Encountering Scripture

About this Age Group

Adults come in all shapes, sizes, and ages. They also come with varied life experiences and a variety of ways of encountering scripture. Some long-time church members may know little about the Bible, while others may have studied the Bible in college. Some people learn about the Bible from magazines or the media or online resources or a colleague at work. Some read the Bible every day. The activities in this Exploration try to help you and your group discover some of the “baggage” as well as the joy you bring to encounters with scripture. For some, scripture is a gift from God to be unwrapped, experienced, and cherished. For others it may be a puzzle, a mystery, or a challenge. Given the different levels of experience and familiarity with the Bible, you may need to provide basic information such as help finding passages by book, chapter, and verse or an explanation of the different parts of the Bible.

About this Exploration

Scripture tells the story of God’s relationship with human beings. It is a gift of God for the people of God. Scripture is accessible to all—those who have been reading the Bible for years and those opening it for the first time. Wherever we are on life’s journey, the Bible can connect with our experience. We encounter Scripture as an ancient text, but one that is living, breathing, and alive to contemporary pilgrims. It comforts and challenges, heals and holds accountable. Scripture expands worldviews and limits selfishness, offers forgiveness and embraces those who are on the margins. As we engage with Scripture, we discover God and we discover a new world through ancient words. We join with others, the great diversity of God’s people, to ask questions, connect with the text, pray, and discern together God’s continuing word for us.
Encountering Scripture

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
Proverbs 2:1–8
John 21:1–19

Leader Preparation

Spend time with the Bible passages before reading the suggested activities. Read them. Read them aloud. Trust that God will speak to you as you explore the text. Become comfortable with the words, the flow of the language, the sequence of the story. Allow the passages to become part of your life. As you prepare to meet your participants on this faith journey, remember that they may come from different faith traditions or religions or understandings. Some people may interpret the Bible literally, others metaphorically, others as a text to illuminate ancient times, others as a combination. One of your tasks is to guide everyone to create dialogue that is open and respectful. Invite the group to help you create a safe space for all to explore, question, and learn. Listening attentively, even when we disagree, is a gift we give one another. These learned skills can also be a gift to our families and our wider communities.

To build a respectful group atmosphere, consider viewing Eric H. F. Law’s short video that includes a simple activity that could be incorporated into your group time, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hDUBMhC6OUQ. In his book Inclusion: Making Room for Grace (2000), Law outlines RESPECT guidelines as follows:

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 Brainstorming: Passages (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Scripture or Bible verses are sometimes called Bible passages. Explore the word “passage” in its various contexts. A passage is a pathway from one point to another point, an opening. The passage may be physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual. Scripture can be a passage allowing us to listen to and hear about God’s involvement with God’s people. Scripture can create a passage between the written word and every heart and mind.

Supplies:
• markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Use your insights from the Leader preparation to introduce the activity. Lead a conversation about the word “passage.” Record main ideas on newsprint or a whiteboard. Use these or similar questions for discussion:

• What are the various meanings of the word “passage”?
• Name some physical passages.
• What are some mental passages that you have experienced?
• Name some emotional passages. Consider times when you created different options for yourself or others through changing your response in a situation.
• Explore some spiritual passages. Consider times when hearing scripture or an experience in a faith community influenced your faith.
• How does this conversation about the word “passage” change how you think about the idea of a “passage of scripture”?

2 As We Gather at Your Table

Leader preparation: Learn the hymn “As We Gather at Your Table” and reflect about the meaning of the verses in your life. If needed, arrange for an accompanist for your group.

Supplies:
• song: “As We Gather at Your Table,” (tune: Beach Spring 8.7.8.7.D), http://www.oremus.org/hymnal/a/a366.html
• (optional) hymnals

The hymn “As We Gather at Your Table” was commissioned for a congregational tricentennial celebration. As a group, listen to the hymn, and then hum the tune once. Ask someone to read verse 1 aloud prayerfully. Sing verse 2 together, and then use some of the following questions for discussion.

• What does “turn our worship into witness in the sacrament of life” mean to you?
• How does sacred story nourish you?
• How does worship guide us to know God’s presence?
Encountering Scripture

Learn these motions to go with verse 3, or create your own.

- “Gracious Spirit”: arms lifted toward heaven
- “Summons”: hands cupped near mouth, as if calling out
- “Share”: arms extended and moving outward, as if welcoming to the table
- “Love”: draw hands back to your heart
- “Welcome”: arms shaped like a hug
- “No more envy”: shake head sideways in rhythm
- “As we join”: hands folded, as in prayer

The concluding phrase, “repeat the sounding joy,” is from the second verse of the popular Christmas carol “Joy to the World.” Sing or say the words of that hymn. Then use these or similar questions for discussion:

- Why might the songwriter have used wording from a carol to conclude this hymn?
- When does your worshiping community encounter scripture and respond with joy?
- What other feelings does scripture evoke for you?

Complete this activity by inviting people to close their eyes and hum the tune to “As We Gather at Your Table” one more time.

Create Your Own Proverb

Leader preparation: Complete the attachment for yourself. Then, read Proverbs 2:1–8. Some Bible translations include the heading “The Value of Wisdom” for these verses. Reflect on the words and how they connect with your life right now.

Supplies:
- “Proverbs 2:1–5 Worksheet,” Attachment: Activity 3
- Bible
- pencils or pens

Distribute the attachment and pens or pencils. This proverb gives instructions to someone from God. Ask the group to spend a few minutes pondering what they would need so they could discern the knowledge of God. Then invite them to fill in the blanks. Listen to the proverbs created by those willing to share. Ask someone to read aloud Proverbs 2:1–8. How are the group’s proverbs similar to or different from the Old Testament verses?

Session Development

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

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

Prayer: Loving God, grant me energy, insight, and the confidence that your Word continues to illuminate and guide. With my doubts, embrace me. With my convictions, embrace me. With my thanks, embrace me. With my tears, embrace me. Help me keep your Word in my heart, so you are always guiding my actions. Amen.

Discerning & Deciding Activities

Dramatization of John 21:1–19 (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Know the John 21:1–19 passage well. This would be a wonderful outdoor activity, especially if you are near a body of water. Gather props if you wish, but they are not essential. Read the activity and determine how much time you will allocate for the various parts of the activity.
Supplies:
- Bibles
- (optional) props
- lined paper and pencils or pens

Knowing we will be asked to use the material we read (or listen to) heightens our attention. For this activity, learners need to be familiar with the passage. Have someone read aloud John 21:1–19 as others follow along in their Bibles. Ask basic questions so everyone is familiar with the passage, but keep this conversation short. The skit is the key part of this activity.

- Where does the passage take place?
- Who are the main characters?
- What happened? (List the key events.)

Ask learners to put aside their Bibles and form small groups of three or four people. Ask each small group to create a short dramatic presentation that tells the story (or some part of the story) from John 21:1–19. Suggest that to begin they might retell the story in their own words with the group members helping one another fill in the details. Identify key moments or a part of the story that seem especially significant. Encourage them to use contemporary language or settings to create the dialogue in song or however they feel inspired. This activity isn’t about a polished performance. It is about encountering scripture, exploring together, and sharing what we discover. Tell groups how much time they will have to prepare. Then, have each group present its drama to the whole group. Be an appreciative audience for one another.

Create a Journal

Leader preparation: See the attached instructions for creating a simple, no-stitch journal, or purchase inexpensive journals online or through a book outlet. Each participant will need one journal. Paper without lines is preferred so participants have more options to express themselves.

Supplies:
- “Make a Simple, No-Sew Journal,” Attachment: Activity 5
- materials to make journals or commercially made journals
- pens and colored pencils

Either have people make their own journals or give a journal to each participant. For a first entry, ask each person to write or illustrate what the Bible means in his or her life right now or what questions or struggles each has with the Bible.

Journaling: Hidden Depths

Leader preparation: Spend at least two minutes looking at the artwork. What do you notice? What feelings emerge while viewing this image? Read the activity description and complete the activity prior to guiding the group. This activity includes important “heart work” as you and your participants explore a new faith practice. If you should decide to use a journal instead of individual sheets of paper, see Activity 5 for directions for making a journal.
Encountering Scripture

Supplies:
- paper and pencils or pens
- calming music, such as nature sounds
- (optional) instrumental music or soft jazz

Spend at least two minutes looking at the poster. Ask participants: What do you notice? What feelings emerge while viewing the image? Distribute paper and pens or pencils. Explain that people will not be asked to share what they write in this second part of the activity; this is just for individual reflection. Invite people to draw a line across the sheet of paper, dividing it in half, or to create the outline of an iceberg across the paper. Label one half of the paper “Private” and the other half “Public.”

Encountering scripture is a difficult faith practice for many people. Bible readings may summon a variety of emotions. Some people have been hurt by other people’s reactions to scripture, and some people have been healed. Many people have a mixture of experiences with scripture. Sometimes negative experiences with specific Christians or specific faith communities may affect our ability to read scripture with an open heart and an open mind. Explain to learners that many times what individuals say publicly about scripture is actually the tip of the iceberg. There may be much more beneath the surface. During these next few moments, ponder what you truly believe about the Bible and when and how you formed your opinions. Fill in your public and private portions, as desired, remembering that your work will remain private.

If possible, play background music during the private reflection time. To conclude, remind people that they may continue this activity throughout the week. What is important is that we do personal “heart work” as we approach this faith practice of encountering scripture with awareness, humility, anticipation, and joy.

Sending & Serving Activities

MarketPath interview (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: When we encounter scripture, we are changed. The members of First Grace Church in Akron, Ohio (United States), were inspired by Jesus’ words. Their ministry focuses on meaningful worship and feeding and tending the people in their community. They created an independent fair-trade store—an environmentally friendly store—called MarketPath. All profits from the store return to First Grace to support their outreach ministry, which includes a food pantry, youth programs, nutrition education, medical care, and weekly meals that serve more than 2,000 people each month. Gather information on MarketPath from the website [http://www.themarketpath.com/], or arrange for computers with Internet access.

Supplies:
- “Follow Me: First Grace’s Response to Christ’s Call,” Attachment: Activity 7
- Bible
- computers with Internet access
Have someone read aloud John 21:1–20. Consider reading it aloud twice from different translations. How does this passage inspire you? If this passage were to inspire your worshiping community, what might be the result? Share the story of MarketPath with the group as an example of how one congregation responded to scripture. Use the article as a handout, or paraphrase it. What are the various ways First Grace responded after encountering scripture? What commitment is needed to maintain their ministry? When has your congregation been energized by scripture and allowed that energy to transform a ministry? What commitment have you made after hearing Christ say “Feed my sheep”?

Ask learners this week to be attentive to the issues that tug on the heart. Perhaps you will feel that tug while reading the news, listening to a coworker, seeing a neighborhood’s challenge on your way to work, or while praying. Reread the John passage throughout the week, and record your thoughts. Share your awareness with a trusted friend.

**Reflection: Seeking Treasure**

**Leader preparation:** Reflect on the questions in the attachment prior to meeting your participants. The first part is a group discussion. The reflection questions may be used during the coming week. You may make copies of the reflection questions or send the questions in an e-mail.

**Supplies:**
- Bible
- “Reflection for This Week,” Attachment: Activity 8

Read aloud Proverbs 2:1–8. Have learners pay special attention to verse 4: “If you seek it like silver, and search for it as for hidden treasure.” What do you normally seek during your week? What do you value as a treasure? How have your “treasures” changed as you mature?

If someone analyzed your spending habits, what would they say you seek and treasure? If someone looked at your daily schedule, what would they say you seek and treasure?

Distribute copies of the attachment, and invite people to use this reflection activity during the coming week.

**Listening for God’s Voice: Follow Me**

**Leader preparation:** The goal of this activity is to help participants listen for God’s voice throughout the week. This will be a new concept for some and familiar territory for others. God is speaking today and every day, but it’s difficult to hear God’s voice if we don’t listen. It does not matter which passage the participants choose. Encourage them to “stick with it” for the entire week. There is a tendency to switch passages mid-week. You may want to send an affirmative group e-mail mid-week as a reminder or to offer time of listen to their discernment. There is an organic awareness of God that blossoms when we allow scripture to seed our daily lives. Enjoy!

**Supplies:**
- Bible
- journals or computer
- “Reflection for This Week,” Attachment: Activity 9
Read aloud Proverbs 2:1–8 and John 21:1–19. Ask each person to adopt one of these passages for the week. Suggest people commit to read the chosen verses both indoors and outside, in a variety of settings. *Experience the verses at different times of the day. If comfortable, share the verses with someone else. Each day, record (journal, computer document, artwork) how the verses speak to you. At the end of the week prayerfully review your entries, listening for God’s voice speaking to you.*

Have the Proverbs people and the John people gather together. Ask them to decide how they might connect and support one another during the week (phone calls, e-mails, texting, blogging). People might use these connections as a way to share some of what they are experiencing through their reading of the chosen passage.

**Reflect**

A. W. Tozer (1897–1963) said, “If you would follow on to know the Lord, come at once to the open Bible expecting it to speak to you. Do not come with the notion that it is a thing which you may push around at your convenience.” What do you expect from the Bible? What do you think your participants expect? Reflect on what you have experienced together. How will you build on what has happened in future sessions together?
Proverbs 2:1–6 Worksheet

________________________, if you ____________________ my words
(your name) (verb)

and ______________________ my commandments within you,
(verb or verb and preposition)

________________________ attentive to wisdom
(verb + ing) (body part)

and ______________________ to understanding;
(verb + ing) (body part)

if you indeed ____________________ for insight
(verb or verb and preposition)

and ______________________ for understanding:
(verb) (noun)

if you ____________________ it like ____________________,
(verb) (noun for something precious)

and ______________________ for it like ____________________ —
(verb) (noun)

then you will understand the fear of the Lord

and find the knowledge of God.
You may make a journal with any dimensions desired. These instructions are for your reference, and you may adapt them.

**Supplies**

- cardstock for cover, any color (9 in × 12 in; yields 2 covers)
- copy paper for inside sheets, white or pastel colors (a heavier weight of paper allows for artwork as well as writing in the journal)
- paper cutter
- T-square and utility knife or a mat cutter
- cording or heavy yarn
- hole punch (heavy duty)
- supplies to decorate the cover
- table knife without serrations

**Cover**

1. Cut cardstock to 8¾ in × 5¾ in. You will need one cover per person.
2. To create the spine: On the long edge score the cardstock at 4¼ in and 4½ in. To score the cardstock means to mark it lightly in a straight line (using mat cutter or T-square and utility knife). But do not cut through the cardstock. If you cut through, start over and learn from the mistake, saving the cardstock for another project.
3. Carefully fold along the scored lines, pressing gently to create a smooth edge. (A table knife provides weight and keeps finger oils off the cover.) Do this for both lines to create your journal spine.

