

Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Discovery

About this Age Group

Youth are explorers who want to know about the world and their place in it. Although they may not articulate this, they value opportunities to connect with wise elders, to encounter age-old traditions of faith, and to explore their own hidden depths. They are able to engage biblical texts playfully and creatively, reminding us that it is possible to have fun while encountering scripture.

As youth encounter scripture, they bring skepticism and questions as well as sincere faith. In our wired world, they are bombarded by information from many sources, all of it declaring its own particular truths. Young people may find themselves confused by contradictory worldviews and values. In this Exploration, youth have a chance to consider what scripture means for them and what wisdom it may have to offer.

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

The diversity of these activities reflects the wide variety of biblical writings. You will help youth discover age-old wisdom, explore their faith, and gain courage for daily life. Be a fellow explorer—a caring companion on the way. Do not be afraid to share your own faith and strength. As you prepare to lead, consider the particular needs and interests of members of your group. Read all activities and choose ones that will suit your context. Read Proverbs 2:1–8 and John 21:1–20. Reflect on how these texts speak to your own life.

Prayer:

*Holy One, you are the well of wisdom—
pure and sweet, never running dry.
You are the morning light on the water,
beckoning us to come and have breakfast.
You are the potter, molding human beings
out of the clay of the earth and the dust
of stars,
blowing into us the breath of life.
You are good news, today and tomorrow,
and every day!
May our sacred time together
evoke praise, prayer, and wonder. Amen.*

Session Development

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

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Wisdom Mandalas (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Every culture has traditions of wisdom, handed down through families and recorded in sacred writings. Listen for the voices of those who taught you as a child. Can you hear them still? Consider what words of wisdom have served you well. Think about where you gained that wisdom. Read the mandala instructions and prepare a sample mandala based on wisdom in your life. Is there some advice that was true for earlier generations, but no longer fits? Claim your role as a source of lifelong wisdom for your group.

Supplies:

- “Wisdom Mandala,” Attachment: Activity 1
- colored markers and crayons
- pens
- Bibles

The word “mandala” is Sanskrit for “circle” or “community.” In Hindu and Buddhist sacred art, mandalas use geometric patterns as a focus for meditation and as symbols of the perfection of the universe.

The central theme of the book of Proverbs is wisdom. Biblical scholars believe that Proverbs was originally written as an instruction manual for young men, to teach them how to live wisely. Invite the participants to read aloud Proverbs 2:1–8. Pass a Bible around the group, inviting each person who is willing to read one verse.

Note that wisdom comes from more than one source in our lives. It can be practical, like “how to build a bookcase”; emotional, like “how to deal with failure”; or spiritual, like “how to develop a prayer life.” It can be advice, such as “Don’t eat moldy food!” or “Everybody deserves respect.” We grow in wisdom through painful experiences as well as joyful ones.

Hand out the mandala pattern and directions. Point out the inner square within the mandala and note the four potential sources of wisdom. We receive wisdom from many external sources such as parents, teachers, friends, scripture, and the church community. And sometimes we access wisdom simply by tapping into our own deepest selves. Some people describe this as being led by the Holy Spirit, or as listening to God within us. For this activity, we are calling this source of wisdom an “inner voice.”

Invite the youth to fill in the outer segments of the mandala with one or two things they have learned from each of the wisdom sources listed. Ask them to share one piece of wisdom they have received and identify its source. Affirm the diversity of answers. Continue the activity by adding additional pieces of wisdom to the mandalas and decorating them with bright designs and colors. Post the mandalas in your meeting space.

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

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

2 Goin’ Fishin’

Leader preparation: Familiarize yourself with John 21 so you can tell it in your own words.

Supplies:

- fish-shaped crackers (an abundant supply, or at least ten crackers per person)
- 8½” x 11” paper (scrap paper is fine)
- scissors
- masking tape (one roll for every three to five people)
- Bibles

Tell the story of John 21. Emphasize the disciples’ discouragement after their unsuccessful night of fishing, their amazement with the morning’s abundant catch, and the appearance of Jesus on the shore. Highlight the specifics of 153 fish and the net not breaking. Have fun with this story.

Have learners work in groups of three to five people. Give each group two sheets of paper, scissors, a roll of tape or stapler, and a few fish-shaped crackers. Ask each group to make a paper fishing net using only the supplies provided. Encourage them to be creative, but explain that their net must be able to hold as many fish-shaped crackers as possible and that they will have only five minutes to make the net.

Each team will fill its net with as many crackers as it can hold. While one person holds the net, the other team members “row the boat” by carrying or dragging the person holding the net across the room to the “beach.” At the beach points are awarded for the biggest catch. You’ll get:

- 1 point for every fish in the net
- 10 points deducted for every fish that fell out of the net
- 20 points for every team that makes it to the beach still intact as a team

After everyone has made it to the beach with their fish, count up the points, declare winners, and eat some “fish.” Clean up any fish that fell out of the net. Ask: *What parts of the fishing story stand out for you? How does this story connect to your life over this past week?*



3 Creation in Dust and Clay

Leader preparation: Consider the complexity of the world around us, and the limitations to our understanding, whether we look through the lens of faith or of science. Enjoy the mystery as you explore these stories in this activity. Ponder how science and faith enhance one another’s insights.

Supplies:

- clay, preferably natural earth-colored (a piece about the size of a tennis ball for each person)
- washable mat or surface for modeling
- “Creation in Dust and Clay,” Attachment, Activity 3
- Bible

We sometimes make false distinctions between the physical world and the spiritual world. However, the opening chapters of the Bible remind us that our faith is grounded in the natural world in all of its diversity. While religion is more concerned with meaning, and science is more concerned with facts, both try to

make sense of the world and its origins. Sometimes these two approaches seem to conflict. At other times, they harmonize.

Give a piece of clay to each person. Invite group members to mold the clay any way they like while they listen to you read from the creation accounts in Genesis, interspersed with scientific theories about the origins of the universe. The goal is not to produce a finished sculpture, but to respond intuitively to the readings.

Read the texts slowly, pausing for a moment of silence between each section to allow space for creativity and wonder. Have a time of silence or invite group members to share their questions or insights.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Stranger than Scripture (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Do you find some parts of the Bible perplexing or even amusing? Do you think the Bible is always serious? This activity explores Bible texts that may seem strange from our twenty-first-century modern perspective. Perhaps they have meaning, perhaps they are expressions of something that no longer makes spiritual sense to us, or perhaps they are an example of biblical humor. Read the stories yourself and see what you think. Prepare a printout of the attachment. Cut it so that each story is on its own strip of paper.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- “Stranger than Scripture,” Attachment: Activity 4

Some Bible passages are hard to understand, and some may seem quite funny to a contemporary audience. Hand out the stories you have prepared, one or two per person, and give group members a few minutes to read what they received. Have them tell the stories to the group, using their own words or reading from the slip they have been given. After each story is told, ask the group to vote, naming it either as “Scripture” or “Stranger than Scripture” (that is, not in the Bible.) Tally the guesses, and then have people look up the passages in their Bibles to see how well the group guessed.

Decisions about which stories, letters, and other writing to be included in our Bible happened over many centuries in many different communities. *If you had been charged with collecting stories to include in the Bible, which of the passages we read today would you have included? Why?*



5 Peter’s Morning Swim

Leader preparation: Read John 21:1–14, and spend time with the artwork. Think about the “I wonder . . .” statements below.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Baptism of Jesus” by Pheoris West
https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1282230595?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=17101&store_id=1401
- Bibles

Read John 21:1–12, with a different reader for each paragraph. Ask the group how they imagine this scene. What pictures or images came to mind as they heard it

read? Put up the poster so it is clearly visible to everyone. When you refer to the poster, don't use its title.

Imagine that this poster shows the moment when Peter is wading into shallow water near shore. Take your time; allow plenty of room for wondering, using open ended sentences such as the following:

- I wonder what the water feels like.
- I wonder why he turned his head.
- I wonder: is that a dove?
- I wonder what Peter will say to Jesus.
- I wonder if Peter is remembering his baptism.
- I wonder what the source of Peter's strength is.
- I wonder if Peter still feels tired.
- I wonder what's for breakfast.

Invite participants to suggest their own "I wonder" statements. Read John 21, verses 13–14. *As you looked at the art, what new ideas or insights into the story did you gain? What feelings or insights came to you?*



6 Hidden Depths, a Wisdom Meditation

Leader preparation: Consider how the inner lives of teenagers can be very different from what they reveal on the surface. Joy, shame, integrity, and despair can all be masked by adolescent shyness or silliness. Think about how maturing in Christ means coming to terms with who we really are—on the surface and down deep. Where are you in this journey toward wisdom?

Supplies:

- "Go Deep," Attachment: Activity 6
- Bibles or hymnals with Psalm 139
- artwork: "Hidden Depths"

<http://affiliates.allposters.com/link/redirect.asp?item=416482&AID=1413628417&PSTID=1<ID=1&lang=1>

The book of Proverbs describes wisdom as key to a good life. Read the litany "Go Deep," which is based on Proverbs 2:1–8. Look at the poster "Hidden Depths." Guide learners in a silent meditation as you offer these questions. Pause for a few seconds between each question for reflection.

- Imagine you are approaching this iceberg in a small boat. How would you feel?
- Would you want to get up close, or keep your distance?
- In what ways does the image speak to you of beauty or of mystery?
- Do you sense danger, threat, or warning?
- In what way does this image remind you of yourself? Are there parts of you that no one sees, except God?
- Do you have beauty hidden deep within you?
- Is there some scary stuff down deep, things you'd rather not think about?
- What are your secret joys?
- Where is the wisdom, under the surface, that stabilizes you?

Have the youth pair up and share one thing they thought about while looking at the poster. This image evokes widely varying reactions, so let the conversation flow according to your group's needs and responses.

We all have hidden depths, some of which strengthen us and some that may scare us. *Does wisdom involve befriending all the parts of ourselves? Is it possible that God loves us in our fullness and in our imperfection? How can wisdom help us to develop a healthy fear of certain behaviors and attitudes that will lead to grief? What do you think the writer of Proverbs meant by saying, “If you understand the awesomeness of God, you will come face to face with God’s truth”?*

Sending & Serving Activities

7 Actions Speak Louder Than Words (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Prepare four slips of paper, each with one of the following Bible references printed on it: John 21:1–3, John 21:4–8, John 21: 9–14, John 21:15–17.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- four slips of paper with Bible references

Divide learners into four teams. Give each team a Bible and a slip of paper with a scripture reference written on it. Each team prepares to act out the assigned part of the Bible story using movements, gestures, and facial expressions (but no words). Give the groups five minutes to prepare their scene. Groups present the scenes in sequence. What was challenging about telling the story without words? How was each team able to show essential emotions or events of the story?

Option: If your group is small, divide the group in half and have each group prepare two scenes.

