

# Experiencing Beauty



## Exploration: Discovery

### About this Setting

All of us experience beauty in different ways, but if we are awake to it, beauty reveals itself to us every day. We find beauty in the midst of joy and struggle, in times of brokenness and healing. We discover it in work and play, individually and in community, in the midst of relationships with spouses and partners, parents and children, friends, co-workers, and acquaintances. Our call is to be ready, to open ourselves to the experience of the beauty all around and within us. As we learn to connect with all that is holy in the universe, we find ourselves being changed from the inside out. We grow into the people we are created to be, and we understand the innate beauty within us and within all of God's creation.

### 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**

## Household and Family Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity



#### 1 Reconnecting (Easy Preparation)

**Supplies:**

- blanket

Go for a walk with someone you love—your spouse or partner, your child, or a close friend. Find a secluded place away from crowds, such as a park, a lakeshore, or even your own backyard. If weather permits, spread out the blanket, and just sit or lie there, looking up at the clouds. If it's too cold to sit, then just walk in silence, noticing what's around you.

For the first few minutes, don't say anything. Just watch and listen. Quiet yourself and attend to the sounds of the wind, the rustling of grass and leaves, the singing of birds, or the chattering of squirrels. Notice the way the wind moves the branches, and the way the clouds swirl and form. Pay attention to your own breathing, the feel of the blanket under your back, and the warmth of the sunlight on your face. If warm enough, take off your shoes, and feel the grass under your feet.

When you're ready, share with your loved one the sights, sounds, and smells that you noticed. How do you feel when you are out in the open, away from noise and technology? What experiences come to you that you don't usually notice: sounds, smells, tactile sensations? How does God meet you in the quietness? How does it connect you with the beauty of the created world and the beauty within yourself?

### Discerning & Deciding Activity

#### 2 Drawing the Senses

**Supplies:**

- unlined drawing paper
- crayons, colored pencils, or markers
- (optional) music

Art is not just for children, and it's not just for the "gifted" or "talented." It's for all of us. So gather your family or loved ones around the kitchen table, on the living room floor, or outside in the yard, and use this simple activity to become more aware of the beauty available to us every day. Don't be critical of yourself or of one another; don't expect to produce great art. Just enjoy the process. Play music if you like.

Let your mind drift to different things that speak to you of beauty, wonder, or delight. You could think about:

- something that smells wonderful
- something that feels comforting

- something that makes you smile or laugh
- something that tastes heavenly
- something that sounds delightful

Choose one or more colors, and then draw that feeling. It doesn't need to be a representational picture, just an expression of what you feel. When you're finished, talk with one another about the process. Where do you find beauty in life, and how does it make you feel? Post the pictures where you can all be reminded to look for beauty all around you.

### Sending & Serving Activity

#### ③ Creating a Family Altar

**Supplies:**

- shallow bowl or large plate
- several large candles
- small paper bags

This is an activity for your family or loved ones that can help remind you of the divine beauty in the everyday things around you. Each participant will take a paper bag and go out into the yard or neighborhood to gather objects that reflect the beauty of the Creator: a few stones, a wildflower, a twig, an evergreen branch, an eggshell, a weed in the crack of the sidewalk. Look for things that are small and seemingly ordinary, things that might normally be overlooked.

When you come back together, show the rest of the group what you've collected. Discuss why you chose the items and why you think they're beautiful. Take time to discover the beauty in one another's offerings. Talk about how these beautiful things might have been created and how you see God's hand in them.

When you've finished, arrange the objects in a shallow bowl or on a plate among the candles. Place them as a centerpiece on your table as a family altar. When you gather for meals, light the candles and spend a few moments thinking and talking about the ways you experienced beauty throughout your day. Be aware of the little things, and be grateful.

## Individual and Personal Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity

#### 4 Waking Up (Easy Preparation)

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- small stone
- indelible marker

Read aloud Genesis 28:10–19. As you read, notice what words and phrases stand out in your mind. Jot them down. Then read the passage a second time slowly and note any insights or personal connections that come to you.

In this scene, Jacob is running away. He deceived his father and betrayed his brother, and now he’s living with the consequences of his bad decisions. His brother has threatened to kill him, so Jacob is running for his life. He runs until sundown, and then, exhausted, camps in a place so uncomfortable he has to use a stone for a pillow.

And there Jacob dreams. He dreams of a ladder reaching up to heaven, and angels ascending and descending. In the dream God says, “I’m going to give you this land and make your descendants so numerous you won’t be able to count them. Everywhere you go, I will be with you.”

It’s an odd place for God to meet him and make elaborate promises about his future, don’t you think? Yet when Jacob wakes up, he doesn’t question the dream. Instead he says, “Ah. God is in this place, and I didn’t know it.” He takes the stone he’s been using for a pillow and sets it up as an altar to God.

What situations in your life mirror the story of Jacob? What are you running from? What’s chasing you? Where do you find that you have to use a stone for a pillow? What promises come to you in that place? Where is the truth in your dreams? How does heaven open up to you?

What one word would you use as your prayer to the God who is with you even when you do not know it? Take a small stone, and write your word on it. Put it the stone in a prominent place to remind you to be more aware of the presence of God in your life. And thank God for being there even when you weren’t awake to it.

### Discerning & Deciding Activity

#### 5 A Hundred Ways to Kneel and Kiss the Ground

**Supplies:** None

Today, like every other day,  
 We wake up empty and frightened.  
 Don’t open the door to the study  
 And begin reading.  
 Instead, take down a musical instrument.



Let the beauty we love be what we do.  
 There are a hundred ways to kneel and kiss the ground.  
 —Jalaluddin Rumi (1207–1273), *The Book of Love*

As seekers of God’s way, we know that who we are is more important than what we do, and yet how often do we identify ourselves according to our job, or our accomplishments, or our material acquisitions? Thirteenth-century Persian poet and mystic Jalaluddin Rumi gives a bit of advice that is every bit as applicable for those of us who live in the twenty-first century: when you’re afraid and empty, don’t try to fill the emptiness with head knowledge. Instead, feed your soul with beauty.

There are, indeed, a hundred—perhaps a thousand—ways to kneel and kiss the ground: traditional prayer, quiet centering, meditation, yoga, music, or dance. What matters is not what we do, but how we connect with God in our deepest core.

Today, try a meditation walk. Take a few minutes on your own—in the morning, on your lunch hour, or after work—and take a brief walk. As you settle in to the rhythm of your stride, try using this phrase as a mantra: “Let the beauty we love be what we do.”

What kinds of beauty do you most love? And how does that beauty help you become the person you were created to be? How does it connect you with God? What would you say to God by way of thanks?

## Sending & Serving Activity



### 6 Consider the Lilies

#### **Supplies:**

- 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>
- (optional) Internet access

Read Matthew 6:24–34.

Spend time studying Georgia O’Keeffe’s painting, “Red Canna.” About her art, O’Keeffe said:

Nobody sees a flower—really—it is so small—we haven’t time—and to see takes time. . . . So I said to myself—I’ll paint what I see—what the flower is to me, but I’ll paint it big and they will be surprised into taking time to look at it—I will make even busy New Yorkers take time to see what I see of flowers.

—Georgia O’Keeffe, contribution (1939) to the exhibition catalogue *An American Place* (1944)

What do you see in the O’Keeffe painting that surprises you? What feelings does it evoke in you? How does the artist make you stop and take time to really look at the canna lily?



If you have flowers in your yard, go out and pick one, and look carefully at it. If not, consider this photograph of a red canna lily at [http://www.flowerphoto.org/flowers/canna/photos\\_143.html](http://www.flowerphoto.org/flowers/canna/photos_143.html). How do you respond differently to the real flower or the photograph than you did to O’Keeffe’s painting? What does the artist help you to see in the wonder of creation?

In the Matthew text, Jesus says, “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these” (Matthew 6:28–29, NRSV). What do you think Jesus wants you to learn from the lilies? What do you see when you stop and take time to look at them?

## Work Place and Communal Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity



#### 7 Faces in the Crowd (Easy Preparation)

**Supplies:** None

Before or after work or on a Saturday morning, take time to go by a local coffee shop, or a busy café, or the food court in the mall. Sit in a place where you can observe people coming and going. As you watch people, listen to bits and pieces of their conversation. Take in the antics of a small child or the way two lovers look at one another. Watch the old couple holding hands or the young mother with the haunted, frazzled expression. Look at the janitor, the teenager who serves your coffee, the homeless guy coming in out of the cold, or the woman in the back corner with the bruise on her cheek.

Don’t turn away from the bits of life that are irritating or ugly or disturbing. Instead, look at them fearlessly, name them, and give them a face. Can you see past the shabbiness to the beauty in that homeless woman’s eyes? Can you appreciate how painful it must be for that old man with the walker to get around? Do you recognize the courage it takes to be the single mother of two small children? Then you are seeing people as Jesus might see them.

## Discerning & Deciding Activity

### 8 For the Beauty

**Supplies:**

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

Over the course of this faith practice, we will consider how different kinds of beauty resonate with different kinds of people. One way this happens is through music. Some people find a connection with God and their own soul through traditional hymns, some through classical music, and some through contemporary renditions.

The following YouTube video is a contemporary interpretation arranged by John Rutter of the old familiar hymn “For the Beauty of the Earth,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHIfrLNYUGw>.

