28:10–19a. Pause for a moment of silence after the passage is read. Then invite people to recall what they noticed in the story. What happened? What did the scene look like as they imagined it?

Read the story again slowly. Ask people to pay attention to the feelings they notice in the story. What did people notice during this second reading? What emotions were depicted? What might have it felt like to be there? What did they feel as they heard the story?

Have someone else read the story again, perhaps from a different version or translation. What did people notice in the passage this time that they hadn't noticed previously? What happens to Jacob at Bethel? What does God promise? What is Jacob hoping for? Recall that Jacob has fled from his home in fear of his life. What significance does this experience have for Jacob? What experience in your own life does this story bring to mind? Invite participants to pair up and share with one other person an experience in their lives that in some way connects with Jacob's experience at Bethel. Were they able to experience beauty in an unusual or unexpected circumstance?

5 This Place Is Awesome

Leader preparation: Think of a place you have been in your life that you might describe as "awesome." What was significant or special about that place? If you have a photograph of the scene, look at the image. Read Genesis 28:10–19a, paying special attention to verses 16 and 17. Gather art supplies (see below).

Supplies:

- drawing paper
- variety of drawing materials, such as charcoal, colored drawing pencils, oil pastels, or colored chalk
- Bibles

Read aloud Genesis 28:10–19a. Invite people to look at verses 16–17 in their own Bibles. Think of a place you have been that you would describe as awesome. What was that place like? Imagine a place or scene that you might call "the gate of heaven" or "the house of God."

Use art supplies to create an image or impression of such a place. You can create an abstract representation using colors and shapes or draw a more detailed image.

After people have finished, read the following line from a poem by Elizabeth Barrett Browning: "Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush aflame with God. But only he who sees takes off his shoes." (Elizabeth Barrett Browning, [1806–1861], *Aurora Leigh*, Book vii). Ponder what distracts people from seeing the presence of the holy in the world. What can help us sit up and take notice of beauty?

6 Opening to Beauty

Leader preparation: Make arrangements to walk outside with the group. You may need to phone people and invite them to bring clothing and footwear appropriate for the weather. Consider any special needs or mobility limitations in your group. If you can't walk outside, it may be possible to gather near a window that looks out upon sky, a tree, or other natural beauty. Ponder the sentence "In beauty we discover the face of God." (This quotation is from Christine Valters Paintner, October 22, 2009, in a posting at <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Beauty-and-Spirituality.html> on the site Pantheos, <http://www.patheos.com>. Pantheos is an online forum for discussion of religion and spirituality.)

Supplies:

- (option) computers or cell phones with Internet connection

Together, reflect on the quotation “In beauty we discover the face of God.” (Christine Valters Paintner, October 22, 2009.) Ask how this principle has been true in the lives of participants.

Take a walk outside. Look for an example of beauty; a tree branch, a cloud, or even a clump of weeds may be infused with beauty. When you find something, take a few moments to ponder it in silence, noticing the details. Return to your meeting area to discuss what you noticed. *How does beauty help us to connect with the Holy?*

Option: Browse the Internet for images of beauty, or do a search using the word “beauty.” What do you discover?

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Bread and Roses (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read the poem “Bread and Roses” from the attachment. How is beauty important in your life? Is beauty an “optional extra” in life, or is it a human need as important as daily bread?

Option: Locate a version of “Bread and Roses” that has been put to music to play for your group from sites such as <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oYRcCa-ddOo> or <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxE5V-fF12k&feature=fvsr>.

Supplies:

- “Bread and Roses,” Attachment: Activity 7
- Bible
- pens
- paper
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- (option) equipment to play a YouTube video “Joan Baez—Bread and Roses,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LWkVcaAGCi0&feature=related>

Distribute paper and pens. Ask people to each make a list of the ten beautiful things that are most important in their lives. In pairs, have each share his or her list with another person and discuss the following questions: *If you had to choose five items on your list to give up, which would they be? Which two things would be hardest to part with? What would it be like to live without these two things?*

Distribute copies of “Bread and Roses,” Attachment: Activity 7. Ask people to read the poem for themselves. Discuss the following questions. *What are the basic necessities of life for human beings according to this poem? Is beauty one of them? Explain your response.*

Invite the group to think of ways that we can share beauty with others who may not have much beauty in their lives. Record ideas on newsprint or whiteboard. Invite people to choose one action they might take this coming week to share beauty with another person (either someone they know or a stranger).

Option: Play a musical version of “Bread and Roses” for the group.

 **8 Consider the Lilies**

Leader preparation: Arrange to display the artwork “Red Canna” by Georgia O’Keefe or to display the image from the Internet. Review instructions for making calla lily paper cards from http://www.ehow.com/video_7753909_wedding-invitations-paper-calla-lilies.html, and make a sample. Gather the supplies needed.

Alternative: If you do not think making lilies will appeal to the group, consider writing a litany based on the theme “consider the lilies.”

Supplies:

- artwork: “Red Canna” by Georgia O’Keefe, <http://www.art.com/products/p10032683-sa-i674918/georgia-okeeffe-red-canna.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&ui=4FA2E7AB9F664A828CD2028E434AEDC4>
- white tissue paper
- yellow construction paper
- card stock
- glue guns or glue sticks
- Bibles
- (optional) paper and pens
- computer with Internet access and projection capabilities

Gather around the artwork “Red Canna” by Georgia O’Keefe. Invite participants to spend a few moments in silence looking at the image. What do people notice? What attracts them? What beauty do they find in this painting? Invite participants to look closely, taking in the details. Notice the texture of the painting, the rich colors, the smooth lines of paint.

Ask someone to read aloud Matthew 6:28–29. Note that *The Message* translation of the Bible renders Matthew 6:28–29 this way: “Instead of looking at the fashions, walk out into the fields and look at the wildflowers. They never primp or shop, but have you ever seen color and design quite like it? The ten best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them.” What do you think of when you consider the beauty of a flower?

Make a lily card to send to someone who may be feeling anxious or troubled. Follow the instructions at http://www.ehow.com/video_7753909_wedding-invitations-paper-calla-lilies.html. Enclose a message of hope or comfort and deliver or mail the card.

Alternative: Invite the group to work in pairs or small groups to create a litany based on the theme “Consider the Lilies.” For example:

- One: When we are troubled and fearful,
 All: Consider the lilies.
 One: When we are distracted by the business of daily life,
 All: Consider the lilies.
 One: When . . .

 **9 Beauty and Gratitude**

Leader preparation: Gather items for a worship center. Consider how you can make the space comfortable by arranging for chairs or cushions to sit on. Choose a recording of peaceful music, and arrange for audio equipment.

Supplies:

- items for a worship center such as a decorative cloth, candle with matches and a holder, a potted plant or fresh flowers, some beautiful objects (such as shells, pottery, feathers, or pictures), and a Bible
- artwork: “Red Canna” by Georgia O’Keeffe
- <http://www.art.com/products/p10032683-sa-i674918/georgia-okeeffe-red-canna.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&ui=4FA2E7AB9F664A828CD2028E434AEDC4>
- recording of peaceful music
- equipment to play music
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projection capabilities

Work together to create a worship center using the items provided. Display the artwork “Red Canna” by Georgia O’Keeffe. Make the space beautiful and welcoming.

Invite all to gather in the space and find comfortable positions. Sit quietly. Take a few deep, cleansing breaths. Notice the items you arranged, and appreciate their beauty. Light a candle. Listen to a recording of peaceful music.

Invite people to think of something beautiful in their lives for which they are grateful. They may give thanks for these items in a prayer.

Say a prayer of thanks for beauty: *Holy Presence, we give thanks for beauty in our lives. We give thanks for . . .* [participants say aloud things for which they are grateful]. *Holy presence, we give thanks for beauty. Amen.*

Reflect

Think back over the activities you selected for this Exploration. How did you experience beauty with your group? What did you discover about the faith practice “Experiencing Beauty”? How did members of your group respond to the activities? Consider what your answers to these questions tell you about your group members and their particular preferences or interests. Some in your group may enjoy arts while others respond to music, silence, movement, discussion, or nature. Keep this information in mind as you plan activities for future sessions.

Attachment: Activity 7

Bread and Roses

The slogan “Bread and Roses” comes from a poem of the same name by [James Oppenheim](#), published in *The American Magazine* in December 1911. The poem has erroneously been associated with a women’s textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, during January–March 1912, often known as the “[Bread and Roses strike](#).”

The poem appeals for the right to the basic necessities of life (bread) and also for food for the heart—art, love, beauty, and roses.

As we come marching, marching in the beauty of the day,
A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill lofts gray,
Are touched with all the radiance that a sudden sun discloses,
For the people hear us singing: “Bread and roses! Bread and roses!”

As we come marching, marching, we battle too for men,
For they are women’s children, and we mother them again.
Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes;
Hearts starve as well as bodies; give us bread, but give us roses!

As we come marching, marching, unnumbered women dead
Go crying through our singing their ancient cry for bread.
Small art and love and beauty their drudging spirits knew.
Yes, it is bread we fight for—but we fight for roses, too!

As we come marching, marching, we bring the greater days.
The rising of the women means the rising of the race.
No more the drudge and idler—ten that toil where one reposes,
But a sharing of life’s glories: Bread and roses! Bread and roses!

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Scripture

About this Age Group

There are some young adults today who have been active in a faith community all their lives and who are very familiar with scripture. However, many in this age group may have attended church only sporadically or not at all. Some may have little knowledge of the Bible. In an increasingly secular society, there are many who will not have learned skills for connecting scripture with their daily lives. Others may question the relevance of the Bible or its potential to speak to their own experience. And many in this age group will have difficulty connecting scripture with experiences of beauty or wonder. Approaching scripture as art means noticing without judging, opening to multiple interpretations, discovering more about how the work was created, appreciating the beauty to be found, learning more about the form, and knowing the context from which it came.

About this Exploration

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

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Luke 9:28–36
Nehemiah 8

Leader Preparation

Recall a passage of scripture that you particularly treasure. If you're not sure how to find it, do a key word search using a site such as <http://bible.oremus.org/>. Read the text. Savor the beauty of the words and phrases. What do you particularly like about this passage? Read Nehemiah 8. Notice how deeply moving it is for the people to hear scripture read aloud.

When has a passage of scripture touched you deeply? Read Luke 9:28–36. How does this story connect with your life? As you prepare to lead this Exploration, consider what scripture means to members of your group. How might they hear these texts? What questions might they raise? Are there some in your group who have not grown up in a church context, or for whom these texts may be entirely unfamiliar? How might you help them to find meaning in these passages?

Prayer: Spirit of Life, touch me with your truth, move me with your wisdom, open me to the beauty of your word alive in my life. As I explore scripture, help me to be open to new revelations and unfolding beauty. Transform me. Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Scripture and Beauty (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: So often the Bible has been read out of context, misquoted, and distorted with overlays of interpretation. For many young adults it has become uninteresting. Sometimes we approach scripture with ears only half open because we have heard it so often. This activity invites participants to hear scripture with open ears, suspending judgment and interpretation, letting go of previous experiences with scripture, and simply noticing what is there.

Read the passages of scripture suggested for this activity. Consider which ones you would describe as beautiful. If possible, obtain several different translations, including older ones that retain original metaphors and images (sometimes called word-for-word translations) such as The King James Version, The Revised Standard Version Bible or the Jerusalem Bible and The New Revised Standard Version Bible rather than thought-for-thought versions such as the Good News or Contemporary English Version. You can find a variety of translations at <http://www.biblegateway.com/passages/>.