Close with a quote from St. Francis of Assisi: “Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.” *What do you think he meant? How was Peter asked to convey his love of Jesus? How do our actions show our understanding of the gospel to others?*

8 Treasure Hunt

Leader preparation: Print the proverbs on the attachment on heavy-weight paper or card stock. Cut the card into individual pieces with one proverb on each. Prepare a treasure box. It could be a shoe box covered with decorative paper and stick-on jewels, with proverbs cards and more fake “jewels” such as mardi gras beads or sequins inside. Hide the box. Make a treasure map that will take 2–3 minutes to decipher. It could be hand drawn with an “X marks the spot,” or it could be a series of clues such as, “Begin at the communion table, go thirteen paces toward the church door, descend into the catacombs, take the third door on the left, and look for a low cupboard.” Adapt clues to your setting.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- “Treasure Hunt,” Attachment: Activity 8
- heavy-weight cardboard or card stock
- treasure box
- treasure map

Give the group the treasure map you prepared, and let them follow the clues to find the treasure. Open the box. These cards represent different wisdom tradi-

tions. The blue cards are proverbs from around the world; the green cards are proverbs from the book of Proverbs in the Bible. Have each person draw and read aloud a proverb, identifying it by its origin. *How would you restate this proverb in your own words?* Continue until all the proverbs have been read.

The book of Proverbs was probably written to teach young men how to live. It includes advice on working hard, avoiding alcohol, choosing a good life-partner, and being successful. It has practical advice as well as spiritual truths. Ask the group, of the proverbs read today, which was their favorite? Why? Which proverb do they think is most important for them to pay attention to? Read aloud Proverbs 2:1–8 and ask: *What one piece of wisdom from this passage (or elsewhere in the Bible) might guide your life?*

Let each person take home one jewel from the box and one proverb card. They can take the card they chose earlier or trade cards with one another to get a proverb that is meaningful to them.

9 Good News!

Leader preparation: Respond to the word “evangelism.” Are you an evangelist? Think about a time when you heard some really good news. Was it hard to keep it to yourself? How is the gospel good news for you and your youth? If it isn’t always good news, why not? Offer the gift of unconditional love and careful listening to your group during this activity.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- copies of recent newspapers (either multiple sections or several days), or computers with Internet access

Hand out newspaper copies or assign youth to computers. Invite each person to find one positive news story on the web or in the paper. The following websites focus on good news:

<http://goodnewsdaily.com>

<http://www.goodnewsnetwork.org/>

<http://www.happynews.com/>

As a group, hear the stories that people found. Why do the media so often focus on bad news?

Invite different youth each to look up one of the following scripture verses. You don’t have to use them all if you have a smaller group: Luke 4:18, Luke 7:22, Luke 9:6, Luke 20:1, Romans 10:15, Romans 1:14–15, Acts 8:25, Acts 14:21, Acts 16:10. Have group members read their verses out loud. Note how often the words “good news” and “gospel” appear. Explain that in the original Greek, the word *evangelion* meant both “gospel” and “good news.” What English words sound like the Greek word *evangelion*? (evangelical, evangelism) *What is the focus of the four books of the Bible labeled Gospels? Do you think of the four Gospels as good news? Why or why not? Is the Bible in general good news? If so, how? How might the Bible be better news?*

A twentieth-century German theologian named Karl Barth said that every Christian should begin the day with a newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other. What he meant by that was that we need to be grounded in scripture, yet actively engaged with the world around us. *In what ways can regular immersion*

in the Bible affect our response to current events? In what ways does regular hearing of current news affect how we hear scripture? This coming week, find good news, spread good news, and be good news.

Reflect

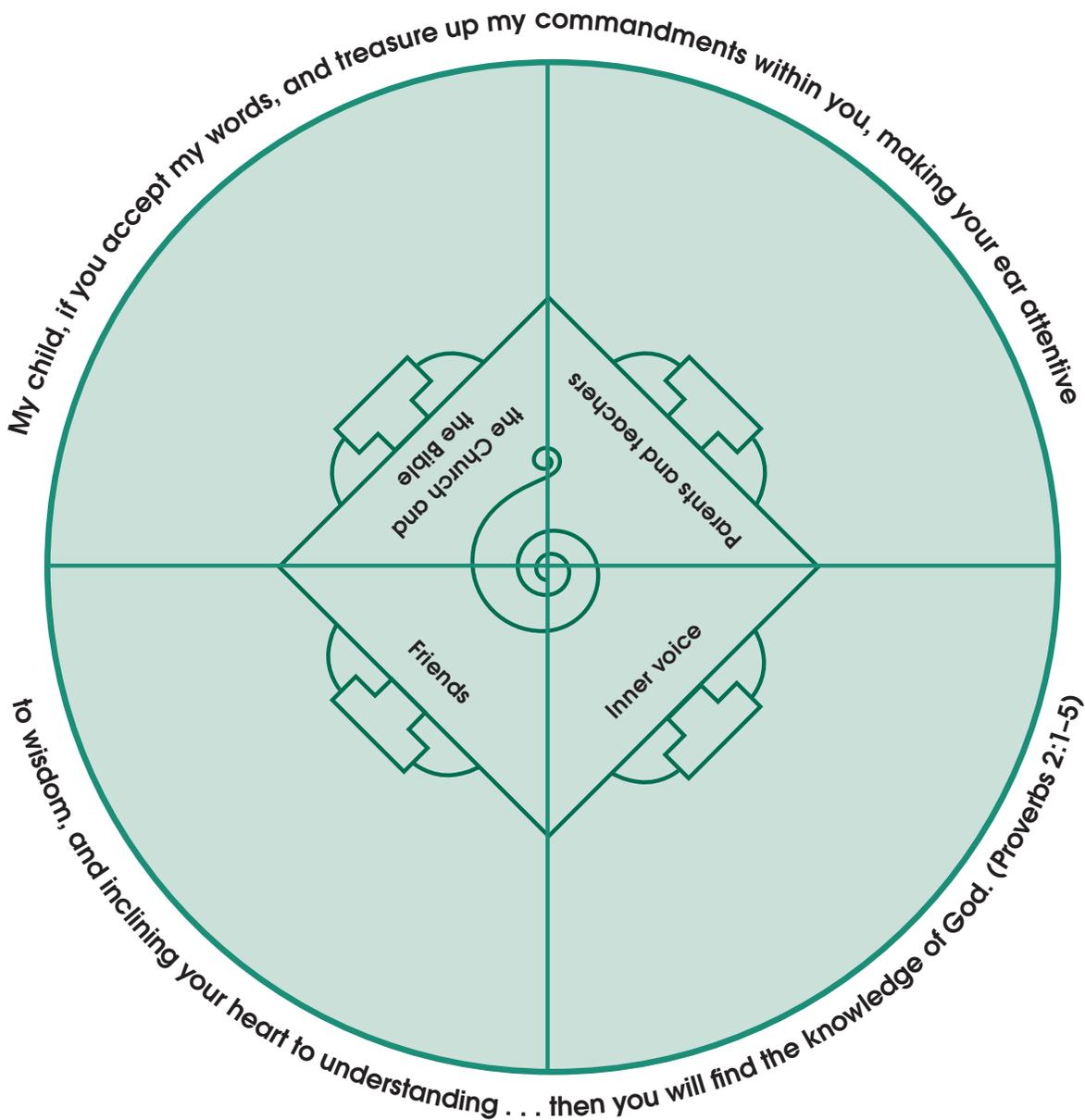
Find a quiet place where you can think about this Exploration. What discoveries did participants make about the Bible? What did you learn about the members of your group? How can you continue to grow in your own encounter with scripture? How will you help group members to continue to support one another beyond the scope of these activities? Pray for each group member by name and give thanks for your time together.

Attachment: Activity 1

Wisdom Mandala

DIRECTIONS

- Think about the wisdom that you possess. Where or how do you obtain wisdom?
- Look at the wisdom mandala and notice the different sources of wisdom that are listed.
- Choose one source (for example, “Parents and teachers”). In that quadrant, write down one or two examples of wisdom you gained from that source.
- Continue in each of the four quadrants, writing down specific wisdom you gained from each of the sources named.



Attachment: Activity 3

Creation in Dust and Clay

Read Genesis 1:1–5.

Pause

About fifteen billion years ago there was nothing at all, except a pinprick of possibility—what scientists call a “singularity.” Then all at once, although there was no one to hear it, there came what scientists call a “Big Bang.” The pinpoint exploded and expanded, a trillion, trillion times. As the energy cooled, matter formed.

Pause

Read Genesis 1:14 and Genesis 1:9–10.

Pause

When the universe had been cooling for ten billion years or more, the planets of our solar system emerged from a nebular cloud. At first there was no life anywhere. But passing comets showered Earth with water and organic molecules. These elements combined and multiplied over millions of years to make the oceans and the plant and animal life of our blue and green planet.

Pause

Read Genesis 1:9–10 and 20–21.

Pause

Our chemical makeup is remarkably similar, whether we are trees, rocks, people, or chickadees. Our building blocks are the same elements, simply arranged in different ways. During World War I, when there was a shortage of blood for transfusions, wounded soldiers were transfused with sea water, and their lives were saved. We are all made of the stuff of life, the stuff of the universe.

Pause

Read Genesis 2:4a–7. (Substitute the phrase “earth creature” for the word “man,” as this is a more accurate translation of the Hebrew text.)

Pause

With all the chance and coincidence required to make life in the vast universe, it is impossible to know why it began, or how it will end. But human beings are the only ones on earth who can wonder about these things. In us, the universe has become conscious and aware. We are uniquely able to reflect on our own origins and purpose. We are able to discern the commonality of all life. We can probe both science and faith, seeking to know who we are and why we are here.

Attachment: Activity 4

Stranger than Scripture

1. Some little boys were making fun of the prophet Elisha because he was bald. He got angry and cursed at them. Then two bears came out of the woods and mauled them. That'll teach you to make fun of prophets. (2 Kings 2:23)
2. Jesus' stomach was growling one morning as he walked past a fig tree. He hoped to pick a juicy fig for breakfast, but the tree had no fruit on it. Annoyed, Jesus cursed the tree, and its leaves immediately withered. (Matthew 21:19)
3. The apostle Paul was in Cyprus, telling people about Jesus and recruiting new Christians. A Roman senator, Marcus, was ready to join them, but he insisted that his pet dog be baptized. Paul hesitated, but decided that God is dog spelled backward, so he did it. Marcus let them meet in his courtyard, which was full of nice-smelling flowers. And the dog was very well-behaved. (Acts 16:52)
4. Abraham and Sarah were senior citizens, who had given up trying to have children decades ago. One day, three strangers came to their tent. Sarah was outside the tent eavesdropping when the strangers told Abraham that they were going to have a baby. She could not stifle her snort of laughter. Later, they realized that the three men were angels, and they named the baby Isaac, which means "He laughs." (Genesis 18)
5. Balaam was riding his donkey on the way to Moab because the king there had asked him to come and curse Moab's enemies. But God had a different idea. Three times, an angel with a sword appeared in the road to block their way. Balaam couldn't see the angel, but his donkey saw it and turned aside. After Balaam beat the donkey, it turned its head and spoke to him: "What have I done to deserve this?" Balaam realized that something else might be going on. He saw the angel, and did what God wanted. (Numbers 22:21)
6. Gideon was choosing an army, but he had too many volunteers. God told him how to weed them out. Gideon took them down to the river and watched them drink. Those who lapped up the water with their tongues were sent back to their tents and goats. Those who cupped the water in their hands were signed up for active duty. They won the battle. (Joshua 6:4)
7. Jonah was stuck in the belly of the whale, but it wasn't all bad. He made sushi from the seafood that drifted in, and he shared it with a mermaid who was in there with him. After three days, he decided to follow God's orders and go to Nineveh. The whale obligingly spit him out, along with the mermaid, and they went their separate ways. (Jonah 2)
8. Jesus met a couple of crazy guys who lived in a graveyard. They started yelling at him, but he pulled the demons out of them and transferred them into a nearby herd of pigs. The pigs went nuts, jumped over the riverbank into the water, and drowned. Jesus got in big trouble for killing a fine herd of swine. (Matthew 8:28)
9. Jesus was having a meal with his disciples one evening, and their feet were cold. Out of nothing, he started a small fire to warm them up. They were toasting their toes, until they realized they were inside and the floor was getting singed. Peter threw water on the fire, and they wore socks from then on. But their hearts were strangely warmed by the experience, and they never forgot it. (John 11:45)
10. Paul once gave a sermon that was just a little too long. By midnight, people were dozing off. One young man named Eutychus (you-tie-cuss) was sitting on a window ledge three stories up. He dozed off, fell out of the window, and died. Paul made up for his too-long sermon by bringing Eutychus back to life. (Acts 20:9)

Attachment: Activity 6

Go Deep

Based on Proverbs 2:1-8

Invite volunteers to read one of the parts for “One.” Everyone says the lines marked “All.”