Listen to the hymn, watch the images, and think about how the music and photographs affect you. In what ways does this hymn help you get in touch with a sense of the presence of God? What familiar feelings does it arouse? In what ways does it challenge you to new ways of viewing God and the beauty of creation? How does the music make you feel? How do you respond to the images? What parts of the lyrics speak to you most profoundly?

Put a link to this YouTube video on your computer desktop. For one week watch this video every morning before you start your day, and see if it makes a difference in the way you view the world, other people, God, and yourself. Then keep it in mind when you encounter other versions of the same hymn.

## Sending & Serving Activity

### 9 The Good That Love Inspires

**Supplies:**

- note cards
- writing utensils

For the good that love inspires,  
For a world where none exclude,  
For a faith that never tires,  
And for every heart renewed,  
God of all to you we raise  
This our hymn of grateful praise.

—Words by Miriam Therese Winter © Medical Mission Sisters, 1993. Used by permission.

This alternate verse to the hymn “For the Beauty of the Earth” gives a fresh perspective on the concept of beauty and divine creativity. God the Creator shaped the universe and all its life forms with infinite care and diversity. As people of faith and seekers of truth, we acknowledge the image of God in everything around us, and within us as well. At least theoretically.



When faced with a breathtaking sunrise or a majestic waterfall, it is easy to think about the creative power of God in the beauty around us. But we don't always take time to recognize that spark of the Holy in one another, or to communicate that awareness to the people we love.

Think about the important people in your life—your spouse or partner, parents, children, family, friends, mentors, and loved ones. What makes them beautiful to you? What influence have they had upon your life that has enabled you to grow into the person you were created to be? How have they changed your life for the better?

Take time to write a note to one of them, thanking that person for being an instrument of God's love and grace in your life, and for the beauty he or she has brought to your world. If you find the experience meaningful, consider making it a practice to write a note once a month, or even once a week, to someone who has touched your life.

When gratitude becomes a spiritual practice, we will find ourselves changed.

All are but parts of one stupendous whole,  
Whose body Nature is, and God the soul.  
—Alexander Pope, "Essay on Man," (Epistle i. Line 267)

How do you know that you are "part of the one stupendous whole"? When do you feel that most vividly? If all the parts are intricately connected, what does that teach us about God, and the universe, and the way we fit into the pattern? How does remembering it help you connect to beauty?

# Experiencing Beauty



## Exploration: Scripture

### About this Setting

The Bible offers us many images of beauty and creativity. Some of them have to do with the physical creation. Some reflect beauty through human relationships of love, friendship, work, and social interaction. Some have to do with deepening our inner being in relationship with God. But all the stories are our stories as well, and when we recognize ourselves in the sacred texts, we begin to discover their beauty and significance and their power to transform us.

### 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**

## Household and Family Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity

#### ① Raindrops on the Window

**Supplies:**

- song: “Joy Is Like the Rain” by Miriam Therese Winter, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjddC0VIHHQ>
- Bible

“It’s a beautiful day.” What do you think of when you hear those words? Do you imagine sunshine, blue skies, a fresh breeze perhaps? Chances are you don’t think of a cloudy and rainy day. Rain is not only a fact of life, but it’s important for growth and fruitfulness. But when the rain comes, either literally or figuratively, we often grumble and complain and use words like “dreary” and “gray” and “boring.”

Listen to the song “Joy Is Like the Rain.” This song images joy as the rain and the clouds and the storm. Whatever comes our way, Christ is with us in the midst of it, always present, always faithful. Like Jesus in the boat in the midst of the storm, we do not need to be afraid, because even the storm is in God’s hands (Matthew 8:24–27). If we are aware of the presence of God, we can learn to see beauty in the rain as well as in the sunshine.

So, on the next rainy day, gather your loved ones and sit for a few minutes watching the rain. Listen to the rhythms it makes on the roof. Watch the designs the raindrops create as they hit against the windowpane, merge together, and slide down the glass. See the patterns that form in the puddles. Smell the freshness of the air. Together, listen to the song and talk about how rain can be a beautiful sign of God’s presence. Then offer a simple prayer thanking God for rain.

## Discerning & Deciding Activity

### 2 Transforming Questions (Easy Preparation)

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- pens or pencils
- small slips of paper

Read aloud Luke 9:28–36. In this story Jesus takes his closest friends with him up on the mountain to pray. While they are there, Jesus changes before their eyes and is transformed with a heavenly glory. Verse 32 says that Peter, James, and John were exhausted and sleepy, but because they stayed awake, they had the opportunity to see the glory.

Talk about what it means to be wide awake—awake to God and awake to one another. How do we learn to see other people from God’s perspective, to see the “glory” of each individual who is made in God’s image? Where do we find Jesus revealed in our daily lives? How do we become aware of our own need for transformation? Where do we find beauty in the midst of the changes and challenges?

Spiritual deepening isn’t always an easy journey. It’s not so much about finding answers as it is about asking the questions. If you could ask God anything, what would your question be? Have everyone in the family circle write down their questions on slips of paper and put them into a basket. Put each question on a separate slip of paper. Then use those questions to generate conversation around the dinner table. Every voice, from the youngest to the oldest, has something to teach and something to learn. And remember that you’re not looking for answers, but for meaningful discussion.

## Sending & Serving Activity

### 3 Through the Wardrobe

**Supplies:**

- book: *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis, available online or in local bookstores

In years past, people often gathered as a family to read books aloud. It’s a challenge in our fast-paced and technological world simply to get people together, but if you can do it, you’ll find it immensely rewarding. Try reading together for thirty minutes in the evening after dinner. It may take a few nights to finish the book, but you also might be pleasantly surprised when your family asks for more.

After you’ve read the book—or maybe even as you’re reading and responses arise—take time to talk about it together. These questions might get you started:

- Lucy takes a risk of faith to go through the wardrobe into Narnia and to trust in Aslan. What risks have you taken, or do you need to take, in order to have a deeper relationship with God and with others?

- Edmund gets tempted by the White Witch because of his own pride and desire for power. What temptations draw you away from what you know is right?
- Peter is reluctant to take on the role of High King and hero of Narnia because he thinks he's not strong enough and because he feels guilty about not believing Lucy and not protecting Edmund. What fears do you have about not being adequate to the call of God or to the responsibilities life presents to you?
- Where do you find your own spiritual truth in the book? Where do you find delight and wonder? Where do you see beauty, both in the physical world and in relationships?
- What connections do you see between Aslan's story and the biblical story of Jesus? What do you learn about forgiveness?

## Individual and Personal Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity



#### 4 On the Other Hand (Easy Preparation)

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- paper or journal
- pen or pencil

First Peter 3:3–4 says that true beauty does not come from outward adornment, but from the inner self, the beauty of a gentle spirit. Sometimes when we grow up, we lose touch with the beauty and wonder we once experienced as children. Maybe a difficult childhood keeps us from remembering much joy, or maybe we're just too caught up in the daily routine of life. Either way, this activity may help us reconnect with the beauty we once knew and be more awake to the presence of God in and around us.

Choose one or more of the following "starters." For ten or fifteen minutes, write about it using your nondominant hand. (If you're right-handed, for example, write with your left hand, and don't worry about being "messy.")

- The best Saturday I ever had . . .
- I always wanted to . . .
- It makes me laugh when . . .
- I had a great dream about . . .
- I feel totally free when . . .
- I know I'm loved because . . .

Allow your adult self to recede into the background for a little while, and let your child self come to the fore. Chances are you'll become aware of the beauty in small things, emotions you thought you had lost forever.

Spend time thinking about the experiences you wrote about and thank God for the beauty that comes with childlikeness.

## Discerning & Deciding Activity

### 5 Eat, Drink, Share, and Rejoice

**Supplies:**

- Bible

Read Nehemiah 8. In this story Nehemiah, the governor of Judah, and Ezra, the priest, gathered together the people of Israel for a reading and interpretation of the law of Moses. For half a day the people stood and listened to Ezra read.

If that doesn't sound like a fun day to you, consider the context of the story. The people of Israel had been in exile in Babylon, the walls of Jerusalem broken down, their homes destroyed. Now the walls had been rebuilt, and more than 40,000 exiles had come home. After years in exile, they heard the word of God read to them again, and they wept. The leaders said to them, "Don't weep. Instead, go and feast—eat the fat and drink the wine and send portions to those who have none, for this day is holy to our God. And do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

These were people who understood firsthand what it meant to be outcasts, to be marginalized. When they finally returned home, they celebrated. But they included in their celebrations those among them who didn't have enough. The beauty of that day, and the joy of the homecoming, was intended for everyone.

Let's get practical. Who are the outcasts, the marginalized, of our society? Maybe it's you. Maybe it's someone in your family, or someone you know. Maybe it's the guy on the corner whose sign says he's homeless and hungry. Maybe it's the woman who cleans houses and keeps her head down because she's afraid she'll be deported. Maybe it's the boy who's been shuttled around to four different foster families. Maybe it's the grouchy old man in the nursing home, or the disabled little girl who's unable to speak, or the woman who has lost her memories to Alzheimer's.

What would it be like to be that man, that woman, that child? Create a scenario in your mind of what the daily lives of these people might be like, and reflect on what it would be like to have someone reach out to them and treat them as people of value? How might you bring beauty and belonging to someone who stands on the margins?

