

Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Discovery

About this Age Group

The multiage group encompasses children ages five to eleven years old—that is, children in the elementary years of school. Encountering scripture is probably less difficult for children than for adults. Children enter scripture filled with wonder. They expect miracles. A miracle in the Bible seems as real as the miracle of a wound healing beneath a gauze pad. The youngest children in this age group have a limited understanding of time, decades, and centuries. They may know that Moses and Jesus both died, but they think their parents could have known them. Children have an abundant faith. If God says so, that's the way it should be. Encountering scripture with a child is a gift adults can give themselves.

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. As we engage with scripture, we discover God and we discover a new world through words from long ago. We encounter scripture as an ancient text, but one that is living, breathing, and alive to contemporary people. 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 encounter scripture, we join with the great diversity of God's people to ask questions, connect with the text, pray, and discern together God's unfolding word for us.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Proverbs 2:1–8
John 21:1–19

Leader Preparation

In this Discovery Exploration you will work with two passages. John 21:1–19 describes a postresurrection appearance of Jesus to his disciples. Proverbs 2:1–8 is about wisdom. The passages quoted in activities here and throughout the resource are from the New Revised Standard Version. Feel free to use the children’s version you may normally use. Read Proverbs 2:1–8 and John 21:1–19. Note any key words or phrases that stand out for you. Consider how these texts connect with your life right now. Ponder what connections children may make between these texts and their own experience.

Prayer: Gracious and Loving God, fill me with a sense of abundance, knowing that you always provide what I need. Sometimes you provide for me before I even know my needs. Give me wisdom and confidence in my leadership. Help me be a faithful disciple. Open me to hear your word anew through the energy and excitement of children. 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 Activities,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding Activities,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving Activities.” The first activity in each category is

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 Prayer: Inhale and Exhale (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: There are many kinds of breath prayers. One possibility is to address the Holy Spirit or God as you inhale—imagining drawing the power of the Spirit into your own body. Words are repeated in your mind, but not said aloud. As you exhale you offer an affirmation or blessing or a request. Children remember breath prayers and enjoy creating them. Read the paraphrase of Proverbs 2:1–8 below and create a simple breath prayer in response to the text. For example,

Holy Wisdom (slowly inhale)
show me your truth (slowly exhale)
(repeat two times)

or

God of all knowing (slowly inhale)
your truth is like treasure (slowly exhale)
(repeat two times)

Supplies:

- Bible or children’s illustrated Bible

Read aloud a paraphrase of Proverbs 2:1–8 such as the following:

Children, treasure my words. Bend close as I whisper in your ear.
Hunt for wisdom the way you would hunt for silver or buried treasure.
Never give up. Ask lots of questions. Keep searching until you understand.
Everything we know comes from God.
God gives understanding to those who seek it,
And guides them on the way of goodness and truth.

Teach the children a simple breath prayer, and then lead the prayer, saying it at least three times. Encourage children to use deep breaths. They will probably start breathing noisily trying to get the rhythm through exaggeration. That’s fine. They will find the rhythm and be able to offer suggestions. Explain the format of a breath prayer—breathe in and say a name or a phrase for God (such as Holy One, Wonderful God, Loving God, Holy Spirit). Then breathe out with a prayer of gratitude or ask God for something (perhaps help me be wise, thank you for wisdom). Pray some of the children’s prayer suggestions. They breathe and the leader says the words slowly as they do so.

2 Film Clip: Tale of Desperaux

Leader preparation: This is “Reading” from the beginning of the movie *Tale of Desperaux*. The movie is based on the book by the same title, written by Kate DiCamillo. Prior to your gathering time, preview the clip at <http://tinyurl.com/84tmwju>. Or borrow the movie from a library and advance to the correct location. Read the activity, and adapt the questions depending on the ages of children in your group.

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.

Supplies:

- computer with Internet access and projector, or the DVD from a library or rental location
- Bible

This movie clip comes from a film about a small mouse that can talk and has great dreams. Desperaux is anxious to learn and asks questions because he is curious. Show this part of the film. After the film ask any of the following questions: *Did Desperaux know all the stories when he opened the book? What did he like? (Truth, justice, bravery, sword fights) What surprised him? What was special about the princess?*

The Bible is the special book for Christians. There are lots of stories about truth, justice, bravery, battles, God, and Jesus in our Bible. Invite children to mention any stories they know from the Bible. Like Desperaux, you may learn to like things you never suspected you would like.

How do we learn about God? Invite conversation about some of the different parts of the Bible and things they tell us about God. Look at the psalms. These are songs and prayers to God, and some of them tell us what God is like. Read aloud Psalm 23:1. Read Genesis 1:1. *What does this verse say about God? Read John 1:1. What does this verse tell us about God?*

Desperaux was not reading the Bible, but we can. We can find adventure, poems, funny stories, sad stories, and many ways to learn about God. We can find hope and joy. The Bible is amazing!

3 Follow the Leader: Jesus

Leader preparation: Read John 21:1–19. Inside and outside the learning area, make sure you follow your community’s safe sanctuary or child protection policies. Safety first. This activity highlights how your congregation is already following Jesus. Plan a route that your children can take around the building that is safe and won’t disturb other groups. Consider what examples of faithful activities you can point out to the children.

Supplies:

- Bible

When Jesus was with the disciples he told the disciples that he wanted them to follow him and to take care of others. Show the group the Bible. Invite older children to help find John 21:1–19 by book title, chapter, and verse. Jesus said, “Feed my sheep” and “Tend my sheep.” Jesus sometimes referred to people and other animals as sheep and himself or God as being like a shepherd. Jesus talked about sheep and lambs a lot. Lots of farmers in Jesus’ country took care of sheep and lambs. *How is God like a shepherd caring for sheep?* Invite children to play “Follow the Leader.” Instead of doing jumping jacks (you can do these, too), follow the leader and stop whenever you spot something that shows that your congregation is following Jesus. Wander past rooms where folks learn about the Bible, serve food, and worship; look at the bulletin board with the activity schedule or the prayer list; walk past the recycling cans or a place where food is collected for the food bank. At each stop ask: *How are we following Jesus here or doing what Jesus wants?* If no one mentions the room where this group meets, remind them that they are also following Jesus by learning more, by being kind to one another, and by being kind to you.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Jesus Fixes Breakfast (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read John 21:1–14. Then read the attached skit. You may prompt the younger readers. You do not need props, but some can be improvised. Chairs in a line can be the boat, and a circle of red blocks or sticks from outdoors can be the fire.

Supplies:

- chairs in a line for the boat
- red blocks or sticks
- (optional) dress-up clothes
- “Jesus Fixes Breakfast,” Attachment: Activity 4

Ask the children to help you set the props for the skit. Tell them they are making a pretend boat and a pretend fire. Divide the skit parts. If there are not enough children for all the parts, double up, having one child be more than one disciple. If dress-up clothing is available, use it. Act out the skit.

5 Fish and Bread

Leader preparation: Jesus prepared breakfast for the disciples. They were blessed with abundance, as are all disciples then and now. Enjoy your own meal of fish and bread. You may want to add grapes.

Supplies:

- Bible
- fish sticks
- pita or crackers or bread
- (optional) grapes
- water or juice
- plates
- napkins

Read John 21:1–14, or invite a volunteer from the group to read the text aloud. Invite the children to eat a meal just like Jesus and the disciples. Ask for helpers, and serve the fish, pita, and drinks. You may also want to serve grapes. While eating, pose questions such as the following:

- I wonder why Jesus made breakfast for the disciples.
- How do you think the disciples knew it was Jesus on shore?
- I wonder how everyone feels while eating together.
- Are there any other meals like this at church?
- I wonder what we might do to help feed others.
- What do you wonder about in this story?

6 Treasure Hunt

Leader preparation: Create the scrolls or paint the rocks. This is designed as an indoor activity. If you have a safe outdoor area, hide the scrolls or rocks, and allow the children to look for outdoor treasure.

Supplies:

- Bible
- rocks or scroll with words or symbols for peace, joy, love, faith, and justice, or fairness, generosity, care, hope, wisdom, and knowledge. You will need one rock or scroll per child.
- sandbox sand or uncooked rice
- deep container

Today's verses are from Proverbs. It's a book of sayings, like poems. They are not stories. Read Proverbs 2:1–5. Say: *This proverb has a female named Wisdom speaking. What does wisdom mean to you? She is saying that if we listen to God and follow God's commandments, then God will be proud of us. What do we have when we follow God's rule? Let's go on a treasure hunt and see what we find.* Ask the children, one at a time, to put their hands in the sandbox and pull out one scroll or rock. After everyone has had a turn, learn together what you have received.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Game: Warmer and Colder (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Look around the room for several religious items. If there are not very many, you might have to add some to play this game. Many Christian beliefs are translated into symbols, and this activity helps children recognize Christian symbols. Earlier Christian communities used symbols to help people remember the Christian story. This was important because many believers could not read. Think of the symbols you know and their meaning (chalice, shell, butterfly, dove).

Supplies:

- religious items (cross, fish, chalice, picture, candle)

This is a simple game where the leader chooses an object in the room and the group tries to guess what it is. Do not look at the object. You might say, "I see something where we read about Jesus." You may only say "warmer" or "colder" (closer to the object is warmer, moving away is colder) as the group looks for a Bible. The group then moves around the learning area following your calls of temperature until they guess the object. The children do not have to be able to reach the object; it can be on the wall or ceiling, but it must be visible. If the children do not know the meaning of the symbol, help them with a brief explanation. Congratulate them at the end and ask them to keep looking for Christian symbols throughout the week. Symbols remind us of our faith and help us keep the verses alive.

For older children: As the older children gather, quietly ask them to help you with this game. Ask them to identify the Christian symbols in the room. Make sure the symbols selected are Christian symbols. Then ask the older children to lead this game, each selecting one symbol at a time and taking turns.

8 Hymn: “As We Gather at Your Table”

Leader preparation: This hymn is a good choice to complement the John passage, bringing Jesus’ breakfast at the shore to your congregation’s communion table. This activity explores the first verse, so the children become familiar with the hymn. Reading hymns is a difficult skill. Many eleven-to twelve-year-olds are just learning how to return to the top for the second verse and then read the second line all the way down. This is not a skill children learn in school. They learn to read hymns at home and at church. If you have mostly younger children, learn the tune and a few lines. If you want, ask another person to play the melody on his or her favorite instrument.

Supplies:

- hymn: “As We Gather at Your Table,” (Tune: Beach Spring, 8.7.8.7.D), www.tinyurl.com/fp-table

Have copies of the hymn for every child, even those who may not be able to read. Have an enlarged copy for you. Hum the tune first with your finger following the notes. Sing the first verse on “la” with your finger following the notes. Then, say the first verse in short phrases, explaining the phrases as you go.

“As we gather at your table.” (Ask: *What table is mentioned?*)

“As we listen to your word.” What word? (Sing the first line, with your finger following the notes.)

“help us know, O God, your presence” (Explain: *This means help us recognize God in ourselves and others.*)

“let our hearts and minds be stirred” (Describe the other meaning of “stirred,” so children aren’t thinking of cake batter with hearts and mind swirling in a bowl. Sing the second line, then first and second lines together.)

“Nourish us with sacred story” (Explain: *Scripture is sacred story and it nourishes or feeds us.*)

“till we claim it as our own” (Mention your congregation’s confirmation class. Sing the third line and then first through third together.)

“teach us through this holy banquet” (Explain that this means communion)

“how to make Love’s victory known” (Explain: *Jesus’ death and resurrection.* Sing the last line and then the first verse.



9 Art: Christ Among the Children

Leader preparation: This is a beautiful image that can be used to teach or remind all of us that children are also disciples. When Jesus says “Follow me” in the John passage, he includes disciples of all ages. When Proverbs instructs us how to seek wisdom and where to find it, the audience is any attentive listener or reader. Seeking wisdom and following Jesus are responsibilities and privileges for all Christians. Practice the activity.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Christ Among the Children” by Emil Nolde www.tinyurl.com/fp-uCCR3
- children’s illustrated Bible or Bible storybook, or a Bible
- song “Jesus Loves Me,” <http://tinyurl.com/3rv6xox>

Gather so everyone can easily see the artwork. Have them look at this picture. Ask: *What do you notice? What in the painting interests you the most? If you could be any character, which one would it be?* Ask the children to stand up and point to the image. *Why would you like to be that character? Do you think the children are disciples? Why or why not?* Listen to their responses and affirm that children may also choose to be followers of Jesus, that is, disciples. There are many stories in the Bible about children. Look through the Bible storybook or children's illustrated Bible for images of children. *What do you notice?* Invite participants to share stories they know about children in the Bible. Close with the song "Jesus Loves Me." Ask the children to notice ways they follow Jesus or follow God's way of love during the week. Remind the children that Jesus loves all of them, all the time.

Option: With older children or confident readers, have learners look up passages about children in the Bible, such as the following: Matthew 14:13–19, Mark 10:13–14, and Luke 2:43–47.