**Inside Paper**

1. Fold 8½ × 11 copy paper in half to create a journal that is 8½ in × 5½ in. Determine how many sheets each person will need. (Six to eight sheets fit nicely within the ½ in spine.)
2. Place the folded copy paper inside the cover with the fold and spine aligning. Using the paper punch, create holes through the paper and the cover. You will want one hole near the top and one hole near the bottom.

**Decorate**

- Decorate the cover as desired. You may also decorate it after assembly, if desired.
- You want to paper or decorate the inside cover.
- **Note:** Decorations created with markers, colored pencils, stamping, or stickers, for example, will require little drying time. Decorating with paint, glitter, or glue will require longer drying time.

**Assemble**

1. Cut cording so it is at least 30 in long.
2. Align the holes in the cover and the paper.
3. Thread the cording, from the inside holes, working outward. The loose ends should be on the outside.
4. Align the two lengths so one is a lot shorter than the other. With the short end, tie a knot as close to the spine as possible. This knot holds the cover and the paper together, creating the journal.
5. You have two options with the long length of cord. First, you may cut it, creating an open journal. Or you may use the long length to wrap around the journal, creating a closed journal, tying the end in a bow or tucking it under another piece of cording.
Follow Me: First Grace’s Response to Christ’s Call

When you enter MarketPath and meet Jennifer Browning-Patrick, you experience a walking, talking, effusive personification of God’s love. Her commitment to be a 24/7 disciple is apparent. She immediately offers that she’s the store manager, that God is the CEO, and that this store is a mission for First Grace, just around the corner, where all are welcome.

What is MarketPath?
MarketPath is an independent fair trade store. Fair trade is a collaborative effort between artists in developing countries and people selling their work in North America. Artists are paid for their work as products are purchased (no consignments). The products are created with a contract that negotiates fair wages for the artists—there’s no child labor; there’s a direct, collegial relationship with artists in developing countries; and artists and MarketPath make a commitment to be environmentally responsible. MarketPath also carries art created by local artists who agree to the fair-trade principles.

How did MarketPath start?
Browning-Patrick gave all the credit to Rev. Bob Dreese, the pastor at First Grace. She said that he had the idea for a fair-trade store many years ago. The church started learning about the fair-trade concept, which began with the Mennonite Church over 60 years ago. Then First Grace started selling coffee and chocolates after church. Rev. Dreese kept encouraging the congregation to do more, but the congregation and Dreese weren’t sure how they could do more. They were feeling called, though. Everyone kept praying, feeling tugged, and trying to discern options.

What happened?
Browning-Patrick responded, “It’s not really one thing. It seems like at least three: First Grace was already well known and respected, we’re in a great neighborhood, and people looked our direction during a crisis. You know, when you put out divine intention and trust God, God puts key people and opportunities in place.”

The church already had a dynamic worship ministry, so that was reaffirmed. And First Grace kept working hard on its education and outreach programs—preschool, after school, youth, community wellness, and free meals.

The store is located in Highland Park, a neighborhood within the city of Akron. This area is home to many people, ranging from young students in their first apartment to elderly people in nursing homes. The residents include people living well below the poverty level to people who are affluent. Many residents do not drive. Instead, they walk, bike, or use public transportation. Residents with cars frequently walk to local restaurants, stores, and the theater. So there was a neighborhood where folks smiled and waved to one another in passing.

Then, in 2003, a hopeful situation became a crisis. It started when a large contractor received the bid to demolish the beloved neighborhood grocery store and surrounding land. There were grand plans for Highland Square, including a new grocery store and new retail spaces. The land was cleared, the grocery store was gone, and the contractor was unable to keep his commitment. The time had arrived for a worshipping, praying, serving, and caring congregation to
When the contractor was able to break ground for the retail spaces, Dreese and church leaders approached the congregation about opening a store in one of the new spaces to sell fair trade products. The profit from the store would be used to support the outreach ministries at First Grace. The congregation supported the project with the understanding that the store employees would also educate shoppers about fair trade and would create cultural awareness as a step to world peace. The store would give First Grace an even larger presence in the community and would be an answer to many prayers about expanding markets for fairly traded products. The store would set the tone for the kind of businesses the residents in Highland Square hoped to attract. It was a significant risk.

When did MarketPath open?
MarketPath opened in November, 2007. The first year was a success. Then, in 2008 the United States entered a recession. First Grace cancelled planned renovations and upgrades, and MarketPath scaled down travel and the quantity of merchandise. During the recession every outreach program remained fully funded. By July, 2010, the independent fair trade store was thriving again, expanding its ministry to include selling products created by low-income people in the United States and serving as a community hub. Browning-Patrick and the store employees tell every shopper about the store’s mission, commitment to world peace, and environmental justice. And shoppers hear about the person or group who made every object in the store. The profit feeds more than 2,000 people per month, covers the cost of housing the Akron AIDS collaborative, supports middle and senior high youth programs, and provides community wellness education. Browning-Patrick says, “We like being part of the golden web that God creates between communities.”

MarketPath has also been able to expand the church’s ministry in unpredictable ways. In May, 2010, one of the local artists represented at MarketPath had her son kidnapped and taken overseas by the child’s father. By the end of June, the First Grace community and MarketPath had held two fundraisers for the mother’s legal fees and had a three-concert benefit scheduled. The store became the gathering place for other parents with children kidnapped internationally. Browning-Patrick admitted that no one in the church was aware of the issue, but they recognized an injustice when it happened, responded quickly, learned about a new justice issue, and provided ministry to another group of people who desperately need the love and support of the First Grace community. As First Grace knows, when Jesus says “Follow me,” we often need to take risks and expand our comfort zone.


MarketPath
833 West Market Street
Akron, Ohio 44303-1017
(330) 258-9003
www.themarketpath.com
## Reflection for This Week

Read Proverbs 2:1–8 every day this week. Reflect on your day for a few minutes, using the following questions as a guide.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reflection</th>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
<th>Saturday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How did you treasure God's commandments within you today?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When did you cry out for understanding?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did you treasure most?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When did you experience wisdom?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whose actions reminded you of God?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

Copyright ©2011 The Pilgrim Press. Permission is granted for use by a single congregation for one (1) year from the purchase date of the subscription. No part of this download may be reproduced or transmitted—beyond the group using these materials—in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without the written permission from the publisher.
Encountering scripture is an important practice for Christians. However, many adults have not encountered scripture's potential to enrich, inform, and energize their lives. Perhaps they think they don't have time, or they don't have any more to learn. They may have had scripture preached at them or against them. Or, they may not have discovered connections between these ancient texts and their own lives. Some people think that they need special classes or an advanced degree to understand scripture. Moses reminded the Israelites that the commandments they were given were not too hard for them. “No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe” (Deuteronomy 30:14 NRSV). This Exploration may help adults discover the life giving possibilities of scripture, like water nourishing the roots of a tree.

About this Age Group

Encountering scripture is an important practice for Christians. However, many adults have not encountered scripture's potential to enrich, inform, and energize their lives. Perhaps they think they don't have time, or they don't have any more to learn. They may have had scripture preached at them or against them. Or, they may not have discovered connections between these ancient texts and their own lives. Some people think that they need special classes or an advanced degree to understand scripture. Moses reminded the Israelites that the commandments they were given were not too hard for them. “No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe” (Deuteronomy 30:14 NRSV). This Exploration may help adults discover the life giving possibilities of scripture, like water nourishing the roots of a tree.

About this Exploration

The Gospel of John gives us an image of God as creative Word living among us. God is not remote or far off; God is present in the world with us. The divine lover, “the Word become flesh,” is intimately involved in our human experience. Encounter with Scripture invites us into dialogue with God who dwells with us. Such encounters may heal or challenge, delight or disrupt, comfort or transform. When we hear Scripture as a community, we discern its life-giving word for us. We reconcile the ways it has been misused and distorted with its power to create new life.
Encountering scripture is difficult for many people. While the Bible is the sacred text for Christians, it is also a controversial text. This faith practice is not a Bible study, nor will it solve the many questions that divide Christian disciples. This practice offers opportunities to enter the text and become part of the sacred. Those who interpret the Bible literally and those who encounter the text historically or metaphorically or sacramentally will be able to enter these activities. For further study, you may wish to refer to these resources:


Our hope is that through the activities in this faith practice you and your sojourners will learn different ways of encountering scripture. This resource works with twelve Bible passages. There’s a lot of unexplored scripture. We hope these activities equip you with the tools to lead this study as well as with ideas for encountering other biblical texts.

### Investigate: Open the Bible! (Easy Preparation)

#### Leader preparation
Sometimes we need to stop and simply look at the Bible. We need to open the cover and investigate what may be in the pew rack during worship, or on the shelf at home, or in a drawer in hotel rooms. This activity is a basic review of the Bible. An abundance of additional information is available online, in libraries, and probably on your minister’s bookshelf. Some of the information may be new to your group members.

#### Supplies:
- Bibles, one per person, in a variety of translations and versions

Distribute Bibles. Invite people to open to the cover page of the Bible. *Which translation are you holding? Unless you are reading the original Greek (New Testament) or Hebrew (Old Testament) texts, you are reading a translation of the original manuscript.* Translators are biblical scholars who have studied the original Greek or Aramaic or Hebrew texts, who understand how language was used in ancient cultures, and who try to honor the original authors and God by doing their very best work. Most versions of the English Bible are the work of a group of translators and editors working together. If you look at English translations, you will note that the King James Version is different from *The Message*, which is different from the New Revised Standard Version.

Invite people to read aloud John 1:1–4 in different versions. *What differences do you notice? Why do you think translations vary in the way that they translate the original Hebrew or Greek words?* Each translation is also a reflection of when and where that Bible was produced. Also, there are sometimes several different ancient Hebrew or Greek manuscripts of a given biblical book, of different ages and from different places. None of them is the original manuscript, but because they were copied by hand, there may be differences or errors introduced.

Have participants look at the table of contents. *How many books are in the first part of the Hebrew part of the Bible (Old Testament)? [39] Read aloud the names of the books. How many books are in the Christian Scriptures (New Testament)? [27] Read those names aloud, too. Many Christian Bibles have 66 books. Locate the cover page for the Old Testament, and locate the cover page for the New Testament. What is on these pages?*

Refer again to the table of contents. *Is either of the two Testaments subdivided by headings, such as “letters” or “poetry” or “the law” or “the Gospels”? If so, which books are in the various categories? The Hebrew Bible was assembled between 70 and 135 CE by rabbinical councils. The councils divided the Hebrew Bible into the law (Pentateuch), the former prophets, the latter prophets, the twelve, and the writings. For this Faith Practice, our Hebrew Bible readings are from the law (Deuteronomy), the writings (Proverbs, Psalms, Ruth, and Esther), and former prophets (2 Kings).*

The New Testament was assembled in 367 CE and is often divided into Gospels, church history, letters, and apocalypse. The Christian Scriptures are not in chronological order, nor are they in the order they were written. Many of the letters were written prior to the Gospels. *Does your Bible contain the Apocrypha of the Old Testament? The Latin Vulgate Bible included the Apocrypha. These books are considered divinely inspired, but were not included in the Hebrew Bible. Martin Luther placed the Apocrypha between the Old and New Testaments. The 1611 King James translation, which owes immense thanks to the work of William Tyndale...*
in the early 1500s, did not have the Apocrypha. Today, the Apocrypha is included in Roman Catholic Bibles and in many study Bibles.


Meditation: Musical Prayer

Leader preparation: Read John 1:1–5. When do you feel a creative force that inspires you to worship? Frequently, music has the ability to change our attitude, lower our blood pressure, focus our thoughts, and heal us. A tune can transport us to a different place or a different time. Since ancient times, faith communities have used music as a means to connect scripture with the sacred experience. Preview this activity. You do not need to enjoy classical music to enjoy this activity. Center yourself in a quiet place, close your eyes, and listen. Raise the volume as loud as possible without harming your eardrums. Many people encounter scripture through music. Obtain a recording of Rachmaninoff’s “Vespers” (“All-Night Vigil”) from http://www.amazon.com/dp/B000V6NWIK/, a public library, or a choral music fan; you could also purchase a recording through iTunes or another online music site. You can listen to this piece of music at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YT_0Ta3OSVI&feature=related.

Supplies:
- equipment to play an audio recording, such as a computer, CD player, or MP3 player

Read John 1:1–5 aloud. Ask: How is God is described as a creative force in this passage? What does the word “creator” mean to you? When do you feel a creative force in your life? Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943) was not an especially religious man. Regardless, he wrote a choral masterpiece, “Vespers” (“All-Night Vigil”), based on the Russian Orthodox liturgy. The composition premiered in Moscow on March 10, 1915, at a fundraising concert for the Russian World War I relief effort. The first movement is entitled, “Come, Let Us Bow Before God” (Russian translation) or “Come, Let us Worship God,” which is the usual English translation. Read aloud the English translation of the piece. Listen to the first movement as a meditative prayer. Let yourself be transported by the blended notes and orchestral arrangement. Relax, and trust that the Holy Spirit will use the music to guide you closer to God. Trust the Holy Spirit as a creative force in your life.

Russian:
Amin.
Priidite poklonimsya tsarevi nashemu Bogu.
Priidite poklonimsya i pripadem Khristu tsarevi nashemu Bogu.
Priidite poklonimsya i pripadem Samomu Khristu tsarevi i Bogu nashemu.
Priidite poklonimsya i pripadem Yemu.
Amin.

English:
Amen.
Come, let us worship God, our King.
Come, let us worship and kneel.
Before Christ, our King and our God.
Come, let us worship and kneel before Him.
Amen.
Painting: In the Beginning

Leader preparation: John’s Gospel begins with the Word of God as more than speech or language, but as God creating, God in action. Read John 1:1–5, noticing how the image of “Word” is used in many different ways. This activity focuses on the first five verses, inviting each pilgrim to create an illustration for John 1:1–5. Some people may focus on one aspect of the passage, such as light or dark or God or Word. Some may depict a particular image while others may choose to create an abstract impression. Gather the art supplies prior to session. Other than painting for interior decorating, many adults have not held a brush since their school days. Be affirming of all efforts and styles. Be prepared to explain simple painting techniques, or invite someone familiar with this medium to introduce it to your group. Have the surfaces and supplies prepared so the time spent on this activity can be creative time and not organizational time. At the end of your gathering time, ask volunteers to help with cleaning and putting away supplies. Arrange for a flat drying space where paintings can be left.

Supplies:
- large sheets of newsprint, water color paper, or paper for acrylics
- paint (tempera or acrylic)
- brushes, variety of sizes
- plastic or newspapers to cover surfaces
- containers for paint (bowls, cups, empty yogurt containers)
- fun extras for applying or texturing the paint—sponges, rags, bubble wrap, wooden spools
- aprons or coveralls
- Bibles

Allow time for each participant to read John 1:1–5 silently. Give them enough time to read the verses at least two or three times. Do not discuss these verses as a group. Then, ask them to use any of the supplies to create an illustration for the beginning of John’s Gospel. Encourage people to be playful and creative, rather than worrying about their skills as an artist or the finished product. Abstract colors and shapes are fine. Ask whether people want to continue working silently, or whether they would like to share an insight about their work or about the creative process.