## Sending & Serving Activity

### ⑥ Praying with Colors

**Supplies:**

- blank paper
- crayons or colored pencils
- Bible

When we think of beauty, we often think of the Grand Canyon or delicate dogwood blossoms or the power of the endless ocean. We think of fine art or classical music or the enduring words of the great poets. But we need to recognize that not all beauty comes from outside us. We need to appreciate as well the beauty within us and learn to express it without worrying about how we look or how well we're doing. In this activity we're not going to be artists. We're going to pray with colors.

Consider these biblical images of beauty:

- Isaiah 62:3: You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.
- Wisdom of Solomon 7:7, 10:  
Therefore I prayed, and understanding was given me;  
I called on God, and the spirit of wisdom came to me.  
I loved her more than health and beauty, and I chose to have her rather than light, because her radiance never ceases.
- Ecclesiastes 43:9: The glory of the stars is the beauty of heaven, a glittering array in the heights of the Lord. (NRSV)

Let your mind circle around the images of beauty that capture your imagination. Never mind that nagging little voice inside that says you have no talent. Never mind the compulsion to create a stunning picture or even draw something that anyone else can identify. Just use the paper as a prayer mat and colors instead of words. Pick a color that speaks to you. Draw whatever image or motion comes into your mind. Enjoy yourself. Let yourself go. Let the crayons form an abstract, multicolored prayer of gratitude and joy and thankfulness. Words aren't necessary. God understands the language of the heart.

## Work Place and Communal Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity

#### 7 There Must Be a God Somewhere

**Supplies:**

- song: “Over My Head” African American traditional, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6GVc0rFTFw&feature=related>

“Over my head, I hear music in the air. There must be a God somewhere.”

Listen to the YouTube video. This African American spiritual, like most of the songs that grew out of enslavement, speaks of an awareness of God even in the midst of difficult challenges. There must be a God somewhere, because there’s still music, still beauty, in the world around us.

Consider the words of the biblical creation story: In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness (Genesis 1:1–4 NRSV).

God brings light from darkness. God’s spirit hovers over the void, and the breath of God sweeps down, and there is light. It’s the ultimate divine surprise.

Describe an experience in which you were aware of God with you or within you. Was it something you were expecting or hoping to cultivate, or something that came upon you without warning? In what ways have you seen light come out of your darkness? What is it about your experience of beauty—any kind of beauty—that convinces you that “there must be a God somewhere”?

### Discerning & Deciding Activity



#### 8 Wind from the Sea

**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&archstring=wind+from+the+sea>

Spend a few moments looking closely at Andrew Wyeth’s painting “Wind from the Sea.” The Bible speaks of the Spirit of God as wind—the breath of creation, the mighty rushing wind of Pentecost, the elusive breeze that whispers of God’s presence.

- What feelings does the wind evoke in you?
- What do you see in Wyeth’s painting that speaks to you of the Spirit of God?
- What do you see that speaks to you of beauty?



- What feelings does it evoke in you?
- Where do you imagine the road goes?
- What do you see in the curtains?
- What do you think the house behind you is like?

The sea is just barely visible, a sliver of water glimpsed from the corner of the window. If you hadn't known the name of the painting, what would you have called it? Why? What do you see from the window of your own soul? Where might your spiritual path be leading you?

## Sending & Serving Activity



### 9 Meandering (Easy Preparation)

**Supplies:** None

Rush, rush, rush. In John 14:27, Jesus says, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. The peace that I give you isn't the kind of peace the world offers. Don't be troubled; don't be afraid" (paraphrased from NRSV).

Yet most of us are troubled. Think of a pond or a river after a hard rain—the water has been troubled, and the silt has risen so that the water is no longer clear. So it is with our souls. We get stirred up and troubled. We're always in a hurry. We're late because we think our schedule is so important that we have to cram in one more "vital" phone call or e-mail before we leave for that appointment. And then we end up rushed, fried, and frazzled.

No wonder we miss the beauty of the world around us. No wonder we don't feel centered and grounded. No wonder we lose sight of the path.

These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist with God to-day. There is no time to them. There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Self-Reliance*

Now is all we're given. We only have today's roses. Yesterday is past, and tomorrow hasn't come. Meanwhile, the gift is offered to us today—God's peace, right here, right now, no matter what else is happening. If we intend to enjoy the journey, we need to slow down, breathe, center ourselves, and take in the scenery along the way.

Did you ever think that meandering could be a spiritual practice? Take an extra thirty minutes and explore a back road you've never been on before. Slow down. Turn off the radio and open the window. Feel the wind on your skin. Breathe. Sing. Look at the sky, the trees, the sun and shadow (or the rain and clouds). Pull off on the shoulder and watch a hawk hanging in the air. Let the silt in your soul settle a little.

Learning to go slowly is a beautiful thing. It lets us get in touch with our true selves and with God—lets us get away from frantic demands of a harried world. Thirty minutes? It's not much time, but the spiritual payoff can be priceless, both for you and for those around you.

Truth, and goodness, and beauty are but different faces of the same All.  
—Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature: Addresses and Lectures*

What truth, goodness, and beauty have you found in the Bible? What stories most touch you or resonate with your life experience? How do these stories intersect with your own story?

# Experiencing Beauty



## Exploration: Discipleship

### About this Setting

When we look at the life of Jesus, we see someone who lived fully into the promise of what it means to be human. He loved and accepted all kinds of people, reached out and touched them, and met their needs. He ate and drank with his friends, told stories, and probably laughed a lot. He was, above all, true to himself and to his calling from God. So what does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus? How does that relate to our experience of beauty? Does a consciousness of God in our lives change the way we perceive the world around us? Does a commitment to the way of Christ enable us to see beauty where we couldn't see it before and to bring beauty to those who need it? These activities will help bring us to a place of greater understanding about what it means to live in an awareness of God's presence with us on a daily basis.

### 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**

## Household and Family Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity



#### 1 Praying through Touch (Easy Preparation)

##### Supplies:

- a covered basket or paper bag
- a variety of items that give different tactile sensations—smooth, sticky, squishy, prickly, crackly, soft. Each item should be small enough to hold in the hand.

Some suggestions:

- a small rock or marble
- a feather
- a handful of dryer lint
- a leaf
- a stick
- a small sheet of paper
- a nail
- a ball of clay or Play Doh
- a wadded up ball of tape (so you can feel the sticky side)
- a sweet gum ball or other seed pod from a tree
- a shell
- a piece of flannel
- a coin
- a sponge

According to scripture Jesus touched people. He let them touch him. He connected with people who usually didn't feel a loving touch—lepers and prostitutes, old people and children, sick people, and those who needed emotional healing. He expressed love and acceptance through touch, and he taught his disciples to reach out as well.

Life is full of many different sensations, but often we don't register them simply because they're so familiar. In this exercise, we try to be intentional about touching and experiencing ordinary things and using those ordinary things as a focus for family prayer. One at time, each member of the circle will reach into the bag or basket and draw out an item. Without looking at it, the person holding the item will feel it and describe it without naming it, while the others try to guess what it is.

As you touch these items without being able to see them, think about the ways you can reach out and connect with the world around you with the loving touch of God. Maybe it's something as simple as picking up trash or recycling your soft drink bottle and remembering that the earth doesn't belong to us. Maybe it's kissing away the pain of a skinned knee or holding a fragile hand at the bedside of an elderly parent. You can bring the touch of the Divine to everything you touch simply by being aware of the power of that connection.

When all the items have been identified, offer a simple prayer of thanks, something like this: *Thank you, God, for the simple things of life—for seeds and shells, for*

*clay and feathers and rocks, for everything we touch, including each other. May we be like Jesus, bringing healing and wholeness and connection to our piece of the world. Help us be aware of the beauty all around us and within us. Amen.*

## Discerning & Deciding Activity

### ② The Giving Tree

**Supplies:**

- book: *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein. You can obtain a copy at your local bookstore or library, or you can watch the video and listen to the author read the book here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1TZCP6OqRIE>.

Share the story with your family circle, and then talk about what it means to you, using these or similar questions:

- What kind of person is the boy in the story? Does he ever really appreciate what the tree gives him? When and why does he stop appreciating it?
- A repeated refrain in the story is “And the tree was happy.” Why is the tree happy, even when she has lost everything? Does her relationship with the boy seem to be a healthy one, or an unhealthy one? Why do you think she keeps on giving?
- What spiritual truths do you find in this story? What does it say to you about the human relationship with God, with the environment, and with the whole created universe? If you were the boy in the story, what would you do differently? If you were the tree, what would you do?
- What is one thing you can do to be more appreciative of the gifts you have been given?

## Sending &amp; Serving Activity

## ③ Movie Night

**Supplies:**

- movie: *The Secret Garden* (see a trailer at [http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B000HF6XV8/ref=atv\\_feed\\_catalog?tag=imdb-amazonvideo-20](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B000HF6XV8/ref=atv_feed_catalog?tag=imdb-amazonvideo-20))
- popcorn and soft drinks or other snacks

Watch the movie together. As you watch, think about the transformations and connections that take place. After the movie, talk about it. These questions might get you started:

- What kind of pain does Mary Lennox carry when she first comes to Yorkshire to live with her uncle? How does that parallel her uncle's pain and that of her cousin Colin? How does that pain manifest itself in ways that look like selfishness?
- Mary doesn't coddle Colin the way everyone else does. Why does this treatment help him to get better?
- What is the garden like when Mary first finds it? Why is she so fascinated with it?
- At its essence, this is a story about resurrection. Mary and Dickon work together to bring the garden back to life. How is that work an image of what is happening within Mary herself and within Colin?
- What kind of magic does the garden have? Who in the movie is touched by the magic? Why is it important that Mary had to work on the garden to make it beautiful again?
- Discipleship is about following the way of Jesus, living as he lived, and becoming Christ-like in our daily lives. Who in this movie reflects the healing power of Jesus? Who brings healing and compassion to others, and who is healed? How are the characters changed because of what is weeded out of their lives, and what is nurtured?