Reflect

When we encounter scripture we learn how much Jesus loves us. What a wonderful message to give to children—and youth, and adults of all ages. Which activities did the children most enjoy? Are you and your co-leader working together well? What changes, if any, need to be made? Which unexpected smiles or insights from your young learners can you take with you this week?

Attachment: Activity 4

Jesus Fixes Breakfast

Based on John 21: 1-14

Peter: I'm so tired. We've been fishing all night. Nothing! Not even a minnow!

Disciple 1: This is a waste of time.

Disciple 2: Who's waving from the shore?

Jesus: Good morning! How many fish do you have?

Disciple 3 (*a little angry*): None!

Jesus: Try casting your net on the right side.

Disciple 4: Let's quit. I'm hungry.

Peter: Let's try. We can't do any worse.

Disciple 5: Here go the nets.

(Everyone casts the net overboard.)

Disciples (*surprised*): What's happening?

Peter: We have more fish than our net can hold. There's fish everywhere.

Disciple 6: It's Jesus. That's who is on the shore.

Peter: You are right. Bring the boat ashore. I'm diving in and will meet you there.

(Peter and Jesus help the disciples land the boat.)

Jesus: You are safely here. Bring some of your fish, and we will cook it.

Peter: Jesus has a fire going. Everything is ready for us. Fish and bread, our favorite meal.

(Everyone eats together, knowing that Jesus is sitting with them.)

Disciples: Thank you, Jesus.

Jesus: You are very welcome.

Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Scripture

About this Age Group

In a group with a wide age span, it is important to offer a variety of activities. It is also important to open the texts to more than one possible meaning or interpretation. Do not tell the learners what the texts mean. Instead, invite them to explore with you and with one another how texts connect with their life today. Many passages of scripture have metaphors and images that will speak to people in different ways throughout their lifetimes. For example, thinking of the Word as an image of who Jesus is will mean something very different to a child who is just learning to read than to a teenager who is developing a complex vocabulary in one or perhaps several languages. Seek to establish an atmosphere of respect and creativity in which many interpretations are possible.

About this Exploration

The introduction to the Gospel of John gives us an image of God as one who is not distant or inaccessible but active 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 and challenge, delight and disrupt, comfort and transform. When we hear Scripture as a community, we discern its life-giving word for our lives and our world. We seek to acknowledge the ways scripture has been misused and recover its power to create new life.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

2 Kings 2:1-14
John 1:1-14

Leader Preparation

Both focus passages are difficult for children if you read them directly from the Bible. The 2 Kings passage is about Elijah transferring his authority and blessing to Elisha. A fiery chariot comes between them, and then Elijah ascends to heaven in a whirlwind. The John passage is an image of Jesus as the sacred Word, there in the beginning, alive and dwelling with us. Many of the children in your group are literal thinkers and may need help understanding biblical metaphors such as this one. Read the two scriptures in different translations, pondering what these passages mean to you. Then read the verses with your children in mind.

Prayer: Creator, help me make scriptures accessible to those in the early years of their faith journey. Help me to deepen my own understanding of your word. Illumine me and fill me with your truth and your compassion. Help me understand in a way that deepens my faith. 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 Activities,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding Activities,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving Activities.” The first activity in each category is designed for “easy preparation” (able

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Hear a Bible Story (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read the story of Elijah and Elisha in 2 Kings 2:1-14 and from the attachment. Think about how you will introduce this story to your group. Consider how this story speaks to you in your life today. How might it be heard by children in your group? What connections might they make with their own lives? Gather several different Bibles. You might check for these in the church library or minister’s office. You may need to look in several learning areas to gather different Bibles. If possible, bring a Bible that is special to you personally, such as an old family Bible or a Bible that you received as a child or teenager. Do an Internet search of images of old biblical manuscripts.

Supplies:

- Bibles (several different versions)
- “Elijah and Elisha,” Attachment: Activity 1
- (optional) computer with Internet access

Show the children the Bibles you have brought. If you have one that has personal significance, tell the group about this Bible. Sometimes we call the Bible “holy” or “sacred.” What does it mean to say the Bible is holy or sacred? Older children might look up meanings of these words online if you have a computer available. The Bible is a very special book for Christians. Some of the Old Testament scriptures are part of the Jewish holy books as well. The Bible contains many stories written a long time ago. The story we will hear today is from a part of the Bible we sometimes call the Hebrew Scripture because it was written by people who spoke Hebrew. Another part of the Bible we call the Christian or Greek Scriptures (New Testament). Show the children where 2 Kings 2 is located in the Bible. This story is about someone named Elisha who learned how to follow God from a prophet named Elijah. Read 2 Kings 2:1-14 from Attachment: Activity 1, and invite the children’s participation in the story. Encourage children to talk about the story using questions such as: *How do you think Elisha felt about Elijah going away? What did Elisha want? Did he get what he wanted? Does this story remind you of anything that has ever happened to you? I wonder if Elijah knew what was going to happen. I wonder who these two prophets were.* Older children might use computers to find out more about Elijah and Elisha.



2 Light Shining in Darkness

Leader preparation: The John passage may be difficult to understand because there are so many metaphors. Read John 1:1-14 and notice the metaphors for divinity: Light; Word/Word in living form/Word become flesh; Father/Parent; Son/Child. Which images particularly speak to you today? What does it mean to you to think of Jesus as “light shining in the darkness” or as “word becoming a living being”? What other images from scripture do you use to think of the Divine or Holy One? The Bible uses many images from daily life to point to things that are far bigger than any one image or human idea. Children can understand that God created light shining in darkness, but they are also capable of understanding how things in the natural world around us can point to an understanding of who God is and what God is like. Older children need to be encouraged to think beyond the literal meanings of the words. Select some favorite images to show the children from sites such as the following:

Encountering Scripture

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.

- <http://hubblesite.org/gallery/album/>
- <http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/bugs/firefly/>
- <http://www.waitomo.com/waitomo-glowworm-caves.aspx>

Print the images or bookmark them on a computer to show the children. Display the artwork where it will be visible to all.

Supplies:

- images from nature (printed or bookmarked on computer)
- “God-Word-Light-Life,” Attachment: Activity 2
- Bible

Say: *Gospel means “good news.” There are four Gospels or “good news” books in the Greek or Christian Scriptures (show learners where to find Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). In the fourth Gospel, called the Gospel of John, we read about “light shining in the darkness.” Where do we find light shining in the darkness? Read “God-Word-Light-Life” from the attachment. This passage refers to God and also to Jesus. How is God like a Word at the beginning of everything? How is Jesus like a Word? Like a light shining in the darkness?*

Show photographs taken by the Hubble Telescope, a huge telescope taking pictures as it travels through the universe. The telescope is programmed to send the pictures back to earth so scientists can learn more about space. *What do you see?*

God created everything, including insects. Some insects have a special quality called bioluminescence. This is a fun word to say. Bio-lu-min-es-ence. Creatures that are bioluminescent can create light from their own bodies using a chemical reaction. Fireflies or lightning bugs are common during the summer months in warm and moderate climates throughout the world. They are bioluminescent. Glowworms are insect larvae that are bioluminescent. There are glowworm caves in New Zealand, Australia, and North America. Note: Links are available with more information about fireflies and the Waitomo Glow Worm caves in New Zealand. You may share the information with the children, as desired. Ask: *What do you think of these insects? What do you think about the idea of a God who makes light shining in darkness? In John’s Gospel he wrote about Jesus being light. Why might John have thought Jesus was like light?*

③ Christmas: The Word Became Flesh

Leader preparation: Regardless of the season, display a nativity set. “The Word became flesh and lived among us” is an eight-word summary of Jesus from John 1. Celebrate the Word coming to us as a baby in Bethlehem.

Supplies:

- nativity set
- Christmas snack (perhaps tangerines or shortbread cookies)
- recordings of Christmas carols and sound equipment
- Bible

Ask an older learner to find John 1 and read aloud verses 1 and 14 (or read the verses yourself). In the Gospel of John we hear that “the Word became flesh and lived among us.” “Became flesh” means became a living person. *Who do you think this person is that is being described? What do you think the author is saying about who Jesus is? What would it mean for a word to come alive?* Invite the group to set up the nativity set and talk together about Jesus’ birth. *What do you remember about the Christmas story?* Conclude with a Christmas snack. Play Christmas carols as you eat.

Discerning & Deciding Activities

 4 Song: The B-I-B-L-E (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: “The B-I-B-L-E, now that’s the book for me. I’m standing now on the word of God. The B-I-B-L-E.” The words and tune are not difficult. Learn the song and enjoy leading the children. This is also an activity where an eight-to-eleven-year-old could learn the song and lead the group. Learn the song “The B-I-B-L-E, That’s the Book for Me” from <http://tinyurl.com/3zya74g> or purchase an MP3 version of this song to play for the group from <http://tinyurl.com/3o5be4u>

Supplies:

- song: “The B-I-B-L-E, That’s the Book for Me,” <http://tinyurl.com/3zya74g>
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

The Bible is sometimes called the “Holy Bible” or “Sacred Scripture.” *What does it mean to say the Bible is sacred or holy?* Go over the words to the song and sound out B-I-B-L-E. (Bible fits the “magic E” guide in phonics. If there is an E at the end of the word, the other vowel says its name.) If you have readers, write the words on newsprint or a whiteboard. Explain that we aren’t really “standing on the word of God.” Ask what the children think “standing on the word of God” means. Sing the song together.

Option: Invite the children to make up a new verse to this same tune.

5 Experiencing Miracles: Elijah and Elisha

Leader preparation: Read the 2 Kings passage carefully so you understand the sequence of events. You will use the text from the Bible translation you usually use with children to walk them through “signposts” or “stations” in your learning area. You do not need a large space, although you may use one. There are four locations (a beginning point, Bethel, Jericho, and Jordan River), so four corners or four areas of the space will work well. Move from station to station and read from the Bible at each station, acting as you travel. Display signs to indicate “Bethel,” “Jericho,” and “the Jordan River.” Gather props and walk through the imaginary journey yourself, thinking about how you will help the group hear and experience the story.

Supplies:

- signs made from newsprint or poster board that indicate “Bethel,” “Jericho,” and “the Jordan River”
- Bible
- props such as sashes, yarn tied at waist, necklaces, or other symbols for the group of prophets; biblical costumes; piece of fabric to use as the prophet’s mantle; two pieces of blue fabric (at least four feet long) to represent the river

This activity walks the children through an imaginary journey as they recall the journey Elijah and Elisha traveled before Elijah was taken up into heaven. Let them experience the story from the Bible. Begin at the doorway. You or another reader may read 2 Kings 2:1–2. Then, Elijah and Elisha travel to Bethel. The remainder of the group can be the prophets waiting in Bethel. At Bethel, read 2 Kings 2:3–4. Now Elijah and Elisha travel to Jericho, and the prophets need to be Jericho’s prophets and not Bethel’s prophets (add a sash or necklace or so we

know they are not the same group of prophets). At Jericho, read 2 Kings 2:5–6. Everyone moves to the Jordan River where two children are lying on the ground covered by a strip of blue cloth. Read 2 Kings 2:7–8. When Elijah “strikes” the water, ask the children to roll to the opposite side so Elijah and Elisha can walk between them. Roll the river back together and read 2 Kings 2:9–14. Encourage the children to act as the fiery chariot and fiery horses. Encourage Elijah to ascend in a whirlwind. There’s not a “right” way to do this, so allow plenty of imaginative play. Encourage Elisha to be amazed and grief-stricken. As he picks up the prophet’s mantle from Elijah, return to the Jordan River. Elisha “strikes” the river and it parts again. He walks back toward Jericho. At the end ask the children what they liked about this story.

Ask the two river people to lie down again. Ask them to separate and allow each child, one by one, to experience walking through the water, imagining themselves as either Elijah or Elisha. Ask other children to be the river so your original “river” can experience walking through the miracle. If desired, you may walk back through the river, one by one to Jericho.



6 Caring for Children: Death and Grief

Leader preparation: There are many biblical stories about death, grief, and loss. Elijah’s time on earth has come to an end. According to the story, he is amazingly removed from the earth with a whirlwind. Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah experience the death of loved ones. Esther and Mordecai confront a plot to destroy all the Jews, and they risk their lives to save their people. Moses dies before he is able to enter the promised land of Canaan. Death and change are a normal part of life. Children grieve, sometimes deeply, about changes such as changing schools, experiencing an adult separation or a divorce, moving, or having a friend move away, missing a sports season due to injury, losing a pet, or experiencing the death of a loved one. Learning how children grieve, before you need the information, allows you to be prepared and gives children information and vocabulary that is familiar before they may experience a death or loss. This activity introduces the topic using the Elijah story. The following sites have resources for supporting children and families through grief and loss: <http://tinyurl.com/436zns9> and <http://tinyurl.com/3vq6ldn>.