All: Go deep!

One: My child, if you accept my words

One: and treasure up my commandments within you,

One: if your ears are open to wisdom

One: and your heart longs for understanding;

One: if you cry out for truth,

One: and call out for wisdom on the street corners;

One: if you seek wisdom like silver,

One: and search for it like buried treasures—

All: Go deep!

One: If you understand the awesomeness of God,

One: you will come face to face with God’s truth.

All: Go deep!

One: For the Holy One gives wisdom,

One: knowledge, and understanding.

One: God stores up sound wisdom for the upright.

One: God shelters the innocent,

One: guarding the paths of justice

One: and protecting the ways of the faithful ones.

All: Go deep!

Attachment: Activity 8

Treasure Hunt

Directions: Copy the international proverbs onto blue paper or card stock. Copy one set of Bible proverbs on green paper or card stock. Cut into individual cards, one proverb per card, and place in treasure box. Mix up the biblical and international proverbs.

International Proverbs

A closed mouth catches no flies. (Italy)	A courtyard belonging to everyone will be swept by no one. (China)
A hungry man is an angry man. (England)	A monkey never thinks her baby's ugly. (Haiti)
A thief believes everyone steals. (unknown)	A broken hand works, but not a broken heart. (Iran)
A friend's eye is a good mirror. (Ireland)	A lie travels around the world while truth is putting on her boots. (France)
A society grows great when old people plant trees. (Greece)	A wise man does not make the goat his gardener. (Hungary)
Don't bargain for fish that are still in the water. (India)	The greatest strength is gentleness. (Iroquois)

Attachment: Activity 8 (continued)

Biblical Proverbs

<p>A good name is better than great riches. (Proverbs 22:1)</p>	<p>If you don't hear the cry of the poor, no one will hear you when you call for help. (Proverbs 21:13)</p>
<p>To have wisdom is to love yourself. (Proverbs 19:8)</p>	<p>Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses. (Proverbs 10:12)</p>
<p>Better a dry crust with peace, than feasting in a house full of strife. (Proverbs 17:1)</p>	<p>Those who put other people down are foolish; a wise person remains silent. (Proverbs 11:12).</p>
<p>A soft answer turns away anger. (Proverbs 15:1)</p>	<p>When pride comes, then disgrace follows. (Proverbs 11:2)</p>
<p>Anxiety weighs down the human heart, but a good word cheers it up. (Proverbs 12:25)</p>	<p>A beautiful person without sense is like a gold ring in a pig's snout. (Proverbs 11:22)</p>
<p>Wisdom is a tree of life. Those who hold on tight are called happy. (Proverbs 3:18)</p>	<p>Wisdom is better than jewels and knowledge more precious than fine gold. (Proverbs 8:10-11)</p>
<p>Those who give away freely grow richer. (Proverbs 11:24)</p>	<p>Trust in God with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. (Proverbs 3:5)</p>

Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Scripture

About this Age Group

Teenagers are testing their powers and learning adult skills and behaviors. However, they still have one foot in childhood. This Exploration invites them to consider their potential as prophets—as those who carry the word of God. Youth live in and through their bodies, bodies that are rapidly growing and changing. For faith to have meaning for youth, it must be more than an abstract or intellectual activity. In this Exploration they are encouraged to see faith as something that is experienced in and through our lived experience, through our bodies. The Word can become flesh once again through their own changing bodies and in their lives.

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

Consider all the different kinds of writing in the Bible. There are words of comfort, challenge, joy, and judgment. Genres include poetry, history, prophecy, gospels, letters, and more. Some sections of the Bible are easy to understand; some seem very difficult. Think about your favorite verse of scripture and remember why it is important to you. Are there books of the Bible that you know very little about? Be open to sampling the wide breadth of God's word with your group. Prepare for some surprises as you encounter scripture through these activities. Don't expect to answer every question. Be an explorer with your group.

Prayer:

*Living Word,
as you speak in the voices of people long
past,
as you offer gifts for our world today,
as you hold hope for tomorrow,
may your holy texts tease and tempt us
to know you better and to follow you
boldly. Amen*

Session Development

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

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 "First Words" Scripture Exploration (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Write these twenty words on separate slips of paper: mama, bird, uh-oh, daddy, thank-you, baby, cow, book, kitty, no, hot, apple, bye-bye, Batman, shoe, juice, all gone, mine, bear, more.

Write the books of the Bible listed below in groups of three on pieces of paper, with each piece having three books of the Bible.

Genesis, Job, Matthew
Exodus, Romans, Luke
Song of Songs (or Song of Solomon), Ezekiel, Mark
Jonah, 1 Kings, Hebrews
Ruth, John, Philippians
Psalms, 1 Chronicles, Philemon
Ecclesiastes, Acts, Revelation
Numbers, Proverbs, 1 Thessalonians

Supplies:

- Bible for each learner, with an index to locate page numbers for each book
- pens or pencils
- "First Words Worksheet," Attachment: Activity 1

Distribute the slips of paper with the twenty words to the participants. Some may get more than one word. In 1982, an American mother made a list of her baby's first one hundred spoken words. Invite participants to read aloud the words on their slips. These are the first twenty words this child spoke. These words suggest some of the early stages of human development. They identify things that are important to a toddler who is just beginning to talk. They also tell us something about this child's world, what was available in the environment, and what the child loved. *Which of this baby's first words reflect universal human needs? Which reflect stages of development every child experiences? Which words are specific to this child's environment, culture, or family?*

The Bible records the history of human development. It is the story of humankind's relationship with God over many thousands of years. We often think of the Bible as one book, but it is actually sixty-six books, a whole library in one volume! Distribute the slips of paper with books of the Bible. Similar to a baby's first words, the Bible addresses some aspects of human life that everyone experiences. It also highlights very specific concerns related to the particular times, places, needs, gifts, and circumstances.

Have group members open their Bible to the index page. Review how to locate a book by its page number. In many Bibles, the page numbers start over for the New Testament. Ask group members to work in pairs or small groups to fill out the "First Words" attachment for three books of the Bible.

After about seven minutes, reconvene the group. *Which "first words" made you want to read more? Which of the opening lines surprised or shocked you? Which of these verses already familiar to you? Which ones? Name one thing you learned about the Bible today.*

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.

We can think of scripture as being both “written by God” and “written down by human beings.” Scripture arose as a dialogue between God and God’s people and expressed their changing relationship with God over thousands of years. What we have today as “the Bible” began in oral form—as poems, songs, stories, and lists, spoken words that were passed from generation to generation and eventually written down. The books of the Bible are diverse (and sometimes contradictory) because of all the different ways people have conceived of God, have encountered Jesus, and have tried to pass on their experiences of faith.

Pray aloud this prayer:

*Holy One, you have been there from the time we were babies,
when we were exploring our world and saying our first words.
But long before we were born,
your Word was shared and spoken and saved.
Sixty-six books only begin to tell the story of your love.
Thank you for all these words.
Help us to discover more about our Bible and to make it our own Book of Life.
Amen.*



2 Sweet!

Leader preparation: Imagine the Bible as a banquet table, spread with all manner of foods, both nourishing and delicious. Picture the specific foods that would be on the table with their fragrances, colors, textures, and tastes. Lead this activity with a sense of abundance, discovery, and celebration.

Note: If there are learners who are diabetic or have allergies or other food sensitivities, offer alternatives, such as cheese spread from a squeeze bottle or wheat-free crackers.

Supplies:

- large, flat plain crackers, such as matzo, at least two pieces per person
- several tubes of colored “writing” icing
- honey
- Bibles
- Bible concordance
- song: “As We Gather at Your Table” (tune: Beach Spring, 8.7.8.7.D.)
<http://www.oremus.org/hymnal/a/a366.html>, tune:
<http://www.ccel.org/cceh/0001/x000147.htm>
- “Sweet Scripture Words,” Attachment: Activity 2

Break a few crackers into smaller squares, spread a bit of honey on each one, and share them. Ask people to open their Bibles to Psalm 119. This psalm is unusually long. That’s partly because of its complex acrostic structure. Each stanza begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Both the psalm’s structure and its subject celebrate the Word of God. Notice that in this psalm God’s word and God’s law are used interchangeably. The law is not seen as restrictive, but rather as joyful and liberating. While eating the honeyed crackers, read aloud Psalm 119:97–105, with volunteers reading a verse in turn.

Explore the concept of “sweet” words, using questions similar to these:

- What are some sweet words? (If the group needs help getting started, offer some ideas such as peace, thank you, names of people, activities, or places we love.)
- What is it that makes words sweet?
- Why did the psalmist think God’s word was like food?

The sixteenth-century English philosopher Francis Bacon once wrote: “Some books are to be tasted, others are to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested.” *What might it mean to eat or digest scripture?* (Possible answers: It becomes part of you; it nourishes you, it feeds your soul, it gives you energy to do good things.) *What is your favorite verse or phrase from scripture? Why do you like that passage?* Read aloud John 1:1–5.

Bring out the full-size crackers and icing tubes and let learners decorate their crackers with a “word” or phrase of scripture. Let them select from the “Sweet Scripture Words” list you provide, or find their own in their Bibles. Offer the concordance for them to look up key words. As learners decorate their crackers, use the following to spark conversation.

The Spanish word for “taste” is *sabor*. It’s related to the English word “savor.” Invite learners to share what savoring means to them. Point out that the word “savor” comes from the Latin root word *sapientia*, which means “wisdom.” Ask the group to speculate why tasting, savoring, and wisdom are related in our languages. *What links them? Does Psalm 119 make the same connection?*

Use “As We Gather at Your Table,” verse 1, spoken as a unison prayer:

As we gather at your table, as we listen to your word,
 Help us know, O God, your presence, let our hearts and minds be stirred.
 Nourish us with sacred story, till we claim it as our own,
 Teach us through this holy banquet, how to make love’s victory known.

Eat your iced crackers, and enjoy God’s sweet word!



3 Christ among the Children: John 1 Meditation

Leader preparation: Spend time with the artwork. Imagine yourself as one of the children. Imagine you are one of the disapproving disciples. Consider how you might cultivate an atmosphere of prayerful wonder for your group today.