## Individual and Personal Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity

#### 4 Bring It On (Easy Preparation)

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- pen
- paper or journal

Read Exodus 35:20–29. The context of this passage is a story of sin, forgiveness, and restoration. The Israelites left their enslavement in Egypt and followed Moses into the wilderness. But while Moses was up on the mountain receiving the law of God, the people grew restless and impatient and melted down their treasures to make a golden calf to worship. Now they have repented and been forgiven, and Moses is instructing them in building a tabernacle, a place to worship God.

Consider this story in light of the call to discipleship. People whose hearts were stirred, people whose spirits were willing, came and brought what they had: gold and silver and bronze, personal jewelry, fabric, wood, yarn, spices, and oil. Whatever they possessed, they brought as an offering to God. Whatever skills they had, they brought those, too—smithing and woodworking, weaving and sewing.

Building the tabernacle and worshiping God wasn't a job for the "professional" religious leaders, such as the priests and the scribes. Everyone was involved, and everyone had something to offer. What do you have to offer? Make a list quickly without editing or second-guessing yourself. List things you can do, what you love, and where your passions lie. Look over the list and see what jumps out at you. How can you bring that gift or love or passion with a willing heart? What might you do to contribute to the worship of God and the building up of your faith community?

Whatever you have is enough. Who you are is enough. Just bring it.

### Discerning & Deciding Activity

#### 5 Are We There Yet?

**Supplies:**

- paper
- pen or colored pencils

Sometimes life passes by in such a blur of doing that we forget what it means to be, and to become. We look around and wonder how we got here—and where, exactly, here is.

The example of Jesus shows us that life is a journey, and that as long as we live, we're on the road. We don't "get there" in the sense of reaching a destination; instead, we find our destiny along the way.

One way to be more intentional about understanding the journey is to keep a spiritual timeline. A timeline is a relatively simple tool that can show us a visual representation of the struggles and victories of our lives and help us remember that God is always present with us.

You can make this timeline by hand on a plain sheet of paper, or if you prefer to do it on the computer, Microsoft Word has an easy timeline program you can use. Just open Word and type “timeline” in the help box.

Turn your paper sideways (“landscape”), and draw a straight line across the center. Put the date of your birth on the left end of the line and the current date on the right end. See the example below.

1965-----|-----|-----|-----|-----2012

In between, in chronological order, identify events in your life that affected your spiritual life or relationship with God. Put the “positive” events above the line and the “negative” ones below the line, so that the events you choose show the “highs” and “lows” of your life. You can use words or images.

When you’ve charted the significant spiritual and emotional events of your life, you can connect the events into a line graph that shows your spiritual ups and downs as well as the times you felt closest to God or farthest from any sense of God’s presence.

These questions might help give you focus as you create your timeline:

- What gives your life direction? When did you first get a sense of that direction? When have you lost sight of it?
- When was the first time you remember being aware of God or of some spiritual reality?
- What individuals have most influenced your life, either positively or negatively?
- What do you remember as the lowest point in your life?
- What is the highest point so far?
- What has been your biggest disappointment?
- What has been the best surprise?

When you finish (or come to a stopping point), give thanks to God for the journey and for all the experiences that make you who you are. You might use a prayer such as this: *Thank you, God, for all the ups and downs of life. Help me be aware of your presence in the good times and in the difficult times. Let me always remember that life is a journey, and that you are my companion on the way. Amen.*

## Sending & Serving Activity

### 6 The Bells of Mindfulness

**Supplies:**

- Internet access

We are like sleepwalkers, not knowing what we are doing or where we are heading. Whether we can wake up or not depends on whether we can walk mindfully on our Mother Earth. The future of all life, including our own, depends on our mindful steps. We have to hear the bells of mindfulness that are sounding all across our planet.

—Thich Nhat Hanh, *The World We Have: A Buddhist Approach to Peace and Ecology* (Parallax Press, 2008), pp. 1–2.

A commitment to discipleship is a commitment to changing our daily lives so that following the way of Jesus becomes a practice and the awareness of God becomes second nature. A mindfulness chime can help. Here are two possibilities:

- <http://www.mindfulnessdc.org/mindfulclock.html>: This website allows you to download a mindfulness clock to your computer. The program is customizable and includes invitation bells and a meditation timer as well as Westminster chimes.
- <http://soft.and.free.fr/enindex.php>: “Soft and Free” offers a free chiming clock to add to your PC. It can be set to chime every hour, half hour, or quarter hour and has a variety of peaceful-sounding bells.

Using one of these programs, or a more conventional alarm from a cell phone or bedside clock, set a reminder for yourself. Whenever you hear the chime, stop for a moment and pray for someone you know, or thank God for the gifts of your life, or simply pause and focus your thoughts on the beauty and wonder of life. Sometimes all we need is a gentle reminder to stop, breathe, focus, and remember that God is within us and around us in every moment of our day.

## Work Place and Communal Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity

### 7 Potluck Partners

**Supplies:**

- a food dish to share with friends

When we read the stories of Jesus, we find him often in the homes of friends, sharing a meal. His first recorded miracle was turning water to wine at a wedding. When he taught on the mountainside, he made sure people were fed, even if all he had to work with were a few loaves of bread and a couple of small fish. On the night before he died, Jesus met with his closest friends for the Passover dinner. Even after the resurrection, his disciples found him at the lakeshore, grilling fish for breakfast. Nothing fancy, nothing elaborate—just a chance to get together and talk.

There's something about food that brings people together and helps them open up to one another. Maybe there's someone new in your community who would appreciate the chance to meet people. Maybe there's someone who's going through a hard time with death or divorce or a troubled child. Or maybe there's someone you'd like to get to know better, but you just haven't taken the time to do so. One important spiritual lesson we can learn is that God reaches out to touch us and transform us in the ordinary, seemingly mundane events of life. Discipleship is about the everyday stuff.

Invite a few friends to bring a food dish to share, and spend an evening eating and talking. Ask questions; listen to one another's stories; hear one another's hearts. Share something of your spiritual journey. Take the risk. And invite Jesus to come to dinner.

## Discerning & Deciding Activity



### 8 Reaching Out (Easy Preparation)

**Supplies:**

- Bible

Read Acts 9:17–20. Ananias was a pretty brave man. By the beginning of Acts 9, Saul has already participated in the stoning of Stephen and has begun an all-out persecution of the church. Saul, a devout Jew and a Pharisee, hates these followers of the Way and is determined to slap them in chains and drag them all—men, women, and children—to prison.

So imagine what it would feel like if God came to you and said, “You know that fellow Saul who’s been murdering and imprisoning church members? I want you to go and talk to him, help him see the light.”

Ananias responds the way we probably would: “Are you kidding, God? You know who this man is, right?” God knew who Saul was. And God also knew who Saul could become.

It’s a lesson we might do well to remember if we seek to be disciples of Jesus. God sees beyond what *is* to what *might be*. If we can see that, too—see the potential for greatness or godliness in others—we might be less likely to judge and more likely to encourage. Ananias reached out to Saul and gave him back his sight, and Saul went on to become Paul, the great apostle to the Gentiles.

Is there someone in your life—an acquaintance, a co-worker, someone at church, even a family member—who dislikes you, or annoys you, or misunderstands you? Picture that person. Try sitting with palms up, receptive to God’s whispers. Perhaps contact with this person is unwise or impossible. Nevertheless, you can still pray for God’s grace and healing. Perhaps you could try reaching out. Invite that person for a cup of coffee. Don’t be defensive or try to make him or her see

your side of things. Just listen to what this person has to say. You don't have to work miracles to give people the gift of transformation. That's God's job. You just have to see them, and hear them, and touch them, and care.

## Sending & Serving Activity

### 9 Gifts from the Universe

**Supplies:**

- vase or glass jar
- cut flowers

As disciples we are called to follow the example of Jesus in how we live and relate to others. Jesus gave of himself and walked among people offering beauty, love, and grace. We can do that, too, in simple acts that enhance the lives of those around us.

One simple and beautiful thing we can do for others is to bring them flowers. If you have a garden that's in bloom, go out and cut flowers. If not, stop by the grocery store or convenience store and pick up a mixed bouquet. Arrange them in an inexpensive vase or even a glass jar. Take them to work, to your book club, to the church office, or to the food pantry. It doesn't cost much to bring happiness and beauty to others.

Go early and put the flowers in a prominent place—on the reception desk, in the break room, on a friend's porch or desk. You might wish to add a small card that says, "With love from God," or, if God-talk is inappropriate in your situation, "With best wishes for a good day." Trust it. Your gift will make someone else's day better.

What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.

—Henry Stanley Haskins, "Meditations in Wall Street," 1940

The word "discipleship" comes from the same root as "discipline"—that is, training. As followers of Jesus, the disciples watched and imitated their Rabbi and were trained in the way of love. But the only lasting discipline is self-discipline, that which comes from inside us, rather than any rules or limitations imposed from the outside. What motivates you to be a disciple of Jesus? What stands in the way of becoming the person you were created to be?