Supplies:

- *The Next Place* by Warren Hanson (Minnesota: Walman House Press, 1997)
- “Elijah and Elisha,” Attachment: Activity 1

In the Hebrew Scriptures we learn about Elijah and Elisha. Their names sound almost alike, but they are two different people. Elijah was a prophet, a person who listened carefully to God and told other people about God. Elisha was his student, also a prophet. When Elijah knew that it was time for him to die, he knew that God would ask Elisha to be the next prophet. Then Elijah was taken away in a whirlwind. Read the story from Attachment: Activity 1, or tell the story in your own words. Pause between each “I wonder” statement. Allow the children to ponder quietly. *I wonder how Elijah felt being God’s prophet. I wonder how Elisha felt when his teacher was taken in a whirlwind. I wonder if he cried. The Bible tells us that Elisha tore his clothes apart and then he wore Elijah’s coat. I wonder why Elijah left his coat for Elisha. I wonder if any of you have experienced someone moving or dying. If so, what do you remember about them?* Allow the children to share as they feel comfortable. Read the book *The Next Place*, by Warren Hanson.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Body Prayer: Portion of St. Patrick’s Prayer (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read John 1:12–13. How do we become children of God? Children need concrete images to help them understand the Christian faith. This prayer uses language and images that are readily understandable. It reminds children that wherever they are, Christ is already there, journeying with them and within them. Read the prayer and consider which movements you would create for this prayer. This is a portion of a much longer prayer. The “Saint Patrick’s Breastplate” is a Christian hymn written in Old Irish and traditionally attributed to Saint Patrick during his Irish ministry in the fifth century. However, it is probably from the eighth century. Decide whether you want the group to learn a few lines and, if so, which ones. Write the prayer on newsprint or a whiteboard prior to your gathering time.

Supplies:

- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- Bible

Read John 1:12–13, or have one of the learners read the verses. *How do we become children of God?* List the group’s ideas. *How does the Bible help us to know we are children of God?* Then, as a group learn this prayer or any portion of this prayer. This is an Irish prayer, sometimes called St. Patrick’s Prayer. Create movements for the prayer. Then say the prayer with these movements.

*Christ within me,
 Christ before me,
 Christ behind me,
 Christ beneath me,
 Christ above me,
 Christ at my right,
 Christ at my left,
 Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,
 Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks to me,
 Christ in every eye that sees me,
 Christ in every ear that hears me.
 Amen.*

8 Lego Elijah

Leader preparation: Preview the video of Elijah at <http://tinyurl.com/3pum93v> and arrange for equipment to show the video to the group. Gather construction toys such as Legos or Play Mobile blocks and figures. Make sure you have a variety of people.

Supplies:

- Lego or other construction toy supplies such as by Play Mobile
- markers, paper, and transparent tape
- video of Lego Bible Elijah and computer with Internet access (at <http://tinyurl.com/3pum93v>)
- camera or video camera to record scenes of the story of Elijah

Recall the story of Elijah. Show the video of Elijah at <http://tinyurl.com/3pum93v>, which was created using Lego figures and bricks. Invite the learners to consider how they could create scenes from the story of Elijah using Legos or another construction toy set. Use a camera to record scenes from the story. *Hint:* Use paper, markers, and tape to add props, features such as beards, leaves of trees, cloaks, and so forth.

Alternative: Brainstorm favorite Bible stories. Have children create scenes from their favorite stories using the construction toys.



9 Finger Painting: In the Beginning

Leader preparation: Read the John passage. The beginning of the John passage focuses on God and Jesus (the Word) creating. View the painting and then allow the children to be creators on paper. Create your own image prior to leading. Gather art supplies. Arrange for an area where the paintings can dry. Put up the artwork where it will be clearly visible to the group.

Supplies:

- artwork: “No-Traveller’s Borne,” by Jess, www.tinyurl.com/fp-uCCR3
- paper
- finger paint
- smocks
- plastic or drop cloth to cover work area

Review John 1:1–14. Display the artwork and invite the children to study the image. Give at least one full minute for them to look at all aspects of the picture. Ask: *What do you see? In how many different directions can we view this painting? (Hold in four ways.) Where is God in this picture? What do you think the world looked like “in the beginning”?*

Invite the children to create a masterpiece. Ask what would they include if they were creating a new world. Encourage them to use lots of color. As they work with the finger paints, talk with them about colors and feelings. Affirm all of their paintings. If there is time, ask the children to talk about their painting. Ask the children to help with clean up.

Reflect

What did you enjoy most about preparing and leading this session? Where did you need to allow more time? Which activities did you need to adapt to suit your group? How did the children respond to the various activities? How were you able to encourage and affirm children in their own leadership? What did you learn from them? Recall that when you guide children in the faith, you are giving them a glimpse of Jesus, through your words, through your actions, through your smiles.

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Attachment: Activity 1

Elijah and Elisha

Based on 2 Kings 2:1–14

Once, long ago there was a leader named Elijah. Elijah was a prophet who helped others learn about God. Elijah was very old. He knew he would not live much longer. Soon he would be swept up into heaven inside a mighty wind like nothing anyone had seen before. Elijah told his student, Elisha, “Stay here. God is sending me to Bethel.”

But Elisha said, “No way! I will not leave you!” (*Have the children shake their heads “no” and repeat with you, “No way! I will not leave you.”*) So Elijah and Elisha went to Bethel together.

At Bethel, a group of prophets asked Elisha, “Did you know that today God is going to take your away your teacher, Elijah?”

“Yes, I know, but don’t talk about it,” said Elisha. (*Have the children put their finger to their lips and say, “Shhh, don’t talk about it.”*)

“I am going to Jericho now,” Elijah told Elisha. “Stay here in Bethel.”

But Elisha said again, “No way! I will not leave you.” (*Have the children shake their heads “no” and repeat this phrase with you.*) So Elijah and Elisha went to Jericho together.

At Jericho, some more prophets said to Elisha, “Did you know that today God is going to take your teacher, Elijah?”

“Yes, I know, but don’t talk about it,” said Elisha. (*Have the children put their finger to their lips and say, “Shhh, don’t talk about it.”*)

Then Elijah told Elisha to stay in Jericho. “I’m going to Jordan,” said Elijah.

But Elisha said again, “No way! I will not leave you.” (*Have the children shake their heads “no” and repeat this phrase with you.*) So Elijah and Elisha went to Jordan together.

When they reached the Jordan River, Elijah took off his coat, rolled it up and struck the water. The water divided. Elijah and Elisha walked to the other side on dry ground.

Elijah then asked Elisha, “Before I am taken from you, what can I do for you?”

Elisha said, “I want to be just like you. I want my spirit to be strong like yours.”

Elijah said, “That’s a big thing to ask. But if you are watching when I am taken from you, you will be given what you ask. But you must be watching.”

As they walked along, suddenly a chariot and horses of fire appeared. The two prophets were separated. Elijah went up into heaven in the mighty wind.

Elisha cried out, “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” Then he didn’t see Elijah any more. Elisha was very upset and tore his clothes. He picked up Elijah’s coat. Sadly he walked back to the Jordan River. He stood alone at the side of the river, looking at the swirling water. Then he called out for God. He struck the water with Elijah’s coat, and the water divided. He crossed to the other side of the river on dry land.

God-Word-Light-Life

In the beginning was the Word.

The Word was with God. The Word was God.

The Word was with God in the very beginning.

God, the Word, created everything that exists
—the earth and sun and stars, the whole universe. Everything.

The Word was Life, and Life was Light:

God-Word-Light-Life for all people. Everyone.

The Light shines in the darkness.

The darkness cannot overcome it.

Love Light Life forever. Evermore.

Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Discipleship

About this Age Group

When we encounter scripture we learn what God has asked of disciples through the ages. Then we reflect and discern how to live as a disciple today. Many times when children encounter scripture they perceive the Christian faith as just another set of rules. Christian discipleship does include following rules, like treating others as we want to be treated and not stealing. However, discipleship for Christians is a privilege, a way of life that we choose. It's a way of life that keeps us close to God every moment of every day. When children read and experience scripture, we need to help them relate those stories to actions, choices for discipleship today.

About this Exploration

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.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Ruth 1
Acts 8:26–40

Leader Preparation

How do you follow Christ? How do you act as a disciple? Think through these questions. Read the Bible focus passages at least twice. You might want to read the entire story of Ruth as well. Select the activities that you think you and your learners will most enjoy. Mostly, live with the passages and the questions for a few days and listen to what God is saying to you about discipleship through these stories.

Prayer: Holy One, grant me discernment so I know how to be your disciple. Grant me the wisdom to listen to the stirrings of my heart as I read your Word, as I guide these children and as I strive to serve 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 Activities,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding Activities,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving Activities.” 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.

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Thinking It Through: Discipleship (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Many times in congregations we use the words of our faith and assume other people will understand what we are saying. This is especially true when adults speak with children. We need to say what we mean and guide children as they learn the faith vocabulary. Give the children an opportunity to think about discipleship in various areas of life—home, school, sports, extracurricular activities, church. You may use this activity for either the Ruth or the Acts passage.

Supplies:

- Bible

Gather the children around you. Ask: *How many of you have heard the word “disciple”? How many of you have heard the word “discipleship”? Disciple and discipleship sound very similar. A disciple is a person who follows someone she or he respects. Christians are disciples of Christ. Discipleship describes a way of life. Discipleship includes how we treat people and animals, how we speak, act, worship, work, and play. How might disciples of Christ act?* Listen carefully to the answers the children offer. Affirm their responses. They are giving you clues about their understanding of your faith community and what they witness and experience. Talk about what the word “discipleship” means for you and why you have chosen to be a disciple of Jesus. Introduce the story from Acts, a story about two disciples. One of them, Philip, was a good friend of Jesus. The other man, a man from the country of Ethiopia in Africa, is a new disciple. Read Acts 8:26–40, or invite one of the strong readers to read the passage. *What did Philip do that showed he was a disciple of Jesus? What did the Ethiopian man do that showed he wanted to be a disciple of Jesus?* Ask the children what are some things they have done today that involves being a disciple. Encourage them to think of things that don’t necessarily involved doing something “good.” Playing, enjoying life, singing, telling someone about your church, thinking about God, being with other Christians at church, being loved by others are all part of discipleship.

2 Beach Ball Prayer: Prayers Up and Blessings Down

Leader preparation: Read the Ruth passage. Naomi and her family, Ruth, and Orpah remained faithful to God in good times and in bad times. How can we translate their actions so we remember and can be inspired by their faithfulness? First, think how you have been faithful through the trials and joys in your life. Then read through the activity. You will need to inflate lightweight beach balls, with one ball for every four people. Have at least two balls. Decide if you want the children to share prayers and blessings aloud or silently. This activity is a visual reminder that when prayers are sent heavenward, blessings come down. *Note:* You may also write the prayer requests on the balls with permanent markers. This is effective if you have shy children or children with a learning disability who cannot respond quickly. The prayer beach balls can be used anytime you desire a fun, interactive, and meaningful prayer.

Supplies:

- Bible
- lightweight, inflatable, plastic beach ball
- (optional) permanent markers

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

Sometimes life brings big changes. Ask: *What are some changes you have experienced, such as moving, going to a new school, adding a new person to the family, parent unemployed, parent on military leave? One strength of the people in Ruth's story is that they remembered to be faithful, even in bad times.* Read Ruth 1, or paraphrase it. *How were Ruth and her family faithful? One way to be faithful is to remember your blessings, ways that God is working in your life.* Ask the group what some of their blessings are. Make sure every child can identify a blessing.

Invite the children to pray with beach balls. Think of any prayers you want to bring to God. When the ball is tossed in the air, say a prayer (aloud or silently). When the ball comes down, say a blessing. Prayers up, blessings down. Toss the beach ball gently from person to person—prayers and blessings shared, received, connected, uplifted. Sometimes we don't recognize our blessings immediately. If the children can't think of a blessing, simply receive the ball and gently toss it to someone else, or ask for help identifying a blessing. There will be at least two or three balls in the air simultaneously. At the end, collect the beach balls, say "Amen," and set the balls aside. At the end of the gathering, deflate the balls or store them where they will not be damaged.

③ Hymn: We Are Dancing Sarah's Circle

Leader preparation: Learn the hymn "We Are Dancing Sarah's Circle," which is sung to the tune of "We are Climbing Jacob's Ladder." The hymn verses include seeking and finding our story, doing our own naming, generational learning, and remind us of the joyful inclusivity of a circle. Decide how many verses you want your children to learn. This may be sung a cappella, or ask someone to accompany you on their favorite instrument.

Supplies:

- Song: "We Are Dancing Sarah's Circle, " (tune: Jacob's Ladder, 8.8.8.5.
- www.tinyurl.com/fp-ladder
- (optional) Bible
- (optional) name tags
- (optional) church directory

Learn the tune. You may need to remind the young children that Sarah was Abraham's wife, who was also faithful to God (Genesis 17:15–19; 18:9–15). Sarah's circle includes a generational collection of women, men, girls, and boys who choose to be God's people. Look at verse 2: "here we seek and find our story." *Where do we seek and find our story? What story? How do we learn the story?* (You may want to hide the Bible and find it.) Verse 3: "we will all do our own naming." *Why are names important? Who gave you your name? Does your name have a special meaning?* (You may want to hide name tags and find them.) Verse 4: "every round a generation." *What do we learn from other generations? What do other generations learn from us?* (If you have a church directory you may want to show it.) Verse 5: join hands and dance in one direction, "on and on the circle's moving."