If you have two leaders, one leader could read the scripture verses, while the other leader offers the questions. Allow time after each set of questions for meditation. Gather the group around the poster, the closer the better. Minimize distractions in your room. This is a quiet activity.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Christ among the Children” by Emil Nolde https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1282230595?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=17101&store_id=1401

In an ancient practice of reading scripture called “lectio divina,” the text is read slowly, almost as a prayer, while we let God speak to us through our imagination. This activity is a variation on lectio divina. As we gaze at this work of art, we will listen to scripture verses from the first chapter of the gospel of John. Questions will be offered to ponder in silence

Read these selections from John 1 and the questions that follow. Read slowly and pause between questions.

- John 1:1–3: What is just coming into being in this picture? What things are eternal?
- John 1:4: As you look at the poster, which colors signify life for you?
- John 1:5: What is the source of the darkness in this scene? How is it overcome?
- John 1:10–11: What do you notice in the faces of Jesus and the children? Who is welcoming whom?
- John 1:12: Where is power being shown in this scene? What kind of power?
- John 1:14: Where is skin touching skin? Where do you see glory in this painting?

Invite learners to talk about what they noticed in the painting. What new ideas did you hear in these verses of scripture?

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Bible Professors (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Write the following dates on pieces of paper and put them on the floor in a long line in your meeting room: 3000–1500 BCE, 1100 BCE, 1000 BCE, 586–520 BCE, 400 BCE, 285 BCE, 4 BCE–50 CE, 70–100 CE, 300–500 CE, 1500–1611 CE, 1600–2010 CE. Allow several feet between each date, if possible. If space is tight, go around the perimeter of the room

Print the attachment and cut it into individual sections to hand out to participants. There are twelve different notes, so for a group of six, each learner would be professor twice. If your group is larger than twelve, two students can share a set of notes and present them as a team. For a group smaller than six, have everyone move through the timeline together, taking turns being the “professor.”

Supplies:

- “Bible Timeline: Professors’ Notes,” Attachment: Activity 4

Hand out the professors’ notes, dividing them among your group members. For a group of six or larger, split into two groups and have them stagger their start by a few minutes, so the professors are presenting to one group at a time. When each professor completes a presentation(s), he or she joins the group. The whole group then moves on to the next place on the timeline.

Give everyone a minute to review their notes. Tell them they are going to be Bible professors as we explore the history of the Bible and how it came to be in its current form. If needed, they can teach the material by reading their notes, but it is better if they use their own words and just use the notes as a guideline.

See if anyone has any questions about what is in their notes. Review with individual professors any words they need help pronouncing or things they don’t understand.

Begin by having the first three professors stand on their spots on the timeline. (Note: the first professor has general information and stands to the right of the timeline itself.) After they present their notes, they join the group, and the next three become professors, standing on their dates in the time line. Enjoy your walk through Bible history.

5 Dress Up

Leader preparation: Gather dress-up clothes from the list below, or adapt as needed. Familiarize yourself with 2 Kings 2:1–14, the story of Elijah and Elisha. Think about the youth in your group who still can enjoy childish things like dressing up, but who also are stepping into more adult roles and responsibilities.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- paper and pens
- dress-up clothes, such as: doctor’s white jacket, stethoscope; minister’s robe and or stole; bathrobe; king’s crown; man’s suit jacket; woman’s dress; hunter’s plaid jacket; fur stole; clown’s wig; politician’s mask; wizard’s hat or wand; military camouflage shirt

Have each learner choose something from the dress-up box and put it on. *Imagine the kind of person who would wear this outfit. If you were that person, what would be your pride and joy, your area of competence, your challenges? Complete each sentence based on what you are wearing:*

- If I were wearing this, I could easily . . .
- If I were wearing this, I would need to know about . . .
- The best thing about being this person is . . .
- The worst thing about being this person is . . .

Little kids love to dress up and to pretend they have all the powers and status of adults. Clothes don’t change who we are inside, but sometimes wearing a certain uniform makes us feel or act differently. In the Bible story of Elijah and Elisha, the young prophet Elisha inherits the old prophet’s mantle as a symbol of Elijah’s prophetic power. Elisha asked for a double share of the prophet’s inheritance, but along with the cloak came great responsibility.

Read 2 Kings 2:9–14, assigning one person to read Elijah’s words, another to read Elisha’s words, while someone else reads the “Narrator” parts.

- Notice Elisha did not put on the cloak right away, although he used its power. What feelings do you think Elisha experienced when he inherited Elijah’s mantle?
- When have you felt unprepared to take on a new role? Do clothes ever help us to “fake it until we make it”? What else helped you to feel more comfortable? Did you grow into the role?

6 Logos and Logos

Leader Preparation: Words and images are all around us, often conveying the most ordinary meanings. But words and images can also be powerful vehicles of meaning. They can move us to buy things we don’t need, or inspire us to build a better world. The Bible is full of words. Yet God’s Word as a whole has power to shape our lives in profound ways. Is Jesus the “brand name” who defines your life?

Supplies:

- roll of newsprint spread on meeting table, or large pieces of unlined paper
- markers or pens
- newsprint or whiteboard

A logo is an instantly identifiable symbol of a product or organization. Corporations make their logos simple enough so people can take them in at a glance and rich enough to suggest a whole world of values and meanings. Logos often suggest ideas beyond what the product can actually deliver. Logos include both visual symbols and slogans. A really good corporate logo evokes a set of values, emotions, and aspirations far beyond the product itself.

Invite the learners to name some logos they know. List these on newsprint or the whiteboard. Look at the list. *What does each logo convey? Is it associated with a certain lifestyle, group, or brand loyalty? Is there a promise of happiness or success? Athletic achievement? Faith? Are these outcomes achieved by buying the product?*

Logos (pronounced low-goss) actually means “word” in ancient Greek. It carries not only the ordinary meaning, but also a deeper, more complex idea. *Logos* is the basic guiding truth behind all reality. Ask learners to read aloud John 1:1–14, substituting the word *Logos* every time they come to “Word.” (In the beginning was the *Logos* and the *Logos* was with God and the *Logos* was God . . . and the *Logos* became flesh and lived among us . . . full of grace and truth . . .)

Using the roll of newsprint on the table, design a modern logo for Jesus that incorporates both an image and a slogan. *Can Jesus be the brand name (the Logos) that defines your life?*

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Word to Flesh (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: This activity focuses on translating God’s word into actions in daily life. Familiarize yourself with service opportunities in your church and in your community so that you can suggest opportunities your group may not know about. Be prepared to facilitate action steps by providing transportation or setting up a group volunteer experience if needed. Prepare index cards with one scripture verse written on each (make extras for a larger group).

- Matthew 5:44: Love your enemies.
- Matthew 5:24: Be reconciled to your sister or brother.
- Matthew 7:1: Do not judge.
- Matthew 19:14: Let the little children come to me.
- Luke 10:5: Whenever you enter a house, say, “Peace to this house.”
- Luke 22:26: The greatest among you must be the least; the leader must be the servant.
- Matthew 25:35: I was hungry and you gave me food.
- John 21:17: If you love me, feed my sheep.
- Matthew 5:16: Let your light shine.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- prepared scripture cards

The first chapter of John’s gospel is one of the hardest to understand in all the gospels. It’s also a key passage for Christian theology. It suggests to us that Jesus existed with God from the beginning of creation. He took on human form in order to make God known to us. In Christ, the abstract becomes concrete, and the universal becomes specific. The Word becomes flesh, and the result is light, grace, and truth. Read John 1:1–14 slowly, as poetry. Then ask these or similar questions: *What images and ideas surfaced as you listened? What else did you notice? What images came to mind? Who is Jesus, for the writer of this passage?*

When we talk about the body of Christ, we might be referring to Jesus’ physical earthly body, his humanness. But the church is also called the body of Christ. *In what ways are we the Word made flesh?*

Pass out the scripture cards you prepared. One at a time, have someone read the verse. If a learner does not want to read, allow him or her to pass the card to another learner. Have the group brainstorm ways this Word could be lived out in the real world of school, neighborhood, and family. *What might we do as a group to live out this scripture?* Encourage the group to plan something specific they could do together.

After you have shared several cards, invite learners to choose one card to take home. Their assignment is to come up with a way this week to turn this Word into flesh, that is, into a real life application.



8 Single or Double?

Leader preparation: Print the attachment on card stock, and cut up game cards. *(Optional: Decorate the back of the cards with the name of the game: “Single or Double?”)* Read and familiarize yourself with 2 Kings: 2:1–14. Get the prizes that will be given in the game, and put them in a paper bag before the group arrives.

For a group larger than thirteen, add more coupons and more prizes such as pocket crosses, posters, or bookmarks. Also add “responsibility” cards. Customize these to your setting, adding things such as: “Do the dishes for coffee hour. Ring the bell before worship. Read scripture in church. Serve food at the soup kitchen.” For each, identify single and double portions.

Supplies:

- two \$1 bills or coins
- two candy bars
- two small pieces of jewelry or hair clips
- a dozen doughnuts divided into two packages of six each
- card stock for game cards
- paper bag large enough to conceal prizes
- “Single or Double?” Attachment: Activity 8

Tell the story of Elijah and Elisha from 2 Kings 2, focusing on the following details:

Elijah was an important prophet during a crucial time in Israel’s history. Elisha was his apprentice who worked with Elijah for many years. When Elijah was about to die, Elisha asked if he could inherit a double share of Elijah’s powers of prophecy. A double share of an inheritance was the amount typically given to the oldest son. That sounds good, right? Let’s see . . .

Introduce the game “Single or Double?” This is a game in which you must choose, before each turn, whether you want a single portion or a double portion. Lay cards face down on table. Go in alphabetical order of group member’s first names. On their turn, the participants state whether they want a single portion or a double portion. Then they choose a card, turn it over, and read it to the group. Have the prizes hidden in a paper bag. If the prize is something tangible, bring it out and give it to them in single or double portion. For immediate actions, have them do it right away. For later actions, give them the card to take home as a reminder of what they must do. When everyone has had a turn, share the doughnuts while talking about the implications of this game. Use questions such as the following:

- Which worked out better for you, getting a single or double portion?
- Which of the inheritances were gifts and which were responsibilities?
- How does this game relate to being a person of faith?

In the end Elisha did inherit Elijah’s spirit of prophecy. Prophets listen for the word of God and call others to follow it. They often speak for those who are mistreated or who have no voice. But, as in the movie *Spiderman*, “With great power comes great responsibility.” *What gifts and responsibilities might Elisha have received from Elijah? What are some of the gifts and responsibilities of being a prophet today?*

Ask group members to fulfill the responsibilities they have been assigned and to enjoy the gifts they have received.

9 So You Think You Can Be a Prophet

Leader preparation: Is it audacious to believe that God speaks through you? Through one of the young people in your group? Through all of them? Consider how our faith calls us to be humble and modest, but also to be bold, brave spokespersons for God’s grace and power. You are God’s prophet. Wear the mantle. Congratulations!