# Experiencing Beauty



## Exploration: Christian Tradition

### About this Setting

If we've had much experience in the church, we may find beauty and life-giving truth in our traditions, or we may find that those traditions limit or even hinder our spiritual growth and transformation. In this setting we will endeavor to recapture a sense of wonder about the world and our relationship with God and find new ways to express our 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*

## Household and Family Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity



#### 1 Stargazing (Easy Preparation)

**Supplies:**

- Internet access

We don't have to be in church to connect with the majesty and wonder of God. All we need to do is look up at the stars. But there's much more to the universe than we see from our light-polluted world. Here are some opportunities to see more:

- If you're fortunate enough to have one nearby, take your family or a group of friends to a planetarium.
- If you can find a dark place away from city lights, go out on a clear night and spend time looking up at the heavens.
- Make time to experience one of the annual meteor showers. An annual schedule for 2012 and 2013 can be found at: <http://www.theskyscrapers.org/meteors/index.php/year/2012> or <http://www.theskyscrapers.org/meteors/index.php/year/2013>.
- Explore the amazing photos taken from the Hubble telescope at <http://hubblesite.org/gallery/>.
- Examine where you are in the universe with one of the many interactive sky and constellation charts available online: <http://www.skyandtelescope.com/observing/skychart/>, or <http://www.astronomy.com/News-Observing/Intro%20Sky.aspx>, or <http://www.astroviewer.com/download-av.php>.

Any or all of these experiences can help us connect with God our creator and recognize the Divine in the world around us. May we look at the ever-expanding universe with new eyes and number God's gifts to us like the stars in the heavens.

## Discerning &amp; Deciding Activity

 2 Guatemala Procession**Supplies:**

- artwork: “Guatemala Procession” by Betty LaDuke, [https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1004323110?VIEW\\_PRODUCT=true&product\\_id=15626&store\\_id=1401](https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1004323110?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=15626&store_id=1401)
- computer with Internet access

Talk about some of the traditions your family enjoys. What is beautiful about them? What traditions, if any, do you cherish from your faith tradition? Share your favorite memories.

View the artwork “Guatemala Procession.” During the Christmas season in the village of Chichicastenango in Guatemala, statues of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints are carried in a special parade. The artist, Betty LaDuke, portrays Christ on a donkey in this artwork. Talk about the print. What colors and shapes does the artist use? What emotions do the faces show? What would it be like to be a part of a procession like the one that happens in Chichicastenango? Talk about what you would include in a parade that celebrates those parts of your faith that you most appreciate. Consider acting out a procession of your own.

## Sending &amp; Serving Activity

## 3 Movie Night

**Supplies:**

- movie: *Contact*
- DVD player
- (optional) popcorn and soft drinks or other snacks

Gather your family or friends and watch the movie together. Afterward, spend time talking about it.

When Ellie is just a child, she asks her dad whether there is intelligent life on other worlds. He responds, “I don’t know, Sparks. But I guess I’d say if it is just us . . . seems like an awful waste of space.” Does the enormity of space make you speculate about what might be “out there”?

For millennia, Aristotle’s geocentric model of the universe was the prevailing belief—the idea that the earth was the center of the universe and the sun and moon and other planets revolved around us. The church endorsed this belief as scientific proof of the biblical creation story and the idea that human life was the crown of that creation. Beginning in the fifteenth century with Copernicus, the heliocentric (sun-centered) model of the solar system began to take precedence, but the church still denounced it as heresy. In the seventeenth century the church excommunicated Galileo for his declaration that the earth revolved around the sun, and he was placed under house arrest for life. It wasn’t until well into the nineteenth century that we discovered that the universe is millions of times larger than our own galaxy and that Earth is only a small planet in orbit around a relatively small star.



Think for a moment about church tradition and its relationship to scientific discovery. How does it change our image of ourselves when we admit how minuscule we humans are in the vast expanse of the universe? How does it change our image of God? Does the awareness of millions of other galaxies, and possibly other intelligent life forms, diminish the value of human life on earth or enhance it?

In the movie, Ellie weeps at the beauty of her contact, and says, “No—no words. No words to describe it. Poetry! They should’ve sent a poet. So beautiful. So beautiful. . . . I had no idea.” What do you suppose she means when she says, “They should’ve sent a poet”? In what ways are poetry and theology more fitting for such an experience than science? In what ways do the artistic beauty and symmetry of the universe speak to you of God?

## Individual and Personal Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity



#### 4 For the Beauty (Easy Preparation)

##### **Supplies:**

- hymn: “For the Beauty of the Earth” by Folliot S. Pierpoint, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PaMkj4\\_H8WM&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PaMkj4_H8WM&feature=related).
- Internet access

Listen to the John Rutter setting of the traditional hymn “For the Beauty of the Earth,” and watch the video images. What response do you have to hearing these words set to different music? Do you find yourself more aware of the meaning of the lyrics because of the less familiar tune setting?

How do the images affect you? Do you respond to particular images of God’s love and beauty more than others? Does this music move you or speak to you more or less than the traditional hymn setting?

What blessings are you thankful for when you hear the words:

- For the beauty of the earth
- For the glory of the skies
- For the wonder of each hour
- For the joy of human love

Spend a moment or two in quietness, and “raise your hymn of grateful praise” to God.



## Discerning & Deciding Activity

### 5 The Fragrance of Love

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- scented objects you appreciate

Read John 12:1–8. This story takes place in the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, close friends of Jesus who supported his ministry and often provided food and housing for him and his disciples when they were on the road. Jesus has just raised Lazarus from the dead, probably his most spectacular miracle. The Jewish leaders are already plotting to kill Jesus. Passover, the night of Jesus' arrest and trial, is only a week away. Mary, in an act of deep love and devotion, takes an outrageously expensive perfume, anoints Jesus' feet, and wipes them with her hair, and the fragrance spreads throughout the entire house.

Psychologists say that smell is the human sense most closely tied to emotion. A brief whiff of your grandmother's talcum powder can take you back to childhood in the blink of an eyelash. Certain smells, such as coffee beans, popcorn, or green onions, can evoke feelings that may be difficult to identify, but are very real nevertheless.

Fragrance is its own kind of beauty, and it permeates a space and inserts itself into our consciousness. Since the Bible likens the Holy Spirit to wind, or breath, perhaps it's not too great a stretch to think of the Spirit as fragrance, the aroma of God that permeates our senses and reminds us of forgotten connections to the Holy. Certain fragrances may have special meaning for you in light of your own church traditions or history. They might be incense or the musty scent of old wood and stone. Perhaps they are the scent of candles burning, the tang of communion wine, the yeasty smell of fresh baked bread, or the heady sweetness of Easter lilies.

These scents from our religious tradition can evoke God's nearness and bring us back to a place of connection with the Holy. Spend time enjoying the scents of the objects you gathered. Why are they beautiful to you?

The next time you catch a whiff of something beautiful, stop for a moment and remember that God is present in that beauty. Pour out your love and gratitude like the finest perfume, and let your heart worship.



## Sending & Serving Activity

### ⑥ Centering the Load

**Supplies:**

- journal
- pen
- an empty soda bottle with a screw-on top

People talk a lot these days about balance. We try hard to balance the responsibilities of home and family, work and school, church and personal life. The problem is, most of the time we're juggling, not balancing. We're dancing with all our might, trying to keep everything up in the air, trying to keep it from crashing down around us.

Modern life tends to be frazzled and fractured. We try to accomplish too much in too little time, we cram each day with a to-do list, and we feel guilty if we take time for quiet reflection. And thus our souls get off-center like a heavy load of wash during the spin cycle. Nothing moves right; we sense our souls laboring and clunking and trying to get back on track. When that happens, nothing helps except to stop the spinning and rearrange the load.

Try this little exercise: Lay an empty soda bottle on a horizontal surface such as a counter or table, and try spinning it. Then fill it half full of water and try spinning it again. (Be sure to screw on the lid tightly.) Feel the difference? The second time, the bottle is unbalanced, and it doesn't spin right. It's like the washing machine when the load gets one-sided.

Jesus took time to get away from the noise, the rush, the people, the expectations. He often went apart by himself. We're not told what he did during those times; we assume he needed time just to be, to meditate, to pray, maybe even to take a nap. Most certainly, he spent that time recentering his load.

Sometimes we look at our religious traditions and see them merely as duties or as rituals that have little meaning in our daily lives. But if we incorporate them into our lives as spiritual practices, they can become centering places for us. Prayer and meditation, worship and music, attentiveness, and listening can become practices that enrich our lives and connect us with God on a daily basis.

Spend time today recentering. Get quiet. Breathe. Visualize your soul spinning slower and slower until it stops altogether and everything that is inside comes to a place of rest. Consider what you could remove from the load to make it lighter. Mentally rearrange the rest of it to make it more balanced.

Ask yourself:

- What events in my life spin me out of control?
- How can I minimize the effects of those events?
- What is my center—the place where I am most myself?
- What does my life look and feel like when it is balanced?
- How can I be more mindful of the practice of centering?

Write a prayer, asking for the grace to stay centered and balanced, to stay awake, to remain aware of and grateful for the gifts of life.