Discerning & Deciding Activities

4 Baptism: Sanctuary Walk (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Ask the pastor to be part of this activity and to discuss his or her favorite part of the baptism sacrament. How would the pastor describe “sacrament” in one sentence? Think about your own baptism and the baptisms you have witnessed. If you have mostly older children, remind them that communion is also a sacrament. If you have mostly younger children, focus only on baptism.

Supplies:

- Bible
- baptismal font or bowl or baptistry
- water
- baptism liturgy

Read the Acts passage. Ask: *Why did the Ethiopian want to be baptized? How was he baptized by Philip? What is baptism?* Walk to the sanctuary. Either stand or sit around the baptismal font or the bowl used for baptism or the baptistry. Ask the children about baptism. *Who has been baptized? Who will be baptized when you are older? If you were baptized as an infant, how do you know about your baptism?* Pour water into the baptismal bowl. Explain that baptism is a sacrament, a holy act that brings us closer to God. Jesus was baptized, and Christians have been baptized for many, many, many generations. At this point mention the way your community baptizes believers: Infants, youth, adults? Water on the head, immersion? Also include words from your liturgy. Do adults make a commitment to help raise these children in the Christian faith? Remind the children that once they have been baptized, they do not need to be rebaptized. They are baptized for life, and the way they live their life tells others that they are a disciple of Christ.

5 Art: Baptism

Leader preparation: View this painting and carry the image in your thoughts as you prepare.

Supplies:

- Bible
- artwork: “Baptism of Jesus” by Pheoris West www.tinyurl.com/fp-uCCR3

Read the Acts passage aloud or ask a few stronger readers to read. In baptism water is a symbol that reminds us that God loves and accepts us. It washes away all the things we do that are not good. Any person who believes in Jesus may be baptized. Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. After Jesus was baptized God said, “This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased.” In the Christian churches, baptism is a sign that we (or our parents on our behalf) have chosen to be disciples, that is, to be followers of Jesus. Invite discussion about why the Ethiopian man might have chosen to become a follower of Jesus. View the painting. Give the children time to look carefully. There’s a lot to notice. Ask what they see and if they think this is a painting about baptism. Invite discussion about why this may or may not be a picture of baptism. It could be the baptism of the Ethiopian man (Ethiopia is a country in Africa). Say the title that the artist, Pheoris West, gave this painting. Ask: *What do you notice in the painting now that you know the title? Does this change the way you think about this painting?*



6 Ruth

Leader preparation: The short story included with this activity is a paraphrase of the Ruth narrative. At the end there are questions and an opportunity to view the Blake image. If you have a Bible atlas or maps in your Bible, show the children where Judah and Moab are located.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Naomi Entreating Ruth and Orpah to Return to the Land of Moab” by William Blake, www.tinurl.com/fp-apwb
- Bible map for locating Judah and Moab
- “A Love Story: Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth,” Attachment: Activity 6

Pose the question: *How would you describe a loving relationship?* Then, read aloud “A Love Story: Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth,” which summarizes the first chapter of Ruth.

Ask an open-ended question such as: *What are you feeling?* or *What do you think about these women?* Give the children time to think and to respond, clarifying details if necessary. Show them the Blake image. *Which part of the story might this picture illustrate?* Ask what they think will happen next in this scene.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Living the Story (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: The Bible is not a rule book. It cannot tell us what to do in each situation of our complex, twenty-first-century lives. In faith communities we discover together how God and God’s love can be revealed to us through the stories of scripture and how we might live that love in the world. The story of Ruth contains several uses of the Hebrew word “chesed.” This word, more often used of God, describes God’s faithfulness, God’s loving kindness, toward all creation. As you think of the story of Ruth, consider how Ruth shows loving kindness toward Naomi. What do her actions reveal about God’s loving kindness toward us? This activity can help learners discover how to use a story from scripture to discover more about God’s loving kindness and how they can show loving kindness to others.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- “A Love Story: Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth,” Attachment: Activity 6

Tell or retell the story of Ruth, or invite the learners to help you retell it. This story was written in Hebrew. There is a Hebrew word “chesed” (the “ch” is pronounced as an aspirated “h” like a small cough in the back of the throat and each “e” is short like the “e” in bed—he-sed.) Have the children learn the word and say it together. Say: *Chesed means “loving kindness.” Loving kindness is what God shows the world. It is also what Ruth shows Naomi. What does this story tell us that loving kindness is like? How does Ruth show loving kindness to Naomi? How does God show loving kindness to us? If we were going to tell a story about someone showing loving kindness to someone else, what might we talk about?* Invite a variety of suggestions and ideas. Ask each child to name a way we can show loving kindness to someone else today.

8 Art Making: Baptism of the Ethiopian Man

Leader preparation: Make your own watercolor image about baptism. Select any scene from the Acts passages. You will also need to locate a flat drying space for the artwork. *Note:* When painting figures or details with watercolors use a slightly damp brush with the concentrated watercolor pigment. When painting backgrounds or larger areas of color, more water can be used and the color will be softer or diluted. You may also enjoy this activity using markers and paper.

Supplies:

- Bible
- watercolor paints, brushes
- watercolor paper or white construction paper
- containers of water to clean brushes
- paper towels or napkins

Read Acts 8:26–40 from a version you normally use with your group. Pause and invite the children to imagine the various scenes: the Ethiopian court official traveling and reading, meeting Philip and asking for guidance in understanding scripture; Philip telling him about Jesus; the Ethiopian's baptism in a body of water; Philip's departure. The children may create an illustration of any scene. Allow them to select the scene that interests them the most.

9 Prayer of Blessing

Leader preparation: Recall the two stories that have been the focus of this Exploration: Ruth 1 and Acts 8:26–40. Notice the blessing Naomi offers Ruth and Orpah in verse 8, “May God show you loving kindness.” Think of the blessings that are revealed in Acts 8. Consider how you would describe the concept of blessing.

Supplies:

- Bible

Invite children to help retell the story of the Ethiopian man being baptized by Philip and the story from Ruth 1. If you have not yet told either of these stories, tell them now. Consider what the word “blessing” means. One way to think about blessing is to think of it as something that comes from God. To be blessed is to receive the love and kindness and grace that comes from God. When we bless someone, we wish them the good things that come from God. Notice how Naomi blesses Ruth and Orpah. Read Ruth 1:8 or have an older child find and read the verse. Ask: *How did Philip show God's blessing to the man from Ethiopia?* (e.g., he baptized him, he helped him understand the Bible) *What does Naomi offer the two daughters-in-law?* Have the children find another blessing in the Bible. Have an older child look up Numbers 6:24–26. There are lots of other blessings in the Bible. We know that Jesus blessed children and he often laid his hands on sick people to bless them. Invite the children to pass a blessing around the group. Gather in a circle. Teach the words Naomi used in her blessing, “May God show you loving kindness.” Start by whispering this blessing in the ear of the person to the right. That person passes the blessing, whispering it to the person to his or her right until the blessing has passed around the circle. Close by saying the blessing aloud in unison.

Reflect

How did God speak to you through these two Bible focus passages and through the activities and conversations in your group? What do you think the children in your group may have discovered about their own discipleship through this encounter with scripture? What have you learned about your own discipleship? How will you take what you learned from this Exploration and apply it to your life? What will you build on from this Exploration in future gatherings with your group?

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A Love Story: Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth

Once there was a woman named Naomi. She, her husband Elimelech, and her two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, moved from Judah to the country of Moab. They moved because they were hungry. There was a famine, which meant that there was very little food and farmers were unable to grow healthy crops. Traveling from Judah to Moab was a difficult trip. *(Use the map to show where Judah and Moab are located.)*

Moab was a good place for Naomi's family. They had shelter, food, and water. Her sons married wonderful Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. They worshipped God and did their best to keep God's commandments.

Then, a series of tragedies happened. Naomi's husband died. Later both of her sons died. Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah were very sad. They helped each other as they grieved, wiping tears and being supportive.

Naomi heard that the famine was over in Judah and she wanted to go home. She told Ruth and Orpah of her plans. Naomi thanked each of them for being so kind to her husband, to her sons, and to her. She thanked them for the memories she had of all of them as a family. Then Naomi asked Orpah and Ruth to return to their childhood homes so they could live with their families and be near their friends. Naomi had experienced three deaths, and she loved Orpah and Ruth so much that she was encouraging them to live full and happy lives without her.

Naomi's request was difficult to honor. Orpah loved Naomi and Ruth very much. She decided to listen to Naomi and returned to her family. Ruth loved Naomi and Orpah. She said, "Naomi, where you go, I will go. Where you live I will live. Your people in Judah will be my new family. Your Yahweh will be my God." Naomi understood that both women were listening to how God was speaking to them in their hearts.

Naomi and Ruth traveled from Moab back to Judah. They arrived safely. Naomi was still very sad, but being around her family and friends helped her feel better. Ruth met a wonderful man named Boaz, and they got married and had a son. Naomi felt that her life had been blessed and that through good times and bad times God was with her.

Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Christian Tradition

About this Age Group

Children tend to like traditions because they give them a sense of stability. The hymnal is in the pew rack or on the chair, the cross is usually in the same location, and the Jesus Prayer, or Prayer of Our Savior, is repeated every week. There's comfort in knowing how to be a part of a church family. Children appreciate routine and predictability, and it is important to establish some familiar routines in your multiage group. Don't feel that everything you do has to be new or different—they may love to hear a favorite story or sing a familiar song; they enjoy rituals such as beginning with a prayer or lighting a candle. Children may also be aware that traditions can change. Grandma's favorite cream soup may be made with skim milk or the family's favorite Christmas carols may now include carols from different cultures. Children who participate in communion learn that sometimes we take a piece of bread and dip it in a cup (intinction) and sometimes we stay seated and the elements are passed. They know that traditions can be adapted. In your planning, honor traditions while helping children discover that all traditions, including our faith heritage, grow and change from generation to generation.

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.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Psalm 96
2 Timothy 1:1–14

Leader Preparation

Read Psalm 96 and 2 Timothy 1:1–14, listening for God's voice. Read these texts again sometime during the coming week, and make these verses part of your life for a few days. Select the activities that will be most meaningful for your group, and adapt them as needed. Enjoy sharing with children how Christians encounter scripture through the traditions, that is, through the gifts from other generations.

Prayer: Creator and lover of all, guide me as I work with these children. Help me to reflect your love for me so completely that the children sense your joyful presence. Make my welcome and preparations a sign of your welcome, a gift that the children can receive, learn, and pass to others. Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 Greetings: Grace and Peace (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: How do people in your congregation greet one another? You may use this activity as the children enter the room or as an activity after everyone has arrived. This is a variation on the greeting from 2 Timothy.

Supplies:

- Bible

Smile and greet each child with “Grace, mercy, and peace from God to (child’s name), and tell them, “Grace, mercy, and peace from God” is a greeting; it’s a way I say “hi” to you. How do you say “hi” to a friend? What if I had said “grace, mercy, and peace from God,” with a frown? (Use a sad voice saying it.) Is that the same message? Grace is an unearned gift, given freely. God’s love for us is an example of grace. Mercy is an act of compassion even if we deserve a harsher reaction. What is peace?

The Bible contains letters. Some were written to churches; some to individuals. Show where the letters in the Bible are found (the books from Romans to Jude are all written in the form of letters). Followers of Jesus wrote letters to other Christians. They also wrote sermons that sound like letters. We send letters today, as well as e-mails and text messages. “Grace, mercy, and peace from God” is a greeting in a letter from Paul to Timothy. Read 2 Timothy 1:1–2. Ask the children how people greet them at church. How do they say “hello” to people at church? If your church has a “passing of the peace” or greeting in worship, mention that also.

2 Sing to the Lord

Leader preparation: Singing to God is a wonderful way to place scripture in our hearts. If you do not know the tune and words, learn “I’ve Got the Joy, Joy, Joy, Joy, Down in My Heart.” You can hear the tune at: <http://tinyurl.com/3hndyjf>.

Supplies:

- Song: “I’ve Got the Joy, Joy, Joy, Joy, Down in My Heart” <http://tinyurl.com/3gz8od9>
- Bible
- (optional) rhythm instruments

Psalms are songs. Many of them are songs of joy and thanks to God. Help children locate the book of Psalms in the middle of the Bible. Psalm 96 was written long before Jesus was born, but Jesus probably heard this psalm during worship at the temple or synagogue. Maybe he also heard it from his parents. Read Psalm 96:1–3 from the Bible. *What feelings do you hear in this psalm?* Invite the children to sing “I’ve Got the Joy, Joy, Joy, Joy Down in My Heart.” What does the psalm want



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 Activities,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding Activities,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving Activities.” 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.

people to do? Together, clap, dance, and praise God. Add rhythm instruments if you wish.