Supplies:

- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- Bibles (from several different versions if possible)
- “Suggested Scriptures,” Attachment: Activity 1
- pens
- paper

Invite people to think about how the Bible is viewed or valued in our society today. Consider popular culture, the views of friends, Facebook or other Internet postings, and recent articles they have read. Brainstorm a list of adjectives that might be used by people outside the church to describe the Bible. Record these adjectives on newsprint or a whiteboard. Which of these adjectives would participants use to describe the Bible? What other words would they use? What does the Bible mean to them today? Invite a variety of responses, and encourage honest reactions.

Explain that you will read aloud three short selections of scripture, each of which is an example of Hebrew poetry. Although these passages have been translated into English, it is still possible to discern the original poetic metaphors and images. Invite people to notice the beauty of the form and language of each text. See the suggested texts from the King James Version (KJV) on Attachment: Activity 1, or use the Bibles in your learning area.

Distribute pens and paper. After each text is read, pause for a time of silent reflection, and invite people to write their feelings and responses to the text. Then read the next text. You may want to distribute copies of the attachment. Some people “hear” better if they can see the words.

After the texts have been read, invite participants to talk in groups of two to four people, using the following discussion questions:

- What images stood out for you as you heard these texts?
- Which, if any, of the texts do you consider to be beautiful?
- In what ways can scripture help us be more open to the beauty in life?

 **2 Transfiguration**

Leader preparation: Stand somewhere near a window. If possible, open the window and feel the air. What does an open window symbolize for you? In what way can scripture be a window on our world?

Study the artwork “Wind from the Sea” by Andrew Wyeth. What do you notice in this image? If possible, arrange for a place where your group can gather near an open window. Place the artwork where the group members will be able to see it. A flat tabletop works well if you have a small group. If you are unable to post materials on a wall, use a flipchart stand or hang the artwork from a piece of cord strung across the room.

Session Development

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

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

Sometimes we come to scripture closed to its multiple sensory and spiritual possibilities. This activity invites participants to listen to scripture with all their senses so as to appreciate its full beauty and significance.

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>
- Bibles
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projection capabilities

Gather the group near an open window if possible. Alternatively, gather near a doorway or a place where it is possible to see outside. Invite the group members to stand in silence, noticing whatever sensory impressions come to their attention. Encourage them to close their eyes and pay attention with senses other than sight. Perhaps they might notice a touch of cool breeze from the window or a particular sensation, sound, or smell.

View “Wind from the Sea” by Andrew Wyeth. Share impressions. What appeals to participants about this image? What does this image remind them of from their own experience? Ask the group to consider approaching scripture the way we have approached the art, with our full senses.

Read aloud Luke 9:28–36. Pause for a moment of silence, and have people imagine the scene using all their senses. Ask: *What sounds or sensations came to mind when you listened to the scripture? What smells, movements, tastes, physical sensations, or textures did you imagine? What stood out for you from this story? Of what does this story remind you in your life?*

3 Tell a Story about Mountains

Leader preparation: Read Luke 9:28–36. What mountaintop comes to mind as you think about this text?

Supplies:

- Bibles
- paper
- pencils

Ask a member of the group to read aloud Luke 9:28–36. Invite people to think of a “mountaintop” moment—a significant spiritual experience, a time they climbed or saw a mountain, or another experience that this story brings to mind. Have people share their experiences with one other person.

Distribute paper and pencils. Reassure people that what they write is for them only and need not be shared. Have people draw a horizontal line across the page. This line represents their lives from birth until now. On the line, mark some high points—significant markers of their life’s journey such as graduating from high school, a first car, a first job, a first romance, and so forth. Mark these with an asterisk or a small peaked shape on their lifelines.

Then have them mark any particularly significant spiritual experiences—a time when they felt God’s presence, a particular faith decision, baptism or confirmation, wedding or funeral, vespers at summer church camp, Bible study at Vacation Bible School, a spiritual insight, or a time of significant questioning. A symbol such as a star or a cross can mark these moments.

Finally, they should mark times when they were aware of beauty in some way—beauty in nature, a creative experience, their first time seeing a ballet or hearing a symphony, or an encounter with a beautiful person.

Give participants time to work on their lifelines on their own.

Option: Invite people who wish to do so to find another person and share with that person something from their lifelines.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Rejoicing in Community (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read the background to the book of Nehemiah from Attachment: Activity 4. Plan to present this information to your group.

In the book of Nehemiah, a group of Jewish exiles return to the homeland their parents had left sixty years previously. This is a land they have never seen before, because they were born in exile. When they hear God’s law read aloud, they are in many ways hearing it as though for the first time, because many traditions and community practices were lost or abandoned during the period of exile. In some ways, this experience may be similar to that of many young adults in our churches who may be returning to the faith community of their parents or grandparents, having been away for some time.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- “Background to the Book of Nehemiah,” Attachment: Activity 4

Invite someone to read aloud Nehemiah 8. Ask people to listen to the text at face value, simply noticing what is going on the story. Then discuss the following questions. *What do you think is happening in this story? What do you like about the story? What questions does this story raise for you? Imagine yourself there in the scene: what might you be doing, feeling or noticing?*

Give the background information on the story from the attachment. What does this new information tell you about what is going on in this story?

Nehemiah is addressing a group of second-generation exiles who returned to the homeland of their parents—a land they have never seen until now. Discuss answers to the following questions.

- How does this information change your understanding of the story?
- Imagine what it may have been like for this group of exiles to rediscover the traditions or practices of their forebears. Who do you know who may be experiencing something similar today? (Perhaps refugees who return home, Aboriginal people rediscovering the spiritual or community practices of their ancestors, young adults returning to church after a long time away)
- If you were returning to this faith community after a long absence (or having never known such a community), which faith practices might be most special or significant to you?
- What do you find to be the most beautiful of our Christian faith practices?

5 Research the Text

Leader preparation: Read information about the Jewish festival of Sukkot from sites such as <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sukkot> or <http://www.bookrags.com/tandf/sukkot-tf/>. Consider asking your Jewish friends (or a local rabbi) how they celebrate Sukkot. This activity assumes you will be able to access computers or data phones. If this is not the case, consider alternatives, such as asking group members to gather information ahead of time or using the resources of a local library.

Supplies:

- computers with Internet access
- natural materials to create a worship tent or booth (such as evergreen branches, flowers, ribbon, vines, small stones, fabric, and rope)

Invite participants to work in pairs to find out what they can about the Jewish festival of Sukkot. Suggest sites such as <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sukkot> or <http://www.bookrags.com/tandf/sukkot-tf/> if people need help getting started. Suggest that they try to find out information that comes from a Jewish perspective or from a particular Jewish community or tradition rather than from an encyclopedia site such as Wikipedia. Look for clues in the Internet address or home page as to the source of the information that is posted.

Gather the group and share what you have discovered. Then have people read Nehemiah 8. What is the “festival of booths” (Sukkot) about? Use the materials supplied to make a simple structure that you can gather inside. Drape fabric over the rope to make a tent-like structure. (The group might do this activity outside.) Decorate the place with the materials provided.

Gather inside your “booth” to hear Nehemiah 8:13–17. Discuss the significance of remembering the transitory nature of our human existence. Consider what difference it makes to see ourselves as nomads and sojourners on earth (as opposed to permanent residents or “owners” of the earth). How might this scripture help us to “see” the world and its beauty with new eyes?

6 Illuminate a Manuscript

Leader preparation: Do an Internet search for images of illuminated manuscripts (try, for instance, Google images). Download a few samples to show the group. Gather art supplies.

Supplies:

- samples of illuminated manuscripts
- Bibles
- art supplies: fine-tipped, high-quality colored markers or well-sharpened colored drawing pencils and a sharpener; drawing paper or linen vellum paper
- a concordance, or computers or cell phones with Internet access

Ask participants each to choose a passage of scripture that he or she especially likes. It might be one you have used in previous Explorations or in this session. If people have trouble finding the passage they want, help them use the concordance to search for key words or do an online search using the search terms “Bible passage” plus one or two key words.

Show samples of illuminated manuscripts; note the intricacy and beauty of these documents. Ask what this artwork suggests about what the text meant to those who illustrated it. Explain that an illuminated manuscript is a manuscript in which the text is decorated with initials, borders, and tiny illustrations. Most illuminated manuscripts are from the Middle Ages, although there are some dating from 500–400 CE and many from the Renaissance. Most are religious texts.

Suggest that people copy a verse of scripture and “illuminate” the text in some way. Encourage people to be creative. (This is not an art competition!) They may then show their creations to one another and talk about how they chose to decorate the scripture text.

Sending & Serving Activities

7 Tweet a Text (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: If you are not familiar with tweeting and Twitter, visit the Twitter site at <http://twitter.com/> or practice writing a 140-character “tweet.” A tweet is a short message of exactly 140 characters. All characters count, including letters, punctuation, and spaces. This style of writing forces one to get right to the point and is an interesting exercise in focusing on what is most important.

Supplies:

- cell phones or pens and paper
- (option) computers with Internet access

Invite participants to write a 140-character tweet on the topic “Scripture is beautiful because . . .” Most young adults will have cell phones with them, many with access to Twitter. However, if they don’t, paper and pencil is a fine alternative. You can also use computers with Internet access. If neither of these options is available, use paper and pencils to create tweets that can be sent later.

Encourage people to maximize the power of their tweets by avoiding any unnecessary words and getting right to the point. Encourage playful collaboration and creativity.

Gather again to share the tweets the group created (or send links to one another). Which tweets are most convincing? Which tweets stand out as memorable or interesting? How is scripture a source of joy or beauty in our lives?

8 Movement to Show Transfiguration

Leader preparation: There are many ways of responding to scripture through the arts—dance, sculpture, painting, poetry, music, and movement. Which artistic forms speak to your heart? What examples can you name of beautiful works of art inspired by scripture? How do these acts of beauty enhance our understanding of scripture?

Supplies:

- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

What words or phrases come to mind when you hear the word “transfiguration”? Record ideas on newsprint or a white board.

Have people work in groups of three to five people for the following activity. Ask each group to read together Luke 9:28–36 and to consider what transfiguration means in the context of this passage. Who or what is transfigured, and in what way?

Next, the groups will find a simple movement or series of movements to show the transfiguration that takes place. Keep the movements very simple and concise. Not everyone needs to do the same movement, but there needs to be connection and coordination between the movements.

Gather together after about five minutes to have groups share their movements with the others. Invite comments of appreciation from other groups. How did the movements add to participants’ understanding of this text?

9 Music of Scripture

Leader preparation: Locate a recording of a passage of scripture that has been set to music. Examples include: Isaiah 40 (“Comfort Ye”) from Handel’s *Messiah* and “Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord” from *Godspell*. There are many settings of Psalm 23 (The Lord Is My Shepherd). One is by Howard Goodall and is the theme from the British sitcom *The Vicar of Dibley*. Alternatively, you might search through your congregation’s hymnal to select hymns based on a scripture text. Look for an index of scripture references in the back of the hymnal. Arrange for an accompanist.

If you have sufficient time to give advance notice, you might invite participants to bring recordings of favorite scripture songs or settings. Locate some simple rhythm instruments. Anything that makes a pleasant tone is fine, including wooden blocks, spoons, some inexpensive water glasses or glass bottles, chimes, shakers, and so forth.

Supplies:

- recordings of a musical setting of a scripture passage
- equipment to play the music selection
- simple rhythm instruments (at least one per person plus a few extras, with a variety of different sounds)
- Bibles
- (optional) hymns based on scripture passages

There are many beautiful, powerful musical settings of scripture. Invite people to find a comfortable position in which to listen to music. Play a favorite musical selection, or sing a scripture-based hymn together. Ask someone to read aloud Micah 6:8.