## Work Place and Communal Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity

#### 7 Target Love (Easy Preparation)

**Supplies:**

- plain paper
- colored pens or pencils

If you sit at a local coffee shop or restaurant, in a park, or other some other location where people come and go, chances are you'll see all kinds of people: business colleagues, spouses or partners, parents and children, grandparents, loners, and acquaintances. You will likely find you can identify the relationships by the way people interact: the spaces between them, the formality or informality, the politeness or rudeness, the conversations or silence, the laughter, the familiarity or wariness.

Now think about your relationships as a series of concentric circles, like an archery target. At the center is the smallest, most intimate circle of connection: your spouse or partner or other of your closest emotional relationships. Extending outward from there are ever-larger circles of extended family, friends, church and community connections, co-workers, acquaintances. All of us are connected to one another through different levels of intimacy.

Draw a diagram of those concentric circles, using different colors for different levels of closeness. Write in the names of the people you feel closest to—not the people you *think* should be closest, but the ones you truly feel connected with: the people you miss when you can't see them; the ones you want to call when something good happens or when trouble strikes; the people who understand you and connect with you spiritually and emotionally; the people you support with your love and care and concern and those who support you.

Are there any surprises? Anyone in the closer circles of connection that you didn't expect to be there? Anyone with whom you want to have a deeper spiritual or emotional connection?

If there's someone you need to cultivate more closeness with, don't put it off. Call and set a lunch date. Write a letter. Make a phone call. Let that person know you care. Sometime during the coming week, take the time and effort time to express your appreciation to someone who has made your life richer. Take a moment to express your gratitude to God for that person as well.



## Discerning & Deciding Activity

### 8 Medicine for the Soul

**Supplies:**

- small cloth or leather bag
- various collected items to put in the bag

A medicine bag is a traditional North American Indian container for various items of supernatural power. You may decide to purchase a bag, or you can create a simple bag from leather and lacing available at most craft stores. It doesn't matter how large or small your bag is, but it should be simple and functional and capable of holding the items you choose to put inside.

What you put in it is entirely up to you. You may want to choose items that speak to you of your past, your present, and your future; items that reflect your authentic self and remind you of who you are; a stone, a bird's feather, bark from a tree, a shell from the beach; a crystal, a leaf, a dried flower or herbs, perhaps. Select natural items that connect you with the earth and with the depths of your own spirit.

Try using your "medicine bag" as a focus when you pray. Spread out the contents before you, and think about each item as a physical representation of some aspect of your spiritual life: a stone for grounding, for example, or a feather for learning how to let your spirit soar; a seed pod for new life, a piece of sea glass for transformation—anything that speaks to you. Let the items remind you of where you have come from and where you are going. Let them remind you of the beauty of your faith journey.

## Sending & Serving Activity

### 9 Graffiti Grace

**Supplies:**

- heavy butcher paper or thick newsprint, preferably white
- multicolored indelible markers or crayons
- a small box or basket to hold the markers

*Note:* This is an ongoing, long-term project that can be used in your family circle or at your place of work.

We've all seen the t-shirts and bumper stickers that say "Stuff Happens." And we know that to some extent it's true. Life is life, and sometimes unexpected and unwelcome things happen to gum up the works and get in the way of our fine plans for the "Way It Ought to Be." But too many times we let ourselves focus on the negative "stuff" that happens, rather than looking more deeply and seeing the gifts and grace that come our way every day. We need reminders of the daily, small, often overlooked movements of God's spirit within us and around us.

One way to remind ourselves is to create a Grace Wall, a place for encouraging graffiti about the "good stuff" that happens. Choose a wall or door in your home or office that is easily accessible. Cover the space with butcher paper, using masking tape so the surfaces won't be damaged. If you're using markers rather than



crayons, it's a good idea to use multiple layers of paper so that the markers won't bleed through.

In large bright letters at the top, write the words GRACE HAPPENS. Put a basket of pens or crayons nearby. Then every day, encourage your family, friends, or co-workers to write encouraging graffiti messages on the wall, such as happy faces, positive quotations, favorite sayings. Use the graffiti wall like a guest book where people who visit can write messages as they come and go.

Let creativity bloom. You'll be amazed at how positive energy can bring joy and connection and blessing to you and everyone around you.

[When I have ] a terrible need of religion . . . then I go outside in the night to paint the stars. . . .

—Vincent van Gogh, *Letters to Theo*, 28 September 1888

Where do you find closeness with God? What aspects of nature most deeply connect you with a sense of God's presence? What experiences in your religious tradition or background do you find beautiful? Which most speak to you of the Holy?

# Experiencing Beauty



## Exploration: Context and Mission

### About this Setting

All of us have a calling from God, a mission to use our gifts and abilities for the building up of the larger community of faith. The activities in this Exploration are designed to help us identify where we are in our spiritual lives, where we are going, and how we might discover a renewed sense of beauty and passion along the way.

### 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***

## Household and Family Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity

#### ① A Time for Everything

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- song: “Turn, Turn, Turn” by the Byrds, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wb6jhbtdUZE&feature=related>

Gather your family circle together and listen to the Byrds’ classic song “Turn, Turn, Turn.” Then read Ecclesiastes 3:1-13. Remember that this is a poem, so read slowly and give attention to the structure and rhythms of the alternating ideas.

As you read the verses, ask people to think about particular words or phrases that stand out to them. Then read the passage a second time. Stop after each pair of words (for example, “a time to be born and a time to die”) and let it sink in. When you’re finished reading, talk about the words that seemed most significant. These questions may get you started:

- What particular words bring you hope or comfort? (Or what words do you like?)
- What words disturb you, or with what words do you disagree? (Or what words don’t you like?)
- In what ways does this passage represent the reality of life?
- Do you think this is a description of how things are, or a statement about how God wants them to be?
- Why do you think these verses are in the Bible?
- What parts of this passage reflect the kind of person you want to become?
- What one thing can you do today to be that person?

*Prayer: God, we know that life isn’t always pretty and that sometimes reality brings pain. Help us to be the kind of people who plant, who heal, who dance, who embrace, who love, and who bring peace. Amen.*

## Discerning &amp; Deciding Activity

 2 Uniquely You**Supplies:**

- Bible
- plain white paper
- small nontoxic stamp pad, either black or multiple colors
- photos of fingerprints, [http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&rlz=1T4GGLL\\_enUS395US395&biw=1004&bih=549&site=search&tbm=isch&sa=1&q=fingerprints&btnG=Search&aq=f&aqi=g10&aql=&oq#q=fingerprints&hl=en&sa=G&rlz=1T4GGLL\\_enUS395US395&tbm=isch&bav=on.2.or.r\\_gc.r\\_pw.r\\_qf.&fp=1&biw=1385&bih=746](http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&rlz=1T4GGLL_enUS395US395&biw=1004&bih=549&site=search&tbm=isch&sa=1&q=fingerprints&btnG=Search&aq=f&aqi=g10&aql=&oq#q=fingerprints&hl=en&sa=G&rlz=1T4GGLL_enUS395US395&tbm=isch&bav=on.2.or.r_gc.r_pw.r_qf.&fp=1&biw=1385&bih=746)
- Internet access

The creation story in Genesis reminds us that we are made in the image and likeness of God. Each of us is unique and uniquely beautiful. There's never been anyone exactly like you, and there will never be another. Look at the photos of fingerprints to see how they're all alike and yet all different.

Using the stamp pads and paper, take your own fingerprints and look closely at them. Make designs with them. Have fun. Here are some ideas to get you started: [http://www.dltk-kids.com/crafts/miscellaneous/fingerprint\\_characters.htm](http://www.dltk-kids.com/crafts/miscellaneous/fingerprint_characters.htm)

When you're finished, post your fingerprint pictures where you can see them so you can remember how unique you are. Give thanks to God with a prayer such as this: *God, sometimes I forget that you have made me to be myself, and that being me is enough. Help me to see the beauty in myself and those around me and to know that you have made us all in your image. Amen.*

## Sending &amp; Serving Activity

 3 Mystery Trip! (Easy Preparation)**Supplies:** None

This is an ongoing activity that can be as simple or as complex as you want to make it. Be creative. Be aware of the world around you, and find ways to make it come alive for others.

Plan a mystery trip for someone you love. Alert this person to the need to be ready to go with you and to ask no questions. The purpose of the trip is to surprise your friend with some unexpected beauty. You might go into a yard to view a baby rabbit you found in a nest or a lovely flower growing out of the sidewalk (five minutes). You might attend a concert (several hours) or travel to a bend in the road where wild flowers fill a meadow. You might go out for ice cream, or you might plan and cook a candlelight dinner. You might lead the way to a spectacular display of autumn leaves or to see the first crocus pushing up through the snow.



It's not important how simple or complex the experience is. What's important is that you find beauty in the context of your everyday life and that you make it your mission to share that with someone else.

As you go about your daily activities, look for things you can share. You don't have to spend money or even invest a lot of time. If you do this often enough, the people you love will begin to anticipate the words "Mystery Trip!" They will know that you care enough to think about bringing beauty and joy into their lives.