3 Creation Rejoices

Leader preparation: Read the paraphrase of Psalm 96 below. Consider how the ocean and sea creatures might praise God. How might trees sing? Have you ever heard the grass making music? Wonder at the many ways creation praises God. Preview the video of ocean waves at <http://tinyurl.com/3chdnnw> and wind <http://tinyurl.com/42qavoq>. Bookmark the videos and arrange for equipment to show them to the group.

Supplies:

- equipment to show YouTube videos
- Bible

Have an older child locate Psalm 96 in the Bible. Show younger children where to find the book of Psalms (in the middle of the Bible). Psalms are a collection of songs that are found in our Bible. Read the following paraphrase of Psalm 96:

Tell the sky and earth to get ready.
It's time to celebrate!
Order the ocean to start roaring.
And all of the sea creatures too
Tell the grass to join the music.
Trees in the forest, let me hear you singing!
Everything that is, start singing. Sing for joy to God.

Play the videos of waves and wind. Invite conversation about sounds in nature or experiences of wind and storms.

4 Detective Work: Sanctuary Tour (Easy Preparation)

Discerning & Deciding Activities

Leader preparation: 2 Timothy 1:8–14 speaks of “holy calling,” of not being ashamed that we put our trust in God, and of choosing sound teaching. How do congregations do that? Your congregation’s worship area probably has many examples of ways the Christian faith has been and is being taught. The area may also reflect your congregation’s holy calling. You may have a cross, Bible, baptismal font or baptistry, communion table, hymnals or praise books, and musical instruments. What art do you have in your sanctuary—banners, stained glass windows, other? The art may have symbols, such as a dove, flames of fire, and crown of thorns. Make arrangements for your group to tour the sanctuary.

Supplies:

- Bible
- empty toilet paper tubes, or paper rolled into a tube
- pads of paper
- pencils or colored pencils
- healthy snack

Read 2 Timothy 1:8–14. Ask: *What is a holy calling? Why might Paul have reminded Timothy to not be ashamed of trusting in God?*

Team older and younger children so the older child can be the scribe to take notes. Hand out the toilet paper rolls or paper tubes. Ask everyone to gently put it toward their eye. Tell them that they are detectives seeking clues, trying to learn what things in the sanctuary may tell the Christian story. It could be a symbol or an object. When you find something, write or draw your idea on the paper, but work as quietly as possible so you do not give clues to another team. Use your special detective eyepiece to help you look carefully. Walk around the sanctuary or chapel area. Give the children a time limit and gently remind them when there are five minutes remaining. At the end either return to the learning area or stay in the sanctuary. Allow each group to share one drawing and why they think it is important. Go to the next group. After everyone has gone once, go around a second time, if time permits. Then, congratulate everyone for their fine detective work.

Serve a healthy snack. While sharing the snack ask: *How does our congregation show that they are not ashamed of being Christian? What Bible teachings are really important to our congregation?* (Answers might include baptism, communion, hearing about God’s Word, glorifying God with music, and so on.)

5 Looking at Art: Helping One Another

Leader preparation: The Rivera painting depicts two women of different generations and an infant. Our imaginations fill in the blanks of how they might know each other and what they are saying. Read the 2 Timothy passage and learn about Timothy, Lois, and Eunice—three generations of faith. Be prepared to mention any families in the congregation where three or more generations worship with the congregation. Think of helpful, faithful people in your life. Remember to include the children in your group who deepen your faith.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Two Women and a Child” by Diego Rivera, www.tinyurl.com/fp-apdr

Read 2 Timothy 1:114. Or, read this paraphrase of the letter:

My beloved child,
 I am happy when I think of you.
 I’m sending peace from God to you.
 Your faith is true.
 That faith lived first in those who went before,
 and now it lives in you.
 So let your faith burn bright inside.
 It makes you brave and strong.
 It gives you power and love.
 It keeps you on the path that is God’s way. (2 Timothy 1:1, 5–6, paraphrased)

Timothy was a follower of Jesus who learned about faith from his mother and grandmother, Lois and Eunice, and from Paul. Paul was a follower of Jesus who had learned about Jesus from Jesus’ friends and disciples. He was a good friend of Timothy. *How might the women have helped Timothy learn about God and Jesus? How do you learn about God and Jesus? How does the Bible help us learn about God and about Jesus?*

Gather so everyone can see the image. Invite the children to look quietly at the art for a short time. Then, ask, always listening for responses: *What do you see? What*

do you think the women are talking about? Do you think they are whispering so the baby stays calm? Who do you talk to? Who are some of the people who help you learn about Jesus?

6 Generations: Aunt Mary's Rose

Leader preparation: This activity references 2 Timothy 1:1–6 and explores how faith is shared generation to generation. “Take care of this rose, Douglas,” Aunt Mary had said, ‘and one day there will be a bit of you inside of it. And a little bit of the rose inside of you.’” Douglas Wood, the author, is the fourth generation to care for the old-fashioned rugosa shrub. The bush connects generations past and present and highlights a family’s love, commitment, compassion, and care for the earth. This is a book with many layers, beautifully woven together. Read the book a few times prior to this session. What aspects of your family story have been shared through the generations? What traditions are part of your church?

Many times trees or bulbs are planted for memorials. If your church has a generational plant (an old oak tree, a hundred-year-old cactus, trees planted when the church was built, a hill of daffodils), include that in this activity. Otherwise, use a poinsettia or an Easter lily, or other seasonal plant. You may use the actual plant or pictures from the Internet or magazines.

Supplies:

- Bible
- the picture book *Aunt Mary's Rose* by Douglas Wood, illustrations by LeUyen Pham (Somerville, Massachusetts: Candlewick Press, 2010)
- (optional) potted plant or picture of a plant

Read 2 Timothy 1:1–7. Ask the children what is special about Timothy’s family? What is special about their family? How does their family tell our faith story? (Answers may include family Bible with recorded names and special dates, special recipes, Christmas ornaments passed down, special rituals, quilts, photo albums.) Gather the children so that everyone can easily see the illustrations in the book. Tell the children that this story is about a little boy who learns about his family while taking care of a rose bush. The family shares its history through the rose bush. The story has happy parts and sad parts. Read the story. As you read, feel free to pause and clarify questions, especially if you have a younger group. Ask what they see in an illustration. Keep engaging the children as you read. At the end, ask the children questions such as the following:

What did you like the best about this story? What did Douglas learn about his family? In church we say we are a church family. How do we tell our story about Jesus? Do we have any flowers that help tell our story? Complete the activity by showing a plant special to your congregation (actual plant or image of the plant) or use a poinsettia (Christmas) or a lily (Easter) as plants that remind of us of Jesus. Many times our faith story is told through images and frequently through plants.

Sending & Serving Activities

 **7 Litany: Thanking God (Easy Preparation)**

Leader preparation: This activity is inspired by Psalm 96. Write the litany on newsprint or whiteboard. Try to not edit the children’s thoughts. There’s nothing wrong with a litany that celebrates soccer coaches and hamsters. Children tend to be very specific while litanies written for adults are more general and sometimes metaphorical. If the children are willing to have their work shared, make a copy of the litany for the minister or include it in congregational worship time.

Supplies:

- Bible
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Read Psalm 96. Make a list of everything the psalm mentions that praises God. Now, write a litany celebrating God. Ask for a scribe, or you may be the writer. Ask the children to complete the litany by listing plants, animals, and natural objects such as mountains and rivers. Work on this as a large group, encouraging ideas. Here’s a format you might use.

Voice 1: All creation, praise God.
All: Thank you, God!
 Voice 2: (parts of nature)
All: Praise God!
 Voice 3: (all kinds of people)
All: Thank you God!
 Voice 4: (bugs and insects)
All: Praise God!
 Voice 5: (plants and trees)
All: Thank you God!
 Voice 6: (animals and birds)
All: Praise God! Thank you, God. Amen.

Sample litany:

Everyone and everything, say thank you to God.
Praise God!
 Kids at school and babies, and all our families,
Thank you, God.
 Grasshoppers, worms, spiders, and creepy crawly things,
Praise God!
 The big pine tree on the corner and the fields where we play ball,
Thank you, God
 Our pets, and wild animals, and all the ducks,
Everything in the whole universe, say thank you and praise God. Amen.

8 Blessing: Laying on of Hands

Leader preparation: The 2 Timothy passage mentions the laying on of hands. The laying on of hands is an ancient tradition that most children do not know. If your children are in worship, they may have seen it when church officers are installed or when youth were commissioned before going on a mission trip. Create one affirmation per child. Make all your affirmations the same length. If one of your

children must be in a chair (wheelchair, crutches) then everyone is in a chair. *Note:* This is an activity that children may request in the future. It's meaningful, especially since children tend to be corrected more often than affirmed.

Supplies:

- Bible
- chair(s)

Read 2 Timothy 1:1–7. What is the “laying on of hands”? How might it help “rekindle the gift of God” within each of us? Tell the children that as a group you are going to bless one another by laying on hands. Instruct them: *We are going to use our hands to bless someone else. When we bless someone today, we will gently place our hand on that person's shoulder, and we then say something nice about them. When we speak to them, we will look at them. Everyone will have a turn. First, gather in a semicircle or sit on the floor or in chairs. One person will sit in the middle. Then, each person will go forward and say something happy or positive or thoughtful to that person. I will go last. After my turn, please return to your seat and another child comes to the middle. We will want to sit quietly so everyone has a turn. Close with everyone holding hands or laying their hands as a group on top of the Bible. Possible prayer: Loving God, thank you for our friends today and their many kind words. Help us to be caring every day. Help us to be a blessing. Amen.*

If time permits, debrief by asking the first two questions again: *What is the laying on of hands? How does it help us find God within us?*

9 Drawing: Psalm 96

Leader preparation: This activity focuses on Psalm 96:11–13a. Children usually like these because they can use their imaginations.

Supplies:

- Bible
- paper
- drawing supplies: crayons, markers, colored pencils

Say: *Psalm 96:11–13a declares: “Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord.” Wow! All of nature is rejoicing. I wonder what that looks like.* Ask the children to illustrate how the earth would look rejoicing. They may select one part, such as a rejoicing sea or a rejoicing forest. Encourage children to enter the spirit of the psalm and to enjoy this art-making time. Post their art in your learning area or invite children to take their art home to share with their families.

Reflect

Sharing our faith traditions is a tradition. Thank God for this opportunity to be a guiding disciple for these children. Be aware that you are doing what countless generations have also done. You have shared a part of our faith story. What parts did the children especially like? What activities did you need to adapt? What would you do differently with this group if you were leading this Exploration again? How might you build on your insights and learning in future sessions with your group?

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Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Context and Mission

About this Age Group

Children often enjoy serving and want to help. They gain satisfaction from working together with caring adults. There are many opportunities for children to share their gifts of time, talent, or leadership with their parents, at school or through sports, in extracurricular activities, and in faith communities. When adults work side by side with children, children are able to learn new skills while developing special friendships. Empowering children and encouraging them to be involved in mission helps form another generation of servant leaders, but, more importantly, it helps children to participate in God's activity of love and compassion in our world.

About this Exploration

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. Mission and serving others is important for five- to eleven-year-olds, as it is for youth and adults. Serving expands our worldview while giving us a demonstrated way to practice our faith.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Esther 4:1–17
Mark 4:26–34

Leader Preparation

Read Esther 4:1–17 and Mark 4:26–34. Notice how these stories speak of mission. How do you feel called to participate in building God’s realm (God’s time of peace, justice, and love) in our world? Read through the nine activities and select the options that will engage your group members. Three mission options are included: UNICEF, Church World Service, and the Global Art Project. You may incorporate any of these options, or connect with the mission in which your congregation is already involved, or the mission of your denomination. Check with your church leadership to find out more about the mission activities of your congregation and your denomination.

Prayer: Creator of all, help me plant seeds of understanding, compassion, and faith. Help me to see your time of shalom, your realm, growing like a seed. Guide me to plant seeds everywhere I go and with everyone I meet. Inspire me with Esther’s courage and fill me with your hope. 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 Activities,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding Activities,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving Activities.”

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 For Such a Time as This (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: In the New Revised Standard Version, Esther 4:14 has the phrase “for such a time as this.” Mordecai is speaking with Esther. He tells her that she may have become the queen so she was in the right place at the right time to help save the Jewish people from genocide. Esther acts to save her community because she acts faithfully in the place and time where she finds herself. This activity helps children understand that God also wants them to respond in the time and place where they find themselves. Focus on how the children can help here and now. Use this activity as a time to affirm children for the part they play in God’s mission. Read the background on the story of Esther from the attachment.