Discerning & Deciding Activities

Silent Movie: Elijah and Elisha (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read 2 Kings 2:1–14. Know the sequence of events well. Decide how you want to divide the group. This activity is a dramatization of the 2 Kings text. The end goal is to act out the vignettes so a person who does not know the story may have an idea of that part of the story. A photograph of each vignette should remind participants of the text. Sometimes you have a group that does not enjoy drama, or may not be easily mobile, or may be too self-conscious. This option could also be a drawing activity, with one drawing per vignette. It would still be an easy preparation. Instead of a silent-movie-inspired dramatization, create a storyboard or a comic book or another type of visual narrative. Adapt this activity to best suit your group. If you choose the drawing option, you will need paper and colored pencils or markers.
Encountering Scripture

Supplies:
• Bibles (one per person)
• (optional) digital camera or video recorder
• (optional) paper and colored pencils or markers

Read aloud 2 Kings 2:1–14. Then have people read it for themselves. Invite the group to create eleven vignettes, or role-plays, to retell the passage. Depending on the size of the group, you may need some people in more than one vignette. You may also choose to have the group work together on each scene, keeping Elijah and Elisha consistent in each vignette. When the group performs their scene, they may use actions but no words. Their body positions and facial expressions need to dramatize the text, as in a silent movie. Have other people create background and special effects (such as the Jordan River, the whirlwind, and the chariot) using body positions and movements. The scenes are divided as follows:

1. 2 Kings 2:1–2
2. 2 Kings 2:3
3. 2 Kings 2:4
4. 2 Kings 2:5
5. 2 Kings 2:6
6. 2 Kings 2:7–8
7. 2 Kings 2:9
8. 2 Kings 2:10
9. 2 Kings 2:11
10. 2 Kings 2:12
11. 2 Kings 2:13–14

Option: Take a photograph of each vignette. Those images could be uploaded and e-mailed or printed. Or someone could create a PowerPoint presentation or a video. Before sharing photographs of people, make sure you have permission to use each person's image. This is especially important if images will be shared electronically.

Children of God
Leader preparation: This activity focuses on John 1:12–13. “Child of God” or “Children of God” is a phrase we hear frequently in church. “Child of God” is a metaphor—parents who have completed school emergency medical forms, various registration forms, or a passport for a child do not write “God” in the parental information section. “Child of God” is a way of describing our relationship with God and God’s relationship with us. To what does this image point?

Supplies:
• markers and newsprint or whiteboard
• Bibles (one per person)

Read aloud John 1:1–14. Read this aloud even if you have worked with the John passage in another activity. In the New Revised Standard Version, John 1:12–13 reads: “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.” Eugene Peterson’s contemporary language version, The Message, reads: “But whoever did want him, who believed he was who he claimed and would do what he said, he made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves. These are the God-begotten, not blood-begotten, not flesh-begotten, not sex-begotten.”
What is needed to be a child of God? How is “child of God” a metaphor? How is this metaphor important in our faith as Christians? How is this image important or significant for you personally? What other metaphors are in the John passage (such as “light” and “Word”)? List each metaphor on newsprint or a whiteboard. Invite people to talk about how that metaphor speaks to them personally. Conclude by asking group members to close their eyes as you read aloud John 1:1–14 from your preferred version of the Bible.

Discussion with Art: Mentoring

Leader preparation: Look deeply at the Rivera painting, putting yourself in the place of each character. Then think about people who have been mentors in your life, people who through their words or actions guided and inspired you. Familiarize yourself with the activity prior to session.

Supplies:
- markers and newsprint or a whiteboard
- Bibles
- artwork: “Two Women and a Child” by Diego Rivera

Ask: What is mentoring? Record responses on newsprint or a whiteboard. (This is a quick brainstorm, not a discussion.) Read aloud 2 Kings 2:1–14. Then ask the group to identify examples of mentoring. Who is mentoring whom? How is this an example of mentoring? What qualities or skills are needed to be an effective mentor? When have you been mentored by someone else? What was the most helpful part of the mentoring? When have you mentored another person? What was the most helpful? What did you most enjoy? What did you least enjoy?

Display the Rivera painting “Two Women and A Child.” Allow everyone to simply enjoy the image for a few minutes. What might the women be discussing? What do you think their relationship is like? Consider the relationship between Elisha and Elijah. How is it different from or similar to the relationship you imagine exists between these two women?

Sending & Serving Activities

Bible Interpretation: Moral Imagination (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read this activity. Review the questions on the attachment. You may want to refer to the RESPECT guidelines to ensure that the group members listen to one another with care and respect. The Bible has stood the test of time because Christians have been able to discern God’s Word, generation after generation. The struggles with scripture are not limited to the 21st century. A brief history of Christianity highlights conflicts with scriptural interpretations.

Supplies:
- Bible
- “Moral Imagination,” Attachment: Activity 7
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
Ask someone to read John 1:1–14. Mention that the handout refers to moral imagination as a way to interpret scripture. This is not the only way to interpret scripture. Either have people read the handout silently, or ask someone to read it aloud. If reading it aloud, allow a few minutes for people to skim or reread portions of the handout individually. Then, facilitate the discussion using the questions at the bottom of the attachment. Record responses on newsprint or a whiteboard. Suggest that people continue to think about this activity during the week, noting when and where moral imagination impacts their understanding of scripture.

**Newspaper Blackout Poem**

**Leader preparation:** Read John 1:1–14. Cut the newspaper pages at the fold so they are single pages, not double pages. Use pages that are mostly print, not ones that are primarily ads, large pictures, or comics. Create a sample blackout poem inspired by John 1:1–14, following the directions below. View examples of blackout poems or arrange to show samples to the group, found at [http://www.flickr.com/photos/deathtogutenberg/sets/72157594575556771/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/deathtogutenberg/sets/72157594575556771/) Austin Kleon’s photo gallery.

**Supplies:**
- Bible
- black markers, permanent or water-based
- newspaper
- (optional) computer with Internet connection

Read John 1:1–14 aloud. Pause. Read it again or ask someone else to read it. You may use different versions. Gather around a table and give each person a newspaper page. Tell them they are creating a poem, inspired by the John passage but using the words in front of them. Show your example, or show an example from Austin Kleon’s gallery. Participants are to select the words they want in their poem and then darken everything around it. The “light” of the poem emerges from the darkness. Invite people to share their creations if they wish. Suggest that during the week, people might try this same activity at home using the 2 Kings passage.

**Parting Gifts**

**Leader preparation:** Learn the spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” It is based on the 2 Kings passage. Think about gifts given to you by people who are no longer alive. Access one of the following versions of “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” and arrange for equipment to show it to the group:

- Kathleen Battle, Boys Choir of Harlem, New York Philharmonic, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UVyBjqY3r0k&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UVyBjqY3r0k&feature=related)
- Web-based hymnal, [http://nethymnal.org/htm/s/w/swinglow.htm](http://nethymnal.org/htm/s/w/swinglow.htm)

**Supplies:**
- Bibles
- computer with Internet access
In 2 Kings 2:1–14 Elisha requests a gift from Elijah. Read the passage aloud. What gift was requested? Why do you think this was important to Elisha? What parting gifts have you received (or wanted)? What gifts do you have that you would like to leave someone else? Are the gifts physical, such as property, furniture, financial, heirlooms? Are the gifts spiritual, such as wisdom and knowing they are loved?

Invite the group to sing “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” as a group. Share information about the spiritual from the website.

Chorus:
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Comin’ for to carry me home;
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Comin’ for to carry me home.

I looked over Jordan,
And what did I see,
Comin’ for to carry me home,
A band of angels comin’ after me,
Comin’ for to carry me home.

Repeat Chorus

If you get there before I do,
Comin’ for to carry me home,
Tell all my friends I’m comin’ too,
Comin’ for to carry me home.

Reflect

“Goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate, light is stronger than darkness, victory is ours through him who loves us” (Archbishop Desmond Tutu). Where are you experiencing light being stronger than darkness? Who among your group members will need an encouraging call or e-mail this week? What have you learned from this experience about scripture? About yourself as a leader? How are you honoring your gift of leadership?
Moral Imagination

In The Good Book (New York: Avon, 1996), Peter Gomes writes about the Bible and Race. He uses this issue as an example of “an unchanged text with changed thinking,” an example of moral imagination. Gomes notes that the Bible does not condemn slavery, either in the Hebrew Scriptures or in the New Testament. Slavery is not condemned by the patriarchs, prophets, or Jesus. Both sides in the American Civil War (1861–1865) firmly believed that their interpretation of the Bible was correct. Many southern Christians believed the Bible supported slavery. Many northern Christians and abolitionists believed the Bible was against slavery. At the end of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation to free the slaves, but that was not the end of racism.

During the 1960s, Martin Luther King, Jr., was asked by various Southern religious leaders to cease his leadership in the civil rights movement because his actions were unbiblical. Gomes asserts that abolitionists during the Civil War and civil rights advocates in the mid-20th century used moral imagination to read and discern scripture through the lenses of a contemporary context or setting, instead of reading it literally. During the summer of 1995, the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, apologized publically for its role in justifying slavery and racial segregation.

“In the beginning” God was living and creating, says the prologue to John’s Gospel. Through the Holy Spirit, Christians may experience the living God while reading ancient biblical texts. The Bible is Christianity’s sacred book. It is dynamic and vital. On many issues, the wisdom of the Bible is wisdom for our world today. But Christians need to seek the Holy Spirit’s guidance as they discern scripture in a contemporary context. Ponder questions such as these to guide your thoughts and discussion:

• Name examples of ancient biblical wisdom that is wisdom for our world today.
• Name examples where the teaching of the Bible is not wisdom for today.
• What are some issues that are controversial for Christians today? How is the Bible used to support different or opposing points of view on these issues?
• When might we need to challenge interpretations of the Bible that are used to hurt, discriminate against, or exclude others?
• How do we discern when and whether the Holy Spirit is guiding our conversation about these issues?
• What can help us to be more open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit?
• How can we listen to opinions different from ours so everyone is honored as a child of God?
Discipleship is the path we are called to travel with Christ. Sometimes discipleship is a joy, and sometimes it is a challenge, but the journey should enrich our life and the lives of the people we know. Discipleship is a choice, a way of life, grounded in biblical teachings and our relationship with Jesus Christ. It is more than Sunday morning worship, although regular attendance is a good beginning. It is a commitment that we reaffirm with every breath, every decision. Adults live their discipleship in many different ways. Some may understand their work as a vocation—a living out of God’s call in their lives. For others, volunteer work in the community or within the church may be an expression of their discipleship. Some adults may be able to readily articulate a sense of the gifts and skills that equip them as followers of Jesus. Others may not be familiar with or comfortable with terms such as “discipleship.” The activities in this Exploration use Bible stories about Ruth’s decision to accompany Naomi (Ruth 1) and an Ethiopian official's decision to be baptized (Acts 8:26–40) as occasions to reflect on the meaning of discipleship.

For the Christian, discipleship includes servant leadership, listening for God’s voice, responding to Scripture, learning the practices of our faith, mentoring others, passing on the stories of our faith, and learning how to live with compassion and love. When we hear Scripture, we must discern how to live into its teaching. As Christians, we believe that Scripture makes a difference in our living. Encountering Scripture is one way we discover how to live in Christ’s way.
Encountering Scripture

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
Ruth 1
Acts 8:26–40

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 Chesed (Easy Preparation)
Leader preparation: Read Ruth 1 aloud for yourself and ponder the discussion questions below. Read about chesed (HEH-sed) in the activity description below and at this website: http://www.bible-researcher.com/chesed.html. When Jewish people write or speak about chesed, the book of Ruth is often in their thoughts. The pairing of chesed and the book of Ruth is so strong that the relationship is sometimes assumed. Ponder where chesed is in your life and be prepared with an example.

Supplies:
• Bibles in several different translations

Assign parts for a dramatic reading of Ruth 1. Ask one person to be the narrator, who reads everything not in quotation marks. Ask others to take the parts of Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah. Invite the group to talk about each character. When have you felt like Naomi? Have you ever had to make a difficult decision, such as the one faced by Ruth and Orpah. What was that like? Who do you most identify with in this story?

Tell learners that chesed is a Hebrew word that has no exact equivalent in English. It is often translated into English as loving kindness, but its meaning is much bigger than mere kindness. It is a word that speaks of covenant and ongoing relationship. Have someone read aloud Ruth 1:8. This verse contains the word chesed. Naomi uses it when she blesses Ruth and Orpah: “May God show chesed to you as you have shown chesed to the dead and to me.”

Compare this verse in different versions of the Bible to get a sense of some of the possible meanings of this word. How is the word translated? Chesed refers to loyalty and faithfulness, emerging from a sense of caring and commitment. The word is used often in the Bible to describe God’s covenant relationship with God’s people. How is chesed evident in the relationships in the Ruth passage? Which of your relationships embody chesed? Where does your faith community embody chesed? How does chesed describe God’s relationship with you? How does chesed describe your relationship with God?

2 Music and Art: When I Was Baptized
Leader preparation: Read Acts 8:26–40 and think about the baptism of the Ethiopian. When you read or hear the word “baptism,” how do you respond? What is your immediate reaction? How does your worshiping community celebrate baptism? What are some ways you honor someone’s decision to become part of your church community? How is what you do influenced by scripture? Think about your group and the various faith traditions that are part of each person’s experience. Be prepared to honor all the ways baptism is celebrated.

Supplies:
• Bible
• “When I Was Baptized,” Attachment: Activity 2
• markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Leader Preparation

Discipleship moves scripture off the page and into real time. As we encounter scripture in faith communities, we reflect on how we are called to live out its meaning and call. How we understand scripture is reflected in our daily life. These passages speak to baptism, deep friendships, uncertainty, questioning, and teaching. Read the activities and select the options that will allow your participants to encounter scripture as fully as possible. Read Acts 8:26–40 and Ruth 1. Consider the decisions made by Ruth and the Ethiopian official. Whom do they choose to follow? What do you think motivates them to respond as they do? What are some marks of faithful discipleship that you observe in these stories?

Prayer: Gracious God, where you lead I will follow. Guide my steps, my actions, my words, and my thoughts. My deepest desire is to be faithful to you. Amen.

Session Development

For each session leaders may choose from nine activities that help learners engage the practice of faith. It is best to select at least one activity from “Exploring and Engaging,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving.” The first activity in each category is designed for “easy preparation” (able to be done with minimal preparation
Read aloud Acts 8:26–40, or invite one of the group members to read it for the group. Use these or similar questions for discussion:

- Why might the Ethiopian have wanted to be baptized?
- In your faith tradition, how does a person join a faith community? What rites or celebrations accompany a person’s decision to become a member of the church?
- How is baptism an act of discipleship?