Supplies:

- Bibles
- an ornate or colorful piece of fabric big enough to drape over a person’s shoulders, such as a table runner, minister’s stole, or altar cloth

What is a prophet? Brainstorm ideas. Many people think that prophets are like fortune tellers predicting the future. But in the Bible, prophets serve as spokespersons for God’s truth. Prophets speak truth to power, often getting in trouble because they challenge unjust rulers or corrupt religious leaders. Modern day prophets might challenge heads of corporations, speak up about unpopular issues, and oppose unjust laws. *Who are some modern day prophets?*

The prophet Elijah was very old. His mantle, or prophet’s cloak, was the symbol of his power, his wisdom, and his connection with God. When Elijah was about to die, his long-time assistant, Elisha was hoping to step into Elijah’s shoes. Elisha wanted to wear Elijah’s mantle. Read 2 Kings 2:1–14 with your group, alternating readers by verse or paragraph.

How do you think Elisha felt during this time? How do you think he felt about possibly wearing Elijah’s mantle? Did you notice that there was a community of prophets who were involved and keenly interested in this story? We are all called to be prophets, although some of us are bolder and more able to speak out than others.

Sit in a circle on the floor. Drape the mantle over the shoulders of the first person and ask him or her to finish the first statement. The leader will say, “When I think

about how to make the world a more peaceful place, I hear God saying . . ." The person wearing the mantle completes the sentence after taking time to listen for God. Any group members can pass, by saying, "I am still listening" (if they aren't coming up with a way to finish the prompt).

Move around the circle, draping the mantle over each participant in turn, and repeating the prompts or using new ones from the list below. You can go around the circle more than once to give youth more than one chance to be prophet, using prompts more than once if needed.

- When I think about how to make the world a more peaceful place, I hear God saying . . .
- When I think about what our community needs, I hear God saying . . .
- When I think about one thing our church should do, I hear God saying . . .
- When I think about an issue that needs to be addressed, I hear God saying . . .
- When I think about a terrible injustice, I hear God saying . . .
- When I think about what makes God smile, I hear God saying . . .
- When I think about what makes God cry, I hear God saying . . .
- When I think about what kids our age can do, I hear God saying . . .

Anoint each person as a prophet. Have the "prophet" kneel, while wearing the mantle, and have the whole group lay their hands on the person's shoulders while saying "_____, . . . God sends you. God speaks through you." Invite youth to share how they felt when being asked to speak for God and how they felt while being anointed as prophets.

Reflect

How did this Exploration whet your appetite for more scripture? Which activities seemed to engage or energize your group? What do you need to adapt to meet the needs of your group? Name three positive outcomes that were sparked by this activity and thank God for them. Receive God's blessing for your holy work with youth.

Attachment: Activity 1

First Words Worksheet

For each book assigned to you, write the name of the book. Read the first few verses of the book and answer the questions.

Book of the Bible	Mood suggested by the first lines	How do the first words make you feel?	Information given about the writer of the book	Information given about the audience or situation	Type of writing (poetry, history, advice, gospel, song, dream, letter, other)

Attachment: Activity 2

Sweet Scripture Words

Treasure my commandments.
(Proverbs 2:1)

Come, have breakfast!
(John 21:12)

Choose life.
(Deuteronomy 30:19)

I remember you constantly.
(2 Timothy 1:3)

Where you go, I will go.
(Ruth 1:16)

Peace be with you.
(John 20:19)

Love one another.
(1 John 4:7)

Rejoice always.
(Philippians 4:4)

Take and eat.
(Matthew 26:26)

Let your light shine.
(Matthew 5:16)

Comfort, comfort my people.
(Isaiah 40:1)

I am the bread of life.
(John 6:35)

God so loved the world.
(John 3:16)

God is love.
(1 John 4:16)

Attachment: Activity 4

Bible Timeline: Professors' Notes

BC means "before Christ." AD stands for "anno Domini," which is Latin for "in the year of our Lord." Today, many people use the abbreviations CE, and BCE to indicate "Common Era," and "before the Common Era." All the dates in the time line are approximate.

3000–1300 BCE

Our Bible's story begins about 3000 years ago when the Hebrew people herded sheep and goats. They passed the stories of their faith from generation to generation by storytelling. The Hebrew patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lived around 1500 BCE. Moses, who was also part of this early era, lived around 1300 BCE. Their stories would later be written down and would become the books of Genesis through Deuteronomy.

1100 BCE

Around 1100 BCE, stories began to be written in Hebrew, first on stone tablets, and then on animals skins and papyrus scrolls. Later additions to these stories included works of poetry, law, history, and prophets. Over time, these scrolls took on special significance and were treated as sacred writings.

1000 BCE

King David lived around 1000 BCE. He united Israel in a period of faith and national strength. He was a great military leader, but is also said to have written many of the psalms. His reign was considered a golden era for Israel.

586–526 BCE

In 586 BCE a major event turned society upside down. Jerusalem was invaded by Babylon, and most of its leaders were carried off to exile in Babylon. They remained there for three generations. When they returned to Israel, they had to rediscover much of their tradition and rebuild their temple. The books of the prophets, as well as Ezra and Nehemiah, tell about this period in Hebrew history.

400 BCE

Around 400 BC, the Jewish people began deciding which writings would be considered sacred. They chose which ones would be counted as part of the Hebrew Scriptures and which ones would not. These decisions were based on which ones had stood the test of time, which were most widely used, and which best told the story of God's people.

285 BCE

In 285 BCE the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek (the common language for the ancient world). At this time Jewish people were scattered all over the Mediterranean world and spoke many different languages.

Attachment: Activity 4 (*continued*)

4 BCE–50 CE

Jesus was born around 4 BCE, and was crucified around 30 CE. The first stories about Jesus circulated in oral form. The first writings of the New Testament were the letters of the apostle Paul, written to the early churches. Thessalonians is the earliest at about 50 CE.

70 CE–100 CE

The Synoptic Gospels, (stories about the life and teachings of Jesus) were based on oral stories that had been circulating for many years. Mark was the first Gospel to be written down, around 70 CE. Luke and Matthew date from around 85 CE, and John (the latest) was written down around 100 CE. These were all written in Greek. There were other gospels in these early years, some of which survived but are not part of our Bible.

300–500 CE

The Christian church chose which writings would be included in the Christian Bible. They decided based on how old a text was, how widely it was used by the church, and whether its teachings were consistent with church teachings. Many texts were rejected or put to the side at this time. What was included is called the Canon. The Canon equals the official books of the Bible as we know it today. Around 500 CE, the Bible was translated into Latin, which had become the new common language.

1500 CE–1611 CE

After a period of neglect, Bible scholarship and study took off. Thanks to the invention of the printing press, Bibles no longer had to be copied by hand, but could be mass produced. Martin Luther translated the Bible into German, allowing people to read it in their own language. Scholars in other countries did the same. The King James Version was published in English in 1611. Many people could read and interpret the Bible for themselves.

1600–2010 CE

Between the 1600s and today, the Bible has been translated into more than 1,000 languages. New archeological discoveries have unearthed old manuscripts that have helped to make newer translations more accurate. Translators have tried to remain true to the original texts while conveying their meaning to modern people of faith. As we know it today, the Bible contains sixty-six books of law, prophecy, poetry, history, gospels, and letters.

Attachment: Activity 8

Single or Double?

<p>Single: Your group blesses you by saying, "May the Holy Spirit give you peace and strength," while they rest their hands on your head and shoulders.</p> <p>Double: You get two blessings.</p>	<p>Single: A group member sits on your lap.</p> <p>Double: Two group members sit on your lap.</p>
<p>Single: Choose your favorite seat in the room, and whoever is sitting there has to move.</p> <p>Double: You get to sit in your favorite seat and choose who will sit next to you.</p>	<p>Single: You get the job of cleaning your meeting space when group ends today</p> <p>Double: You get to clean up next time, too!</p>
<p>Single: A half-dozen doughnuts to share with your friends!</p> <p>Double: A dozen doughnuts to share with the whole group.</p>	<p>Single: Pray for three nights for someone who has hurt you.</p> <p>Double: Pray for six nights for someone who has hurt you.</p>
<p>Single: A candy bar</p> <p>Double: Two candy bars</p>	<p>Single:</p> <p>Double:</p>
<p>Single:</p> <p>Double:</p>	<p>Single:</p> <p>Double:</p>

Attachment: Activity 8 (continued)

Single or Double?

<p>Single: A dollar bill</p> <p>Double: Two dollars</p>	<p>Single: Speak up the next time you hear someone make a racist or antigay comment or joke. Say, "It bothers me when you say . . ."</p> <p>Double: Speak up on two occasions.</p>
<p>Single: Give half your allowance or earnings this week to your church or a charity.</p> <p>Double: Do this for two weeks.</p>	<p>Single: Spend an hour helping at home, beyond your normal chores.</p> <p>Double: Spend two hours helping.</p>
<p>Single: A small item of jewelry or hair accessory</p> <p>Double: One to keep and one to share.</p>	<p>Single: Half the group will treat you like a rock star for the rest of the day.</p> <p>Double: The whole group will treat you like a rock star for the rest of the day.</p>
<p>Single:</p> <p>Double:</p>	<p>Single:</p> <p>Double:</p>
<p>Single:</p> <p>Double:</p>	<p>Single:</p> <p>Double:</p>

Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Discipleship

About this Age Group

Youth learn about reverence through experiences of beauty and love. Through encounters with scripture, they discover their own hunger for holiness. As they explore both their talents and the needs of the world around them, they discern where God is calling them. They develop courage and competence as they are inspired to follow Jesus.

Youth are learning to take on new responsibilities in their lives. This is a time of experimentation and growth. They need encouragement to risk new forms of leadership. They also need places where it is safe to make mistakes, where they will be supported to try again. Give youth in your group lots of support and reminders as they learn how to follow through on their commitments. Start small, and keep expectations within the skill and maturity level of your group members.

Youth need models of discipleship that are male and female, young and old, and of different cultures and backgrounds. Biblical images of discipleship include children who share bread, women who lead churches, tax collectors who become apostles, and outcasts who preach the good news. Introduce youth to the diversity of biblical and contemporary disciples.

About this Exploration

For the Christian, discipleship includes servant leadership. As Christians, we believe that scripture makes a difference in our living. Engaging with scripture is one way we discover how to live in Christ's way. As we hear, read, and interpret scripture, we listen for God's word. We discern how to live into its teaching. And as we respond to scripture, we learn the practices of our faith, mentor others, pass on the sacred texts, and learn more about living with compassion, hope, and love.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Ruth 1
Acts 8:26–40

Leader Preparation

As you prepare to lead this Exploration, consider what the word “discipleship” means for you. What biblical characters or stories come to mind as you think about what it means to be a disciple? Sometimes we think only of adult men as disciples of Jesus. Can you think of female models of discipleship in the Bible? Read Luke 8:2–3 as a reminder that many women also followed Jesus and supported his ministry. Consider also the woman who met Jesus (John 4) at the well and the many women Paul mentions in his letters, such as Phoebe, Priscilla, Lydia, Dorcas, and Eunice. Do a web search to find out about these lesser known church leaders and disciples.

Prayer:

*Spirit of life, provider of abundance,
companion of those who suffer,
speak to me and through me in these
activities.*

*Help me hear those who are privileged
and safe
as well as those who are hanging on by a
thread.*

*Help all of us to offer companionship to
one another.*

*No matter where our journey of discip-
leship takes us,
remind us that you walk ahead of us to
lead us
and beside us to bless us. Amen.*

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 That’s Me! (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Young people often have deep ideas about faith, but can be shy about sharing them with one another. This game provides a simple way to do some faith sharing and to claim Bible verses and stories as life guides. Group members can decide how seriously or lightly they want to engage.