Supplies:

- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- “The Story of Esther,” Attachment: Activity 1

All around us are opportunities to love and care for others and our world. Ask for ways the children in your group help others, and record on newsprint or a whiteboard ideas they suggest. Ask: *How do you help at home? How do you help at school? How do you help at church? There are many tasks young people can do well. Make a long list. Be amazed at everything you are already doing.* Read the story of Esther from the attachment. Say: *Esther was not very old, but she did what was needed to help save her people. What other Bible stories about children and youth do you know?* Children may know about David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17), the boy who helped Jesus feed a big crowd (John 6:9–13), or the brave little slave girl who helped the great general, Naaman. (2 Kings 5:1–13).



2 Cooking: Hamantaschen (Haman’s Hat)

Leader preparation: The activity focus is on cooking. Either read Esther 4:1–17 from the Bible or read the summary from Attachment: Activity 1. Be prepared to paraphrase the story. Read the instructions for making Hamantaschen from Attachment: Activity 2. These cookies are an expected treat during the Jewish holiday of Purim, a holiday that celebrates Queen Esther. You will want to make the dough ahead of time so it is chilled and ready to use. Hamantaschen are not difficult to make. Alternatively, you can use premade sugar cookie dough. To shape the cookies create a thin circle and add a bit of jam. Press into a triangle by pinching the edges. The jam is in the middle and the middle will be slightly open. Bake according to instructions on the attachment.

Supplies:

- Bible
- “Hamantaschen Cookies,” Attachment: Activity 2
- (optional) computer with Internet access

Tell the Esther story to the children. The part of our Bible written in Hebrew is a collection of stories, law, writings from the prophets, psalms, and histories. These texts are Holy Scripture for three religions: Islam (the religion of Muslims), Judaism (the religion of Jews), and Christians. Jewish people tell the story of Esther at a holiday called Purim. Many families make Hamantaschen—a sweet pastry made in shape of Haman’s hat. Invite the children to help make the cookies. Clean the kitchen counters and wash hands. Preheat the oven to desired temperature. Make the cookies. While the cookies bake, invite the children to recall Christian

Encountering Scripture



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.

holidays (Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, Halloween). *What stories do we tell at these holidays? What special food do we make?* Invite children to name Jewish and Muslim holidays. If you have access to a computer with Internet, look up information about Muslim holy days (for example, Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr) and Jewish holy days (such as Pesach [Passover], Rosh Hashanah, and Sukkot). Clean up. Enjoy the cookies.

3 Noisemakers: Groggers

Leader preparation: Groggers are a traditional part of the Purim story. Jewish children look forward to making these every year. As the Esther scroll is read aloud and Haman’s name is said, the children shake the groggers as hard as possible and say “boo,” since Haman was the court official who wanted to kill the Jewish people. The loud sound identifies Haman as the bad guy. This activity will not take long to complete. Prior to the session, learn the Esther story either by reviewing the skit in Activity 5 or by reading the Bible.

Supplies:

- empty, clean bottles with lids, one per person (any empty container with a lid will work well)
- uncooked rice, aquarium gravel, or dry peas (avoid kidney beans, which are poisonous if raw)

Tell a condensed version of the Esther story such as the one from Attachment: Activity 1. Jewish people read the Esther scroll every year for the holiday of Purim. Tell the children that during the reading in worship, children shake the groggers very hard whenever Haman’s name is said. Ask: *Why might they do this? When might be a time when you experience something like this done outside of worship, such as when opposing basketball players are at the free throw line?* Instruct the group to put a small handful of rice or beans in the empty container. Tighten the lid and shake. Adjust the number of beans and rice for the desired sound. Then read or tell the Esther story. Have the children shake the groggers whenever they hear Haman’s name.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Visual Guided Meditation: Seeds (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: This is a visual meditation reflecting on the Mark passage. Adapt the text as desired to suit your group. You may also adapt the text to an image of your choice. You may use a form of this meditation with any nature image.

Option: Download a video of a seed growing, such as from <http://tinyurl.com/25zbcx>.

Supplies:

- “Images of Seeds,” Attachment: Activity 4
- computer with a projector or computer with Internet connection
- Bible
- (optional) a variety of seeds

Read aloud Mark 4:26–32 from the Bible. Invite children to find a comfortable position on the floor and in chairs. Read aloud the same passage using a different translation (perhaps a child with strong reading skills can do this). Then ask

everyone to take a few deep breaths and ask them to look at the images of seeds from Attachment: Activity 4. State: *During the time I am speaking keep your eyes focused on the image. Let your ears hear, your mind think, and your heart receive everything. Look silently for ten to fifteen seconds. I wonder where these seeds grow. (Pause) I wonder if the seeds are part of a tree or a bush or a flower. (Pause) I wonder what animals like to eat these seeds. (Pause) I wonder if these seeds drop to the ground or fly in the air. (Pause) I wonder what these seeds will be when they grow up. (Pause) If you were a seed, I wonder where you would like to go. (Pause) I wonder how God's realm is like a seed growing. (Pause). I wonder how God grows peace and love and justice in our world. (Pause)*

Alternative: Show an image of a seed growing from YouTube, such as at <http://tinyurl.com/25zbcr>.



5 Drama of Esther's Story

Leader preparation: This skit has parts for readers and nonreaders. Use costumes as desired, but they are not necessary. Every year, Jewish children act out the Esther story during Purim. This skit includes some information that is not part of the selected text, but is found elsewhere in Esther, so there's a setting and an ending. The skit does not include the hanging of Haman. Read the selected Esther passage, and then read the skit, becoming familiar with the dialogue.

Supplies:

- "Courageous Esther," Attachment: Activity 5
- (optional) costumes: headbands or crowns for Queen Esther and her king
- hat for Haman

Divide up parts for the drama. This skit also needs an audience, which can be other children or other people in your faith community. You may also perform the skit more than once so everyone has an opportunity to be characters or audience members. Doing the skit more than once also helps children learn the story. *How did Esther save her people? Why was this a dangerous thing to do? How did Esther get ready for her dangerous task?*

6 Mission: UNICEF and Church World Service

Leader preparation: UNICEF (The United Nations Children's Fund) and Church World Service (an ecumenical, faith-based charitable organization) help children around the world. Both organizations are well regarded for their ability to use funds wisely and to be effective in parts of the world where it is difficult for aid agencies to work. Both organizations have projects that create excitement among young people, and you may reap the fruit of these seeds for many years. Look at the organizational web sites at <http://teachunicef.org/> and <http://tinyurl.com/3m42rje>. Consider which organization might be of interest to your group. Alternatively, invite an older child to review the sites and prepare to tell the group about the two organizations. Check with the pastor to see whether your community requires permission for fundraisers or to present materials for another organization. Or find out information about your own denomination's mission and justice work in other parts of the world. Read Mark 4:26–34. Reflect on what seeds you have planted through your love and care of others in your family, your community, or other places. How do you help nurture the seeds of God's love and compassion?

Supplies:

- Bible
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- (optional) computer with Internet access

Why is it important for Christians to help care for our world and for other people? Listen to the children's responses carefully and record them on newsprint or a whiteboard. Their answers will give you clues about their faith journey. We sometimes use the word "mission" to talk about our responsibility to care for others and our world. Invite children to tell what they know about the mission involvements of your church. Ask: How do we know that Jesus cared about other people and the world? Guide them to identify Bible stories they know. Then read Mark 4:26–34. Explain that when Jesus spoke of God's kingdom, or realm, he meant a time of peace and justice when things are as God knows they should be. Ask: What would God's realm be like? Jesus said that God's kingdom is not far off or far away. It is very close and right here. How is God's realm like a seed? What can we do to help grow God's realm? In what ways can our actions be like seeds? Our kindness to others can grow kindness in other people. No kind words can grow hurt feelings in others. All of our words and actions plant seeds in some way. How might our service to others be like seeds planted? Planted for others? Planted for God?

Learn about one or more organizations that serve people all over the world. (If your group is younger, select one option.) Ask the group: *How can we help? Which project might we get involved in?* If you have computers with Internet access, invite children to look at some of the different projects. As a group, select one activity in which to participate. Create a plan: *What? When? How? Where? What materials are needed? What will your group do? How can they tell others about the plan? Who is assuming responsibility for each part of the project? What is the timeline?* List their suggestions on the newsprint or whiteboard. Do not make this an adult project where children barely do anything. Make this child-friendly, so the children may assume leadership. Have adults help as requested, but not lead the way.

Sending & Serving Activities

7 Global Art Project: Let's Join Hands (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: The mission of the Global Art Project (GAP) is to joyously create a culture of peace through art. Let's Join Hands is another element of the Global Art Project for Peace. The Global Art Project invites you to join hands with thousands of others around the world to celebrate peace and diversity. People are invited to send a paper outline of their hand with their name, country, and wish for global peace, love, and friendship on it to the Global Art Project. Volunteers in Tucson string the hands together as a visual expression of the thousands of people who join their energy together to create peace. You can learn more about GAP at their website: <http://tinyurl.com/3owu6ee>.

Note: Be attentive to issues among the children, since some may be recent immigrants from war-torn countries or have parents serving in the military. Also be attentive to international news stories. If your children are thinking about war, then it is important to give space for conversation. They may have concerns or fears they want to talk about.

Supplies:

- Bible
- white construction paper
- drawing supplies: crayons, markers, colored pencils
- scissors
- (optional) computers with Internet connection or material downloaded from <http://tinyurl.com/4y9tg7p>

Read Mark 4:30–34. The Gospel compares seeds to God’s kingdom, or realm. *How are seeds like God’s realm?* Talk about what a peaceful, happy, caring world might be like. Ask the children how they describe peace, and how we can help share our ideas and hopes for a peaceful world. Tell the children about the Global Art Project founded by Katherine Josten and her desire to create a vision of world peace through art. One person, one idea. Invite the children to participate with you in Let’s Join Hands. Have the children outline their hand on the paper, and cut out the outline. Then they color both sides of the paper hand and write their name and country on the hand, along with a wish for global peace, love, and friendship.

The children may either take home their hands, or you may send them to the Global Art Project to be included with thousands of other hands. The address is: Global Art Project, PO Box 40445, Tucson, Arizona 85717, USA. If you mail the hands to GAP, let the children know that their hands, joined with thousands of other hands, will be a tangible representation of the people around the world who join their energy together to create a peaceful future.

Option: Invite everyone in the congregation to contribute a hand to this project.

8 Biodegradable Pots: Planting Seeds

Leader preparation: Watch the video at <http://tinyurl.com/66sycp> to learn how to make newspaper flower pots. Then guide the children in making a sample pot. You may make as many pots as desired. Select seeds that have a high success rate, such as sunflowers or cosmos. These flowers also self-seed, so the parable of the seed goes on and on. Another option is perennials, such as coneflowers or daisies, or herbs seeds, such as basil or parsley. Cover the work area to protect it, and set out planting materials.

Supplies:

- Bible
- potting soil
- glass or plastic tumblers
- seeds
- cloth or plastic tablecloth to protect the work area

Read Mark 4:30–34. Discuss: *What is special about the seeds? How do seeds grow? We’re making a pot from newspaper, so we are recycling for this project.* Guide the children to make pots. Have them add some potting soil, so the seeds have a good place to grow. Now, add a couple seeds, pushing them down carefully. Do not water the seeds yet. Ask parents or caregivers to water the seeds lightly when the children get home and to place the pots in a sunny window. Tell the children that when the seeds sprout, they may transplant the sprouts into an outdoor garden, or they may plant the newspaper pot and the seed together (but it is better to transplant the seedlings).

9 Song: Inch by Inch, Row by Row

Leader preparation: The song “Inch by Inch, Row by Row,” which has been a folk music classic since David Mallett performed it in 1978, connects with the parables in Mark 4:30–34. It has been performed by many people from Pete Seeger to Kermit the Frog. Now, it has been adopted by many urban community gardening organizations. Ask a guitar player to help teach the song, if desired. Help another generation learn this beautiful song about our role in planting seeds and caring for nature. You are provided a video link or an option to inexpensively order the sheet music. See these sites: <http://tinyurl.com/ddnuxx> and <http://tinyurl.com/3lgbw35>. MP3 downloads are also available at <http://tinyurl.com/3dcxd3f>. Alternatively, ask older children to learn the song and have them lead this activity.

Supplies:

- Bible
- (optional) MP3 player and speakers, or computer with Internet access

Read Mark 4:26–32, or invite the children to recall the two parables about seeds. Teach the chorus of “Inch by Inch,” or listen to the song on MP3 player. You may sing the verses or sing along with the video. *Who blesses the seeds we sow? With younger children, keep the analogy literal. We plant seeds, God blesses them, we tend them, and some of them grow. Praise God! With older children, ponder seeds as an image of God’s shalom time of love and justice, that is, of God’s realm. What kind of seeds are you planting daily? How is God helping you tend your “garden?” How are we helping tend God’s garden?*

Reflect

What have you discovered in these scripture encounters with five- to eleven-year-olds? Which activities were especially meaningful? Know with complete certainty that each time you guide this group, you are planting seeds—seeds of mission, seeds of faith, seeds of caring, seeds for Christ. These seeds are already blessed and growing.