Invite the group to use rhythm instruments to make a percussion composition, chant, or tone poem based on this text. If your group is large, divide into groups of four to six people to complete this activity. Encourage people to be creative and to use whatever instruments are available plus anything else they can dream up—their voices, repeated words chanted, their bodies, and so forth. Share the compositions and enjoy their beauty.

Reflect

Think back over the activities you selected for this Exploration. Which ones seemed most meaningful to participants? Which ones stretched you or helped you to grow as a leader? What did you discover about the concept of beauty? What did you notice about the images or ideas about beauty in scripture? Consider how in future sessions you might build on what you learned. What will you do differently next time?

Attachment: Activity 1

Suggested Scriptures

A poem to a beloved: **Song of Solomon 2:11-14** (KJV)

¹¹ For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone;

¹² The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land;

¹³ The fig tree putteth forth her green figs, and the vines with the tender grape give a good smell. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.

¹⁴ O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs, let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely.

A song of praise for God's care: **Psalms 139:7-13** (KJV)

⁷ Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence?

⁸ If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there.

⁹ If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;

¹⁰ Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.

¹¹ If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me.

¹² Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee.

¹³ For thou hast possessed my reins: thou hast covered me in my mother's womb.

A vision of peace: **Isaiah 9:2-6** (KJV)

² The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.

³ Thou hast multiplied the nation, and not increased the joy: they joy before thee according to the joy in harvest, and as men rejoice when they divide the spoil.

⁴ For thou hast broken the yoke of his burden, and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian.

⁵ For every battle of the warrior is with confused noise, and garments rolled in blood; but this shall be with burning and fuel of fire.

⁶ For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

Attachment: Activity 4

Background to the Book of Nehemiah

The story contained in the book of Nehemiah is set somewhere between 500 and 400 BCE (before the Common Era, also sometimes referred to as BC, before Christ). Judah (including the city of Jerusalem) had been conquered and destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. By the time of this story, Persia has taken control of the region and Judah is a tiny province within the Persian Empire.

Nehemiah is a member of the exiled Jewish community living in Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire. The book of Nehemiah tells us that Nehemiah is a cup-bearer to King Artaxerxes II. Thus, he holds an important official position.

At his own request, Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem as governor of Judah. He finds the city in ruins and undertakes to rebuild the city walls and to repopulate the city with Jews returning from exile. He faces opposition from three powerful neighbors: the Samaritans, the Ammonites, and the Arabs, as well as the city of Ashdod. But he manages to rebuild the walls. He begins to segregate the Jewish community from its neighbors and to enforce the laws of Moses.

The book celebrates the return from exile of many members of the Jewish community. In particular it emphasizes a spiritual revival as the community rediscovers traditions and religious practices that had not been part of their life while in exile. They “delight in God’s law” as they reconnect with their spiritual and religious roots.

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Discipleship

About this Age Group

Young adults live in an increasingly secular society where words like “discipleship” may have little meaning. Many of their peers have no connection to a faith community. An increasing number of young adults see all structured religion as negative. Although they may describe themselves as spiritual, they shun formal religious organizations. Such institutions are harshly criticized as being rule-bound and rigid. The language of beauty and creativity may help to span this divide for young adults who do choose to remain connected to a faith community, because beauty is a language that is in some sense universal.

Beauty can open young adults to an awareness of sacred presence even if they do not always use the language of the faith community. Awareness of beauty also opens an understanding of discipleship that is broader and deeper than the rule-bound stereotypes of religious institutions, helping young adults see that following Jesus can be creative and life-affirming. As the Apostle Paul discovered, discipleship does not mean conforming to religious rules and traditions. It is transformative of self, church, and world.

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 Exodus 35:20–29 and Acts 9:17–20, and spend time considering each story. Imagine what each story may sound like to the young adults in your group, some of whom may know little about the contexts of these two texts. What might they notice? What might puzzle them? Come to these stories with fresh eyes, removing the scales of layers of interpretation or previous experience with these texts. What symbols or images stand out? How might these texts connect with your life today? Of what do the stories remind you? Then, consider what these texts might say of beauty or of discipleship.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, awaken me to your beauty. Help me to see with fresh eyes. Remove the blinders of tradition and complacency. Stir me to respond with renewed creativity as I seek to be a follower of Jesus this day. Amen.

Session Development

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

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Scales from the Eyes (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Acts 9:17–20. Recall the context of the story by reviewing Acts 9:1–16. Saul genuinely believed that he was acting righteously, defending his faith tradition against those who would destroy it. When have you acted to defend something of value to you that you felt was being threatened? What religious traditions do you righteously defend? Have you ever acted with good intentions that turned out to be misguided? How did you feel about your actions when you discovered you had been wrong? What did you do to make amends? Make copies of “Reflection Questions,” Attachment: Activity 1.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- pens
- paper
- “Reflection Questions,” Attachment: Activity 1

Introduce the scripture by inviting participants to listen to the story with open ears and imaginations, as though they are hearing the story for the first time. Ask them to listen for an image or idea that particularly stands out for them rather than trying to figure out what the story means. Invite someone to read aloud Acts 9:17–20 as others listen.

Go around the circle, asking people to identify an image or idea that stood out for them as they heard this text. Then invite conversation about the story. What happened to Saul? Invite those who know the full story to share the background information, or have participants read Acts 9:1–16 for themselves. Remind the group that Saul, renamed Paul, became an important apostle in the early church, founding and supporting many early Christian communities throughout Asia Minor.

Hand out paper and pens along with copies of “Reflection Questions,” Attachment: Activity 1. Invite participants to journal for themselves about an experience of scales falling from their eyes.

Gather together again. Discuss how opening to the Spirit helps the scales fall from our eyes, and how opening to beauty helps us see situations in new ways.

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

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



2 Seeking Beauty

Leader preparation: Spend time looking at the artwork “Journey of the Magi.” What do you notice in this image? What surprises you about the way the artist has depicted the travelers? What are the Magi seeking? What are you seeking in your life right now?

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
- “Meditation on the Magi,” Attachment: Activity 2

Invite participants to look at the image on the artwork. What do they notice about the Magi? What do they like about this painting? What do they wonder about as they look at it?

Invite participants to find a comfortable spot, to relax, and to enter into a short guided meditation. Read slowly from the guided meditation on Attachment: Activity 2, pausing as indicated. When you finish, pause for a moment of silence. Then ask people to talk in pairs or groups of three about the meditation experience. Invite conversation about what people are seeking in their lives both personally and spiritually.

3 Meal in the Darkness

Leader preparation: Read information about the Montreal restaurant O Noire from <http://www.suite101.com/content/dining-in-darkness-reveals-joy-a6909> or <http://www.onoir.com/>, and prepare to share this information with your group either in print or on the Internet. Plan a way to completely darken your meeting area (which will only be possible if your space has no windows) or bring blindfolds for participants.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- ingredients for a simple meal or snack (such as soup and buns, pizza, or a platter of vegetables and crackers; utensils and napkins; glasses of drinking water)
- information about O Noire restaurant, downloaded or bookmarked on a computer
- blindfolds for each person (needed if your space cannot be completely darkened)

Read about the restaurant in Montreal called O Noire. Gather, seated, at a table, and put the food you have provided within easy reach of people. If utensils are needed, make sure people know where they are. Darken the room or have everyone put on blindfolds. Eat together in complete darkness. Encourage people to experience the meal as naturally as possible, letting their other senses—sound, touch, taste, smell—guide them. As you eat, talk about what it is like to do so in the dark.

Consider how Paul’s time without sight was an opening to a transformed way of being in the world. Ask how it opened him to the presence of the Spirit. Ask the group to consider what has challenged or transformed them as disciples. Who or what has helped them to experience discipleship differently? Those of us who can see often use vision as our primary way of apprehending beauty in the world.

Have the group consider how we can use senses other than sight to experience beauty.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 As Treasured Gifts (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: This activity will not work as the first activity in a group of people who do not know one another. Use it in groups where people are already familiar with one another. This activity is designed to help learners help one another discern their giftedness. Often when we think of gifts, we think of particular talents or things we do better than other people. It is important to avoid comparisons and to see ourselves through God's eyes as gifted and treasured creations, as beautiful in and of ourselves.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- large sheets of paper (one per person)
- markers, colored pencils, crayons, or colored pens

Ask people to listen to the scripture passage, noticing the colorful, richly textured detail of the text. Read aloud Exodus 35:20–29. Invite people to share what images stood out for them as they heard this text.

Have the group think of a treasured possession that they might have brought to this offering, and ask each to draw a picture of that item on a piece of paper. Ask them to consider how they are like this possession, treasured and valued in God's sight. Each of us is beautiful and gifted.

Distribute the large sheets of paper. Have each person write his or her name at the top of a piece of paper in colorful letters. Place the papers on flat surfaces so that others can write on them. Ask people to write on one another's pieces of paper things they value or appreciate about that person, such as gifts he or she brings to the group, or qualities of faith, leadership, and discipleship the others have observed.

Option: If group members do not know one another well, or if there are newcomers, have people write on the papers gifts that they wish for the other person.

Return the papers to their owners and have people read what others have written. Ask people the following questions, to be reflected on in silence: *As you consider what others have noticed about you, consider which of these gifts are ones you celebrate in yourself. How do you share your giftedness in the world as a disciple of Jesus?*

5 Art Fair

Leader preparation: Ahead of the session, invite members of the group to bring examples of things they do for the joy of creative expression. They do not have to be experts in these fields. For example, people might enjoy crafts, scrapbooking, flower growing/arranging, playing or listening to music, dancing, photography, painting, sculpture, sewing, or baking. Arrange the space so this art and creative expression can be displayed. They could provide photographs if the actual creative expression is not available, such as a landscaped yard or decorated room or handmade piece of furniture.

Option: You might also invite other people in the faith community, including older adults or children, to showcase art. Arrange tables, dividers, or baffles so the art can be displayed.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- tape or push pins, other display materials

Have a “gallery tour” that stops at each art piece to have the artists talk about what they do, how they learned this creative technique, and what their activity means to them. Invite those in the group to teach one another or talk about ways they engage with beauty. Encourage sharing and appreciation of the giftedness of the community. Close with a prayer of gratitude such as: *Creator of all good, thank you for these gifts of art and beauty and creativity. Thank you that our creativity is an expression of your Spirit, which is alive and active in us and in our world. Amen.*

6 Watch Jonathan Conduct

Leader preparation: Preview the video of three-year-old Jonathan conducting Beethoven from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0REJ-ICGiKU>. Arrange for equipment to show this video to the group.

Supplies:

- equipment to show a YouTube video, computer with Internet access
- pencils

Watch the video. *How did you feel as you watched?* Notice how Jonathan gets so caught up in the music that at times he completely forgets himself and his surroundings. *Do you think of this as a spiritual and spirit-filled experience for Jonathan?* Consider how his creativity is an invitation to participate in the joy and beauty of the music. As his imaginary orchestra, we are invited to “play along.”

Creativity is like that, inviting us to deeper relationship with one another, with God, and with our world. We often think of discipleship as serious and demanding rather than joyful and creative. *How would it change your understanding of discipleship to think of it more as an invitation to play with young Jonathan and others like him?*

Close the activity by playing the video again (or a recording of this music) and having the group conduct part of it for an imaginary orchestra. Invite people to conduct with joy and enthusiasm. You could use pencils as batons.

Sending & Serving Activities

 **7 Random Acts of Beauty (Easy Preparation)**

Leader preparation: Think of examples of public displays of beauty in your community—things that are free for all to enjoy and that exist only for their own sake, not to advertise or make money, but just to be beautiful. Examples are flowering plants or shrubs, protected natural areas, murals or decorations on buildings, fountains, parks, or sculpture. What do you do to create beauty in your home or community?