Write the following starters and scripture verses on newsprint, a whiteboard, or poster board. If you know learners well and know their favorite scriptures, add these to the list.

- I pray when . . .
- My favorite story about Jesus is . . .
- The most boring thing about church is . . .
- Jesus’ most challenging teaching for me is . . .
- I like church because . . .
- My favorite Christmas carol is . . .
- My favorite scripture passage is . . .

- The Lord is my shepherd. He leads me beside still waters. (Psalm 23:1)
- Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, “Samuel, Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Here I am. Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” (1 Samuel 3:10)
- God is my rock, in whom I take shelter (2 Samuel 22:3)
- I heard the voice of God saying, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for me? And I said, “Here I am. Send me!” (Isaiah 6:8)
- I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. (Romans 7:19)
- Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. (Psalm 100)
- Here is my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved child with whom I am well pleased. (Matthew 12:18)

Supplies:

- carpet squares, taped X’s, or squares of construction paper taped on the floor of your meeting space

Clear the space of obstacles. Place carpet squares, construction paper, or X’s on the floor so that there is one less marker than there are people in the group. Have everyone stand on a marker, except “It,” who stands in the center of the space. “It” says, “My name is _____ and . . .” (finish one of the starter sentences, or choose and read a scripture verse). Anyone who agrees with what “It” said can say, “That’s me!” They leave their marker and high-five the person in the center. Those who have left their markers, along with the person in the center, find new markers on which to stand. The person left without a mark becomes “It” and goes to the center to begin a new round. Play until everyone has been in the center.

What verse of scripture anchors you? If you do not have one, consider how you might find one. Talk with other people about verses that are important to them. Keep on the lookout for a verse or passage that has special meaning. The breadth of the Bible allows for the expression of every human emotion and condition. Our favorite scripture passages may change over time, or they may last a lifetime.



Session Development

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

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



2 Sacrament

Leader preparation: Arrange a beautiful, inviting table that will feel both holy and festive to participants. Move this activity into your church parlor, if you have one. Arrange the table with a tablecloth, candles, glassware, dishes, flowers, a pitcher of juice, an old Bible opened to the center, and a loaf of sweet bread or coffee cake. All this should surprise and delight the group as they arrive. Adjust the menu as needed for preferences or allergies within your group.

Print the litany of readings and actions on the attachment and cut it into numbered strips.

Supplies:

- song: “As We Gather at Your Table” (tune: Beach Spring, 8.7.8.7.D.)
<http://www.oremus.org/hymnal/a/a366.html>
- “Sacrament: Readings and Actions,” Attachment: Activity 2

Invite group members to take seats around the table you have prepared. The goal of this activity is to experience biblical gifts of fellowship, beauty, peace, and abundance. Instead of just reading words about God’s vision of sacred community, we will experience the Word.

Hand out the numbered strips to group members so that the readings or actions go around the table in numerical order. Actions are printed in italics. Those who prefer not to read aloud can receive action parts. Read the lines or do the action, with a 30-second pause between each segment. If there is extra sweet bread, wrap a piece in a napkin to share with someone else in the church or at home.

Point to the open Bible on the table. *How can the Bible “speak” even when we do not read from it directly?*

Sing the hymn “As We Gather at Your Table.”

3 Ruth’s Roots Game Show

Leader preparation: In this game you will help participants learn Ruth’s story and place it in the context of the larger faith tradition. Familiarize yourself with the questions for the game show. Correct answers are provided in parentheses after each question. Think about how you can have fun while helping your group encounter an ancient culture very different from their own. Consider how you might add typical game show patter to increase the excitement of the game.

Supplies:

- Bibles (some with reference notes)
- bell or buzzer
- fake money (for example, money used in board games)

Divide the group into teams of four to six people each. Each person locates the chapter of the book of Ruth in a Bible and marks the place for later reference. This game show is based on Ruth 1, and almost all the answers can be found there. The leader will call out the questions, and the first team to shout out the correct answer will get \$50 in fake money. The bell or buzzer will sound at the beginning and end of each round. At the end of the game, see who has the most money and declare the winner.

Round One:

1. Why did Elimilech and Naomi go from Bethlehem to Moab? (famine in Bethlehem/Judah)
2. In what other scripture story does Bethlehem appear? (birth of Jesus)
3. What were the names of the two sons of Elimilech and Naomi? (Mahlon and Chilion)
4. Whom did the sons marry? (Ruth and Orpah)
5. Were their wives from the country of Judah or the country of Moab? (from Moab)
6. Bonus question: Were the nations of Moab and Judah enemies or friends? (*Hint:* Check out reference notes or the introduction to the Book of Ruth, if your Bible has these. Enemies)

Round Two:

1. Why did Naomi decide to return to Bethlehem? (Her husband and sons died.)
2. How many times did Naomi tell Ruth to go back to her home and family? (four)
3. What blessing did Naomi offer to Ruth and Orpah? (“May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. . . .” verse 8)
4. Did Orpah reverse two letters in her name, and become a famous TV talk-show host after she returned to Moab? (Have fun with this one. In fact, Oprah Winfrey’s first name is based on the name Orpah.)
5. What did Ruth say to convince Naomi she would go with her? (Wherever you go, I will go. . . . verses 16–17)

Round Three:

1. For how long did Ruth promise to stay with her mother-in-law? (Up to and even after they died)
2. Why does Naomi say “Call me ‘Mara’”? (It means “bitter” and signals her losses)
3. What was just beginning in Bethlehem when they returned there? (The barley harvest)
4. Ruth is the ancestor of a famous king of Israel. Do you know who? (*Hint:* See Ruth 4:17. David)
5. This would make Ruth the ancestor of another famous person in the New Testament. Who? (*Hint:* see Matthew 1:1–5. Jesus!)

Declare a winner, and congratulate all for their efforts.

Moabites and Israelites were enemies. Yet Ruth, the Moabite foreigner, is held up as an example of faithfulness. She is said to be an ancestor of King David. *What significance might that have had for ancient Hebrews? Why do you think this story was included in the Bible? Early Christians struggled with the issue of whether non-Jewish people (foreigners) could be part of the Jesus movement. What significance might this story have had for them? What surprised you about this story? What might this story teach us today?*

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Back Story (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read and familiarize yourself with Ruth, chapter 1. Think about questions you would like to ask these women if you could interview them yourself.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- (optional) tape recorder

Do you know what a “back story” is? When actors are given a script, they often do not know much about their character’s past, prior to the time of the current drama. In order to give their character more depth and realism, many actors make up details of their character’s circumstances and past experiences. They call this the “back story.” We are going to use our imagination to develop a back story for the characters of Ruth and Orpah in the book of Ruth. Scripture stories (like TV scripts) don’t tell everything about a character. We can imagine a variety of reasons why Ruth and Orpah made the choices they did.

Listen for the details that we do know as we hear Ruth’s story. Read aloud Ruth 1:1–18.

Divide the group into two groups (or four groups, if you have more than twelve participants).

Assign each group the task of developing a back story either for Ruth or for Orpah. Consider questions such as the following:

- How do you and your mother-in-law get along? Was it always like this, or did your relationship change over the years?
- You and your husband were married for ten years, but had no children. What was that like for you?
- How did you feel when your husband died?
- What is your own family like? What would it be like for you to return to them now?
- Describe your relationship with your own mother.
- What chance of remarrying do you have if you go back home?
- What was the deciding factor in your decision to stay with (or to leave) Naomi?

After about 6–8 minutes, bring the group back together, and have them tell their back stories to one another. *As you imagined possible backgrounds for Ruth and Orpah, in what ways did your ideas about this Bible story change?*

Option: Record youth, using a talk show interview format, as they tell the back stories of Orpah and Ruth.

5 Guide My Feet

Leader preparation: Be still for a few moments, and open yourself to divine guidance. Rest in God's presence. Listen for Jesus' voice. Give thanks for the nudges of the Holy Spirit. Ask for help in creating a fun, safe activity that will encourage your group to discover new ways to hear God speaking to them. This activity can be adapted to an outdoor setting. Use trees, terrain, or a city playground for your obstacle course.

Supplies:

- song: "Guide My Feet" (tune: Guide My Feet, 8.8.8.10)
<http://www.hymnsite.com/fws/hymn.cgi?2208>
- strip of cloth or long scarf to make a blindfold
- wrapped candies or other small wrapped treats
- Bibles

Ask for a volunteer, someone willing to be blindfolded and guided through an obstacle course. Assure the person that he or she will not get hurt. Have the volunteer leave the room while you set up the course. Quickly set up an obstacle course using things such as couch cushions, upturned tables, or chairs. Group members can also be bridges or narrow passageways. Don't make it too complicated. Six or seven required elements are sufficient. Place the wrapped treat at the end of the course. The round ends when the volunteer goes through the course in the correct sequence and finds and unwraps the treat.

Round 1: Put a blindfold on the person who has volunteered and bring him or her back into the space. Have all the youth call out directions and advice to the blindfolded volunteer. Have two people stand near the volunteer to protect him or her from tripping or falling, if necessary, but not to lead. This may be chaotic, but should be fun. The first round ends when the volunteer completes the course.

Round Two: Ask for a second volunteer to leave the space. After that person leaves, change a few of the elements in the obstacle course. Place another treat at the end. Again, write down the elements so that you can keep track of them. Now recruit one person to be a guide. The guide can only communicate nonverbally with the blindfolded volunteer. The guide will have to touch the blindfolded person to guide him or her through the course correctly. Bring the blindfolded volunteer back into the room. Explain that the course has changed a little, and that this time, you will receive nonverbal guidance only. Again, the round is over when the blindfolded one unwraps the treat.

Ask: Which method of guiding seemed the most effective? What were the advantages of each method? When we are trying to be guided by God, do we have any similar difficulties? Do you think God ever give us guidance through words? In what way? Do you sometimes hear so many conflicting voices that you have a hard time figuring out which one is true, which one to follow?

Ask four learners to look up one each of the following verses of scripture and read them aloud to the group: Isaiah 58:10–11, John 14:25–27, Psalm 23:1–3, and Psalm 16:7–11. Which passage best describes how you experience God's guidance?

Sing together the hymn "Guide My Feet."



6 Leaving Home

Leader preparation: Think about the particular aspects of your home and family life that make you feel secure. Then think about times when you have felt insecure or when you have experienced loss or dislocation. How have these experiences influenced you as a disciple of Jesus?

Do a web search for photos of the 2010 Haiti earthquake, and print a few photos of survivors and rubble. If you have Web access in your meeting room, you can view photos online with your group. Or simply invite participants to share their memories of what they saw in the aftermath of the Haiti earthquake or another more recent natural disaster.

Supplies:

- pens or pencils
- “Leaving Home Worksheet,” Attachment: Activity 6
- Bibles

Invite your group to go with you on a journey of imagination in which they will have to make some difficult choices. Ask them to get comfortable. Share the scenario below. Read slowly and pause for participants to imagine the scene. Close your eyes if you wish, and picture this.