Attachment: Activity 1

The Story of Esther

Based on Esther 4:1–17

A very long time ago the king of Persia chose a beautiful young woman to be his wife. He picked a Jewish woman named Esther. Esther's cousin, Mordecai (more-dih-kai) was very happy. Mordecai had adopted Esther as a little girl and taught her about God's ways. He made Esther promise not to tell anyone she was Jewish because some people didn't like Jews and tried to hurt them.

One day, Mordecai found out that someone was plotting to kill the king. Mordecai told Queen Esther, and Queen Esther told the king. The king was very pleased with Mordecai and Esther. He told his scribes to write everything down in the official record book.

A man named Haman (hay-man) was the king's special assistant. Haman hated Jewish people. He told the king lies about the Jews. He argued and persuaded until finally the king let Haman write an order that all the Jews should be killed. This order went out to all the people. Everyone knew about Haman's plot. Everyone except Esther. No one at the palace had told her about Haman's plans. No one knew she was Jewish.

Mordecai was very upset about Haman's plot to kill his people. Mordecai tore apart his clothes and put on old itchy cloths. He covered his head with ashes and walked through the city and cried out in sadness and anger. He stopped and sat at the palace gate. Jews all over the country were crying, fasting, and praying. Queen Esther was in the palace. Her servants told her about Mordecai.

Esther did not know what was wrong. She sent Mordecai clean clothes, but Mordecai refused to put them on. Esther sent her servant to find out what was wrong. Mordecai told Esther's servant about Haman's order to kill all the Jews. Mordecai gave Esther's servant a message. "Esther, you must go to the king. Beg him to save our people." The servant went at once to Queen Esther and gave her the message.

Queen Esther sent a message back to Mordecai. "Mordecai, the king has not asked me to come to him. If I go without being asked, the king could kill me. It is the law. I am afraid to go."

Mordecai was very upset. He sent a message back to Queen Esther. "Esther, if Haman gets his way, none of our people are safe, not even you. Maybe it was for a time like this that you were made queen!"

Queen Esther thought and prayed. She sent Mordecai this message. "Get all of our people together. Tell them to fast (that is, to not eat) and pray for me. Do this for three days and nights. My servant girls and I will be fasting and praying too. At the end of the three days, I will go to the king, even though it is dangerous. But I have to try." Mordecai left the gate and did everything that Esther asked him to do.

Esther went to the king. She was afraid the king would be angry and have her killed. But the king asked Esther what she wanted. She invited the king and Haman to come to a special feast. Haman and the king enjoyed the dinner very much. The king was very pleased with Esther. "What would you like? Ask and it is yours!"

"Please save my people." Queen Esther answered. "We are about to be killed." Esther told the king about Haman's order to kill her people. The king remembered that Mordecai and Esther had once saved *his* life. He was angry with Haman.

The king stopped Haman from killing Esther's people. Thanks to brave Queen Esther, the Jewish people were saved!

Attachment: Activity 2

Hamantaschen Cookies

Recipe makes 30 cookies

You will need:

- 1 large bowl
- 1 medium bowl
- measuring cups
- measuring spoons
- stirring spoons
- rolling pin
- circular cookie cutter or glass
- baking sheets
- cooling rack
- spatula
- spoons for filling
- access to a stove for baking

Ingredients:

- 10 teaspoons granulated white sugar
- ½ pound or two sticks butter, melted
- ¾ cups flour
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- ½ teaspoon cinnamon
- dash of salt
- 2 eggs
- 3 teaspoons orange juice
- 2 teaspoons vanilla
- filling such as apricot, strawberry, raspberry jam or preserves, or thick poppy seed or prune filling.

Preheat oven to 325°F.

Make cookie dough:

Combine the melted butter and sugar in a large bowl and stir well. In a separate bowl mix the dry ingredients. Add the dry ingredients to the bowl with the butter and sugar mixture. In the now empty bowl mix the eggs, orange juice, and vanilla. Add to the butter mixture and stir well. Sprinkle flour on the countertop and knead the dough until you create a smooth ball. Wrap in waxed paper and chill for a few hours.

Divide the chilled dough into four or five parts. Roll out each part on a floured counter or board. Using a circular cookie cutter or a glass, cut out circles. Place a teaspoon of filling (preserves or jam) in the middle. Create a triangle by pinching the edges together. (Traditionally recipe uses a raspberry, prune, or poppy seed filling.)

Line cookie sheets with parchment paper, or spray with cooking oil. Bake at 325° for 25 minutes. Cool slightly before eating. Hamantashchen are good warm or cool, but be careful that the filling is not too hot.

Alternative: Use a pre-made refrigerated sugar cookie dough.

Images of Seeds



Tree seed



Rye seeds



Thorny seed pod



Seeding plant

Attachment: Activity 5

Courageous Esther

Setting: The city of Susa, capital of the Persian Empire in a time long, long ago

Characters:

Esther (a young Jewish woman who was chosen to be queen by the king of Persia)

Mordecai (Esther's uncle, also Jewish)

God

Haman

Servant

King Ahasuerus (king of Persia)

Props: scroll, pillows on floor, tablecloth on floor, settings for a banquet

Inside the court

Narrator: Esther, a Jew, was chosen to be Queen Esther by King Ahasuerus, the king of Persia. She was beautiful. Her uncle Mordecai knew it could be dangerous for people at the palace to know that Esther was Jewish, so he forbade her to tell anyone. One day Haman, a court official who hated the Jews, came to speak privately with King Ahasuerus.

Haman: Your majesty, there is a group of people who will not bow to you!

King: That's just ridiculous! Everyone must bow to me!

Haman: Sir, they claim to worship another god!

King: I am all they need. Go and learn more about this problem.

Narrator: Haman left and became even angrier. He returned to the king holding a scroll.

King: Haman, what did you learn?

Haman: Your majesty, I learned that these people will not bow to you in Susa, and they will not bow to you anywhere in your empire. They are probably planning a rebellion *(The king looks upset.)*

Haman: Sir! Here is a decree stating that these people must be punished. *(The king signs the scroll. Haman leaves and speaks to the audience.)*

Haman: I am so happy! Now we can kill *all* the Jews.

Narrator: Haman was excited about his new task. He had prepared a decree, a legal ruling, for the whole of Persia stating that the Jewish people should be killed.

Outside the palace wall

Narrator: Mordecai saw the decree, ripped his shirt, and cried to God in his grief.

Mordecai: This is very bad news for my people. Haman hates us and now he has convinced the king to sign a decree. We shall all be killed.

Narrator: Esther heard that Mordecai was upset, so she sent her servant to find out what was going on.

Servant: Kind sir, I am Esther's servant. What is happening?

Mordecai: I have an urgent message for Esther.

Servant: I would be honored to take the message to her. She will listen to you. You have raised her since her parents died. As you certainly know, she loves you very much.

Attachment: Activity 5 (continued)

Mordecai: She needs to know that Haman has sent a decree signed by the king. The decree calls for the death of all Jews. Tell Esther that she must go and talk to the king. She must convince him to have the order changed. It is our only hope.

Servant (*upset*): I will leave right away.

Esther's room in the palace.

Servant: My queen, I have a message from Mordecai. He says that Haman has convinced the king to issue an order to kill all the Jews. The king signed it, and it is now law.

Esther: Oh no! Is this true?

Servant: Yes, Mordecai sent me to you himself. I spoke with him a few minutes ago. He says you must go to the king and talk to him. You must convince the king to change the law.

Esther: But I can't go to the king unless he calls me. You know that. If I go, and he is angry, he could have me killed.

Servant: Mordecai said that maybe you have been made the queen for just such a time as this. Now, if you will excuse me, I have to clean the rest of the palace. (*Servant leaves.*)

Esther (*praying*): What should I do?

God: Your servant is right; you have been placed here for a very specific reason. Your entire life has been training for this moment. You are going to save the Jewish people.

Esther: But how will I do that?

God: Tell the king about Haman's plot. The king will hear your words and he will hear your heart. I will help you select the right words and actions.

Esther: Thank you.

God: Whenever you need me, I'm already here.

Esther: Servant! (*Servant enters.*)

Servant: Yes?

Esther: Tell Mordecai to ask all the Jews to pray for me. Then, tell the king that I am going to cook him a fabulous dinner tomorrow. Invite the king and Haman to come to dinner at my banquet hall.

Servant: Yes, my queen.

The next day, in Esther's banquet hall (pillows, tablecloth and dishes are arranged on the floor for the queen's banquet)

King: Wow, you are amazing Esther. You should be careful, or I'll make you the head chef!

Haman: I agree. Thank you for inviting me to this delicious feast.

Esther: You are most welcome, Haman.

King: You are my trusted advisor after all. Esther, was there something you wanted to tell me?

Esther (*mumbling and scared*): Yes . . . well . . . Haman . . . um . . .

King: Speak up, I can't quite hear you.

Esther (*still softly*): I . . . ahh . . . well . . . you . . .

Attachment: Activity 5 (continued)

King: Haman something?

Esther: You and Haman are invited to dinner again tomorrow.

King: Wonderful! We will be here, and we will be ready to eat!

Esther (*smiling to herself and rubbing her hands together*): Tomorrow.

Narrator: Esther goes to her room. She's upset that she couldn't tell the king about Haman. She couldn't tell him before, during, or after the meal. As she has done her entire life, Esther prays.

Esther: God, I'm so sorry. I didn't have the courage I needed tonight. Could the Jewish people continue to pray for me?

God: Esther, I'm a step ahead of you. The Jews are praying, and all of them trust you. I trust you. Tomorrow will be your finest hour. Esther, I love you, and I know your heart.

The next night, in Esther's banquet room

King: My goodness, that was even better than last night!

Haman: I agree. The king speaks the truth.

King: I am so grateful to you, Esther. Tell me whatever your heart desires. Whatever you want, it's yours!

Esther: I actually invited you tonight to tell you something.

King: What is it?

Esther: I . . . I . . . Haman . . . um . . .

King: Pardon?

Esther: Haman is an evil man who is going to kill my people.

King: What?

(The king and Haman are both confused.)

Esther: Haman is an evil man who is going to kill my people.

Haman: That is not true! I would never try to kill you, beautiful queen.

Esther: But I am a Jew, and you are trying to kill all of the Jews in the empire!

Haman: My king, I did not know!

Esther: You hate the Jews. You have been awful to Mordecai. He is my uncle, and he raised me after my parents died.

King: Haman, BE GONE! You will be severely punished for this, Haman.

The next day, in the royal courtyard

Mordecai: Esther, you are a hero!

Esther: No, I just was in the right place at the right time.

All: Thanks to brave Esther, and thanks be to God! The Jews are saved!

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Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Future and Vision

About this Age Group

Many children ages five to eleven look at the future with excitement. In a short period of time, they have matured from infancy to school, from bouncing to crawling to walking to running to riding a bike, from looking at pictures to reading, from trusting immediate family to making friends in a variety of settings, and from being in the church nursery to being a reader or passing out bulletins or helping with fellowship hour. They do not have the time references of adults, so the future may be tomorrow or the next event. Thinking in years or long-term planning is an adult responsibility. Adults, however, seldom accept the present or the immediate future with the contagious enthusiasm, hope, and wonder of young children. It is important to remember, however, that childhood is not joyous and uncomplicated for all children. Some children struggle with school or self-esteem, or live in complex and difficult family circumstances. Some children in this age group may already be taking on more adult responsibilities or worries. It is important for leaders to provide a reassuring presence and a listening ear. Do not make assumptions about the children or their life circumstances, and be ready to provide support if needed. Encourage the children to see God as active in the past, present, and future. Help them to see that scripture tells of God's activity throughout the ages. It reminds us that God is active in our world today, and it tells of God's visions and hopes and possibilities for the future.

About this Exploration

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.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
Deuteronomy 30:15–30
Hebrews 11:1–16

Leader Preparation

Select activities that you will enjoy guiding and that the children in your group will enjoy experiencing. Read Deuteronomy 30:15–30 and Hebrews 11:1–16. Consider how God is present in your life. Moses said, “Choose life.” He wanted the Hebrews to choose life every day, to establish a pattern of living that creates a lifestyle that then develops a faithful community. Faith, in the Hebrews passage, is believing into the future while living in the moment. Consider how you can live with confidence in what cannot be seen. How does your relationship with the children in your group reflect your faith?

Prayer: Create in me a faith for today and tomorrow, a witness to all people of your goodness. Help me to choose life through you, through Jesus, and through the Spirit. 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 Activities,” at least one from “Discerning and Decid-

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Choose Life (easy preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Deuteronomy 30:15–30 in a Bible version different from the one you normally use. Or look up the passage on <http://www.biblegateway.com/> and read it in several different versions. Choose a version to share with your group. Why do you think Moses wanted the people to choose life? What does it mean to you to “choose life”? Consider how choosing life brings joy, but also responsibility and, sometimes, entails hard choices.