## Individual and Personal Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity



#### 4 Holy as the Day (Easy Preparation)

##### **Supplies:**

- song: "Holy as the Day Is Spent" by Carrie Newcomer, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qZyoRiBtEI>; lyrics, [http://www.carrienewcomer.com/lyrics/gathering\\_spirits\\_lyrics.pdf](http://www.carrienewcomer.com/lyrics/gathering_spirits_lyrics.pdf)

What does it mean to be called by God? Does it mean becoming a professional religious leader: a priest or nun or monk, a pastor or Christian education director or youth leader or music minister? We might think that these are the full-time "professional Christians" after all, those who have studied and obtained degrees and been ordained. The rest of us ordinary folks can't begin to measure up to that. But the truth is, God's calling is for all of us. No matter who we are or what we do, we are called by God to live out our faith on a daily basis and to allow our faith to affect every area of our lives.

Listen to Carrie Newcomer sing "Holy as the Day Is Spent." Read the lyrics. Think about what you do on a daily basis. How can your job or home life or relationships become sacramental for you? How can you see beyond the immediate task to discover something of the Divine in the midst of those activities?

Ask God to open your eyes and keep you awake to the presence of the Holy. Let your daily routine be transformed by an awareness that God is in it with you.



## Discerning & Deciding Activity

### 5 Intentionality

#### Supplies:

- pen
- paper or journal
- (optional) Internet access

What kind of person are you, and who do you want to become? What is your spiritual focus? What kind of spiritual growth or transformation do you want to see over the next year, or two, or five? In other words, what is your mission in life?

If you have no idea how to begin answering such questions, perhaps it's time to think about writing a personal mission statement. Having a mission statement helps keep us focused and gives us direction for the everyday decisions we're called upon to make. It helps us make intentional choices, rather than being swept along by circumstances.

With a quick Internet search you can find dozens of examples of personal mission statements, but there is no set "formula." A mission statement is, and should be, as unique as each individual. It's a way to put into writing a description of what's most important to you and how you intend to live out your values. Most mission statements are fairly brief—a few sentences or paragraphs. Try to make yours positive (how you want to live, or the kind of person you want to become) rather than negative (what you don't want).

Writing a mission statement gives you the opportunity to dig deep and get in touch with the real you, to explore dreams for the future, evaluate where you've been, and assess gifts and skills and talents.

It may take some time and thought for you to write this mission statement. You might have to let the ideas simmer in your mind for a while before they begin to come together. But over the next few days or weeks, think about and journal about some of the following questions to get yourself started:

- What values are most important to me?
- What brings me a sense of drawing closer to God?
- What are the top three character traits that I most want to have?
- What positive behaviors do I want to develop?
- What do I want to eliminate from my life?
- What do I treasure more than anything else?
- If I lost everything, what would I miss most?
- What does this tell me about my priorities?
- How can my actions and behaviors support those priorities?
- What do I believe about the character of God?
- What do I believe about my place in the universe?
- What do I want others to see in me?
- What spiritual or religious values are important in my life?
- How does God play a part in the changes I would like to see in my life?
- If today were my last day on earth, what would I want to do with it? Who would I spend it with?

See if you can identify several core values and beliefs essential to the life you want to live and the person you want to be. Write your mission statement based on those core beliefs and values.

Sending & Serving Activity

 6 Making All Things New

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- artwork: “Navaro Rapids” by Andro 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>
- computer with Internet access

View the art piece “Navaro Rapids.” What words come to mind? To what places in the piece are your eyes drawn? From what sections do you want to look away?

Compare your life to the rushing of water. Where are the calm places for you right now? When do you feel like you may be carried away on the current?

Read 2 Corinthians 5:16–20. Close your eyes for a few moments of silent prayer. Ask God to show you how you are being made new. View the print again. Imagine yourself surrendering to the current of God’s grace and being carried safely to a place of beauty and peace.

Work Place and Communal Life

Exploring & Engaging Activity

 7 The Face of God (Easy Preparation)

**Supplies:** None

Part of our calling from God is not only to discern the leading of the Holy Spirit within ourselves, but to see and affirm it in others as well. This joint meditation will help you and a friend get in touch with the ways God is at work in both of you and in your relationship as well.

Set aside some time in a private space with a friend or loved one you know well. Sit opposite one another—in chairs, or on the floor—wherever you are comfortable and on the same eye level. Make eye contact with one another. Spend a minute or two in silence, breathing and centering yourselves.

When you feel comfortable, say to your partner, “You are God’s gift in my life because . . .” and fill in the blank. Keep your comments simple and direct, and maintain eye contact.

When you’ve spoken your piece, wait patiently for your friend to do the same. Listen carefully. Be present in the moment. Don’t jump ahead thinking about what you’re going to say next.

Next, say something like, “I am thankful for your. . .” (love, honesty, challenge, and so forth). Here, name a characteristic you see in your friend. Then wait and listen while she/he responds.



Finally, say, “I see the face of God in you because . . .” and finish the thought (for example, because you help me grow, because you bring peace to my heart, and so forth). Listen to what your friend says in response.

When you’ve finished sharing your thoughts with one another, sit quietly for a minute, and let those truths settle. Then offer a brief prayer of thanks for the ways God is working in each of you.

## Discerning & Deciding Activity

### 8 Pointing to the Beauty

#### Supplies:

- a white handkerchief
- indelible colored markers

Thirteenth-century poet Jelalludin Rumi wrote:

I can’t stop pointing to the beauty. Every moment and place says,  
“Put this design in your carpet!”

—Rumi, *The Book of Love*, p. 21

Every day, with words and actions and attitudes, we weave a design with our lives. Do we find the beauty in every moment and place? Do we reflect it in our inner souls and in our outward relationships? Do we point others to it?

What gifts do you bring to those around you? What characteristics do you most want to cultivate? What blessings do you want to offer to the world? Write those words, or draw symbols representing them, on your handkerchief. You might want to use newspaper or an old magazine as a pad underneath your handkerchief so that the markers won’t bleed through. Add pictures if you like—anything that reminds you of the beauty, joy, and peace you want to point to with your life, the designs you want to “put in your carpet.”

Carry the handkerchief with you in your pocket or purse. Whenever you think of it, reach in and touch it, or get it out and read what you’ve written on it. Remind yourself of the beauty and possibility of your own life. Let that beauty guide you in the design you weave with your own life.

Point to the beauty. Put it in your carpet every moment, in every place. Give thanks to God for the daily reminders of Divine love and grace.

## Sending & Serving Activity

### 9 Anonymous Joy

**Supplies:**

- a bowl or basket
- a bag of individually wrapped small candies
- white paper cut into small squares
- colored markers

Cut sheets of regular typing or computer paper into squares. If you cut the paper straight down the center and then into thirds, one sheet will make six pieces. Using bright multicolored markers, write encouraging words and phrases on the strips of paper, such as:

- Find grace today.
- Listen to the wind.
- Feel the sun on your face.
- I appreciate you.
- You're a good friend.
- May you know joy.
- Breathe.
- Be at peace.
- Let the love flow.
- Be mindful.

Wrap the papers around the candies, and twist the ends. Fill the bowl or basket, and take it to work or church or wherever you can share it with others.

We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience.

—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Human Phenomenon*, 1955.

If we truly are, as de Chardin calls us, “spiritual beings,” what does that say about our connection with God in every aspect of our lives? How does that awareness change our sense of ourselves, our sense of mission or calling? How does it help us become aware of and cultivate beauty in our contexts?

# Experiencing Beauty



## Exploration: Future and Vision

### About this Setting

Spirituality is all about the journey. In our individual lives and in our relationships with God and other people, we can easily forget to live in the present, and so we lose sight of the beauty and balance that would enable us to move into the future. In this setting we seek to identify a vision of our ongoing relationship with God and discover how our daily faith practices can sustain us and give us life.

### 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*

## Household and Family Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity



#### 1 Making All Things New (Easy Preparation)

**Supplies:**

- Bible

Read Revelation 21:2–5. In this almost last chapter of the Bible, we see the image of the Holy City coming down from heaven and hear the voice of God saying, “Behold, I make all things new.” Talk about these verses in your family circle, using these or similar questions:

- What losses have you experienced, such as moving to a new place, the death of a pet or a loved one, a friend moving away, a loss of a job, changing schools, the loss of freedom from driving or independent living, health, and so forth?
- What makes you cry?
- What “old things” do you want to let go of in your personal life or in your relationships? (For the grown-ups, this might be a pattern of unforgiveness or a tendency to hold onto old resentments. For the kids, this might be an unwillingness to share toys with a sibling or friend, whining or pouting, or a rebellious attitude toward parents or a teacher.)
- How would you like to see those “old things” change? What “new things” would you like to see in their place?
- What kinds of beauty do you think we possess in the eyes of God? In what ways are we of infinite value?
- If we are of such value to God, how should we see one another?
- What one thing can you do to begin to “make all things new” in your life?

### Discerning & Deciding Activity



#### 2 Holding the Future

**Supplies:**

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

View the artwork “Caresse Maternelle (Mother and Child)” together. Talk about what the little girl might be seeing, hearing, feeling, and thinking. Now discuss what the mother might be seeing, hearing, feeling, and thinking.

Invite everyone to talk about people they feel close to, both from older and younger generations. What expressions of care mean the most to them? How is their relationship beautiful? What hopes to people have for caring relationships in the coming days?



Consider closing the activity by placing everyone's hands in a pile and saying the following prayer: *God, thank you for kind words and loving touch. May we remember and share your love. Amen.*

## Sending & Serving Activity

### ③ Stars in Apple Cores

**Supplies:**

- apple
- knife
- index cards
- pens or pencils
- (optional) paint or printing ink

Did you know there are stars in apple cores? Cut an apple straight through (horizontally, not vertically through the stem). There you'll find a star and seeds for the future of the apple tree. Each seed holds immeasurable potential.