Maren Tirabassi and Lauaki Agaiotupo Pouesi wrote a hymn with lyrics in English and Samoan that allows us to experience scripture through music. Sing the hymn “When I Was Baptized” together two or three times. What images come to mind? Think again of the story of the Ethiopian being baptized. How does the hymn change how you think about this story?

View the artwork “Baptism of Jesus” by Pheoris West. Do not tell the title of the painting. Allow everyone time to look. Invite them to notice and appreciate the painting. Which single word describes the painting for you? Ask everyone to share a one-word response.

Have someone read aloud Acts 8:26–40. What do you notice new in the story that you did not notice before? Do you hear the story differently, having sung and looked at art? If so, what has changed?

In this activity we have encountered scripture through reading the Word, discerning a part of the passage, singing, and allowing a painting to expand our understanding. Which way of encountering scripture was most meaningful to you?

Sing the hymn again.

Conversations: Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah

Leader preparation: Read the activity and reflect on the questions and the Blake image of Ruth, Orpah, and Naomi. Have the artwork available to put up, but do not show it to the group until after people have created and shared their dialogues.

Supplies:
- Bibles
- (optional) paper and pens

Divide into groups of two or three people. Ask people read aloud the first chapter of Ruth in the small groups. Have groups create short farewell conversations between Orpah and Ruth and between Orpah and Naomi. Tell participants they may write down the dialogue if they wish. Gather back as one group, and have each small group share its dialogues, taking the parts of the three characters.

View the artwork “Naomi Entreating Ruth and Orpah to Return to the Land of Moab” by William Blake. Which moment from Ruth 1 is represented? Ask everyone to select one figure and pose as that person. Which figure did you select? Why? How are the dialogues the groups created similar to the emotion in the Blake print? How are the dialogues different? What parting gift would you give Orpah if you were Naomi or Ruth? Why? What parting gift you give Naomi or Ruth if you were Orpah? Why?
Poetry (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** This activity works well with the Ruth passage as we focus on how we experience God’s role and our role when we are seem isolated or in personal crisis. In Ruth there are examples of characters making decisions with God’s help but without a lot of community support or discussion. The poem for this activity is by William Blake (English, 1757–1827), who is also the artist of the poster “Naomi Entreating Ruth and Orpah to Return to the Land of Moab.” You do not need the image for this activity, but the poem lends additional insights into the artist’s mindset. Read the poem prior to guiding your sojourners. Create your own poem.

**Supplies:**
- “On Another’s Sorrow,” Attachment: Activity 4
- journal or writing paper, pens

Read aloud Ruth 1, or have a group member do so. Invite people to share what stands out for them as they hear the story. William Blake was a poet, printer, and painter. His accomplishments are lauded today, but he was unrecognized during his lifetime. The poem on the attachment is from Blake’s collection of poems entitled *Songs of Innocence.* It was published in 1789 when it was standard to refer to God in the masculine form. Read it aloud. Ask questions such as:

- What role does God play in Blake’s poem?
- What is your expectation of God?
- Do your expectations of God change when you are in crisis or troubled?
- What is Blake’s expectation of our role in our relationship with God?
- What is your expectation of yourself in relationship with God?
- How does this poem change or influence what you hear in the story of Ruth?
- What skills do you use when reading or listening to poetry that may be helpful when reading or listening to scripture

After the discussion, invite your sojourners to write their own poems, inspired by Blake or inspired by the group discussion of the story of Ruth.

Active Listening: Acts

**Leader preparation:** Read the activity and understand the process of encountering scripture using active listening and discernment skills. Practice it with another person prior to leading the group. This process is enlightening because it involves listening closely, honoring how God is speaking to each person, and expressing briefly what has been heard. Explain the process before reading the text as a large group, and then gently guide the process from step to step. If there are an odd number of participants, you will need to be part of a duo.

**Supplies:**
- Bibles

Select two readers and give them each a Bible. This is a listening exercise, so only the readers need a Bible. Ask the group to listen as if they are hearing the passage for the first time. Ask someone to read aloud Acts 8:26–40. Pause, allowing the group members to reflect in silence. After a few minutes ask a second reader to
read the passage aloud again. Pause again. Then, ask people to pair up. Ask the pairs take turns listening to each other, without comment. Each person shares what he or she noticed in the story from Acts (such as what they heard, what caught their attention, what surprised them or concerned them, what seemed new or important). As one person talks, the other person simply listens and gives full attention to the speaker. Give each person around 2–3 minutes to speak. Then have partners switch places so the listener becomes the speaker and vice versa.

Ask everyone to return to the larger gathering and ask what participants to summarize what their partners said about the passage. Debrief the activity using questions such as: What did you experience hearing the Acts passage spoken? Was the experience different during the second reading? What did you experience while listening to your partner? What did you experience while speaking to your partner?

6 Sharing: Unexpected Situations

**Leader preparation:** This could be a group discussion, with people learning from one another, or it could be a journal activity. Decide which option will work best for your group. Be conscious of people in your group who may currently be experiencing a difficult life situation.

**Supplies:**
- Bible

Read aloud Acts 8:26–40. Philip is miraculously guided to the place where he meets the Ethiopian, and then he is transported on to Azotus. This may sound like special effects in an action-packed movie. But life sometimes moves us to unexpected places. Maybe we need to end an unhealthy relationship or switch jobs or place a child in a different school or learn a new skill or undergo medical treatment or challenge the status quo or help an elderly relative. Many times throughout life we are in an unexpected place or an unexpected situation. We cannot always control the situation, but we can control our actions and our words.

Have you recently experienced an unexpected situation or event in your life? What choices did you have? How did you respond? Were you aware of God’s presence during the situation? If so, how did that presence make itself known? If you could return and redo a decision or a response, what would you do or say? What can we learn from this scripture story about how to be faithful disciples in unexpected situations?

7 On the Lookout: Disobedience as a Blessing (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Leaders are accustomed to having their instructions followed, whether at work or at school or at home or in a faith community. Sometimes the most faithful actions involve disobedience. Review the activity and think of a few examples of blessed disobedience.

**Supplies:**
- Bible
Remind learners that Ruth did not obey Naomi (Ruth 1). How was God present in this act of disobedience? Name some examples of blessed disobedience at the local, national, and global levels. When have you respectfully declined to follow instructions? Were you feeling led by God or were you being obstinate? How do you know when to disobey? Ask participants this week to be actively on the lookout for examples of blessed disobedience in their own lives as well as in the larger community.

**Awareness Building: Women and Homelessness**

**Leader preparation:** Ruth, Orpah, and Naomi were homeless. Orpah returned to Moab. Ruth and Naomi returned to Bethlehem in Judah. They experienced the death of their spouses, and all three women were without children. In their culture they were extremely vulnerable. Today, women remain vulnerable for a variety of reasons.

“We are Dancing Sarah’s Circle” is a hymn to the tune of “Jacob’s Ladder.” Sarah’s Circle is also the name of a nonprofit organization in Chicago, Illinois, that serves homeless women. Learn the hymn, preview the video at the website Sarah’s Circle, [http://www.sarahs-circle.org](http://www.sarahs-circle.org), and arrange for equipment to show it to the group. Reflect on homelessness in your community.

**Supplies:**
- Bible
- song: “We Are Dancing Sarah’s Circle” (tune: Jacob’s Ladder, 8.8.8.5), [http://www.theinterpretersfriend.org/songs/w-r-dncg-srh%27s-crcl.html](http://www.theinterpretersfriend.org/songs/w-r-dncg-srh%27s-crcl.html)
- equipment to view video and computer with Internet access

Read aloud Ruth 1 to the group if you have not already done so. In what ways were Orpah, Ruth, and Naomi vulnerable? (homeless, no spouses, no male heirs, traveling alone, poverty) View the video at the website Sarah’s Circle, or explain about the organization and its purpose. What connections do you find between the story of Ruth and Naomi and the situation in the video? Where is a safe place in your community for homeless women? What are common issues faced by all homeless people? Which people or organizations care for homeless men? For homeless children? Do you sense a call to serve homeless people? Where in your community are Christian disciples needed? Have participants consider the story of Ruth. What can it teach us about responses and action for women who are vulnerable?

Have the group sing “We Are Dancing Sarah’s Circle.” Note that circles connect everyone who is gathered. Then tell the participants, This week, actively seek information about homelessness in your community. Or, consider where in your community your discipleship is needed.

**Testify: What Would You Say?**

**Leader preparation:** Not everyone is a gifted evangelist. Not all of us are scripture scholars. In fact, many of us shy away from that role quickly. We often leave that work to pastors or professional church staff. But all of us bring questions and our own experience to the texts. We share our questions in community and together we seek God’s word within the sacred texts of our tradition.

**Supplies:**
- Bibles
Read Acts 8:26–40 aloud. Who do you most identify with, in this passage, Philip or the Ethiopian? The Ethiopian is reading the book of Isaiah and is clearly puzzled by what he reads in the scripture. Have you ever been baffled by a reading from the Bible? Or, are you confident about your interpretations of biblical stories? What are some of your puzzlements or questions about scripture? Who do you consult or where do you go for answers to your questions about the Bible?

The Ethiopian asks Philip about an Isaiah prophecy, wondering if Isaiah was speaking about himself or someone else. Philip told the Ethiopian about Jesus, interpreting Isaiah’s words as pointing to Jesus. He spoke so convincingly about Jesus that the Ethiopian asked to be baptized immediately. If you met someone who did not know about the Bible, what might you tell them? What are some ways that we discern and interpret scripture as a church community?

Reflect

A Senegalese proverb states, “The opportunity which God sends does not wake up one who is sleeping.” How can you stay awake and be ready for discipleship? As you think back over these activities, where have there been opportunities for you to learn more about discipleship. How has scripture called to you or challenged you in your own discipleship? What have you learned from members of your group? What were some of the challenges and joys of this Exploration?
When I Was Baptized

From Sing! Prayer and Praise®, Copyright ©2009, The Pilgrim Press.
Words: Maren Tirabassi
Samoa translation: Lauaki Agaioiupou Poutesi
Music: Lauaki Agaioiupou Poutesi
Copyright ©2004 Local Church Ministries, United Church of Christ.
All rights reserved. Used by permission.
On Another’s Sorrow

Can I see another’s woe,
And not be in sorrow too?
Can I see another’s grief,
And not seek for kind relief?

Can I see a falling tear,
And not feel my sorrow’s share?
Can a father see his child
Weep, nor be with sorrow filled?

Can a mother sit and hear
An infant groan, an infant fear?
No, no! never can it be!
Never, never can it be!

And can He who smiles on all
Hear the wren with sorrows small,
Hear the small bird’s grief and care,
Hear the woes that infants bear—

And not sit beside the nest,
Pouring pity in their breast,
And not sit the cradle near,
Weeping tear on infant’s tear?

And not sit both night and day,
Wiping all our tears away?
O no! never can it be!
Never, never can it be!

He doth give His joy to all:
He becomes an infant small,
He becomes a man of woe,
He doth feel the sorrow too.

Think not thou canst sigh a sigh,
And thy Maker is not by:
Think not thou canst weep a tear,
And thy Maker is not near.

O He gives to us His joy,
That our grief He may destroy:
Till our grief is fled and gone
He doth sit by us and moan.

—William Blake
Encountering Scripture

Sometimes adults become so busy with their daily lives that they forget to notice how God is at work in and around them. They miss the beauty of a weed growing through the asphalt, or a young entrepreneur’s lemonade stand, or a youth “high fiving” a friend, or someone holding the door, or the breeze across their cheeks, or a smile from a homeless person. When we allow ourselves to encounter scripture so that scripture can encounter us, we choose to become more attentive. We choose to view life through God’s eyes.

About this Age Group

Encounters with God through Scripture take many forms. Christian tradition offers a rich treasury of practices for personal, family, and community engagement with the Word. Over the centuries, scripture story has been read aloud in worship, sung through the Psalms, or enacted in medieval mystery plays. Scripture has been shared through mosaics, painting, dance, architecture, and sermons. Families have anchored their days in the sharing of scripture. Bold souls immersed in God’s word have sparked social change movements. Memorized passages have given courage to those who struggle. Our Reform tradition reminds us that all Christians have the privilege and responsibility to wrestle with God’s word and to give it new voice in our own lives.

About this Exploration

Encounters with God through Scripture take many forms. Christian tradition offers a rich treasury of practices for personal, family, and community engagement with the Word. Over the centuries, scripture story has been read aloud in worship, sung through the Psalms, or enacted in medieval mystery plays. Scripture has been shared through mosaics, painting, dance, architecture, and sermons. Families have anchored their days in the sharing of scripture. Bold souls immersed in God’s word have sparked social change movements. Memorized passages have given courage to those who struggle. Our Reform tradition reminds us that all Christians have the privilege and responsibility to wrestle with God’s word and to give it new voice in our own lives.
Tradition refers to something that started before us and that has endured. Traditions are gifts that were meaningful and that may be meaningful to us. We choose whether to unwrap the gift. Once unwrapped, we choose whether to adapt the tradition. Traditions come with a history, but their interpretation is ours. Read 2 Timothy 1:1–14 and consider how you have received traditions from previous generations of Christians. The Bible is one way our faith tradition has been passed on. Consider your relationship to the Bible. What questions do you bring to scripture? How do you find ways to open traditional texts to new meaning in your own life? Read Psalm 96. Consider the countless people for whom this psalm has brought joy. How does it speak to you today? How may it speak to your learning community?

Prayer: God of all ages, thank you for generations of faithful believers. May our use of their gifts bring us close to you, too. Amen.

Session Development

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

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
Psalm 96
2 Timothy 1:1–14

Leader Preparation

Psalm 96 (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: This psalm is a joyous call to worship. Read the activity and reflect on the ways you worship God. Make your own list of verbs (see below) and consider your own answers to the discussion questions.

Supplies:
• markers and newsprint or whiteboard
• Bibles

Read Psalm 96 with enthusiasm. You may want three or more readers to read alternate verses, or read the psalm in unison. Invite the group to list on newsprint or a whiteboard the verbs, especially the action words (“sing,” “bless,” “tell,” “declare”). You only need to record each verb once. When was the last time you sang to God? There may be a variety of answers. How do you bless God’s name? How do you declare glory to all nations?

Continue to consider the other verbs in the psalm, asking how we act out our praise and thanks to God. At the end you should have an amazing list of ways we worship God, individually and as a faith community.

Hymn of Praise

Leader preparation: Learn the hymn “As the Grain Was Scattered” prior to leading this activity, or arrange for someone else to lead this activity. You’ll find sheet music for the hymn at the end of the attachment. You may sing it unaccompanied or ask someone to play the melody on an instrument of their choice. Read the background to the hymn and the Didache on the attachment.