Supplies:

- Bible
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Read Deuteronomy 30:15–30 in a version of your choice, or share the paraphrase below. Moses said this to the people who were in the desert on their way to the promised land. It was part of his instructions to them about how they should live in the new land. Moses didn’t get to go to the new land with them, so he wanted to leave them with good advice for the future. *What do you think Moses wanted the people to do?* Write the words “Choose life” at the top of a sheet of newsprint or whiteboard. Invite children to think of ways they can choose life. List ideas on newsprint. Divide into two groups. Make sure there are older children or leaders in each group to help guide the activity. Have each group prepare a short skit for the other group that shows a group of people “choosing life” in some way. Have each group present their skit to the others. Be an appreciative audience for each other.

Choose Life

Today, you have a choice—a choice between good and bad, between life and death.

Here’s what you need to do to live life to the full:

Love God. Walk in God’s ways and do what God wants us to do.

Feel how good it is to be loved and blessed by God.

That’s living the good life, really living!

So choose life today. Choose life!

—Paraphrased from Deuteronomy 30:15, 19–20



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

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



2 Faith: Hidden Depths

Leader preparation: What is faith? Children need opportunities to explore the meaning of important faith concepts, and sometimes adults do too. Sometimes we use the words so frequently that we become dull to their meaning. Take the word “faith” off autopilot and think about what it means to you. In Hebrews 11:1 we are told that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen” (New Revised Standard Version) or “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see” (New International Version). Read Hebrews 11:1–16 again. How might this passage be heard by five- to eleven-year-olds? Make three copies of the “Faith is” statements from the attachment, and cut apart the statements.

Supplies:

- Bible
- artwork: “Hidden Depths,” www.tinyurl.com/fp-aphd
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- “Faith is . . .” Attachment: Activity 2

Read Hebrews 11:1–3 slowly. Define any words that the children may not understand, such as “assurance” or “conviction.” Reread it. Then ask: *When you hear the word “faith,” what does that mean to you? How do you know a person has “faith?”* (Note: Some younger children will hear “having faith” in the same context as “having a disease,” like the flu or chicken pox. You will need to clarify.) Record their responses on newsprint or a whiteboard. Distribute the cut apart “Faith is” statements from the attachment to children who can read. Ask children to read aloud the statements. All of these statements are ways of thinking about what faith is. Ask children to think about the statement they like best. Have several copies on hand so that each child can have the statement he or she likes best, if several people want the same statement. Have older children write or draw about how this idea is important to them. Help younger children to draw a picture to remind them of the statement they have chosen. Faithful people don’t know everything about faith, but what they do know and see is enough to keep them trying to be disciples—“the conviction of things not seen.”

Look at the iceberg image in the artwork for at least a minute. Ask: *What do you notice? How might this iceberg be like faith?* Review their recorded comments about faith or retell their observations from the conversation. Faith is rejoicing in what you know and knowing that what’s ahead and unknown will also be guided by God. Reread Hebrews 11:1–3.

3 Spiritual: Guide My Feet

Leader preparation: Learn the spiritual “Guide My Feet” and review the activity. This song can augment either the Deuteronomy or the Hebrews passage.

Supplies:

- hymn: “Guide My Feet,” Tune: Guide My Feet, 8.8.8.10., www.tinyurl.com/fp-feet

This hymn has a simple lively tune. Allow the children to dance to the tune, clap hands, and make the song a celebration. The verse “stand by me while I run this race” was added by fifth-graders to include people who use wheelchairs. This song is an African American spiritual. Ask: *What is the “race” in the song? Who do you think the song is addressed to? Songs like this were important to African American slaves. Sometimes the songs helped people find courage and hope. Sometimes they contained hidden messages about plans for people to escape to freedom—messages about where to meet or which direction to go, for example. Many African American spirituals*

are about stories from the Bible, especially stories about Moses leading the people to the promised land. Read Moses' instructions to the people entering the promised land to "choose life" from Deuteronomy 30:15, 19–20. The "race" in this song could be a race to freedom, or it could be about Moses and the people going through the wilderness to find the promised land, or it could be about life.

Encourage children to recall and sing spirituals they know, such as "Michael Row the Boat Ashore"—notice that this story is about the promised land (the "other side" is the promised land flowing with milk and honey).

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Choose Life: Honoring the Commandments (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: In the Deuteronomy passage, Moses urges us to choose life in God by keeping the commandments. This is a good time either to introduce the Ten Commandments, given to Moses by God, or to refresh memories. The commandments listed are rewritten in the affirmative, what we are asked to do rather than what not to do. Children respond better to sacred options rather than prohibitions. You may use the commandments as written in Exodus 20:1–17 or the affirmative version.

Supplies:

- Bible
- butcher paper, construction paper, or plain drawing paper
- markers or crayons

Read Deuteronomy 30:15–16. Say: *Moses loved the Hebrew people so much that before he died he wanted to remind them how to live faithfully. Commandments are rules or guidelines given by God. Which commandments do we know?* Then share the following list of affirmative commandments or read the commandments from Exodus 20:1–17. Pause to ask which behaviors match each commandment. (Example: Honor your father and mother; listening, being respectful, helping, caring, loving) Have ten sheets of construction paper (any color) or cut ten sheets from rolled butcher paper. Ask the older children to write one commandment on each sheet. Decorate each commandment in a way that helps the group remember the commandment. Display the artwork around the room as a reminder of how God wants us to be faithful. Ask what Jesus said was the greatest commandment. (Love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself, Mark 12:3–31). Notice how these verses (which come from Deuteronomy 6:4, 5 and Leviticus 19:18) sum up the other commandments.

1. Love God
2. Avoid anything that takes you away from God
3. Use God's name lovingly
4. Take time to rest and to worship
5. Honor those who care for you
6. Protect and be gentle to all living things
7. Be loyal and keep your promises
8. Respect things that belong to others
9. Tell the truth
10. Be content with what you have

5 Architecture: Building a City

Leader preparation: Look at your room and other rooms to see what materials are available. Gather the supplies, and place the building materials near the area where the city (or cities) will be constructed. Decide whether you want the group to create as a large group or in smaller groups. If possible, arrange for extra leaders to help small groups build their "heavenly cities."

Supplies:

- Bible
- any solid building materials such as blocks, Legos, Lincoln logs, bridges, train tracks, and so forth
- craft materials such as paper, rolls from toilet paper and paper towels, cardboard boxes, plastic lids, cleaned metal cans (no sharp edges) and plastic containers, pieces of fabric, ribbon
- masking tape, scotch tape, colored duct tape
- (optional) camera

Divide the children into groups. They can be in their "areas" if desired. Tell them: *Soon you will be making your own heavenly city. First, listen to the Bible passage so you know how important this city is. Read Hebrews 11:15–16. Say: Now, think about these questions. Just think, for now. What might a heavenly city look like? What must be part of it? Remember that God is the designer and the architect of this city. You may design a part of the city, or you may design the most important building. We're sharing all the supplies, but you may use anything in this area (point to the area). Use your imagination.* Have extra helpers assist groups that need help. Give a five-minute "wrapping it up" signal or statement. Leave time for each group to describe what they built and why. You may want to leave these masterpieces up so the children can share them with their families, or take pictures to share. Remind them that after showing them, they need to clean up before going home.

6 Faith: Noah and the Ark

Leader preparation: Young children enjoy the story of Noah, and some church nurseries are decorated with a Noah theme. Older elementary children are sometimes frightened because God sent a flood and destroyed everyone but Noah and his family. Keep the focus on faith. In the Hebrews passage Noah is mentioned because he had faith in God. Noah did not know about Jesus or the resurrection because he's an Old Testament figure. If Noah, who didn't know about Jesus, had faith in God, so should we who have the option of a relationship with Jesus. Many faith communities have numerous resources for the Noah story. Select the

resources you most enjoy—picture books, posters, three-dimensional arks with animals inside. The public library will also have resources. “Rise and Shine” is a popular children’s song about Noah that your group may know.

Supplies:

- Bible
- favorite resources about Noah
- song: “Rise and Shine,” <http://tinyurl.com/b8fpdc>

Read Hebrews 11:7 about Noah. Explain that the Hebrews passage talks about having faith even though we don’t understand or can’t see the end result. *The Message* translation reads: “By faith, Noah built a ship in the middle of dry land. He was warned about something he couldn’t see, and acted on what he was told. The result? His family was saved.” How was Noah faithful? Read or show your favorite Noah resources. Use the resources to tell or recall the story together. Conclude with the children’s song, “Rise and Shine,” which is sometimes called “Arky-Arky.”

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Prayer of Jesus: Thy Kingdom Come (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: In the Hebrews and the Deuteronomy passages we are encouraged to remember the heavenly realm while staying true to the commandments. Most Christians say the Prayer of Jesus every week in worship and sometimes as part of their private prayer life. Write the prayer on newsprint or a whiteboard so children can learn it, too. Listen carefully to your children as they explore their understanding of God’s will.

Supplies:

- Prayer of Jesus written on newsprint or whiteboard
- Bible

The Jesus prayer includes the phrase “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” You may rephrase it if children are having difficulty with the word “thy”: “God’s kingdom come, God’s will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Ask: *How would we know if we had God’s will on earth? What would it look like? How do you imagine God’s will being done in heaven? Do any of the words in the first part of the prayer tell us about God’s kingdom?* Show where this prayer is found in the Bible: Luke 11:2–4 and Matthew 6:9–13.

Option: Have older children look up the Bible references and read them aloud. Are these versions of the prayer the same? The Bible was translated into English so the words aren’t exactly the same in all versions of the Bible; the Jesus prayer got changed a bit over time; different people wrote the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke.

8 Photograph Frames: Choose Life

Leader preparation: You will need to locate magnetic frames. They are available in craft stores and also online. They are available with printed designs as well as with a sticky surface that can be decorated with glitter, foamies, and words. Chose the style you prefer. The supply list is for the make-your-own frames. Note: You may also use tag board or heavier paper and cut out frames, decorate them, tape the photo to the reverse, and adhere self-stick magnets to the reverse. Select the option that works best for you. You may use this activity with either the Deuteronomy or the Hebrews passage. For the Deuteronomy passage focus on how we choose a life with God. For the Hebrew passage focus on faithfulness.

Supplies:

- Bible
- equipment to take and print photographs of the children (digital camera, computer, and printer)
- magnetic frames, purchased in craft store or online, one per person
- glitter
- cookie sheets or trays to capture the glitter
- small craft foam shapes
- a piece of paper per child with the words “Choose Life” (Deuteronomy 30:19)
- small bags to hold the finished frames

Take the pictures first. This activity can be finished in one session if someone takes the pictures digitally and then prints them while another person guides work with the children. Read either the Deuteronomy or the Hebrews passage, focusing on the desired topic. Then seat the children around a table and give them one frame per person. Remind them that the surface will be sticky so they need to decide where they want to place their words and shapes before they put them on the frame. They can place the words anywhere on the frame, then add the small craft foam shapes. Have them finish by adding glitter to the remaining sticky places, so the surface is covered. (Add the glitter over a cookie sheet or tray so it can be easily picked up.) Cut the printed photographs so they are slightly larger than the frame’s opening. If desired you may place the frame and photograph in a small bag for easy transport home.

9 Benediction for Deuteronomy or Hebrews

Leader preparation: “Go Now in Peace” is a children’s benediction published by Hinshaw Music. This activity is based on the tune to this song. The benediction may be purchased for a small fee. Natalie Sleeth wrote “Go Now in Peace,” and it may be sung in a round. A benediction or a blessing is a way to conclude your time together while sending one another forth knowing everyone is in God’s hands. Learn the song. If you choose not to use the song, keep the benediction as an activity. Ask the group to write their own benediction based on the chosen Bible text. You may write it as a group or in small groups. Give the benedictions to your pastor as a possibility for use in worship. Download a print or MP3 version of the song “Go Now in Peace” and plan how you will teach the song to your group.

Supplies:

- song: “Go Now in Peace,” <http://tinyurl.com/435e319> or <http://tinyurl.com/3wtb2jr> or <http://tinyurl.com/3o6dp4g>
- (optional) markers and newsprint or whiteboard

A benediction is usually said at the end of the worship service. It is a parting reminder that our ministry is not only in the sanctuary, but also out in the world. Enjoy learning this tune. You decide whether you want to teach the words to the children. Once everyone knows the tune, sing it in a round. Create your own words to this tune based on the Deuteronomy passage or another familiar passage from the Bible. The following is an example:

Choose life today.
Choose life today . . .
Love your sister and your brother
Every day, every day . . .
Choosing life.

Reflect

What ways of encountering scripture were most meaningful to you? How are you planning to take this faith practice and keep it alive in your daily life? Thank you for your commitment to this faith practice and to these learners. Pray a prayer of thanks for your group and for all you have learned and shared together.

Faith is . . .

Knowing God

Feeling God inside me

Being a part of a faith community (such as church)

Trusting God

Believing God loves everyone

Doing things together with our church

Knowing God through nature

Things I am certain about

Knowing things are real even if I can't see them

Feeling close to God

Loving God

Loving other people