Supplies:

- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- paper
- pens

What are some beautiful things in your community that are freely available? Make a list on newsprint or white board. Consider how this beauty enriches the life of the community. How would life be different without it? Think about who made or planted or protected this beauty. Who cares for it?

Work in pairs or groups of three to write an imaginary letter to someone who created one of these places of beauty, thanking that person for the creation. Or write a letter to the editor of a local paper giving thanks for something beautiful in the community.

Share the letters that small groups write. Invite conversation about ways we can participate in bringing beauty into the life of our immediate community. *How is doing so a spiritual act? How is it an act of discipleship?*

8 Creating a Beautiful Place

Leader preparation: Ahead of time, plan something the group can do to care for the church or community space. How might you increase the beauty of a worship area, clean up a neglected space, or make a beautiful display or bulletin board? The task does not need to be long or complex. It might be as simple as arranging flowers on a worship table or placing them at the entrance to the building. Or, if time and weather permit, you might do something more elaborate such as planting bulbs or flowers or repainting a room. Gather the supplies you will need. If necessary, contact participants ahead of time so that they can come prepared and dressed for the project or can bring some of the supplies needed.

Supplies:

- materials needed for the project you have chosen

Work on your chosen project. As you work, invite people to share stories about reclaiming a space and making it beautiful. Ask questions such as the following: *How is beauty important in your life? How is it important to us as a faith community? How does beauty draw us closer to God? How can beauty draw us closer to one another?*

9 For the Beauty of the Earth

Leader preparation: Locate a copy of the hymn “For the Beauty of the Earth” and arrange for an accompanist or locate a recorded version of the hymn.

Supplies:

- hymn: “For the Beauty of the Earth” by Folliot S. Pierpoint (tune: Dix)
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mHOMXiOKEDQ> (There are several possible tunes. Use the one that is most familiar to your group.)
- (optional) recording and playing equipment

The hymn “For the Beauty of the Earth” was written by Folliott S. Pierpoint (1835–1917), from Bath, England. Pierpoint was a devout Anglican. He was twenty-nine at the time he wrote this hymn and was mesmerized by the beauty of the countryside that surrounded him. The hymn first appeared in 1864 in a book of poems entitled *The Sacrifice of Praise*.

Sing the hymn together. Encourage honest and respectful conversation about it. Beauty is very much in the eye of the beholder. What do you like about the hymn? In what way might you prefer to express joy or praise if this style of music is not to your liking? (You may wish to invite the group to bring in music to share with the group during future sessions.) Say a blessing to one another such as: *Be the beauty you long to see in the world. Go in peace and joy. Amen.*

Reflect

How did you experience the beauty of God’s creative Spirit in your time together? What gifts of leadership and discipleship did you offer? What did you learn about yourself as a disciple? What did you learn about beauty? Consider what activities helped to energize or engage participants. How will you use what you have learned in future sessions?

Attachment: Activity 1

Reflection Questions

Consider the image of “scales falling from one’s eyes.” When have you had an experience of scales falling from your eyes?

Have you ever had an experience of seeing something, someone, or some situation completely anew? Perhaps at one time you acted to defend something of value to you that you felt was being threatened such as a religious, social, or family tradition or value, and then later you reconsidered. Or perhaps you acted with good intentions that turned out to be misguided. How did you feel about your actions when you discovered you had been wrong? What did you do to make amends? Or perhaps you have had an experience of discovering that your first impressions of something, someone, or a situation were not accurate.

Take a few moments to describe the experience for yourself. Note what happened, who was there, what it felt like. Then consider what was transformative about this experience. What changed in you or in others? What helped this transformation take place?

Attachment: Activity 2

Meditation on the Magi

Instructions: Read the meditation slowly and clearly in a calm voice. Where indicated with an asterisk (*), pause for five seconds. Watch the group. If people seem comfortable, lengthen the pauses to ten or twelve seconds.

Find a comfortable position to sit and be at peace. Close your eyes if you wish. * Take a couple of deep, refreshing breaths. Breathe from your abdomen, letting your belly slowly expand with each breath. * Relax your shoulders, your arms, your chest. * Breathe in and out slowly, noticing the air entering and leaving your body, filling you and refreshing you. *

Now, imagine you are in a wilderness place, a desert place of blowing sands and steep rock faces. Look around you. Feel the dry heat on your face. Smell the dust stirred up by the wind and the feet of the camels. * Listen to the wind in your ears, the bells of the camels, the calls and shouts of the camel drivers. *

You are on a journey, a quest that has taken you far from your home. * A beautiful vision called you out into this wilderness place. What are you seeking? What dream or hope is so compelling that it has caused you to venture into this wild and beautiful place? *

Follow the path before you. It leads to an oasis. * Enter the oasis, into the shade of the vegetation that grows here. Feel the coolness after the desert heat. * Notice the beauty of this place, the forms and colors of the rocks and earth, the textures and smells of green growing things, the sound of birds. * There is pool here; the water is deep and cool. Touch the water; feel it cool on your hot skin. * Splash your face with it; taste it. * Here, in this oasis, you will glimpse what your heart most desires. * Spend time in this place. Let your whole being be filled, refreshed, restored. *

Then, when you are ready, leave the oasis by the path you came in on. * Gradually return to this place, this time, this room, this group. And when you are ready, open your eyes.

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Christian Tradition

About this Age Group

Young adults live in an era of rapid social change. Computer-based information technologies such as social networking, smart phones, text messaging, the Internet, and Facebook are changing the face of literacy, education, knowledge, and human social interaction. One implication of such change is a widening gap between generations. Young adults, middle adults, and older adults use and process information differently and increasingly inhabit a different cultural context.

Sociologist Margaret Mead once likened this gap to the difference between first generation immigrants and their children, who are growing up in a different world from their parents. People from different generations may experience this gap as though the others are speaking a foreign language.

Another implication of this rapid social change is a tendency to see “newer” as “better.” This perspective can result in dismissing the wisdom, beauty, and knowledge of previous generations and previous eras as irrelevant and outmoded. In this Exploration, young adults are invited to explore the wisdom of their faith tradition and to develop respect and appreciation for it. One activity invites them to spend time with older adults, hearing their stories and sharing their faith.

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

Find a place where you can read Psalm 8 aloud. Read slowly, savoring these words of ancient poetry. Give thanks for the beauty of this psalm. How does it point you to beauty in the world around? What questions or challenges does this psalm pose for you or your group? Then read John 12:1–8. What words or images or ideas stand out as you read anew this familiar story?

Consider the beauty Mary shares with Jesus. Why do you think her action was remembered? Read over the activities for this session, and choose ones that will work well for your group. Consider selecting a variety of activities to accommodate the different needs and interests of your group members. Experiment with an activity that is new for you or for your group.

Prayer: Creator God, open my senses to experience beauty and wisdom. You have been a faithful companion throughout all generations. Be with me now. I seek to learn from this generation of young adults that I lead. Show me the beauty and wisdom of your saints past and present. I anticipate your future with joy and hope. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Work of God's Fingers (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Psalm 8 in a different translation from the one you usually use. If you have access to the Internet, you can locate different translations of Psalm 8 from sites such as <http://www.biblegateway.com>. Read information about Psalm 8 from Attachment: Activity 1.

Supplies:

- "Psalm 8: Background Information," Attachment: Activity 1
- pens
- paper
- Bibles (in several different translations if possible)

Invite someone to read aloud Psalm 8 as others follow along in their Bibles. If possible, read the psalm again in a different translation or version. Ask the group what word or phrase stood out for them as they heard this psalm.

Have people look again at the psalm in their own Bibles and choose a word or phrase that they particularly like. What do they like about it? How does this psalm make people feel?

Distribute copies of Attachment: Activity 1, which has background information on the psalms and on Psalm 8 in particular. Read the article. Ask: *What information or ideas were new to you? Consider what the article says about the word "dominion." What do you think is humankind's proper relationship to the earth? What responsibility do you think we have to protect and care for the beauty of the earth?*

Distribute paper and pens and invite people to write a new version of Psalm 8 that speaks of the beauty of the earth or our responsibility to protect this beautiful planet. They may do this individually, with a partner, or in a small group.



2 Intimate Relationships

Leader preparation: Obtain a copy of the artwork "Caresse Maternelle (Mother and Child)" by Mary Stevenson Cassatt. Spend time looking at the painting. What relationships in your life are you reminded of as you look at this art? Place the artwork where the group can gather around to view it comfortably.

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
- Bibles

Gather around the artwork "Caresse Maternelle (Mother and Child)" by Mary Stevenson Cassatt. Invite people to look at the image, paying particular attention to how they feel. Spend a few moments in silence noticing the different emotions that this art evokes in you. In pairs, share how you felt as you looked at this art.

Session Development

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

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

Gather in a group. Notice the intimacy of the relationship between mother and child. What relationships in people’s lives are they reminded of as they look at Cassatt’s painting?

Have someone read aloud John 12:1–8. Direct the group to notice the relationship between Mary and Jesus. Ask: *In what way is it similar to the relationship as depicted in Cassatt’s painting? How is it different? Consider the gift of beauty that Mary offers Jesus. Consider the gift of beauty that is Cassatt’s painting. How are these gifts of beauty similar? How are they different?*

3 Beauty Smells Like . . .

Leader preparation: Gather information about allergies in your group, and keep this information in mind as you prepare this activity. Do not use any artificial scents, perfumes, or strongly scented flowers such as lilies. Even if members of your group do not have particular scent allergies, there are many people who have strong adverse reactions to these items.

Gather about six to eight scented items such as natural cedar, sweet grass, beeswax, a whole nutmeg clove, olive oil, a citrus fruit, coffee beans, fresh bread, grape juice, moist potting soil, and so forth. Place each item in a separate covered dish on a tray. Cover the tray with a cloth until ready to use.

Supplies:

- scented items as described above
- Bibles

Ask everyone to notice the role of scent in the story from John’s Gospel. Ask someone to read aloud John 12:1–8. Talk about what people noticed in the story. Nard, the valuable perfume Mary pours out, comes from a flowering plant found in the Himalayan mountains of India, China, and Nepal. The root nodules of the plant can be crushed and fermented to produce a viscous, strongly aromatic oil. This amber-colored oil is used as a perfume and in incense. It is also used in herbal medicine and as a sedative. In Jesus’ time it would have been extremely rare and valuable.

Consider the beauty of scent, this gift Mary offers. Invite people to close their eyes and smell the items that you have prepared. You might want to make this activity a fun guessing game by passing one item at a time around the group and seeing if people can identify it without looking at or touching it.

Discuss how certain scents evoke memories. The smell of window putty might remind someone of a school building, or the smell of salt air might instantly bring a person back to childhood. Which scents evoke memories for group members?

We don’t often think of scents when we think of “beauty,” and yet the world of smells is wonderfully evocative. Think, too, of how food tastes (or doesn’t) without smell. What smells do people associate with traditional forms of Christian worship (perhaps lilies, incense, candles)? Which smells do people consider particularly beautiful?

Close this activity with a simple prayer of thanks for God’s gift of the sense of smell: *God, thank you for the world of the senses, and in particular for the beauty of scents—scents such as . . . [list several scents]. Amen.*

Discerning & Deciding Activities

**4 Art in the Christian Tradition (Easy Preparation)**

Leader preparation: Print the article “Where Is His Body?” from Attachment: Activity 4 and make copies for participants. If possible, arrange for computers with Internet access and bookmark the site <http://www.travelpod.com/travel-photo/eddieandlynn/1/1248990138/basilica-of-san-vitale.jpg/tpod.html>.

Supplies:

- “Where Is His Body?” Attachment: Activity 4
- (optional) computers with Internet access

Have participants read for themselves the article “Where Is His Body?” If you have access to computers with Internet access, look at the image of the Jesus on the blue globe. If not, have people look up the image later at home. Notice the green earth and the four rivers of paradise.