Supplies:
• “The Didache—A First Century Christian Text,” Attachment: Activity 2-1
• hymn: “As the Grain Was Scattered,” Attachment: Activity 2-2

Learn the hymn “As the Grain Was Scattered.” Hum the tune first, so folks become comfortable with the tune before adding the lyrics. Then sing both verses. Explain that Arthur Clyde based the hymn on a text in the Didache, a Christian text from the first century. Distribute the handout, and ask people to read the information about the Didache. Invite participants to share their reactions. Are you surprised to learn that such a text exists? Why do you think the Didache was considered to be scripture?

There were many debates in the early church about what was to be included in the New Testament. For example, many other gospels exist besides the four that are in most Christian Bibles, such as the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Mary, and the Gospel of Peter. Some of them are at least as old as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Have participants imagine they are a group of third-century Christian leaders responsible for deciding which writings will go into the Bible and which will be left out. What criteria will you use to decide whether something is scripture? Would you include the hymn “As the Grain Was Scattered”? Why or why not?

Note: The New Testament, as with the Hebrew Scriptures, grew and formed over time. Eventually, in the 16th century, a 27-book New Testament was officially confirmed. Do you think scripture is a closed body of writing, or can other things become scripture over time?
Moving Prayer: Labyrinth

Leadership preparation: This activity works well with either Psalm 26 or 2 Timothy 1:1–14. Sometimes movement can help us to encounter scripture. In this activity we experience labyrinths as a sacred path. Labyrinths can be found in ancient worship sites as well as in contemporary spaces such as churches, hospitals, universities, and homes. Moving through a labyrinth is a way of encountering scripture or of encountering God. It is a way of praying, of discerning and connecting with the Holy. Walking the labyrinth is a spiritual tool allowing you and God to meet intentionally. Read the activity and pray with a labyrinth prior to leading your group.

Supplies:
- one printed labyrinth per person, from http://www.labyrinth-enterprises.com/patternexamples.html
- Bibles

If you have a labyrinth nearby, consider visiting the site and walking the labyrinth as a group. Notice how the paths are narrow so you literally place one foot in front of the other, maintaining concentration and intentionality. Notice that among the stones and gravel there is new life, a beautiful metaphor. Notice that someone raked the path to prepare it and that there are already numerous sets of footprints on the path. You may walk the labyrinth alone, but you are not alone on your faith journey. God is already present, and there are other disciples using an ancient sacred path for clarity on important issues. There are many ways to walk a labyrinth. Ideally, your group can do this activity walking, but if you do not have access to a labyrinth, give each person a printed labyrinth. Explain that instead of walking, they will slowly trace the path of the labyrinth with a finger. It is best to use a finger on the non-dominant hand. If you are right-handed, use a finger on the left hand.

Here’s one example, although you may tailor it to meet your needs. Before you begin this part of the activity, explain the various steps so the activity can flow uninterrupted. Then, read Psalm 96 or 2 Timothy 1:1–14 as a group. Ask pilgrims to quietly reflect on what word or passage was especially meaningful. Then, ask them to read the passage silently again.

When entering the labyrinth, take a few deep cleansing breaths and ponder the passage or word that was meaningful from the Bible passage. As you move your finger slowly along the path, think or very softly speak the meaningful word or passage. You may pause when and where desired. As you reach the center, you may rest, seeking to receive what God may have for you. As you leave the center, slowly move to the entrance, retracing your steps, and allowing the Spirit to merge with your thoughts, preparing you for the next steps in your journey.

As the group finishes, discern whether you want to debrief with questions about their experience or to simply close with a short prayer, such as: Holy One, thank you for moving with and through us as we discern your Word in our life. Amen.
Drawing and Honoring Others: Rings of Faith (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read 2 Timothy 1:1–14. This activity identifies the people and events that helped us this far in our faith journey. It is a reminder that our faith journeys comprise many people, many events, and many activities. This is a meaningful activity to use with more mature adults to help them remember and to tell their story. It is also a way to help newer Christians notice how God has worked in their lives even if they were not raised in a church community. For everyone in the middle years, this activity slows them down and allows reflection. Do not be concerned if this activity takes more than 20 minutes or whatever time you have allotted. People may finish this at home. Start your rings of faith prior to the gathering time. You may share with the other pilgrims or you may keep it private.

Note: if you have people in your group who enjoy biblical history, ask them to prepare a short review of Christian life during the reign of Roman Emperor Nero. (Christianity was legalized in 313 CE by Emperor Constantine, but Christians had a tumultuous history for around 250 years.)

Supplies:
- paper or journals
- colored pencils (well sharpened)
- Bibles

Read 2 Timothy 1:1–14 aloud. In this letter we learn that Timothy is a third generation Christian. Who preceded him? We don’t learn much about his mother or grandmother. The letter talks about Paul’s imprisonment. Paul was in prison in Rome around 66–67 CE. Emperor Nero, following the Great Fire of Rome in 64, started persecuting Christians, using them as scapegoats.

What might Timothy’s Christian journey have been like? What might his mother and grandmother experienced?

Explain that this part of the activity involves thinking about one’s personal faith journey. Use the web link above to allow participants to observe tree rings. Then, describe the activity:

Work with tree rings to help uncover your story. We can determine the age of a fallen tree by the number of rings in the trunk. Each ring represents a year. You can also see the marks of rainy seasons, fires, and other scars or events.

Use the example of tree rings to create a small map of your faith journey. You may choose whether to draw one circle for every 5 or every 10 years of your life. Using colored pencils draw the circles. You may use the same color for all circles or different colors. This is your faith journey. For each circle, think of the people, events, and activities that helped you be the person you are today. How have these people shaped or influenced your faith? You may write those names along the circle or make a list elsewhere on the page.
Research and Sharing: Helping Creation Rejoice

Leader preparation: This activity focuses on the global commitment of religious communities to be environmental stewards. Ahead of the session, ask someone (or a small group) to read about the activities of the World Wildlife Federation (WWF), using the WWF’s website, and then to prepare a presentation to the group. The books *Beyond Belief* and *Environmental Guidelines* are available on the organization’s website, with free materials to download. Provide the website information to those who will do this research one or two weeks before you lead this activity.

Supplies:
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- Bibles

Read Psalm 96 aloud. Consider how nature is addressed in this psalm. Write some of the key verses or phrases on newsprint or a whiteboard. Where does nature need human help in our time? What are some recent success stories where humans have helped creation rejoice again? Ask those who have done research on the World Wildlife Federation to highlight what they learned while reviewing the World Wildlife Federation’s report entitled *Beyond Belief*. Then discuss with participants why religious communities are vital to conservation. How are different faith communities uniting around environmental stewardship? How has your faith community traditionally responded to environmental stewardship? How can your faith community help locally, regionally, nationally, and globally? How is nature a sacred text for us?

Clay Art: Praise the Lord

Leader preparation: You will need to visit a craft store or order supplies online. The website [www.amaco.com](http://www.amaco.com) has three kinds of air-drying clay: Mexican pottery is burnt red, marbelex is gray, and stonex is white. Some craft stores have 5-pound boxes in stock, but you may order 2, 5, and 25 pounds online. All three clays are lead-free and come ready to use. You will want a ball of clay sized slightly larger than a tennis ball for each person. (A 5-pound bag of clay should make around 10 individual projects.) Make an object prior to leading the activity.

Cut the clay with a taunt wire, or chunk off pieces and knead them quickly together. We recommend putting the individual portions of clay in a zip-lock bag, squishing out the air to seal. Cover a sturdy table with plastic to use as a work surface. Ask a sculptor or ceramicist to share their basic tools, or borrow from a preschool program's clay and play-dough supplies. Also, decide whether the objects can dry in the room you are using or whether the participants need to take them home. You will need an empty shelf, lined with plastic on which to dry clay objects. To take home, each person will need a plastic container, such as a clean yogurt container.
Encountering Scripture

Supplies:
- water-based, air-drying clay
- air tight bag
- pottery tools: toothpicks, rolling pin, knives, ceramic stamps
- plastic tablecloth or sheet to cover table
- (optional) clay surface hardener
- (optional) plastic containers
- Bibles

Read aloud Psalm 96. Explain that each person will be given air-drying clay to create any image that reminds her or him of this psalm. It could be a three-dimensional object or clay rolled into a plaque. Before opening the clay (it’s air-drying), knead it in the bag to make it soft. When ready, open the clay and start working it. Have fun!

The clay will stay moist for this activity, but it will start to harden after about 60 minutes. Give the artists time to share their pieces and tell why the pieces were created.

Note: When the clay is completely dry, you may apply a surface hardener to seal it. This is not necessary, but some prefer the glossier finish. The clay must be absolutely dry before applying the finish so you that don’t seal in moisture, which will eventually cause the object to break. Avoid this step during humid weather.

Sending & Serving Activities

Laying on of Hands (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: This activity can be emotional for pilgrims who are not affirmed regularly. If your gathering is large, divide into separate groups, preferably in different rooms. This activity is meaningful for people of all ages. Usually worship services include the laying on of hands when a pastor is ordained or installed with a new congregation, when church officers are commissioned, sometimes for healing services, and sometimes to commission youth prior to a mission trip. In this activity we join with Timothy, Lois, and Eunice and serve as ministers to one another.

Note: This activity has one person sitting in the middle with the other pilgrims standing in a circle. If one of your pilgrims needs to remain seated, then seat everyone. The circle should be a comfortable distance from the person in the middle.

Supplies:
- Bible
- box of tissues (keep them nearby because someone may need them)

Note that 2 Timothy 1:6 states, “For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands.” Timothy is reminding us that our gifts are from God and that sometimes we need to be reminded of them. Gather the group in a circle. Explain:

Each person will have an opportunity to sit in the chair. Every person is asked to say one affirming sentence (maximum of two sentences) about the person in the chair. We will try not to duplicate affirmations. When speaking, you may place one hand on either shoulder and look that person in the eye as you speak. After your affirming statement, return to the
circle and the next person may begin. When everyone has participated, the person in the chair returns to the circle and the next person sits in the chair. The process begins anew.

At the end join hands and close with a prayer such as: Gracious God, we humbly lay our gifts at your feet. Thank you for the people here, for their generous words and compassionate hearts. Continue equipping all of us for ministry so we may be bold and responsible disciples, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Video: No One Is an Island
Leader preparation: Review the activity, answering the questions for yourself. Read the Donne quotation. Preview the video “Mankind Is No Island,” the 2008 Tropfest Winner, by Jason van Genderen. Arrange for equipment to show the video to your group.

Supplies:
• video: “Mankind Is No Island,” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZrDxe9gK8Gk
• Bibles
• computer with Internet connection and a screen or projector

Read aloud 2 Timothy 1:1–14. When do you encounter scripture directly? (Responses may include when reading the Bible, studying, doing devotions, and worshipping.) When do you encounter scripture by being reminded of it in another way? (Responses might include hymns, nature, and viewing people caring for others.) Have participants think of times when they have encountered scripture in a more abstract way, when scripture is alluded to but not directly cited (in literature, movies, media, fund raising appeals). Have them think of the 2 Timothy passage and the generations of faith. How does Christian tradition allow us to transfer the best Christian practices generationally? What “tools” make sharing easier? (Bible, music, creeds, faith practices)

Then, read or project the following quotation from John Donne (1573–1631), who was Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral, London. This passage is from his book Devotions upon Emergent Occasions (1624):

The church is catholic, universal, as are all its actions; all that it does belongs to all. When it baptized a child, that action concerns me; for that child is thereby connected that head which is my head too, and ingrafted into that body wherof I am a member. And when it buries someone, that action concerns me: all of us are of one another, and are one volume. . . . No [one] is an island, entire of itself, everyone is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend’s or of thine own were; any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

After the reading, engage participants indiscussion. What scripture may have inspired Donne? What scripture passages can you name as relevant to Donne’s ideas?

Then explain that Donne’s popular 17th-century religious writing, inspired by scripture and ancient creeds, inspired an artist in 2008. Before viewing the video, tell your pilgrims that you will show it and then end with a prayer of confession.
Reflect

“By reading the Scriptures I am so renewed that all nature seems renewed around me and with me. The sky seems to be a pure, a cooler blue, the trees a deeper green. The whole world is charged with the glory of God and I feel fire and music under my feet.” This quotation is by Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk (1915–1968). How does the tradition of reading scripture renew you? How does the reading scripture change your view of your surroundings? What have you discovered about reading scripture with your group? Which activities worked particularly well? Which ones seemed to challenge and inspire your group? Consider how you will build on what has happened in this Exploration in future sessions with your group.

Explain that the video “Mankind Is No Island” is the 2008 Tropfest Winner. Tropfest is an international festival of short films originally held in Australia and now also at other locations. Show the video to your group.

Close this activity with a prayer, such as: God of all ages, the Donne quotation seems so old, like a relic. Yet, Donne was inspired by your Word, ancient and still speaking, ever present. Here we are today having difficulty with your Word, Donne’s words, and a contemporary video. We forget that we are not an island. We forget that what happens to all humans impacts us. God, please forgive us. Thank you for your Word, which has instructed and inspires, inspired and inspires the faithful. Next time the bell tolls, help us to remember that it tolls for each of us. Amen.

§ Video Prayer: Jesus’ Prayer in Aramaic

Leader preparation: The meditation in this activity is in Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke. Preview the video, and arrange for viewing equipment. Pray with the video prior to guiding your pilgrims. The tune is an Indian raga, a simple melody common in India.

Supplies:
• computer with Internet connection and screen or projector

Your pilgrims will probably know the Jesus Prayer, so they should be able to focus on the music and how they physically and spiritually respond. If you have new Christians among your pilgrims, say the prayer in English before viewing the video. The Jesus Prayer is probably scripture we encounter most frequently. Why is the Jesus Prayer so important to Christians? Which part means the most to you? Why?

Then share Simone Weil’s thoughts on the Lord’s Prayer. In her book Waiting for God (New York: Putnam, 1951), Simone Weil wrote, “It is impossible to say it once through, giving the fullest possible attention to each word, without a change, infinitesimal but real, taking place in the soul.” Ask your pilgrims whether they agree or disagree with Weil. Listen to one another carefully.

Conclude by viewing the video, sharing any of the leader preparation material you think may be important. Ask the pilgrims to take two or three deep cleansing breaths before viewing this visual and musical prayer. Close your session by saying the Jesus Prayer in English. This week, say the Jesus Prayer with focused attention. Try to encounter this scripture with a clear mind and as few distractions as possible.
The Didache—A First Century Christian Text

The Didache (pronounced DID-a-kay) is an early Christian document. The full title in translation is “The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles.” (The word didache means “teaching” in Greek.) Parts of the Didache may have been the church’s first written catechism. It has three major sections dealing with Christian teachings, celebration of rituals such as Baptism and Communion, and church organization.