Think of each seed as a virtue that you want to guide your spiritual path. What do you want to cultivate more deeply in your life? Are you loving? Does your life reflect joy and peace and patience? Are you living in kindness and generosity toward others? Are you faithful to God and to the people God has put in your life? Do your actions manifest gentleness and self-control?

Choose one virtue that you'd like to deepen in your life. Write it on an index card and post it where you'll see it—the bathroom mirror, a corner of your computer screen, the refrigerator door. You may also want to print a picture of the apple-core star on the card as well. Dip the cut apple in paint or on an ink pad and use that as a stamp for the index card.

Each day, when you see that "core virtue," spend a little time focusing on it. Be intentional about practicing it throughout the day and open yourself to the deepening of the Spirit in your heart and mind.

Prayer: *God who put stars in apple cores, perhaps there are stars at the core of us, too. Help us learn to find them and to live them so that we reflect the fruit of your Spirit in our everyday lives. Amen.*

## Individual and Personal Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity

#### 4 Journey of the Wise Ones

**Supplies:**

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

The journey of the magi is a familiar story in the Bible (Matthew 2:1–12), a story that has been told and retold countless times. T. S. Eliot’s poem shows the story from the human perspective, a kind of fool’s errand that may or may not have made any difference except to those who actually made the journey:

A hard time we had of it.  
At the end we preferred to travel all night,  
Sleeping in snatches,  
With the voices singing in our ears, saying  
That this was all folly.  
—T. S. Eliot, “Journey of the Magi”

Think about Eliot’s words and spend time looking at Tissot’s painting “Journey of the Magi.” According to the Bible story, the wise ones, who were kings in their own right, set out on an uncertain journey to meet a king they’d never heard of, following a star they’d never seen before. When they finally arrived, what they saw was not a prince in a palace, but the boy Jesus in an ordinary house with an ordinary Jewish family. Chances are, that’s not exactly what they expected.

So it is with us on our spiritual journeys. We don’t always know where we’re going or where we’ll end up. We just follow the light we’re given, one step at a time. And along the way we learn to trust.

Put yourself in the picture. Are you at the head of the line, urging others forward, eager to get moving along the road? Or are you trailing along behind, grumbling about the hardships of the journey?

What is your camel—that is, the vehicle by which you progress along the path? What is your star—what’s the guiding light that keeps you headed in the right direction?

Have you ever followed a path that seemed like a mistake or, at the very least, foolishness? Have you ever made a choice that other people made fun of or didn’t understand? What gifts do you bring? And what do you expect to find along the way?

## Discerning &amp; Deciding Activity

 5 Another Kind of Journey (Easy Preparation)**Supplies:**

- pen
- paper or journal
- a walking labyrinth, or a finger labyrinth

In *The Celtic Way of Prayer*, Esther De Waal describes the Celtic concept of peregrination, the inner journey of the soul:

There is no specific end or goal such as that of reaching a shrine or a holy place that allows the pilgrim at the end of the journey to return home with a sense of a mission accomplished. . . . What they are seeking is the place of their resurrection, the resurrected self, the true self in Christ, which is for all of us our true home.

—Esther De Waal, *The Celtic Way of Prayer*, p. 2

Spend time thinking and perhaps journaling about your own inner journey, about the vision you have (or might develop) for your relationship with God and your own spiritual growth and deepening.

- Where do you think your spiritual journey is leading you?
- How can you cooperate with the Divine in discovering your own direction?
- What kind of inner promptings do you feel, and how might you follow them?
- Are there places within you that need to be brought back to life?
- What does it mean to you to “find the place of your resurrection”?

Many people find walking the labyrinth a helpful tool for meditation and centering. If you have a walking labyrinth nearby, spend some time meditating there. Here is a link to a printable finger labyrinth that you can use right at your desk: <http://www.agapemcc.com/pdfdocs/AgapeFingerLabyrinth.pdf>.

As you “walk,” open yourself to a vision of God’s presence in your life, and to the directions God may be leading you in the future. Walk slowly. Breathe slowly, in and out. Walking the labyrinth is a kind of “body prayer.” It might be helpful to walk with a kind of mantra, such as “Quiet my mind; open my heart.”

Whatever insights come, welcome them as a gift from the Holy.

## Sending & Serving Activity

### 6 In the Bulb

**Supplies:**

- hymn: “In the Bulb There Is a Flower” by Natalie Sleeth (tune: Promise), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkWYubdnc7c>; lyrics: [http://www.hymnlyrics.org/lyricsi/in\\_the\\_bulb\\_there\\_is\\_a\\_flower.html](http://www.hymnlyrics.org/lyricsi/in_the_bulb_there_is_a_flower.html)

This song is also called “Hymn of Promise.” Listen to the words and look at the images.

What seeds within you are trying to germinate? What can you do to encourage the growth? How do you find the “song in every silence”? How do you learn to listen for the deeper meaning behind your experiences?

This hymn includes the line “in our end is our beginning,” a reference to T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. What do you think these words mean? In what way is each end a new beginning? How can you learn to celebrate the beginnings even as you grieve the endings?

## Work Place and Communal Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity

### 7 Where Were You?

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- poem: “The Creation” by James Weldon Johnson, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C-h4\\_VPXdoY&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C-h4_VPXdoY&feature=related)

Read Job 38:1–11. In this passage God asks the question: “Where were you when the foundations of the earth were laid, when the morning stars sang together and all the heavens shouted for joy?”

Spend a few minutes watching the video and listening to Wintley Phipps performing James Weldon Johnson’s classic poem, “The Creation.” Think about creation, its beauty and enormity, its simplicity and complexity. Let yourself experience it and feel the power of it. Immerse yourself in the images of God’s majesty and creativity.

If you’d like to read the poem for yourself, you can find it at <http://www.accuracyproject.org/t-Johnson,JW-TheCreation.html>. If you’d like to experience the images and music without the poem, see this link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DRzLZybW0gA&feature=related>.

## Discerning &amp; Deciding Activity

 8 Let Go (Easy Preparation)

**Supplies:** None

“Be still and know that I am God.” Psalm 46:10

Be still. It doesn’t mean “don’t move,” or even, “be quiet.” The Hebrew root is *ra-pha*, meaning, “let go” or “surrender.” Translation: Let go. Surrender. Know that God is God.

This is a hard lesson. So often we want to be in control, to be right, to fix things, to tell others what they ought to do. The way of Jesus, however, is the way of surrender. Jesus took time to engage with all kinds of people, to listen to their stories, to hear what they didn’t say. He saw beyond the facade of anger or fear or defensiveness to the underlying pain—the need simply to be heard and valued and cared for.

We can do that, too. We can learn to let go, to give up the illusion of control, and to simply be present. You don’t have to be a therapist or counselor to be a nonanxious, calming presence in another person’s life. You don’t have to have “answers” or be able to “fix it.” You simply need to be able to let go. To listen.

The next time you’re in a conversation with someone who annoys you, rather than turning that person off or making a hasty retreat, commit to listening. Don’t argue. Don’t confront. Just listen. Say, “Tell me more about that,” or “That must have been difficult for you,” or “Yes, I see how you could feel that way.” Let them find their own way without your help. Just be there. Just care.

Try this: For one day, make a commitment not to talk about yourself, not to give your opinion, and not to try to convince other people that your way is right. Just encourage others to talk about themselves and their lives while you listen.

Listen without judgment or anxiety. Listen with the heart. Listen with the mind of Christ. Don’t try to analyze or fix anyone; don’t criticize or blame. Just listen, and ask yourself how you might support and pray for and encourage people.

How does it feel to listen? Turn the exercise inward, and listen to what your own heart is telling you.

You may find this to be an immensely freeing experience, an exercise in grace. You may come away understanding yourself and others better.

Let go. Be still. God is God, so you don’t have to be.

## Sending & Serving Activity

### 9 Creating a Legacy

**Supplies:**

- paper or journal
- pen, crayons, or colored pencils

What brings you joy? What brings you peace? What makes you truly happy? What gives you a sense of completion and satisfaction and significance? Who are the people without whom your life would feel incomplete? Where do you find your deepest connection with the Divine? What would it take for you to live joyfully, without regret?

The answers to those questions help us identify the priorities and principles that guide our lives. The truth is, unless we set our own priorities, the world will set them for us, and we will end up living by values that are not our own.

Look toward the future. Write your obituary, or draw a picture representing your priorities and values. What do you want people to say about you after you're gone? What legacy do you want to leave behind? How do you want to be remembered? What do you want inscribed on your tombstone? What changes will you make now in order for those priorities to be firmly established in your life?

What you thought you came for  
 Is only a shell, a husk of meaning  
 From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled  
 If at all. Either you had no purpose  
 Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured  
 And is altered in fulfillment.

—T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding" from *Four Quartets*

This quotation from Eliot's *Four Quartets* speaks to a reality that lies just beyond our understanding and outside the reach of our perception. We often make decisions based on what we think we know only to realize later that there was a deeper wisdom at work—that somehow the choices we made changed us in profound and unexpected ways. What experiences in your life have given you a glimpse of some power beyond yourself? What light leads you onward when your path seems dark?