What are the implications of art that does not present the crucifixion? Brock and Parker argue that the introduction of the dead body of Jesus is a later imposition of Empire, which accompanied attempts to justify oppression and violence (such as the crusades) with images of a God who avenges and creates innocent suffering. Ask the group what surprises them about that view. What do they think is most significant about their discovery? Ask: *How does art influence our faith? What art is present in your church? How do you feel about the images you see depicted in your worship space? What values or beliefs are reflected in this art?*

**5 Bernice Johnson Reagon: Freedom in the Air**

Leader preparation: Make copies of the article “Bernice Johnson Reagon: Freedom in the Air” from Attachment: Activity 5. Locate an audio version of “Over My Head” from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6GVc0rFTFw&feature=related>, or arrange for someone to teach the spiritual to the group. Preview the YouTube version of the song with the words “freedom in the air” from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFKGopOwGJg> and arrange for equipment to play it for your group.

Supplies:

- song: “Over My Head,” African-American traditional (tune: Over My Head), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2DLSXYxp6O&feature=related>
- equipment to play a YouTube video
- “Bernice Johnson Reagon: Over My Head,” Attachment: Activity 5

Sing “Over My Head” using the traditional words. Hand out copies of the article “Bernice Johnson Reagon: Over My Head” or play the video. Invite people to sing along with the music. Enjoy the spiritual.

Notice how this traditional song became a source of inspiration and freedom. Discuss how art and beauty can inspire us to “find our voice” or work for change. When have participants experienced tradition being soil in which something new and transformative can take root?

6 Memories of the Psalms

Leader preparation: Invite one or two older adults to visit your group to share their experiences and memories of the psalms. (See suggestions below.) If you are not sure who might be appropriate to invite, consult with your minister or another congregational leader. If guests are not available, ask one or two members of your group to share memories or experiences of psalms in their lives, or consider opening this activity to the whole group.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- a concordance

Invite your guest(s) or members of the group to share memories and experiences of the psalms in their lives. For example, they might talk about a particular memory associated with a psalm, how the psalms are important to them, which psalms they know best, or how particular psalms have been especially meaningful.

As particular psalms are mentioned, have someone read aloud one or two lines. Have a concordance handy to look for particular words or phrases in the psalms if necessary.

Invite comments or questions from your group. Which psalms come to mind in times of trouble? In times of joy? Which psalms do they associate with praise to God? Which psalms remind them of the beauty of God’s creation? Do they think the psalms will continue to be a meaningful part of our Christian tradition? Are psalms still being created? Hymns have always been a part of our Christian heritage and that the psalms are like hymns in that they are sung prayers. New hymns are continually being written. Which new hymns are ones that the learners think may be ongoing treasures for our faith communities?

Sending & Serving Activities

7 Beauty As an Offering (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read over the activity. Read John 12:1–8 if you have not yet done so. Notice the gift of beauty that Mary offers. Consider an offering of beauty you could contribute to the world this week.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- pens
- paper

If you have not yet read John 12:1–8 with your group, read it aloud now, or have participants recall the story. Ponder the overflowing excess and abundance of God’s creation. Trees don’t just produce one or two pieces of fruit in a season, but an overflowing abundance. Trees and grasses produce an extravagance of seeds. The wild berries in fall are more than the birds could possibly eat. The colors of flowers and sky and leaves are vibrant and varied. God doesn’t just provide what is strictly necessary; creation’s cup overflows in excess.

Discuss the following questions. *How might you have reacted if you were part of that group, watching Mary's offering? How do you feel about the prodigious abundance of creation? Was Mary's offering wasteful? Is beauty ever "wasteful"? Consider what offering of beauty you might make.*

Distribute pens and paper. Have people write notes to themselves of a commitment they will make to do some act of beauty during this coming week. (They could do something that creates beauty or enjoy something beautiful, or protect or care for something beautiful.) Encourage people to put the notes in their pockets or purses to serve as reminders.

8 When I Look at Your Heavens . . .

Leader preparation: Visit NASA's astronomy picture of the day at <http://apod.nasa.gov/apod>. Read Psalm 8.

Listen to a musical or slideshow setting of the psalm from one of these sites: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ShWf5HWUA0U&feature=related>, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BwDJO9om34&feature=related>, or <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18R4iPJ5U3I&feature=related>.

Arrange for computers with Internet access. Bookmark <http://apod.nasa.gov/apod> for easy access.

Supplies:

- computers with Internet access
- Bibles

Invite learners to go to the NASA site and find an astronomy picture of a day that they particularly like. Look at the image for a few moments as someone slowly reads Psalm 8:1–4.

Browse YouTube for videos with settings of Psalm 8. Examples are <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ShWf5HWUA0U&feature=related>, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BwDJO9om34&feature=related>, or <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18R4iPJ5U3I&feature=related>.

As time allows, participants may suggest the kinds of images and music they would choose to accompany the psalm.

9 Ritual of Anointing to Send Forth

Leader preparation: Arrange flowers, candles, a cloth, and other beautiful items to create a simple worship center for the group. Place a bowl with a small amount of olive oil on the table. Write the words of the blessing on newsprint or marker board.

Supplies:

- olive oil
- bowl
- items for worship center (see above), including a candle with holder and matches
- marker and newsprint or whiteboard

Gather around the worship center. Have a moment of silence. Light a candle. Recall Mary's act of blessing in the anointing of Jesus' feet. Point out that anointing is an important part of our Christian heritage. In ancient Israel, anointing with olive oil was an act of consecration. It was used to anoint kings and in prayers for healing. In the Christian tradition, anointing with oil is used in rituals of healing, blessing, and baptism. Sometimes the sign of the cross is made in oil on the person's forehead.

Anoint each person in turn in the following way. One person from the group dips a finger in the olive oil, places a small dab of the oil on the palm of the person being anointed, and rubs the oil gently for a second. The group offers the following blessing in unison: "[Person's name], you are a beautiful part of God's creation. We bless you to be a blessing."

Option: As the person is being blessed, others in the group can gather around the person being blessed and place a hand gently on that person's head or shoulders.

Reflect

What new discoveries did you make about the role and place of beauty in our Christian tradition? How did group members respond to the activities in this session? Which activities offered joy and beauty to you, and to others in the group?

Attachment: Activity 1

Psalm 8: Background InformationAncient sung poetry

The Book of Psalms in the Bible is a collection of 150 poetic prayers that were sung as part of worship. Although many psalms are said to be psalms “of David,” this does not mean they were composed by King David. Differences in language, style, and internal references suggest many different authors, time periods, and places of origin. Psalms were composed during a period of at least five centuries. As is true in most languages, poetry is probably the earliest form of literary expression in Hebrew. Psalms are among the oldest literature in the Bible, some of them dating to before the seventh century BCE. And Psalm 29, believed by scholars to be the oldest psalm, is adapted from earlier Canaanite worship. Other psalms were not written until after the Exile in Babylon. However, most psalms come from the period of Judah’s monarchy and are associated with worship in the Temple in Jerusalem.

About Psalm 8

Psalm 8 is a song of praise to God the Creator. It parallels many of the themes in the first chapter of Genesis—the creation of the heavens, for example, and the place of human beings within the hierarchy of nature—lower than the angels, but above the animals. Humankind has “dominion over the animals.” This phrase is similar to Genesis 1:28 and humanity’s divine “glory and honor” echoes the idea of human beings made in God’s image from Genesis 1:27.

Dominion

The word “dominion” may have negative connotations, implying control, exploitation, or tyranny. One interpretation is that God made the earth and its resources to serve humankind. Genesis 1 and Psalm 8 have been used through the centuries to support the exploitation and abuse of the earth by humankind.

A different understanding of the word “dominion” is that God calls human beings to be wise stewards and caretakers of the earth. Our role is not to dominate but to tend and protect. This view is reflected in Eugene Peterson’s translation of the Genesis passage in *The Message*:

God spoke: “Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature so they can be responsible for the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the cattle, and, yes, Earth itself.”

Attachment: Activity 4

Where Is His Body? The Crucified Christ Is Absent from Christian Art for the First Thousand Years of Christianity

For the first thousand years of Christianity, Jesus Christ was not depicted dead. This is what American biblical scholars Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker discovered in their survey of early Christian art. At first, they couldn't believe it. Initially, they were convinced that the art historians who reported this fact were wrong. Surely the crucified Christ is too important to Western Christianity to be absent from art. "Could it really be true that images of Jesus' death were absent from first millennium churches?" they asked themselves.

In July 2002, Parker and Brock set out on a pilgrimage to the Mediterranean world. They were searching for depictions of the dead body in Christian art. In their recent book *Saving Paradise*, they say this:

There were no depictions of the crucifixion anywhere. Jesus' dead body was not in the catacombs or Rome's early churches, not in Istanbul's great sixth-century cathedral, Aya Sophia; it was not in the monastery churches in Northeastern Turkey nor in the glittering early church mosaics of Ravenna, Italy; and the crucified body was definitely not on any Eucharist table. We could not find Jesus' body. . . . It was just as the angel had said to the women who went looking for Jesus three days after his crucifixion, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" (Luke 24:5). "He is not here" (Mark 16:6). He most certainly was not. (p. xii)

Parker and Brock discovered that Jesus' lifeless body hanging on a cross was not a central and visible symbol of faith for early Christians who gathered for worship among the glittering mosaics of first millennium churches. The Christ in this art is the risen Christ, the One who hosts a feast of the resurrection. "The community joined this Christ at the table to celebrate life."

Because Brock and Parker, like most western Christians, were so accustomed to images of the agonized Christ, dead on the cross and to a Eucharist that commemorated his death, they were at first stunned by this discovery. As Protestant feminist theologians, they had spent their careers criticizing the idea that Jesus' death saved the world. In their book *Proverbs of Ashes* they argued that this idea contributes to domestic violence, sexual abuse, and war. They believed that showing the highest form of love as self-sacrifice, modeled by Jesus on the cross,

Attachment: Activity 4 (continued)

was problematic. Instead, they argue, “life is the source of life,” and love needs to give people the courage to stand against violence rather than be thankful for someone’s suffering on our behalf.

As Parker and Brock realized, the crucifixion really was absent from the first thousand years of Christian art, they begin to pay attention to what was present: “The images were beautiful. Worship spaces placed Christians in a lush visual environment, overflowing with life. They prayed and processed in their churches, surrounded by a cosmos of stars in night skies, sparkling rivers, and exuberant fauna and flora.”

For example, inside the sixth-century San Vitale church in Ravenna, Italy, the central image just above the plain white marble communion table is Christ as a young man who is dressed simply. Christ is seated on a large, blue globe. Saints, living and dead, and angels are on either side. Beneath the globe, four rivers flow and spread out into green meadows (see http://www.travelpod.com/travel-photo/eddieandlynn/1/1248990138/3_basilica-of-san-vitale.jpg/tpod.html).

Images such as these penetrated our consciousness until at last, we got it: we stood in paradise. The paradise we saw was not an imaginary, idealized afterlife, not a perfect world. Nor was it a return to a primordial Garden of Eden, though its best features resembled the Genesis descriptions of creation at its dawn. It was something else. It was paradise as this world, permeated and blessed by the presence of God, drenched in the power of divine life illuminating ordinary life from within.

According to Parker and Brock, this life-affirming faith enabled Christians to resist the many forces of cruelty and oppression in their world. Their art was full of images of hope, of life, and of the wonder and beauty of creation, not of death or torture.

“They did not believe suffering was a good thing; they sought to alleviate it by taking care of each other.” Thus, art of the first millennium showed and valued Jesus’ ministry as healer, miracle-worker, and teacher. Through their encounter with art, joy and wonder seeped into a world afflicted with violence and sorrow.