The Didache was in wide circulation in the early church by the year 100, and it was very important to Christians in the second and third centuries. This pastoral manual reveals a great deal about how the early Jewish Christians saw themselves and how they adapted Judaism for Gentiles as the Christian faith began to spread.

Some of the Church Fathers considered the Didache to be part of the New Testament, but it was eventually excluded from the New Testament canon. However, the Ethiopian Orthodox church’s “broader canon” includes a work that is based on the Didache.

The Didache was lost for several centuries, but was rediscovered in 1873 in an ancient book called the Codex Hierosolymitanus. An English translation of it was published in 1883. Even though the Didache was lost for a time, it has had a profound influence on the Christian church. If your congregation adds “for thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever and ever, Amen” to the end of Jesus’ prayer, then your worship has been influenced by the Didache.

The Didache contains some material that is in both Matthew and Luke, a lot that is only in Matthew, and much that is not in any of the four New Testament gospels, but it contains virtually nothing that is found in Mark. Sayings of Jesus were probably in wide circulation in both oral and written form. The Didache refers to a collection of the sayings of Jesus known as “The Gospel of the Lord,” but none of the four canonized gospels. Mark wrote his gospel based on the preaching of Peter. Matthew had the Didache and copied from it as well as from Mark. Luke compiled his gospel from several sources, including Mark, but he did not have the Didache. Much of the material in the Didache is also in Acts and the Epistles of Paul.

Arthur Clyde, a lyricist and composer, based the hymn “As the Grain Was Scattered” on a text in the Didache. This hymn is an example of an ancient Christian text inspiring and instructing worshipers anew in the 21st century.
As the Grain Was Scattered

1. & 3. As the grain was scattered on the hills,
   and was brought together to become our bread,

   so we gather from the ends of earth,
   for the gifts of knowledge and of life,

   joined around this table as your Church.

2. From the vine of David we will drink,
   as we give you glory in this holy place.

   On hill sides you feed us, through deserts you lead us, now

   at this table all are one in Christ. We have new life. Church.

Words adapted from the Didache, 2nd century.

From Sing! Prayer and Praise®, Copyright ©2009, The Pilgrim Press.
Words and Music: Arthur Clyde
Copyright ©2004 Local Church Ministries, United Church of Christ.
All rights reserved. Used by permission.
Some adults find mission the least difficult part of discipleship. They may volunteer at the food bank, fulfill their commitment, meet a few homeless or poor people, and go home. They’re done until next month. We want to feel good about our volunteer experiences. We also want to develop the heart of the Servant.

At some point we need to challenge one another about why we are serving and how we understand mission. Do we assume that mission is always people with privilege serving those who do not have privilege? Or, is mission something that all Christians participate in, whatever their social status, economic situation, or life circumstance? In fact, it has been often noted that people and nations with less economic privilege are often far more generous in response to situations of need than those with relative riches. We need to examine our motives and our sense of call. Are we developing a charity resume? Do we serve with someone we want to impress? Do we serve because that’s where our friend serves and it gives us time to socialize? Are we called by our encounters with scripture, or are we called by a sense of duty? Do we give what others genuinely want and need, or do we think we know better than they do about how to help them?

Some calls for mission are short-term because the need is short-term, such as fixing a meal for a family following the birth of child or giving someone a ride in icy weather. Other calls are longer-term: human rights, peacemaking, environmental stewardship, accessible medical care, and affordable housing. Christians encounter scripture and frequently feel called to serve. Our privilege is to serve in a way that is responsible to ourselves and to our families while also helping others in appropriate ways. Our responsibility is also to run a self-diagnostic on our motives so we are developing the heart of Christ.
Jesus offered an image of God’s realm as a tiny seed planted and flourishing. God’s word can be like a seed in our lives and in our world. Individually and collectively, we encounter scripture with the hope of better understanding our own context—the place, time, and circumstances in which we live. Scripture invites us into a more intimate knowledge of God and community. It guides and challenges us to discern our mission to our faith community, our neighborhood, and our world. The tiniest of seeds can produce a rich harvest of peace, justice, and restoration.

**Leader Preparation**

Mission is difficult because it requires a commitment, usually of time, finances, and skills. We may also need to sacrifice something we value to serve. There is also joy and wonderful insights from service. Usually youth groups return from mission trips or immersion experiences exuberant about their time in a different environment. Often, they return with a deepened faith. Their adult chaperons, while tired, talk about turning points and new learning. Mission stretches us beyond our comfort zone and we tend to recognize God more easily there. When we serve others, we often encounter scripture in transforming ways.

Prayer: Creator and servant of all, help me plant seeds among the group members as we gather. Give me the courage and trust of Esther. In all I say and do may I model the Servant of all. Amen.

**Exploring & Engaging Activities**

1. **Body Prayer: Surrounding Yourself (Easy Preparation)**

   **Leader preparation:** You may create different phrases for this simple body prayer. Adapt as needed if your group members have mobility challenges.

   **Supplies:** None

   Explain that in this session, participants will experience “body prayer”:

   Surround yourself with prayer. Give yourself some space from your neighbor, and stand with your arms outstretched. Place your arms above your head and, as you slowly lower your arms to shoulder height say, “God be with me.” With arms at shoulder height, turn one quarter in either direction saying, “Christ be with me.” With arms at shoulder height, make another quarter turn in the same direction saying, “Spirit be with me.” Make another quarter turn, same direction, and say, “God be with me.” Make a last quarter turn, same direction, back to the original position, and say, “Christ be with me.” Stretch your arms above your head and hold them saying, “Spirit be with me.” Then, lower your arms to your side, saying, “Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.”

2. **Watercolor Resist: What’s Growing in Your Garden?**

   **Leader preparation:** Create a “watercolor resist” prior to guiding other people. Gather seeds. Consider using leftover seeds from gardening or cooking, or gather seeds from a walk outdoors, or ask a gardener for spare seeds, or use seeds that may be in your kitchen (flax, sesame, coriander, dill, mustard). These seeds will not be planted. Before leading the group, place a protective layer on the table and set up the various supplies. You will also need to locate an undisturbed flat surface for drying the artwork.

   **Supplies:**
   - seeds (any varieties, but not too large or heavy)
   - glue (can be applied with toothpicks)
   - white construction paper or watercolor paper, one sheet per person
   - white crayon, one per person
   - watercolors
   - brushes, various sizes
   - small containers of water (empty, clean, individual yogurt containers work well)
   - plastic to cover the table.
   - Bibles
ADULTS

Encountering Scripture

Session Development

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

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

Explain to participants that in this activity each will be make a “watercolor resist.” Then give them these instructions:

Glue the seeds on the white paper, using a light touch with the glue. Make sure there is room to draw above and below the seed. With the white crayon draw the roots, leaves, stems, and any flowers or buds. The design can be imaginary or based on an existing plant or flower. When finished drawing, paint with watercolors over the top of the design. The crayon creates a wax resist. The watercolors will color the paper and not the wax drawing. The end product is a seed, drawing, and colored background.

When the group begins the watercolor step, read aloud Mark 4:26–34. Then, use the following or similar questions as a silent guided meditation. Participants may keep working on their watercolors. Discuss the questions when painting is finished. If necessary remind them to think of seeds metaphorically for these questions.

- Think of one seed planted by someone else that has produced fruit in your life. Who planted that seed? When was the seed planted? How has that seed impacted your life?
- Now think of a seed that you have planted for yourself. When did you plant it? Why did you plant it? What were your hopes when sowing the seed? What fruit have you reaped?
- Now ponder a time when you have been surrounded by seeds, but resisted tending them. What person or life event provided the background colors so you could see the potential?
- How is God’s kingdom (God’s time of peace and justice) like a seed?
- When has God planted a seed in your garden? How did you know it was planted by God? What has been the result?

Conclude the meditation with this prayer or one you create: God who knows our strengths and our weaknesses, our compromises and the ways we avoid issues, thank you for loving us. Grant us the ability to recognize the seeds planted by you. Amen.

Drama: Esther

Leader preparation: Many Christian resources exclude the Esther story because Haman is hung in the end. It raises justice issues that we may want to avoid. We need to remember the context of Esther and learn from her example. The book of Esther is also an opportunity to speak about executions or capital punishment and how our individual and communal sense of justice has changed or not changed over the centuries. Esther is a celebrated figure in the Jewish faith for her bravery, for her ability to listen to God, and for the role of her faith community in supporting her faith journey. Christians can learn much from Esther.

The scene of Haman’s hanging occurs at the end of Esther and is not part of this reading. Read the book of Esther for yourself (the story is not long), and read the background information on the attachment.

At least one week before engaging this activity, ask a few people to form a drama group to create a play from the Esther text, Esther 4:1–17. Instruct them that the play should take no more than 15 minutes (or whatever time you allot). Give the drama group copies of the attachment that contains a summary and background to the story of Esther as well as two short dramas based on the story. Suggest that they can focus on Esther 4:1–17 and do not need to tell the whole story. A quick summary at the end of the skit would answer the question “What happened?” Keep the costumes and props simple. The focus is on the story.
Supplies:
- (optional) costumes
- Bibles
- “The Story of Esther,” Attachment: Activity 3

If a small group has prepared a drama, invite them to present it. Be an appreciative audience.

Alternatives: Divide your group into two teams and have each group act out one of the two dramas on the attachment. Or, do one of the dramas as a dramatic reading by volunteers in the group. Or, hand out the attachment and have people read the two dramas for themselves.

After participants have observed or read the drama, engage them in discussion with questions such as these:

- What action does Mordecai take to save his people? What action does Esther take? How does each of them prepare spiritually for their task?
- The story does not mention God explicitly. Where is God in this story?
- What does Esther ask of the Jewish people and of herself? Which spiritual disciplines does she embrace?

Have someone read aloud Esther 4:14. Then ask:

- What meaning do you find in this verse?
- Do you think God places us in situations with a particular purpose, or, do you think life places us where we are and we must discern God’s vision and hope for that situation?
- What can the story of Esther teach us about mission?

Discerning & Deciding Activities

Nature: Thriving after Fire (Easy Preparation)
Leader preparation: If you have a naturalist or nature enthusiast in your group or congregation, ask him or her to assist with this activity. This activity focuses on plants in biological systems that experience natural forest fires. A naturalist may be able to inform you about how species regenerate following fire in your local environment. Review the activity and the following website: http://www.biosbcc.net/b100plant/htm/fire.htm. You may use this activity to explore the two seed parables in Mark 4:26–34.

Supplies:
- Bible
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projector or large screen

Read Mark 4:26–34 aloud. What does it take for a seed to sprout and grow in nature? What does it take for a seed to sprout and grow in God’s realm? How might the seed in God’s realm respond to stress or fire? How is God’s realm like a seed growing?

Read aloud Esther 4:14. Mordecai tells Esther that maybe her role in the king’s court and her Jewish upbringing were part of God’s plan so she was in the right place at the right time. The New Revised Standard Version uses the phrase “for
such a time as this.” When have you been in a situation where you realized that you were at the right time in the right place? What training have you had to prepare yourself so you could respond quickly and appropriately? (Lifeguards, CPR classes, business consultants, attorneys, anyone in the medical profession, teachers, and so on) What previous experience trained you so you could respond quickly, if needed? (Caring for children, volunteering to help human trafficking victims, working with Habitat for Humanity, helping an elderly neighbor, and so on) How are you preparing yourself spiritually so you could recognize God’s voice and be able to discern what God is asking of you?

In nature there are plant species that germinate with fire. The fire may soften a hard shell, allowing water to penetrate, or the fire’s heat may directly activate the process from dormancy to life. The fire poppy needs fire to germinate, and, following a fire, sprouts and blooms quickly helping to protect the barren ground from erosion. Other species develop deep root systems to help sustain themselves. For example, chamise is a chaparral evergreen shrub that thrives in rocky, infertile soil and on cliffs. The plant’s roots can grow as deep as 12 feet. The deep roots help it regenerate, but the chamise’s flower seeds also require fire to sprout—it has a double system of survival.

How can these plants and seeds be a metaphor for understanding our faith? How extraordinary is it that God provided more than one way for plants to regenerate following fire? Has God ever regenerated you? When? How? (Listen carefully to these answers because you are hearing a faith story.) How has God regenerated you at different periods in your life?

Ethnic Cleansing and Genocide: 20th and 21st century

Leader preparation: This subject is overwhelming. There were around 18 million deaths through genocide in the twentieth century, and that number includes only the genocides recognized by the United Nations (including Armenians in Turkey, pogroms in Russia, the Nanking massacre, the Holocaust, and the massacres in Cambodia, Rwanda, and Bosnia-Herzegovina). The genocide in Darfur opened the twenty-first century. You may want to ask one or two sojourners to prepare information for the entire group by using these websites:


Also, gather information from your denomination on advocacy for victims of genocide.

Supplies:
- information on genocides
Explain that following World War II, genocide was named a crime against humanity. Genocide is the planned extermination of an entire national, racial, ethnic, or political group. Implementation of the king’s order in Esther would have resulted in genocide. Where is genocide occurring today? Where can we obtain information about genocide? What are appropriate Christian responses? Almost every faith community has a national office with resources detailing what that denomination is doing to end genocide. Have participants review their denomination’s efforts. How are you willing to help?

Art Discussion: “Christ Among the Children”

Leader preparation: Review the activity and enjoy the painting.

Supplies:
- Bibles

Invite the group to enjoy Nolde’s image of “Christ Among the Children.” As you they look, have them change their facial expression and body stance to match the various expressions in the painting. What especially strikes you about this painting?

Read aloud Mark 4:26–34, which relates two of Jesus’ parables. What do the parables mean to you? How might Jesus be modeling the parables in the Nolde painting? How and where can you act as “Christ among the children”?

Emil Nolde was a German Expressionist painter. This painting was part of the Hamburg Art Museum’s collection (northern Germany) until 1937. From mid to late 1937, it was in an exhibition of Entartete Kunst in Munich, Germany—an exhibition of “degenerate” art. After the exhibition, the Nazi government removed the painting from public viewing and sold it to a private collector. Today, the painting is in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, United States. How does this painting connect with the parables of the seeds in Mark’s Gospel?

Give examples of “mustard seeds” in your personal life that have grown abundantly after a detour or after being dormant for awhile.

Sending & Serving Activities

Holy Calling: For Such a Time as This (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: The purpose of this activity is to invite group members to establish the discipline of setting aside time daily to listen, to question, to discern how God is preparing them for service. God is, indeed, preparing all of us, like Esther, for “such a time as this” when God will need our creativity, our skills, our personal connections, our passions, and our commitment. Listening daily keeps us fine tuned and readily available. Practice this before meeting your disciples.