While you are at school, on a perfectly ordinary day, there is a terrible earthquake in your region. You are unhurt, but the building where you live collapses. Many people die. You are plunged into chaos, tears, and numbness. A week later, one of your few surviving friends or family members invites you to go with them to another place, a city several days away, where you have never been before. What will you do? How will you decide? What makes you want to leave? What makes you want to stay?

Allow a full minute of silence for the learners to reflect, then invite them to open their eyes.

Hand out the worksheet and invite learners to fill it out. Acknowledge that these questions are hard to think about. Recognize that some young people may have experienced homelessness, dislocation, and loss, while others may have had lives of great stability and security. Ask which questions were hardest for the group to answer. *What are some things people lose when they are forced to leave their home and their community?*

Ask someone to read aloud Ruth 1:16–17. If learners are not familiar with the story, tell them that Ruth offered to leave her homeland with her mother-in-law after both their husbands had died. Invite the group to ponder what faith calls for in such circumstances.

Ask another person to read Psalm 137:1–4. Explain that this psalm comes from the period when the Jewish people were exiled to Babylon for 70 years. Again, invite youth to reflect on what faithfulness looks like under such circumstances.

Look at pictures of the Haiti earthquake or another recent disaster. *What do you recall about this event? How did you feel about this event? How do you feel called to respond to such events?*

Pray this prayer, or pray in your own words: *God, thank you for the familiar people and places in our lives, for our ordinary homes and our sometimes annoying relatives. We are grateful for stability and peace, for we know that sometimes human lives are disrupted and torn apart. So remind us that in every circumstance of life, wherever we go, you also go. You are the source of our courage, our strength in time of trouble, our sure companion. And you call us to be your disciples on the road. Amen*

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Call Me Mara (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Youth are often called on to support friends who are unhappy. Situations can include the everyday dramas of adolescence, or much more serious things such as substance or physical abuse or suicide risk. This activity identifies healthy ways to assist others when they feel despair. Gather names of guidance counselors and other helping professionals in case you need to make a referral after this session. Consider how you might help your group decide when it is appropriate for youth to offer help or support and which situations call for adult intervention. In what circumstances are you equipped and trained to offer help and when would you need to turn to other professionals?

Supplies:

- artwork: “Naomi Entreating Ruth and Orpah to Return to the Land of Moab” by William Blake <http://affiliates.allposters.com/link/redirect.asp?item=1590989&AID=1413628417&PSTID=1<ID=1&lang=1>
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Invite the group to look at the poster. Ask a strong reader to read the following meditation:

“Naomi” means pleasant. And her life was generally pleasant. She had a good husband, two healthy, hardworking sons, and two fairly agreeable daughters-in-law. She lived in Moab. It was a long way from where she grew up, but that was okay. It was pleasant. Until her husband died, that is. And then, tragically, both her sons also died. And she was left there. Her only remaining family members were Ruth and Orpah, her two Moabite daughters-in-law. And neither of them had any children. There weren’t even any grandchildren to kiss and cuddle, to ease her emptiness.

Naomi decided there was nothing worth living for, no reason to stay in Moab. “I’m leaving,” she said to Ruth and Orpah. “I’m going back to my old hometown. Go back to your families. Good-bye.”

Ruth and Orpah cried. Naomi cried. And after much talking and tears, Orpah decided to go back to her parents. Ruth made a different decision. She hugged Naomi tightly.

“I will never leave you, Naomi! I am going with you.”

But Naomi said, “Call me Mara [which means bitter]. For my life will never be pleasant again. God has left me broken-hearted and alone. Come with me if you must, but call me Mara.”

Discussion: Invite the group to reflect on times when someone they loved has been in despair or has felt like giving up hope. Have them describe how this made them feel and what, if anything, they were able to do to help. Ask if there were limits to the help they were able to offer.

Write this question on newsprint or a whiteboard: “When someone else is hurting, what can you do to help?” Ask participants to suggest possible actions we can take when someone else is in despair. Responses might include the following:

- Stay with them
- Pray for them
- Distract them with fun activities
- Keep on letting them know you love them
- Do what you can, then leave them alone
- Ask for outside help
- Know your own limits
- Keep yourself healthy

Are there limits to how far you will go to help a friend? This scripture story illustrates two different choices made by Orpah and Ruth. Is it possible that both could be examples of faithful love? Invite a variety of responses. There is no single right answer about what to do when someone is hurting but there may be things not to do. *What might some unhelpful responses be?*

Encourage learners to know their own limits. Talk about situations in which it is appropriate to step back or to seek adult help. Some of us are very willing to be helpers. This is good, but sometimes it can get us into trouble or get us into situations where we are out of our depth. Invite your group to ponder how we can be disciples of Jesus and care for one another while keeping healthy boundaries.

Naomi’s story had a happy ending. She was not Mara (bitter) forever. Encourage participants to read the rest of the book of Ruth. Send them out to be disciples by being good friends to one another.



8 Immersion

Leader preparation: This activity refers to baptism. Your group may include those who have been baptized as infants, those who remember their baptisms, and those who have not been baptized. It’s possible that, like the Ethiopian, someone will want to be baptized after this session. Talk to your pastor about how and when that might be possible.

Supplies:

- a bowl of water
- artwork: “Baptism of Jesus” by Pheoris West
https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1282230595?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=17101&store_id=1401
- Bibles

Open Bibles to Acts 8:26–38. Before you read, provide some background and definitions. A eunuch is a man who has been sexually neutered. Sometimes this was done so that he would not be a threat in a harem. As a servant, a eunuch would have been vulnerable. But in this story, the man’s high position (in charge of the treasury) gave him power and authority. The man is from Ethiopia, in east-central Africa. He seems to have been a follower of Judaism, as were many non-Jews. As

this story begins, this man is returning from worship at the temple in Jerusalem. At this time, all the followers of Jesus are still within Judaism.

Read Acts 8:26–38, dividing parts among the members of the group. Use different people to read the parts for the angel/spirit, Philip, the Ethiopian eunuch, the scripture quoted in verse 32–33, and the narrator, who reads everything else.

Spread the picture on a table, post it, or project it on the wall, where all can see. Invite the group to imagine that this is the eunuch at the moment after his baptism. Keep silent for a moment to let them look and ponder. Offer the following questions, with silence between each:

- I wonder what is ending for him in this moment.
- What is beginning?
- Where do you see signs of his strength?
- Where do you see signs that he is a servant?
- Whom will he tell about his baptism?

After these reflections, ask group members to share what they know about baptism and about their own baptisms. Invite those willing to touch the water and bless one another with a touch on the forehead, saying, “May God bless you and keep you.” This ritual can be both quiet and joyful.



9 Lost Boys

Leader preparation: If possible, borrow and watch the movie *Lost Boys of Sudan* or plan to watch it later with your group. *Lost Boys of Sudan* (directed by Megan Mylan and Jon Shenk) is a feature-length documentary that follows two orphaned Sudanese refugee boys on their flight from Africa to America. Read and familiarize yourself with Acts 8:26–40.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- “In a New Place,” Attachment: Activity 9

Hand out readings. Ask for five volunteers to do the reading. Invite two people to role-play a dialogue between the Ethiopian eunuch and Philip. Have the eunuch ask Philip some or all of the following questions and let Philip ad lib answers.

- Tell me about your faith.
- Does God accept people like me?
- Who is Jesus for you?
- What difference can he make for me?

Role play a dialogue between one of the relocated lost boys of Sudan and an American teenager living in the same neighborhood. Let the Dinka boy ask some or all of the following questions and let the teenager respond.

- Why are people in America so lonely?
- Why do Christians in America celebrate Christmas with so much material excess?
- Who is Jesus for you?
- In our churches in Sudan, everyone sings and shouts and dances. If you are happy about Jesus, why don’t you dance and shout for joy in church?
- Tell me about your faith.

For further info about the Lost Boys, refugee assistance, and action ideas go to <http://www.lostboysfilm.com/take.html>

Reflect

What was the most challenging activity for you and your group? How did you experience God's presence among you? Remember that the fruits of your teaching may be hidden from you or may take a long time to be fully known. Pray for the youth who is most difficult for you. Thank God for working beyond the scope of your activities, extending the grace you have offered.

Attachment: Activity 2

Sacrament: Readings and Actions

A sacrament is a visible sign of the invisible presence of God.
Ordinary things such as water and bread reveal God to us.

(Light the candles.)

Look around the table. Who or what do you see here that opens a window to God?

As we gather at this table and as we listen to your word, help us to know your presence, O God.
Wake us up. Stir our hearts and minds.

Feed us with your sacred story until it becomes our own story.
Teach us how to make your presence known to others.

The sacred transforms the ordinary; God comes near.
This table reveals divine abundance. We see time and space made holy.

(Stand up and serve the juice, pouring a glass for everyone who wants some. Invite people to drink.)

Jesus once said, "Whenever two or three of you are gathered in my name, there I will be with you."
Come Jesus, be our guest. Bless these gifts and our sharing of them.

(Cut the bread, passing it around so that everyone who wants a piece receives some. Invite people to eat.)

God is not only present here in this room, in this church. Sacraments are everywhere.
Every day, God tries to get our attention. Almost anything can point us to the holiness of life.

As we leave this table, help us to love and serve you, O Christ. Help us to bring peace where there
is conflict.

Help us to learn to forgive as you forgave.
Help us to see your face in the world around us.

We see the image of Christ in one another's faces.
We see Christ in those who are lonely, those who need help, those who shine with joy, those who
care for their friends.

Who else would you like to invite to this banquet?
Let's close our eyes and name them . . . living or dead, near or far.

Gracious Spirit, help us invite other people to share this feast, always welcoming those whom the
world considers "last and least."

And so we join with saints and angels everywhere to sing God's praise with joy and thanksgiving.

Attachment: Activity 6

Leaving Home Worksheet

Instructions: Take a few minutes to imagine the scenario, and then fill in your responses to the questions below, or think about your answers silently. *Note:* What you write is only for you. You do not have to share your responses with others.

If your life suddenly was disrupted by a natural disaster and you had to leave your home and community on only a moment's notice . . .

Which friends would you miss most? Why?

Which objects or possessions would you miss the most?

What local scenery or places would you miss?

If you had to start your life over again in a new place with just one person you knew, with whom might you want to be?

Why did you choose this person? (*check one or more*)

- He/she would need me.
- In our common loss we could comfort each other.
- This person understands me best.
- This is the person I can count on to take care of me.
- This is the person I am closest to.
- Other: Write your own reason _____

Attachment: Activity 9

In a New Place

Reader 1: The Lost Boys of Sudan are members of the Dinka tribe. They were orphaned or separated from their families in the 1980s and 1990s during a brutal civil war when government troops wiped out whole villages in southern Sudan. Many younger boys survived because they were away tending herds and were able to escape into the nearby jungles. Without food, water, money, or medical supplies, 27,000 so-called “lost boys” banded together and walked for years across borders to international relief camps in Ethiopia and Kenya. After living in the camps for many more years, some of the refugees were relocated to the United States. The documentary film *The Lost Boys of Sudan* chronicles their amazing journey and their gradual adjustment to life in America.