Information from: *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*, by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008).

Attachment: Activity 5

Bernice Johnson Reagon: Over My Head

Bernice Johnson Reagon is a singer and song leader, civil rights activist, and scholar. Bernice was born in Albany, Georgia, in 1942. Bernice has chronicled African American religious, social, and cultural history through her artistry and scholarship. The founder of the well-known a cappella group Sweet Honey in the Rock wrote, "My history was wrapped carefully for me by my fore-parents in the songs of the church, the work fields, and the blues. Ever since this discovery, I've been trying to find myself, using the first music I've ever known as a basic foundation for my search for truth."¹

In the 1960s she was at the forefront of the civil rights movement. James Foreman wrote about Bernice: "I remember seeing you lift your beautiful black head, stand squarely on your feet, your lips trembling as the melodious words 'Over my head, I see freedom in the air' came forth with an urgency and a pain that brought out a sense of intense renewal and commitment of liberation. And when the call came to protest the jailings, you were up front. You led the line. Your feet hit the dirty pavement with a sureness of direction. You walked proudly onward singing 'this little light of mine,' and the people echoed, 'shine, shine, shine.'"²

Bernice tells of finding her voice in the civil rights movement. At Albany State College, African American students had been arrested for trying to buy bus tickets from the "white" window at the Trailways bus station. Bernice joined a group that marched in sympathy with those in jail. "We left the campus and headed out. Maybe there were 10 people, so I just kept my face ahead. I knew if I turned around, I would just run back to the campus. When we got to the bridge, we had to turn to walk across the Flint River Bridge. Annette, who was

walking with me, said, 'Bernice, look back.' I looked back and as far as I could see, all the way back to the campus, there were people. Those students left their classes and joined that line. It was like, 'good-goodness-it-can-happen!' The power of finding that you can step out and sometimes you'll have company before you get there!"³

As the group circled the jail and arrived at Union Baptist Church, someone asked Bernice to sing a song. She started singing "Over My Head." The traditional words that Bernice learned are "Over my head/I see trouble in the air."

But, as she says, "I flipped 'trouble' into 'freedom.' It was the first time I had ever done that, especially with a sacred song, a spiritual that came from slavery. I realized that there was something about the march that had moved me to a position where I could use the songs I had been taught. . . . The changing of my voice came after jail. In the first mass meeting they asked me to sing, I sang the same song, 'Over my Head/I hear freedom in the air,' but my voice was totally different. It was bigger than I'd ever heard it before. It had this ringing in it. It filled all the space of the church. I thought that was because I had been to jail; it was because I had stepped outside the safety zone."⁴

¹ Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, <http://www.folklife.si.edu/center/legacy/reagon.aspx>.

² Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, <http://www.folklife.si.edu/center/legacy/reagon.aspx>.

³ *Yes Magazine*, by Bernice Johnson Reagon, posted Oct 27, 2000, <http://www.yesmagazine.org/>.

⁴ *Yes Magazine*, Bernice Johnson Reagon, <http://www.yesmagazine.org/>, posted Oct 27, 2000.

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Context and Mission

About this Age Group

Young adults have wide access to media. Smart phones and text messaging provide almost constant access to information about everything from celebrity breakups to global disasters to their friends' social calendars. But their knowledge of the historical and global context of events may be more superficial.

They are growing in their awareness of wider social issues and have increasing skills for analysis, critical questioning, and understanding perspectives other than their own. They may be voting for the first time and are becoming more aware of their social and civic responsibilities. They are increasingly financially independent and may be moving into living situations away from their family of origin. And they are discovering how they can be involved in social change and justice-making in the world.

These developments make for exciting and challenging conversation as young adults explore new ways of seeing the world and new perspectives of faith and spirituality. As a leader, you have the opportunity and privilege of participating in this journey of growth and discovery.

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

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Made New (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read 2 Corinthians 5:17. Make a list of five things that are being made new in your life at the moment.

Leader Preparation

As you prepare to lead this session, read Ecclesiastes 3:1–13 and 2 Corinthians 5:16–20. Listen for the beauty and wisdom in these ancient texts. Ponder how they speak to your life today. What do they call you to do or to be? Think about how they might be heard by the young adults in the group. Will they seem inaccessible and foreign to some in your group? How might you make these passages come alive for them? Read over the following activities and select ones that will inspire and challenge your group. Look for opportunities to serve and participate in mission together.

Prayer: Holy One, let the beauty of your Word challenge and move me to respond in love. Let the beauty of your world inspire me to act for wholeness and peace. Let the beauty of your people teach me the way of compassion and justice. I pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

Session Development

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

Supplies:

- Bibles
- pens and paper

Distribute pens and paper. Have someone read aloud 2 Corinthians 5:16–20. Invite people to list five things that are being “made new” in their life at the moment. What changes are happening in their immediate circumstances; what new growth or change or learning is happening in them? Have them find a partner and share something from their lists with each other.

Read aloud 2 Corinthians 5:17 again. This time ask people to list things that they would like to “become new” in their own lives or in the world. Ask people to talk in groups of three or four about some of the things on their lists.

Read the verse a third time. This time, list things that are being made new in this congregation, in your wider community, or in our world. Share ideas in the group. What does it mean for someone to be “in Christ”? How might that state create something new in that person or in the world?

Whenever artists create something—novels, paintings, poems, songs, dances, sculptures—they are making something new. If the art is not new, then it is merely a replication, not a creative act. And yet, any art always begins somewhere. A poet uses forms and language that others created in the past; a painter uses styles and materials that others made; a dancer uses music and rhythm and techniques developed by previous dancers. The act of creation is to make something new out of the givens of substance or form.

Consider how God, the divine creative one, is an artist creating a work of beauty in and through your life. Read the verse one final time. How does it speak to your life as material with which God creates beauty in the world? Suggest that people write the verse in their own words on a piece of paper and carry it with them or put it on their phone message screens. Encourage people to watch for signs of renewal or new creation during the coming week.

Experiencing Beauty

from “Discerning and Deciding,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving.” The first activity in each category is designed for “easy preparation” (able to be done with minimal preparation with supplies normally found at the church). Using all nine activities could take 90–120 minutes.

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



2 Guatemala Procession

Leader preparation: Obtain the artwork “Guatemala Procession” by Betty LaDuke. Display it in your meeting area. Spend time looking at the artwork and enjoying its color and form.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Guatemala Procession” by Betty LaDuke, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/15822304?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=15626&store_id=1401
- Bibles

Have everyone look at the artwork “Guatemala Procession” by Betty LaDuke. Lead the group in the following reflection. *Simply notice the colors and images. Do not try to interpret, but let yourself enjoy the brightness and feel of the art. Imagine what it might be like to be there, in that moment that LaDuke has captured in art. Where might you be? What might you be doing? How might it feel to be part of that procession?*

Have someone in the group read aloud Ecclesiastes 3:9–13. Ask what connections the group finds between this passage of scripture and the art? Discuss what Ecclesiastes says about work and happiness. Have them think about the daily chores they must do each day—preparing food, doing the laundry, washing dishes, commuting to work. What daily tasks do they find most fulfilling? What might it be like to approach daily chores (for example, housecleaning or shoveling snow) with the same sense of joy and gratitude as is reflected in Ecclesiastes or the Guatemala procession? What beauty or pleasure is there to be found in daily work?

3 Poetry Response

Leader preparation: Read Ecclesiastes 3:1–8. Ask yourself, “What time is it?” at various points during the week. Ponder the signs of the times that you notice around you. Read about newspaper blackout poems from sites such as <http://www.austinkleon.com/category/newspaper-blackout-poems/>, and make a sample poem or print some samples from the web.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- daily newspapers
- thick black markers (avoid the smelly kind)

Ask someone to read Ecclesiastes 3:1–8. Ask people to comment on the shape of the words, the rhythm of the passage, and the way the poet uses repetition to create a beautiful work of art. Pause for a moment of silence.

Newspaper blackout poems are made by taking a marker and blacking out all but a few words from a sheet of newspaper. The words that are left become the poem. Show the samples. Distribute the newspapers and invite the group to make newspaper blackout poems in response to Ecclesiastes 3:1–8 on the theme of “signs of the times” or “what time is it?”

Discerning & Deciding Activities

 4 **Trouble and Beauty (Easy Preparation)**

Leader preparation: “Trouble and Beauty” is the title of a song by Carolyn McDade. It is on McDade’s 1986 CD, *This Tough Spun Web: Songs of Global Struggles and Solidarity*. You might want to obtain a copy of the CD for this session. To order Carolyn McDade’s CDs, go to <http://www.carolynmcdademusic.com>. Consider the trouble and the beauty you observe in your community right now.

Supplies:

- (optional) CD *This Tough Spun Web: Songs of Global Struggles and Solidarity* and CD player
- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Have someone read aloud Ecclesiastes 3:1–8. What images or ideas came to mind as you listened to this text? The song “Trouble and Beauty” by Carolyn McDade captures the longing and hope in struggles for social justice. McDade writes of laboring to come to a place in our lives where we can see both trouble and beauty. *Where do you see trouble (injustice, hurt, oppression, conflict, brokenness) in our world right now?* Record ideas on newsprint or whiteboard under the heading “trouble.” *Where do you see beauty (hope, love, justice, healing, renewal, transformation)?* Record ideas on newsprint or whiteboard under the heading “beauty.”

Work in groups of two to four people to create a litany using these ideas. For example, you might follow the pattern of Ecclesiastes. There is a time of hurt and conflict (name specific “troubles” that have been mentioned) and there is a time to mend and heal (name “beauty” that you have identified). Gather together again to share the litanies or poems that have been created by the small groups.

 5 **The Cellist of Sarajevo**

Leader preparation: Read the article “Vedran Smajlović: Cellist of Sarajevo” from Attachment: Activity 5, and make copies for your group. Preview the YouTube video of Joan Baez visiting Sarajevo in 1993, and arrange for equipment to show it to your group.

Supplies:

- “Vedran Smajlović: Cellist of Sarajevo,” Attachment: Activity 5
- Video: “Streets of Sarajevo” by Jim McCutchen, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=endscreen&NR=1&v=b9LqVc8OSc8>
- Video: “Joan Baez in Sarajevo,” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AkTh_oxtcbk&feature=related
- computer with Internet access and equipment to show a YouTube video

Distribute copies of the article “Vedran Smajlović: Cellist of Sarajevo,” and ask people to read it for themselves. In pairs, share responses to the article. What did the cellist do? How do participants feel about his actions?

Listen to the song “Streets of Sarajevo” by Jim McCutchen. *What does he say about beauty?* Watch the YouTube video of Joan Baez in Sarajevo. Joan Baez is an American singer, songwriter, and social justice activist who worked with Martin Luther King during the civil rights movement. She also joined in many other efforts for social justice, such as peace in Vietnam, anti-apartheid in South Africa, opposition to the death penalty, and gay and lesbian rights, to name a few. Discuss your

responses to the video by sharing answers to the following questions. *How did Baez, as a fellow artist, respond to Smajlovic's actions? What do you think moved her about his playing? What touches you about struggles in your immediate context? In the global context? Consider how beauty may sometimes bring comfort and peace; at other times it may be a sign of protest and outrage or a force for justice and peace.*

6 Ministry of Reconciliation

Leader preparation: Browse some congregational mission statements from congregations in your own community or some of the following: <http://www.kruc.ca/about.html>, <http://www.facebook.com/TibbettsUMChurch?sk=info> <http://www.cedarparkunited.org/beliefs/identity-and-values-statement/>. Or read the Anti-racism/Pro-Reconciling Covenant statement that was developed by Indianapolis staff of Global Ministries, <http://www.globalministries.org/news/staff-board-news/global-ministriesdom-indianapol.html>. Download examples of the statements, or arrange for computers with Internet access.