Copy the attachment so everyone has the activity for the week. Be aware that you may have group members who are experiencing service overload and burning out or risking compassion fatigue. They have extended themselves too far. These people may hear a call to rest and care for themselves. Often, worshiping commu-
nities do not consider taking care of individual needs as service. If individuals focus extensively on others, their long-term ability to care for others is greatly compromised. God does not call us to be unhealthy. Humans need balance between self-care and service to others, rest, and action. You may want to share a personal experience about how you have answered a call while remaining balanced (or trying to remain balanced) or invite a person from your congregation to share.

**Supplies:**
- Bibles
- “A Reflection Activity,” Attachment: Activity 7

Read or review Esther 4:1–17. It’s less difficult to discuss being called when at church or with Christian friends. Sometimes God needs us to pay attention more often. Divide into pairs, and ask each pair to practice this exercise. Invite people to talk about what might enable them to do this exercise every day. Ask the pairs whether they are willing to hold each other accountable during the week as they practice this exercise daily. Ask the duos to share their responses to the questions. Watch the time so everyone has an equal opportunity to share. (You may also want to send a mid-week communication to remind everyone.)

### 3 Music Videos: 21st Century Questions

**Leader preparation:** Complete the activity prior to guiding the group members. Locate versions of Tracy Chapman’s “Change” and Joan Osborne’s “One of Us” to play for your group. There are numerous online choices. Use these links:

- Tracy Chapman’s appearance on the Jay Leno Show in April, 2008, singing “Change,” [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=drXwsVYrd20](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=drXwsVYrd20)
- Joan Osborne singing “One of Us,” [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xEO1Lug25s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xEO1Lug25s)
- Karaoke version of “One of Us,” [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMPJBCalyYo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMPJBCalyYo)

You could also make a different selection. Both tunes are available for MP3 downloads and for purchase online.

**Supplies:**
- computer with projector or large screen and Internet access
- Bibles

Read aloud Esther 4:1–17. Notice that the phrase “for such a time as this” is used twice in Esther 4:14. In the beginning, Mordecai reminds Esther what happens with silence “at such a time as this,” and later he reminds Esther that perhaps God has prepared her “for such a time as this.” Begin the conversation after reading the Bible verses by asking: Who recognized God’s call? How? (Mordecai, Hathach, Esther, Jewish people fasting and praying)

Then listen and watch videos of either or both of the popular songs. What questions do these songs ask? Explain that both women challenge twenty-first century listeners to think about the choices they make. In a contemporary way they are struggling just like Esther and Mordecai. Who’s asking the justice questions today? Who’s listening today? Who’s acting on God’s behalf? How do you know when God is calling you to a specific service?

Ask learners this week to be especially observant. Who is asking the questions today? What are the questions? Who is answering? Where are you experiencing a call to serve?
Movie Video: Planting Seeds

Leader preparation: Preview the website and consider how you will introduce it to your group. Another possibility is the video “The Way We Get By” (from a documentary on the lives of three senior citizens who have made it their mission to greet all United States soldiers as they arrive or depart from the airport in Bangor, Maine). Arrange for viewing equipment. Review the activity instructions. This is a good example of how our sense of mission is sometimes determined by our setting.

Supplies:
- computer with Internet access and projector or large screen
- Bibles

Read aloud Mark 4:26–34 if you have not already done so. God inspires us in different ways, at different times, but in our own context. Sometimes God instructs us to plant the mustard seed, sometimes we witness the growth, and sometimes we are part of the harvest. Then have participants examine the “Warriors Journey Home” website or view the video “The Way We Get By.” What questions are raised by the organization or the video? How are the Mark parables reflected the organization or the video? With which person did you identify with the most? Where was God planting a seed for you? What are the “fruits” of these peoples’ labor?

This week reflect on the needs in your community and your particular gifts. Reread the Mark passage each day. How are you being called to serve others?

Reflect

Olive Schreiner (1855–1920) was a South African writer. She wrote, “I see the vision of a poor weak soul striving after good. It was not cut short; and in the end it learned, through tears and much pain, that holiness is an infinite compassion for others; that greatness is to take the common things of life and walk truly among them. That . . . happiness is a great love and much serving.” What have you discerned from these mission activities? What resources may your group members need to assist their faith journey? Who might be willing to mentor or assist or affirm each participant?
The Story of Esther

Background to the Story of Esther
The story of Esther has a folk tale quality. It is set “once upon a time” in the land of Persia. The hero, Esther, is beautiful, brave, and good. The villain, Haman, is bad through and through. The king is powerful, but foolish. Together, beautiful Esther and wise old Uncle Mordecai use cunning and bravery to foil the villain, win over the king, and restore the fortunes of their people. Because many events in the book are not historically accurate, biblical scholars suggest Esther is a historical novella written to explain the meaning of the Jewish festival of Purim. Although the story probably is fictional, there was a Jewish community in exile in Persia during this period. The setting is the royal palace at Susa, the Persian capital, sometime between 587 and 538 B.C.E.

The Characters
Mordecai is a member of the exiled Jewish community living in Persia. He once saved the king’s life by revealing an assassination plot. Mordecai wears sackcloth (a coarse, scratchy fabric used to make sacks) as a sign of mourning.

Esther is also Jewish. She is Mordecai’s niece and was raised by Mordecai, who acted as her guardian after her parents died. Esther was chosen to be queen by the king of Persia after the previous queen was banished for refusing to obey the king’s orders. Esther lives at the royal court. Mordecai has forbidden Esther to tell anyone she is Jewish. Although Esther is queen, she does not have authority with the king.

Haman is a noble who has been given a great place of honor by the Persian king. Haman hates Mordecai and plots to kill him.

The Key Events
• At a royal beauty pageant, King Xerxes chooses Esther as queen. She takes her place in the royal court.
• Mordecai uncovers an assassination plot. He tells Esther, who warns the king.
• King Xerxes gives Haman, a nobleman, a place of honor.
• Haman orders Mordecai to bow down to him, but Mordecai refuses.
• In revenge, Haman offers King Xerxes a bribe to let him kill all the Jews
• King Xerxes declines the bribe, but lets Haman do as he wishes.
• Haman issues an order under the king’s authority to annihilate all the Jews in Persia
• Mordecai hears of the order and puts on sackcloth as a sign of mourning.
• Esther hears about Mordecai, sends messages to him, and learns of Haman’s plot.
• Mordecai begs Esther to talk to the king. Esther reminds him she could be executed for approaching the king without being summoned
• Esther asks Mordecai and the Jews to fast and pray for her.
• Esther approaches the king, who agrees to listen to her request; she invites Haman and the king two elaborate banquets.
• At the second banquet, after the king has offered to do whatever she asks, Esther reveals Haman’s plot to kill all Jews in Persia.
• The king executes Haman and gives Haman’s estate to Esther
• Mordecai is honored for his previous action to save the king’s life
• The edict to destroy the Jews is repealed, and the Jews live in peace and prosperity in Persia.
Drama of Esther and Mordecai

Based on Esther 4:1–17

**Characters:** Esther, Mordecai, Haman, Narrator, and Hathach (pronounced HA-thack); a servant of the King assigned to Esther

**Esther:** Hathach, I have heard that my uncle Mordecai is sitting at the gate to the palace in funeral clothes and covered with ashes. I sent clean clothes to him, but he would not take them.

**Narrator:** Hathach goes to Mordecai.

**Hathach:** Esther sent you clothes, but you wouldn’t take them.

**Mordecai:** I cannot take them. I am too upset. The King’s advisor, Haman, has convinced the King to sign an order to kill all Jews.

**Haman:** (aside) Ah yes, now I will be able to punish that arrogant Mordecai. I will teach him not to bow before my authority. Now he and all his people will perish at my hand!

**Mordecai:** (speaking to Hathach) Tell Esther that it is up to her to speak to the King. Here is a copy of the terrible order.

**Narrator:** Hathach returns to Esther.

**Hathach:** My Queen Esther, Haman has talked the king into sending out an order that all Jews are to die. Mordecai said that you must speak to the King.

**Esther:** Tell Mordecai that no one can speak to the King unless the King calls for that person. If I appear before the King without being called, he might put to death. The King has not called for me for a month.

**Narrator:** Hathach returned to Mordecai and gave him Esther’s message.

**Mordecai:** Tell Esther that she is not safe just because she lives in the palace. If she does not speak now, all her family will die. Tell her that perhaps she is in the palace for a reason. Perhaps she is there for just such a time as this. She is the only one who can save her people.

**Narrator:** Hathach gave that message to Esther.

**Esther:** Go, tell Mordecai to gather all the Jews in the city. Do not eat or drink for three days and nights. Pray for me. I will do the same thing. Then I will go to the King. If I die, I die.
The Go-Between

Characters:
Narrator  Miguel, Esme’s cousin
Esme, the governor’s wife
Javier, a gardener at the governor’s mansion

Scene 1: In the governor’s garden

Esme and Miguel stand at opposite sides of the space, facing away from each other. As Javier talks with them they turn to face center. They turn away after each scene is done.

Narrator: Esme was a beautiful girl who came from nowhere, became a model, and caught the eye of the governor of a large Southwestern state. He dumped his first wife and married Esme even though she was much younger than he was. Esme lived a life of privilege in the governor’s mansion, with its watered lawns, gardens, and swimming pools. She was photographed at glittering parties with the rich and famous. She was known for her kindness to the staff. One day, she sidled up to one of the gardeners, a Mexican named Javier.

Esme: Javier, can you take a message for me downtown, to the corner where the day laborers wait for work? There you will find a man named Miguel. Tell him I have not forgotten him. I will always remember how he helped me when my parents died.

Javier: (surprised) Are you Mexican? I thought you were a gringa!

Esme: Shh, no one knows. But yes, I was born in San Fernando, and I came across when I was seven years old. My mother died when I was twelve, and my father was sent back to Mexico. I have not heard from him since. Miguel, my cousin, cared for me and helped me get through school. But, I can’t be seen talking to him now. My husband doesn’t know about my past. I need to know if Miguel is all right. Can you talk to him and bring me news of my old friends?

Javier: I’ll go as soon as I finish tending the roses.

Scene 2: On the street

Javier: (quietly) Are you Miguel?
Miguel: (suspiciously) No comprendo.
Javier: I bring a message for you from the first lady, from Esme.
Miguel: (eagerly) Sí, sí, I am Miguel. Tell me, how is she?
Javier: She is beautiful and kind, but I am not sure she is really happy. She seems lonely.
Miguel: You must tell her that we miss her. Life is so hard for us. They have made a new law that says we can be stopped at any time, day or night. They will ask for our papers and if we cannot produce them, we’ll be deported. I have been in this country for twenty-two years working the whole time! How can this be? She is the governor’s wife. Surely she can do something.
Javier: I will tell her what you have said. I know she loves you.
SCENE 3: Back in the garden

Javier: Miguel sends his love and wants you to do something about this new law. He says you should use your influence with your husband.

Esme: My husband! I can still charm him once in a while, but I am not sure he really loves me still. And I don’t know what he would do if he found out I am Mexican. I also am undocumented. These things you have described, they could happen to me! There is no way I am going to get involved in this political matter.

Javier: But your people need you.

Esme: My people? Who are my people?

SCENE 4: On the street again

Javier: I talked with the first lady, and she said she has no power. She is afraid. She is not sure the governor still loves her. She doesn’t want to get involved in politics.

Miguel: Tell her it’s getting worse every day. The brown-skinned people from Nicaragua and Guatemala, from Mexico and Honduras, are getting spit on, beaten up. They are being arrested for no reason at all. Even those who do have papers, the police are pulling them over just to harass them. They hire us for the dirtiest jobs, and sometimes they do not pay us because they know we cannot go anywhere to complain. Tell her this from me: Perhaps God has put you in the governor’s mansion for just such a time as this—to help your people. Tell her to have courage. Ten valor! Tell her now is the time for her to tell the truth about who she is and who her people are.

Javier: I will tell her all that you have said. But she is so alone, and the people around the governor can be cruel and heartless. If she does this, she will be risking everything.

Miguel: I know.

SCENE 5: In the garden

Javier: Miguel says to tell you that things are getting worse. He thinks perhaps God has chosen you for this destiny—to help your people; to speak for those who have no voice. He begs you. Talk to your husband, plead for justice for your people. Will you do it?

Esme: (after a pause) Yes, I will do it. If he rejects me when he finds out who I really am, so be it. My people have suffered long enough. I will go to the governor, and try to stop this.
A Reflection Activity

(For a Week or Perhaps Longer)

Read Esther 4: 1-17.

Set aside a time each day this week when you will reflect on what God would like you to do as a disciple. Set your cell phone or watch to ring, or use an alarm clock to remind you of your commitment. Imagine that this is “God calling.” You may want to select a special ringtone. Some people reflect deeply by sitting quietly, and some people need repetitious motion, as in walking, knitting, or swimming.

When that call is heard, literally, you should pause and reflect on some or all of these questions:

- Assume God is calling right now. What is God asking you to do? Be patient and attentive.
- How can you respond with a spirit of power and of love?
- Esther needed to pray and fast for three days and she invited others to pray for her. What support do you need?
- How has God prepared you “for such a time as this”?
- Who can you speak to about discerning your call?
Future has varied meanings for adults, depending on their faith, age, and health. Many adults, struggling to integrate their faith with their work and family responsibilities, find a renewed call to learn more, and others drift away. Scripture reminds us that God has envisioned fullness of life here and fullness of life in heaven. This is an important vision and future to share with all ages.

As we look toward a shared future as a community of faith, our encounter with scripture restores our sense of hope, renews the multilayered meanings of the texts, and opens our imaginations. We reclaim the stories that shape us and discover possibilities for change and transformation. Encountering scripture fills us with new vision, opening our hearts to Christ who invites us to proclaim and celebrate God’s realm. Our engagement with the Bible moves our faith community from generation to generation.
At Lakeview Cemetery in Cleveland, Ohio, there is a funerary chapel, Wade Chapel, designed by Louis Comfort Tiffany. Tiffany created a wall mosaic with Hebrew prophets and leaders on one side and New Testament apostles and saints on the other side. All of the figures are rowing to the main window, “The Flight of Souls.” Everyone through the ages is rowing to the resurrection, including the people in the pews. You are part of an extraordinary family of faith with an even more extraordinary promise of eternal life. Choose life! Choose faith! Read Hebrews 11:1–16 and Deuteronomy 30:15–30. What images come to mind as you read these texts? How do these passages connect with your life today?

Prayer: Designer and architect of all, fill my every cell with faith in you. Grant me the desire to cling tightly to your ways so that I may be disciple looking forward to a heavenly home. Amen.

Read aloud Deuteronomy 29:10–15. Note that Moses includes everyone—leaders, elders, men, women, children, and foreigners serving the Israelites. Who else does Moses include? Read aloud Deuteronomy 30:1–20. You may want to read it again in different translations. What do you find remarkable about this passage? If you were present when Moses delivered this message, how would you respond? How is this passage relevant to you today? How is this passage meaningful to people of the 21st century?