Supplies:

- Anti-racism/Pro-Reconciling Covenant statement or another mission statement from a congregation that shows a commitment to honor diversity
- Bibles

In 1992, the Saskatchewan Teacher's Federation (Canada) produced a poster that showed the image of a beautiful field of wildflowers in full bloom. Around the border of the artwork are words that identify an array of human differences such as age, race, class, sexual orientation, gender, culture, religion, ability, and so on. The artwork caption, in beautiful lettering reads, "The beauty of our differences begins with our right to belong." Imagine the artwork for a moment and consider the phrase. Say it aloud together. Consider how diversity, when it is celebrated and honored, can be a source of great beauty.

Have someone read aloud 2 Corinthians 5:17–19. *What is our "ministry of reconciliation"?* Write a policy statement for your congregation. Refer to examples such as the Anti-racism/Pro-Reconciling Covenant statement from <http://www.globalministries.org/news/staff-board-news/global-ministriesdom-indianapol.html> for ideas.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Ministry of Reconciliation (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Consider the word "reconciliation." Think of a conflict or unresolved resentment in your community, your congregation, or the world that is in need of reconciliation. Pray about that situation. Consider what your ministry of reconciliation might be.

Supplies:

- Bible
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- paper
- art supplies: modeling clay or play dough, or pens, colored markers, or colored pencils, crayons
- (optional) recording of peaceful music

Read aloud 2 Corinthians 5:16–20. What does the phrase “ministry of reconciliation” suggest to you? Invite participants to identify examples of conflict, war, unresolved tension, resentment, or anger in their own lives, in the community, or in the world. List ideas on newsprint.

Choose one situation from the list. Spend time in silence thinking about that situation. Invite the group to respond by creating a piece of art with clay or play dough or by writing a prayer or poem, drawing, or doodling. Play quiet background music as people work. Invite those who wish to do so to share anything they created or thought about with the group.

8 It Gets Better

Leader preparation: Arrange for computers with Internet access. Read about the “It Gets Better” project at <http://www.itgetsbetter.org/pages/about-it-gets-better-project/>. Bookmark this site for easy access. Preview some of the “It Gets Better” videos on YouTube and choose one or two to show your group.

Supplies:

- computers with Internet access
- Bibles

Have someone read aloud Ecclesiastes 3:4. Invite members of the group to share a highlight and a low point from their week. Talk about the ups and downs of life. How do people get support during low times? How do they give support? Give information about the “It Gets Better” campaign, such as the following: Newspaper columnist Dan Savage and his partner created a YouTube video aimed at young people who were experiencing bullying or harassment because of their sexual identity. He was responding to the recent suicides of youth who had been bullied at school. He offered the video as a way to encourage other people to tell youth that there was hope for the future; in other words, he wanted them to know that it does get better. Scarcely more than two months later there were more than ten thousand videos that had been viewed more than thirty-five million times. The “It Gets Better” project has become a forum for tens of thousands of people and organizations to give hope to youth. Those involved include celebrities such as U.S. President Barack Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, actor Ellen DeGeneres, as well as staff from well-known organizations (such as The Gap and Google), and many ordinary people.

Show a few “It Gets Better” videos. Ask how this project helps to create a new and brighter future for GLBT youth. What are some of the works of art that have been a source of hope or encouragement for your group members? Some are probably great works of art while others may be smaller and simpler (a child’s drawing for example, or a quilt made by a friend). What needs do they notice in their daily contexts? What have they created or might they create that could give hope or encouragement to someone else?



9 AIDS Quilt

Leader preparation: View the AIDS quilt at <http://www.aidsquilt.org/view.htm>. Prepare to share information and some of the images with your group. Look for images of the quilt on Google Images. Talk to your pastor about the possibility of making a panel for the quilt with others from your congregation. If you decide to make a panel for the quilt, check the directions for doing so at <http://www.aidsquilt.org/makeapanel.htm>, and gather supplies for making a memorial panel. Alternative: Instead of making a panel for the quilt, make a more generic quilt panel or create a paper quilt panel. Choose a person or people whose lives

you wish to remember—perhaps members of your congregation who have died recently, your own grandparents or great grandparents, or people in your community who have recently died.

Supplies:

- information about the AIDS Memorial Quilt from Attachment: Activity 9 and from <http://www.aidsquilt.org/view.htm>.
- computer with Internet access
- (optional) fabric and fabric paint or other supplies for making a quilt panel
- (optional) heavy paper and construction paper in a variety of colors
- (optional) markers
- (optional) scissors
- (optional) glue

Share information about the AIDS Memorial Quilt. Lead a discussion that focuses on the following questions. *How has art been used to remember and to create hope? Who do you know who has been impacted by the AIDS epidemic?* If you have chosen to make a memorial panel (either from fabric or paper) for a particular person, talk about who you will be remembering. Work together to create a panel that remembers that person with words and images.

If you do not have an individual in mind, talk about the impact of HIV-AIDS in places such as Southern Africa. Gather information from sites such as <http://www.stephenlewisfoundation.org>, and make your panel a more general memorial. As you work, consider how the AIDS Memorial Quilt Project brings hope and beauty to our world.

Reflect

Consider the song title “Trouble and Beauty” by Carolyn McDade and the phrase “the beauty of our differences begins with our right to belong.” What did you discover about trouble and about beauty in this session? How were you able to honor and celebrate differences? Consider how your group members are growing and learning through these experiences. What signs of newness did you encounter in this session? How are you being changed through this experience? Give thanks to God for this time and this growth.

Attachment: Activity 5

Vedran Smajlović: Cellist of Sarajevo

For twenty-two days in 1993, during the Siege of Sarajevo, Vedran Smajlović risked his life playing a public lament for his fellow citizens. Dressed in black formal wear and seated on a fire-scorched chair, he played Albinoni's Adagio in G Minor amid the rubble of the bombs. Smajlović played for twenty-two successive days, at different times of day, in honor of twenty-two fellow Bosnians who were killed in a bomb explosion as they stood in line to buy bread. He also played for free at different funerals during the siege, even though such funerals were often targeted by enemy bombs and sniper fire. Smajlović's playing caught the attention of people around the world. Famous folk singer Joan Baez visited Sarajevo in 1993 and watched him play. (See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AkTh_oxtcbk&feature=related.)

Vedran Smajlović was a cellist in the Sarajevo String Quartet. He played in the Sarajevo Opera, the Sarajevo Philharmonic Orchestra, the Symphony Orchestra RTV Sarajevo, and the National Theatre of Sarajevo. During the war in Bosnia, Smajlović and hundreds of thousands of other civilians were trapped in the city. They suffered the cold, the shortages of food and water, the bombings, and the deadly sniper fire in the streets. In late 1993, Smajlović managed to leave besieged Sarajevo. He continues to work as a performer, composer, and conductor, and now lives in Warrenpoint, Northern Ireland.

Attachment: Activity 9

The AIDS Memorial Quilt: Memory and Hope

The AIDS Memorial Quilt was started in 1987 when a small group of strangers gathered to document lives that they feared might be forgotten. They decided to create a memorial for those who had died of AIDS. They hoped that the quilt they created would help people better understand AIDS and its impact.

Each “block” (or section) of The AIDS Memorial Quilt measures approximately twelve feet square, and a typical block consists of eight individual 3’ x 6’ panels sewn together.

The quilt was displayed publicly for the first time on October 11, 1987, during the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights. At that time its 1,920 panels covered an area bigger than a football field.

The quilt has continued to grow. It has now become the largest community art project in the world. It has more than forty-four thousand 3’ x 6’ panels—most of them hand-made to honor the life of a particular individual who has died of AIDS.

The quilt is a powerful memorial, but it is also an important tool for public education and awareness building. It is helping to prevent new HIV infections and reduce the stigma associated with AIDS.

More than fourteen million people have visited the quilt at thousands of displays worldwide. Through these displays, more than three million dollars have been raised for AIDS service organizations throughout North America.

As the AIDS epidemic continues, millions of people are affected around the world. But the quilt continues to reach out with its messages of awareness and hope. In 1989, the quilt was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize.

Information from the AIDS Memorial Quilt and Names Project can be found at, <http://www.aidsquilt.org>.

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Future and Vision

About this Age Group

Young adults ages 18–35 have grown up in an era of unprecedented change. They are often future-oriented and less attached to the status quo than previous generations. They may seek to distinguish themselves from the generation of their parents or caregivers, and they may be impatient about changes in their lives that will bring more adult freedom and opportunities. They expect change and take for granted that the way things are now is not the way they will always be.

This mindset opens them to the possibilities and visions God offers. They may be ready and willing participants in the realm of goodness and justice that God is revealing in our midst. However, a down side of this future-oriented perspective is that young adults may need help attending to the present moment. They may need to be supported to slow down and pay attention to the beauty and wonder of God's realm here and now.

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

Spend time reading and reflecting on the two focus passages, Job 38:1–11 and Revelation 21:2–5. What stands out for you as you read each text? Note the questions and challenges that arise for you. What images and ideas about beauty do you notice in the text from Job? Notice how Job is reminded of the awesome wonder of God’s creation. What helps remind you?

As you read the passage from Revelation, notice the image of the future that is presented. What images would you use to describe God’s realm here on earth? How do you think the young adults in your group will hear these passages? As you choose activities for this session, look for ways to help young adults open up and engage these texts. Look for activities that will inspire and challenge your group to experience and imagine God’s realm.

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

Exploring & Engaging Activities

 **1 Creator God (Easy Preparation)**

Leader preparation: Read again Job 38:1–11. Notice the two contrasting sets of images in the passage—one of birthing and the other of building. To which metaphor for God are you most drawn?

Supplies:

- Bibles
- pens or pencils
- paper

Have participants read aloud Job 38:1–11. Ask for volunteers to read one verse in turn or, if everyone is comfortable reading aloud, pass a Bible around the group and have each person read a verse.

Share your answers to the following questions: *What images arise for you as you hear this passage? There are two metaphors for God as creator in this text, one of a building and the other of birthing. Notice each one. What draws your attention? These two metaphors give rise to two different images of God—God as master builder and God as midwife. Which image do you like best? Why? What other Bible images can you think of for God as creator? (Examples include God as sculpture shaping clay in Romans, God as gardener in Genesis 2, or perhaps God as author or word in Genesis 1.)*

Distribute pens and paper. Ask each person to choose an image of God as creator. They might choose one of those previously mentioned or another (painter, weaver, woodcarver, knitter) and write a paragraph of creation in the style of Job 38:4–11. Encourage people to use their imaginations. For example, someone might write, “Where were you when I wove together the branches of trees?”

Option: People might work in pairs or groups of threes to do this. Some may wish to sketch their ideas rather than write them, or may prefer to do this activity verbally rather than in writing. Invite those who wish to do so to share their ideas. They do not necessarily have to read aloud what they wrote, although some may wish to.

  **2 Navaro Rapids**

Leader preparation: Look at the artwork “Navaro Rapids” by Ando Hiroshige. Look carefully, noticing the complexity of the image. Let yourself rest with the art, enjoying Hiroshige’s creation. How does this art speak to you? Prepare the learning area so that the artwork is in a central location, easily viewed by the group. Read Attachment: Activity 2 to learn about how the Japanese color print was made.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- artwork: “Navaro Rapids” by Ando Hiroshige, <http://www.art.com/products/p10023130-sa-i802528/ando-hiroshige-navaro-rapids-c1855.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=ab4fda6b36f84ed3b285828650303e96&searchstring=navaro+rapids>
- “The Making of Japanese Color Prints,” Attachment: Activity 2
- (optional) computer with Internet access and display capability

Session Development

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

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

Ask people to gather around the artwork and look carefully at the art. Discuss what draws their attention. Have people comment on how they think this art was created.