Visual Meditation: Palms and Blossoms
Leader preparation: This is a silent reflection that bridges the two selected passages with the Holy Week narrative. Review the activity prior to leading the pilgrims. Plan to read the Bible passages yourself or ask another reader to do so. You may use either the Deuteronomy or the Hebrews passage for this activity. If using Deuteronomy, ponder the Holy Week story through the lens of the choices we make and the consequences, short-term and long-term. If using Hebrews, focus on your faith journey, thinking of the challenges and victories, as you strive for the heavenly city. Conclude the silent reflection with the discussion, or allow a time of silent reflection.

Note: This activity expects the participants to know the events of Holy Week. If you have new church participants or people new to the Christian faith, you will need to add the details of the Holy Week narrative.

Supplies:
• “Palms,” Attachment: Activity 2

Read either Deuteronomy 30:15–30 or Hebrews 11:1–16, allowing time for a brief discussion. For Deuteronomy: In your faith journey, how do the choices you make help lead you toward life? For Hebrews: On a daily basis, how are you living with confidence about things you cannot see? Have participants view the photograph on the attachment. Allow at least a minute so the image is not completely new when you begin the reflection.
Encountering Scripture

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

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

Reading at a calm, slow pace, say:

Imagine that those are the palms used at the Palm Sunday procession. Hear the hosannas from the crowd. Where are you in the crowd? (pause) Imagine that in between the palms and the blossoms there is Holy Week and the trauma of Christ’s crucifixion. (pause) Then, the blossoms of Easter and the Resurrection. Immerse yourself in that week—the events, the people, the sounds, the emotions, the promises. (pause for at least 2 minutes) In looking at the image, where do you see life? (pause) Where do you see death? (pause) Where do you want your life to be directed? (Conclude by asking your group to take a couple deep cleansing breaths.)

Design: Heavenly City Wanted!

Leader preparation: Review the activity and create a design. Encourage imagination. Some sojourners may choose a graph-paper line drawing, another may draw a detailed color rendition, and another may fold the paper origami style. You may choose to have quiet background music playing during this activity.

Supplies:
- graph paper
- pencils
- paper
- colored pencils
- rulers, protractors, compass
- (optional) recording and equipment to play quiet background music
- Bibles

Read Hebrews 11:1–16 aloud. Point out the city mentioned in verse 10. Have someone read verse 10 aloud. What is the city like that is designed and planned by God? Ask participants to pretend to be an architect creating a proposal for building such a city. Design one important part of the city, an aspect that you are not willing to remove from the plan. Use your imagination for this essential element. Allow participants to use any of the provided supplies to create the design. What might a city look like whose architect and builder is God? Have people share the designs when finished, while others listen attentively.

Journeys: Winthrop Quotation (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read through the activity. E-mail or give a copy of the John Winthrop quotation from the attachment to someone in your group who has a flair for the dramatic. Ask that person to come prepared to read aloud one of the versions to the group. Let your reader select the version with which he or she is most comfortable. This quotation can be found online at http://history.hanover.edu/texts/winthmod.html (17th century English) or http://religiousfreedom.lib.virginia.edu/sacred/charity.html (modern English). The quotation is excerpted from the end of Winthrop’s sermon.
All of us go on journeys, some physical, some mental, all spiritual. Sometimes we know that we are on a journey. Sometimes we don’t notice until the end, and we have the gift of hindsight. All of life is a journey, but there are often events that define a particular period of time. Spend a few minutes quietly reflecting on one situation in your life that has been a journey for you, and think about how you responded to the situation. Allow those thoughts to stay in your mind. If comfortable, close your eyes while rocking. Imagine yourself as part of another journey, this time in an early 17th-century boat. Rock slowly back and forth. You are traveling from England to the American colonies. Adults and children have died as they sailed the Atlantic Ocean. You are hungry; you are exhausted; you need a bath. Stop rocking and journal your thoughts. Write what comes to mind. What have you discovered in this journey? What insight or wisdom do you want to hold onto as you enter the new land and your new life?

Have the reader present the speech using one of the versions on attachment. Before the reader begins, tell listeners that the quotation is an excerpt from a sermon delivered by John Winthrop (1588–1649) on board the ship Arabella in 1630. This sermon was delivered while surrounded by ocean, the Massachusetts Bay Colony still not in sight. This is the excerpted ending of the sermon titled “A Modell of Christian Charity.”

After the reader has presented the quotation, engage the listeners in discussion. What advice or wisdom does Winthrop give to the colonists? What are the most insights in this sermon? What would you want to add or change if you were giving this sermon? Have someone read aloud Deuteronomy 30:15–30. This is Moses’ advice to the Hebrew people as they prepare to enter the new land. What are similarities between Moses’ sermon and Winthrop’s? What are some differences?

Choose Life
Leader preparation: Review the activity and answer the questions prior to leading your sojourners. You may want to gather examples in your personal life or your faith community’s life where changes have been made so they could “choose life.” Examples may be changes in habits, such as recycling, or changes in opinions, such as ending slavery or ordaining women.

Supplies:
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- Bibles

Ask the gathered group: What choices did you make prior to meeting here? (When to get out of bed, how to treat other people or animals, what clothes to wear) Write their responses on the newsprint or a whiteboard. The list will probably be fairly long because we make many decisions just to get out the door in the morning. Then ask: What do you think your choices say about you? You determine whether you want them to answer silently or whether to add their answers to the newsprint or whiteboard. If someone struggling in a third world country or someone in a North American urban slum learned of your choices, what perspective might they have? As a group, read aloud Deuteronomy 30:15–30. Then prompt discussion with questions such as these:
• What might Moses say about your choices?
• What might Moses say about the choices this worshiping community makes?
• How would you define Moses exhortation to “choose life”?  
• What would you need to change in or add to your life to align with Moses’ appeal to God’s people?
• What might this worshiping community need to change in or add to its life to align with Moses?

6 Remember: Communion

Leader preparation: Review the activity. Obtain copies of the communion liturgy most frequently used in your congregation. Prepare the elements and reflect on the questions in the activity. Be prepared for questions about the memories of communion. Some of these memories may be heart-warming stories of parents, grandparents, and cherished friends who shared communion with your participants. Other participants may have negative memories. Acknowledge all memories, the positive and the negative, as we try to live into Christ’s model.

Supplies:
• bread
• wine or grape juice
• basket
• chalice or cup
• communion liturgy
• Bibles

Read aloud Hebrews 11:1–16. The passage lists people who were faithful to God and who lived before Christ’s death and resurrection. Communion is a vital part of our worship life as Christians. Communion is celebrated by all Christians. It is a meal that unites us globally. We even designate the first Sunday in October, World Communion Sunday, as a reminder of our common life in Christ. Set out the communion elements. Reflect on what communion is and means in your tradition and in your personal life. Listen to the responses carefully, because there will probably be a wide variety of responses. How does participating in communion connect you with our faith story as told in scripture? How does communion help you encounter scripture? Which scriptures are especially important for you? What does communion mean to you? Highlight specific passages that are used in the communion liturgy. What memories do you have of communion? Has the meaning of communion changed as you matured? What do you experience in the celebration of communion? How does celebrating communion give you hope and courage for the future? Read Hebrews 11:1–3 again. How does the sacrament of communion express our hope in things that cannot be seen?

Sending & Serving Activities

7 Music and Prayer: Guide My Feet (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Learn the spiritual “Guide My Feet.” Read the activity and determine whether you want the group to trace their feet and cut the pattern as part of the activity, or whether you want to create a pattern based on your feet. Be aware that some people are sensitive about showing their feet in public. Think about your group members and what will work best for the entire group.
Recall or read aloud Deuteronomy 30:15–30. Moses asked the Israelites to walk in God’s ways, obeying God’s commandments and rules for living peacefully and faithfully. Have everyone learn the tune and sing the African-American spiritual “Guide My Feet.” Dance or clap and sway with the music, as desired. Then, explain that today each person will outline her or his foot on a piece of colored paper and then cut out the basic foot shape. Everyone will work with her or his own foot shape in writing a prayer.

Usually when we write, we go from top to bottom, left to right. Have participants turn the foot sideways so everyone is working with a long part, not the toe-to-heel direction. Advise participants to write the prayer in a circular form, starting anywhere on the long side. Begin the prayer with your favorite way to open a prayer. Then, add prayerful requests for God to “guide your feet” as you move into the future. By the end, the “Amen” should be close to the center, surrounded by your prayer.

### Honor Dinner: God as Host

**Leader preparation:** Hebrews 11:1–16 is one of the great texts on faith. Read the activity and decide which people you would like to honor. Make sure your group members are familiar with the person they are assigned. Select fewer names if you have a small group and add names if your group is larger. Moses is included in the activity even though he is not specifically mentioned in the Hebrews text. If the group chooses to give a gift, they will need to describe it since there is not a physical gift to present. Write an accolade for each group member, including yourself. Make this a fun activity. You may make gold stars for the honorees or place confetti on the table. Use your imagination.

**Supplies:**
- Bible
- paper
- pencils and pens
- festive, decorative items such as gold stars or confetti
- accolade for each group member
- a snack of your choice

Read aloud Hebrews 11:1–16. Then have participants divide into small groups. Pretend you are God and you are hosting a formal dinner honoring your faithful. What would you say to Noah, Abraham, Sarah, and Moses? Would you give a gift? After groups have worked on the presentation, have everyone gather together around a table, still pretending to be at a formal dinner. From each group one person needs to be God and one person the honoree. Listen to the various presentations, applauding each person. You may want to allow a brief acceptance speech. When the last honoree is finished, step up and present personal accolades for each group member. End with a round of applause for all the honorees.
Reflect

The Jewish Seder ends with the exclamation of seeing one another “next year in Jerusalem.” It is a benediction of hope and trust in God, as well as a commitment to live faithfully, choosing life per Moses’ instructions. How will you continue this faith practice? Thank you for leading these pilgrims. May glimpses of the Promised Land, our new Jerusalem, fill your heart every day.

Letter Writing: Message to the Future

Leader preparation: Read Hebrews 11:1–16 so it is fresh in your mind. Go to the NASA’s Voyager website, http://voyager.jpl.nasa.gov/index.html, and locate the article “Voyager Celebrates 20-year-old Valentine to Solar System” from February 12, 2010, or another article that you think will interest your group. Select some of the photographs taken by Voyager. Bookmark or print the article and images to show to your group.

Supplies:
- photographs taken by the spacecraft Voyager 1
- computer with Internet connection or printed articles and images
- lined paper and pens

In 1977 Voyager 1 and Voyager 2 were launched from Cape Canaveral, Florida. As of July, 2010, both spacecraft were operational. Voyager 2 has traveled more than 21 billion kilometers from Earth. Show the group the article “Voyager Celebrates 20-year-old Valentine to Solar System” from February 12, 2010 (or another article you selected), and show some of the images taken by Voyager.

Voyager carries with it a recording of sounds, languages, and images from Earth. This is the recorded greeting from President Jimmy Carter, the 39th leader of the United States:

We cast this message into the cosmos. . . . Of the 200 billion stars in the Milky Way galaxy, some—perhaps many—have been inhabited planets and space faring civilizations. If one such civilization intercepts Voyager and can understand these recorded contents, here is our message:

This is a present from a small, distant world, a token of our sounds, our science, our images, our music, our thoughts, and our feelings. We are trying to survive our time so we may live into yours. We hope someday, having solved the problems we face, to join a community of galactic civilizations. This record represents our hope and our determination and our goodwill in a vast and awesome universe.

Recall Hebrews 11:1–16 or read the passage aloud if you have not already done so. What would you like to say to people in the future? Have each learner write a letter to an imaginary group of people sitting in this very spot, 200 years into the future.

Copyright ©2011 The Pilgrim Press. Permission is granted for use by a single congregation for one (1) year from the purchase date of the subscription. No part of this download may be reproduced or transmitted—beyond the group using these materials—in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without the written permission from the publisher.
Quotation from John Winthrop's Sermon

The following excerpt is from a sermon delivered by John Winthrop (1588–1649) on board the ship Arabella in 1630. This sermon was delivered while surrounded by ocean, the Massachusetts Bay Colony still not in sight. This is the excerpted ending of the sermon titled “A Modell of Christian Charity.”

Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one man. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others’ necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberalty. We must delight in each other; make others’ conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as His own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways, so that we shall see much more of His wisdom, power, goodness and truth, than formerly we have been acquainted with. We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, “may the Lord make it like that of New England.” For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God, and all professors for God’s sake. We shall shame the faces of many of God’s worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going.

And to shut this discourse with that exhortation of Moses, that faithful servant of the Lord, in his last farewell to Israel, Deut. 30. “Beloved, there is now set before us life and death, good and evil,” in that we are commanded this day to love the Lord our God, and to love one another, to walk in his ways and to keep his Commandments and his ordinance and his laws, and the articles of our Covenant with Him, that we may live and be multiplied, and that the Lord our God may bless us in the land whither we go to possess it. But if our hearts shall turn away, so that we will not obey, but shall be seduced, and worship other Gods, our pleasure and profits, and serve them; it is propounded unto us this day, we shall surely perish out of the good land whither we pass over this vast sea to possess it.

Therefore let us choose life,
that we and our seed may live,
by obeying His voice and cleaving to Him,
for He is our life and our prosperity.
Winthrop’s Quotation in Original English

The following is Winthrop’s sermon in its original 17th-century English.

Now the onely way . . . to provide for our posterity, is to followe the counsell of Micah, to doe justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, wee must be knitt together, in this worke, as one man. Wee must entertaine each other in brotherly affecion. Wee must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of other’s necessities. Wee must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekeness, gentlenes, patience and liberality. Wee must delight in eache other; make other’s conditions our oune; rejoice together, mourne together, labour and suffer together, allwayes haueing before our eyes our commission and community in the worke, as members of the same body. Soe shall wee keepe the unitie of the spirit in the bond of peace. The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as his oune people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our wayes. Soe that wee shall see much more of his wisdome, power, goodness and trusthe, than formerly wee haue been acquainted with. . . . For wee must consider that wee shall be as a citty upon a hill. The eies of all people are uppon us. . . .

I shall shutt upp this discourse with that exhortation of Moses, that faithfull servant of the Lord, in his last farewell to Israel, Deut. 30. Beloued there is now sett before us life and good, Death and evill, in that wee are commanded this day to love the Lord our God, and to loue one another, to walke in his wayes and to keepe his Commandements and his Ordinance and his lawes, and the articles of our Covenant with him, that wee may liue and be multiplied, and that the Lord our God may blesse us in the land whither wee goe to possesse it. But if our heartes shall turne away, soe that wee will not obey, but shall be seduced, and worshipp and serue other Gods, our pleasure and profitts, and serue them; it is propounded unto us this day, wee shall surely perishe out of the good land whither wee passe over this vast sea to possesse it; Therefore lett us choose life that wee, and our seede may liue, by obeyeing His voyce and cleaveing to Him, for Hee is our life and our prosperity.