Ando Hiroshige was a Japanese painter and printmaker who lived from 1797 to 1858. He was well known for his landscape woodblock prints. Share information from the attachment about how Japanese color prints were made. Ask people how knowing how this print was made changes how they see it. What do they notice now that they did not see before?

Read aloud Job 38:4–11. What do participants hear in this text? What images come to mind as they think about this text? Some scientists say that the more we understand the complexity of the universe, the more we appreciate the artistry of God as creator. Perhaps this is akin to our experience with the artwork “Navaro Rapids,” where understanding the complexity of the printmaking process helps us experience the art differently. What are people’s responses to this idea?

The Changing City

Leader preparation: Arrange for computers with Internet access to view the images from “The Changing City” by Jörg Müller, from <http://www.ubersite.com/m/99704>.

Supplies:

- computers with Internet access to view “The Changing City” from <http://www.ubersite.com/m/99704>
- Bibles

Have the group look at the images from “The Changing City” artwork series by Jörg Müller, noticing the way the city changes. This is a European city from the 1930s to the 1970s. What changes do they notice? Ask how their city or community is changing. How do they feel about these changes? Read aloud Revelation 21:2–5. What do they imagine the “holy city” might be like? What might it be like to dwell in a place where God is at home among people?

Philosopher Maxine Greene says that art can open our imaginations to see things as they might be otherwise (Maxine Green, *Releasing the Imagination*). That is, art helps us discover that the way things are now is not the way things have to be. Ask how Muller’s art challenges us to see that the community we live in might not have to be the way it is right now. Invite the group to imagine how their city or community might be more like the holy city of John’s vision in Revelation. What would change? How might they be a part of that change?

Discerning & Deciding Activities

 4 Gender, Beauty, and Body (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read the activity instructions. Consider what comes to mind when you hear the phrases “gird up your loins like a man” and “as a bride adorned for her husband.” Write these two phrases on sheets of newsprint or whiteboard, and post them in your learning area. Write the following scripture references on slips of paper, one reference per paper:

Song of Solomon 5:11–13

Song of Solomon: 4:1–4

Genesis 29:16–18

1 Corinthians 4:4–11

1 Samuel 16:11–12

2 Samuel 11:2–5

Proverbs 11:22

Proverbs 31:26–31

Supplies:

- Bibles
- pens
- paper
- newsprint or whiteboard
- markers (one per person)
- slips of paper as described above

Post the papers with the phrases “gird up your loins like a man” and “as a bride adorned for her husband.” Distribute markers and have everyone imagine that these sayings are a Twitter or Facebook post to which they are responding. Invite them to respond to the phrases by adding comments or questions to the newsprint or whiteboard. What images of male and of female are suggested by each phrase? Note that to “gird” means to “encircle,” as in a girdle. To gird one’s loins is to add a belt with sword (that is, to prepare for battle).

Distribute Bibles, and have people look up the passages from which these two phrases come: Job 38:1–11 and Revelation 21:2–5. What reaction do you have when you hear the phrases in context? Form six pairs of small groups. (If your group is small, you might have pairs or groups of three work on more than one passage.) Distribute slips of paper on which you have written the scripture references above. Ask people to read the text and discuss: *What does this passage say about what it means to be male or female? What does this passage say about beauty? How might you reword this text to suit today’s generation? Tomorrow’s?* Gather together again. Read aloud each text and have the small groups or pairs share their responses to the texts.

5 In the Bulb There Is a Flower

Leader preparation: Learn the hymn “In the Bulb There Is a Flower,” or arrange for someone to teach it to your group. Bring bulbs for planting, and arrange where you will plant the bulbs. For information on planting spring bulbs outside in the fall, see <http://gardening.about.com/od/floweringbulbs/ht/PlantBulbs.htm> or <http://www.richmondnursery.com/index.php/gardening-articles-main-menu-30/1-gardening/128-the-rules-of-fall-bulbs>. For information on planting

fall bulbs outside in the spring see <http://www.learn2grow.com/gardening-guides/bulbs/featuredplants/fallbloomingbulbs.aspx> or <http://www.flower-garden-bulbs.com/fallbloomingbulbs.html>. For planting bulbs in pots, see http://www.savvygardener.com/Features/forcing_bulbs.html. If you will be planting bulbs outside, contact your group members; ask them to wear appropriate clothing and to bring gardening gloves.

Supplies:

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

Sing “In the Bulb There Is a Flower.” Consider the symbol of the bulb in this hymn. What does the bulb represent? Natalie Sleeth wrote this hymn for her grandchildren when she herself was dying. Ask what the hymn suggests about how she sees life and death, and what hope this hymn suggests for the future.

Plant bulbs together. Talk about other things in life that have a hidden or future-oriented aspect to them. Bulbs surprise us because they seem to spring so quickly from the ground in the springtime. Ask what beauty surprised group members this week.

6 Syracuse Cultural Workers: Art, Social Change, and Activism

Leader preparation: Read about the Syracuse cultural workers at <http://syracuseculturalworkers.com/about-scw>, and look at some of the art they have created. Download or bookmark information to share with your group. Include some of the artwork in the information you share. Gather supplies for making a collage. If you have not made collages before, see tips and ideas for collage-making from <http://www.wikihow.com/Make-a-Collage> or <http://www.squidoo.com/creative-collage>.

Supplies:

- computers with Internet access, or information about the Syracuse cultural workers from <http://syracuseculturalworkers.com/about-scw>
- supplies for making a collage: scissors, glue sticks, and sheets of heavy weight paper, artwork board, or foam core (one per person); magazines, newspapers, calendars, used greeting cards, wrapping paper, and other items with pictures that can be cut up; add-ons such as paper doilies, buttons, sequins, stickers, stars, stamps

Look at the information about the Syracuse cultural workers. Talk about the mission and vision of this group. Ask how they use art to create peace, justice, and social change.

Read aloud the vision of a new world from Revelation 21:2–5. How can art and beauty be a force for change in the world?

Share ideas on collage-making. Make collages that depict your vision of a future of peace, justice, and hope in the world. When the collages are finished, have an “artists’ tour” to view and appreciate one another’s creations.

Sending & Serving Activities

 7 **The Sculptor and the Clay (Easy Preparation)**

Leader preparation: Read Job 38:1–7. What images stand out to you? If you were to mime this passage, what postures would you use?

Supplies:

- Bibles

Divide into two equal-sized groups. Imagine one group as clay, the other as sculptors. The sculptors build a single sculpture out of all the “clay” players. The sculpture is finished when all of the players touch someone else so that all are eventually connected to the finished sculpture. The artists cannot push the clay into position; they can only pull the parts of the clay into the form they want. The sculptors do this “pulling” by almost but not quite touching a body part of one of the pieces of clay (actors) such as a back, arm, head, or leg. They almost touch, with an open hand, and then move the hand about. The “clay” players follow the moving open hand and move into the position suggested by that movement. No words are allowed.

Have someone read aloud Job 38:1–7. The sculptors will craft an image or scene from this passage from the clay. Invite the sculptors to admire the finished sculpture. Have the “clay” participants take turns stepping out of the sculpture to admire it after they are temporarily replaced by one of the sculptors.

Have someone else read aloud Job 38:8–11. This time, those who were sculptors become the clay, and the others become the sculptors who will create a sculpture that represents this passage. Read Job 38:1–11 again. Ask how people hear this passage anew after having been part of sculpting it. How are we clay and how are we sculptors in God’s creative activity in the world?

8 Skater Church

Leader preparation: Preview the video on St. James Anglican Church, Perth Ontario, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3K20scK-eWE>. Read Revelation 21:2–5. Consider what visions and hopes you have for a renewed church and a renewed world.

Supplies:

- equipment to show YouTube video <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3K20scK-eWE>
- Bibles

St. James Anglican Church is located in the small town of Perth, Ontario (about 60 km from Canada’s capital city, Ottawa). The church discovered that skateboarders were breaking into the church to use the church basement for skateboarding. At first, the church responded by trying to keep the youth out with locks and signs. Then it discovered a new vision and a new way of being church. It hired a professional skateboarder and opened its basement as a skateboard park. Watch the YouTube video from St. James Anglican Church.

Lead a discussion that focuses on the following questions. *How did the church change? What new ways of being church did this community of Christians discover? What do you think some of the challenges they faced would have been?* Look at the video again, noticing the differences between the skaters, church members, and

clergy: How do they dress, speak, play? What art forms do they use to express themselves? What differences might there be in their understanding of beauty, of art, or of God?

In order to create a shared vision with those whom we consider to be “other,” we have to learn to see things from another point of view. Ask what they think might have helped the people of St. James to see skaters differently. What do they think might have helped the skaters to see church differently?

Have someone read aloud Revelation 21:2–5. *How is St. James Anglican church helping to create a “holy city” in its community? What visions of church can you imagine for your faith community?*

Blessing and Beauty

Leader preparation: Arrange for an accompanist or someone to lead the singing of the hymn “For the Beauty of the Earth.” Gather supplies you will need. Prepare a note card for each person that says, “[Person’s name], you are blessing and beauty.” Leave space on the cards for others to sign their names and add words of greeting.

Supplies:

- small blank note cards, one per person
- colored drawing pencils
- hymn: “For the Beauty of the Earth” by Folliot S. Pierson (tune: Dix), <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/f/b/fbeauty.htm>

Distribute the note cards, and have people sign their names and add words of blessing or appreciation on other people’s cards. Sing together the hymn “For the Beauty of the Earth.” Consider how each one of us is a gift of blessing and beauty for others. Have group members suggest, for each person in turn, some ways that individual brings blessing and beauty. Close by blessing one another with these words: “[Person’s name], you are blessing and beauty. Go in peace.”

Reflect

Read the lyrics or sing for yourself the hymn “For the Beauty of the Earth.” Consider what gifts of beauty and blessing you have received from this session. What have you learned? How have you been touched or changed by this experience? Say a prayer of gratitude for each person in the group and for the ways their individual gifts have blessed you and others. If you will be leading future sessions with this group, consider how you can continue to grow together. How will you challenge and affirm the people that you lead? What new challenges and growth do you anticipate for yourself?

Attachment: Activity 2

The Making of Japanese Color Prints

Japanese color prints, such those of as those Ando Hiroshige, were made from hand-carved wooden blocks that were printed by hand using a method developed around 1744. No mechanical devices of any sort were used. A key block, printed in black, was made first, followed by a series of color impressions, each of which were made from a separate block.

There were three separate steps, carried out by different people. The artist made the design, whose name it bears; the engraver created the blocks; and the printer printed the impressions to produce the finished print.

The artist made a rough sketch that was redrawn and elaborated in clean lines on thin paper using fine brushes and black ink.

The engraver used a thin rice paste to glue the design, face down, onto a block of cherry wood. Great care was taken in the selection of the wood, with a grain that added to the finished print. The engraver rubbed the paper away, using a little oil, until the lines could be seen clearly. Then the engraver outlined each line with a sharp knife. Sharp chisels were used to gouge away the surrounding wood until the design was left in sharp relief. This process created the key block.

The printer took from the key block a number of black ink proofs by spreading ink on the block and placing paper on top of that. The impression was then rubbed off with a hand tool. The printer made one proof for each color to be used in the final print.

These proofs went back to the artist, who indicated which parts were to be printed in a given color. The proofs went back to the engraver, who made from them a series of blocks, one for each color.

The printer did the rest, putting color on the first block, wiping it off to produce an exquisite gradation, and then placing the paper on top of the block and rubbing to create an impression. This process was repeated for all the blocks.