Reader 2: The eunuch lived in the first century CE. He also was separated from his family at a young age and sent to live and work in the court of the queen of Ethiopia. He was not allowed to marry or quit his job, and we do not know if he ever saw his family again. He was smart, and he gradually rose to a position of importance in charge of the queen’s treasury. He was surrounded by great wealth but was essentially a slave. He worked for a pagan monarch but studied the holy books of the Hebrew scriptures. He was a spiritual seeker, and he was willing to cross boundaries to find the answers he was looking for.

Reader 3: When the Dinkas first arrived in the United States, they had never seen electricity or used a toilet. They didn’t know how to use a light switch, so they sat in darkness in their apartment. At Christmas, they were perplexed by glittering Christmas trees and wondered what the trees had to do with the birth of Jesus. Back in the refugee camp, Christmas had been a day for joyful, spontaneous dancing. They slowly adapted to life in America, but they missed some of the closeness of life in the refugee camp.

Reader 4: (*Reads Acts 8:26–33*)

Reader 5: (*Reads Acts 8:34–40*)

Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Christian Tradition

About this Age Group

Tradition is a dialogue between past and future, and youth hear voices from both directions. These practices of faith give them a context for understanding their own relationships with family and friends. Church may be one of few places where they encounter people of different generations. In church, they may find rituals they trust and community they can count on. However, youth are growing up in a society that privileges youth over age and contemporary over historical. Today's youth experience greater social and technological change than any previous generation. In a culture that constantly re-invents itself around cutting-edge technology, where newest almost always equals best, traditional ways of being church may be hard for youth to appreciate. Each generation finds new ways to communicate the good news of Christ. As you lead youth in exploring and finding value in age-old practices of faith, let them lead you into new traditions and ways to communicate.

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 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

The diversity of these activities is a reminder that we meet God in many different ways; not every path works for everyone. Explore your own resistance to certain forms of worship. Recall a time when a different form of worship really connected you with God in a powerful way. Be flexible as you explore time-honored traditions and as you create new ones together. No matter what, offer learners an atmosphere of unconditional love. Be the family of Christ for them and with them.

Prayer: God of ceaseless activity, you move through the self-conscious awkwardness, the exuberance, and the fidgety bodies of teenagers. You call forth the response of every part of us, not just our minds and our words. Help me as a leader to welcome zany joy, creative discovery, and quiet contemplation in these practices of faith. Holy One, come, be among us. Amen

Session Development

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

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Don't Just Stand There, Do Something! (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Arrange your meeting space with room for participants to sit or stand in a roomy circle, with plenty of space to move arms and legs.

Supplies:

- “Psalm 96 from *The Message*,” Attachment: Activity 1
- highlighter markers

Sometimes faith is all about thinking, praying, and reflecting. Sometimes, we need to sit still and be quiet in order to meet the divine presence. But faith can also be active! Psalm 96 describes various actions of God and various human actions in response to what God has done.

Hand out copies of Psalm 96 from *The Message* and highlighter markers. Ask learners to highlight all the verbs in the psalm. Mark with a “G” those that are God’s actions, and mark with an “H” those that refer to human actions.

Invite the group to sit or stand in a circle and say, “Today we are going to move!” Go around the circle and invite each person in turn to suggest movements for the actions (verbs) in the psalm. For example, if we were acting out “Sing a new song to God,” we might open our mouths wide and move our heads from side to side, as if belting out a favorite new song. Demonstrate this with big, bold movements. Assign a line of the psalm to each person to create a movement to go with this line. Movements should be as big and bold as you like. Try to think of something unusual or creative, but make sure it is a movement everyone in the group will be able to do. You can use facial expressions, arms, legs, posture, jumping, bowing, mime. Depending on the size of your group, participants will likely have more than one turn. Give youth a moment, but not too long, to come up with a movement. Some learners may be more comfortable working with a partner.

Read the Psalm 96 paraphrase slowly, pausing for each person to demonstrate an action and have others copy their movements. Read the psalm again as everyone does the sequence of movements together. *Which words or movements helped you think about or feel God’s presence?*

Option: As a group, refine or improve the movements and offer them to your church during a future worship service as a community movement prayer.

2 Dream Family

Leader preparation: Think about the different family dynamics among the members of your group. Consider how most middle school students find their families annoying or embarrassing yet still have a close bond with them. Think about kids with nontraditional families. Picture your group as a family, a circle of mutual care and unconditional acceptance. Gather five or six small toy figures for each member of your group. You might be able to borrow these from your church nursery or from a family with small children. If you get figures from more than one source, mark them so that you can return them. If you can’t find these, cut out human shapes from paper.

- 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:

- Bibles
- toy figures of people
- basket large enough to contain people figures

Put the basket with figures in the center of the meeting space. Ask the participants to think of—not say aloud, just think of—one way that one of their family members sometimes annoys them. Then ask them to think of one thing they appreciate in a family member.

Each of us will have a chance to make a dream family (like a dream team). Your family can consist of people you know, famous people, someone with a particular talent, real life family members, or a generic someone, like “a sister.” Participants can choose up to six toy figures (more if available), and spend time assigning them names, or attributes. This is a quiet activity.

When they seem ready, ask participants to introduce their dream family to the group. As each one does this, line up the figures in a large circle on the table or floor.

In real life we (usually) don't get to choose our families. What's bad about that? What's good about that?

Families are really diverse. *What are the different configurations of family you know?* Some have more than two generations, some have two parents, some have one. Same-gender couples are families. Sometimes groups of friends become like family to one another, and often church is described as being a family.

Timothy was the son of a Greek father and a Jewish mother. Both his mother and his grandmother were faithful followers of Christianity. As a young man, Timothy worked alongside the apostle Paul, traveling around and starting new churches. Hand out Bibles, and help people find 2 Timothy (note that there are two letters addressed to Timothy). Have each person read alone or with a partner 2 Timothy 1:1–10. *Who is Timothy's family? What gifts does he receive from them? What is the relationship between Paul and Timothy?*

Close with this or a similar prayer for families. Pause briefly at the end of each line:

God, thank you for the people we live with, the ones who annoy us, tease us, make us laugh, forgive us, and share a life with us.

Thank you for friends who care for us, encourage us, and love us like family.

Thank you for our church family, for the models of faith we have known here.

We think of all the people we care about.

We ask your blessing of peace with all who struggle or who are in prisons of various kinds.

We pray for courage and strength to pass on our faith without embarrassment or cowardice.

Bless our families, present and future, through the power and grace of Jesus Christ. Amen.

3 Sing a New Song

Leader preparation: Find the recordings listed below, and be brave about singing a new song. Locate a recording of something “out there,” that will startle your group. It should evoke the response of “What is that?!” Also find a traditional chanted psalm. An example of the Westminster Cathedral choir chanting a psalm may be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VE4tHWdxIrg&feature=related>. A contemporary example of Psalm 40 may be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mEbbKwCSS7I>. Alternatively, search the Internet using search terms “chanted psalm” and “Psalm 40” to find other interesting versions.

Supplies:

- CD player or MP3 player
- a recording of “strange,” “out there” music
- recordings or videos of chanted psalms
- a recording of a contemporary rendition of a psalm
- Bibles (all the same translation)
- (optional) hand drums

Play the “strange” music. Invite learners to share their favorite genre of music or artist. *Why do you like this kind of music? Which types of music don't you like? What are some of your favorite church songs or hymns? Affirm different tastes. Does a song have to be a church song to bring us into the presence of the holy? Play examples of songs that have a spiritual meaning but are not “church songs.”*

Music is powerful. It can tell our story, get us dancing, change our mood, open our hearts, or spur us to activism. The psalms were written to be sung. Many psalms have been set to music throughout the ages. One of the oldest ways to sing the psalms is chanting. In medieval monasteries monks and nuns read the psalms by singing them. Play a short selection of the recorded chants.

One form of chanting is to sing all the words on one note, in a rhythm similar to how they would be spoken. On the second-to-last syllable of each line, go down one note, and on the last syllable, return to the original note. Open Bibles to Psalm 96, and try chanting it. For example sing, on the same note, “O sing to the Lord a” Go down one note on “new.” Return to your original note on “song.” On the same note sing, “Sing to the Lord all.” Go down one note on “the.” Return to your original note for “earth.”

Demonstrate, and then have the group try it together, adding drum beats if you like. Don't worry if it's a little ragged. Stick with it until you find a flow. If the group found a flow, ask: *How did that rhythm deepen your appreciation for the psalm? If you did not find a flow (if it remained awkward and difficult), How did that impact your experience of the psalm? Does the musical style matter, or can any style convey the word of God? What style would you choose to sing or play a psalm?*

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Brothers (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Luke 15:11–32. With whom do you identify in this story? Can you put yourself in the place of one of the other characters? Consider how young people are often locked into family roles and how hard it can be for them to break free of them. Many middle schoolers also are caught between obedience and independence. How does love make true freedom possible?

Supplies:

- “Brothers,” Attachment: Activity 4
- (optional) dishtowels and ties or simple head coverings to suggest biblical costumes

Briefly discuss how birth order affects our lives, and share stories about sibling rivalry. Introduce the drama by saying that it is a memorable story in the Bible about two very different brothers. Begin with the two people facing each other in front of the group and have them put on the head coverings if you have them. They read the parts for the first scene. At the end of the scene, invite two more volunteers to take the parts of the two brothers. Continue with new readers for each scene until done.

For which brother did you feel the most sympathy? Why? Which brother do you think is most like you? Jesus told this story as a parable. What message do you think he was trying to teach? What can this parable teach us today?

5 Balloons of the Spirit

Leader preparation: If you stretch the balloons before your session, they will blow up more easily. Bookmark the scripture verses ahead of time in four separate Bibles.

Supplies:

- package of balloons, one or two per person (use nonlatex balloons in case of allergies)
- Bibles marked at 1 John 4, Luke 4, Acts 2, and Galatians 5
- markers

Hand out balloons. Ask youth to blow them up and to hold them closed without tying a knot. Point out that the balloon is the same material, but its shape has changed. Why?

Have one person read 1 John 4:12. *What does God’s Spirit look like? If it’s invisible, can we see signs of the Spirit’s influence in people of faith? What changes might be visible if a person allows God’s Spirit to flow through him or her? What changes might be real that are not visible to others?* Ask people holding the balloon to stretch the opening to let the air noisily out of the balloon. Observe that air, though invisible, is certainly real.

Toward the beginning of his ministry, Jesus returned to his hometown synagogue. He read from the prophet Isaiah. Ask another person to read Luke 4:18–19, 21. Ask the group to speculate on why some of the people in Jesus’ hometown heard this reading as rude or offensive. *Can you imagine another example of a time God’s spirit moved people in ways that may challenge or offend?* Have group members

blow up their balloons again and then let them go so the balloons fly around the room.

The book of Acts describes the coming of Holy Spirit into the church. Have a third person read Acts 2:1–2, 4. After the experience described in this passage, the first Christians traveled across the known world to share the news of Jesus. The church spread rapidly in its first 100 years. *How might God's Spirit move people to new places?*

Blow up balloons one more time and tie knots in them so they stay inflated. Have someone read Galatians 5:22–23, 25. Ask all the youth to choose one fruit of the Spirit that God has given them, or that they hope for, and write it on their balloon. The Spirit gives each of us different gifts, but they all work together for good with Jesus.

Stand in a circle and bat the balloons into the air seeing how many the group can keep afloat.

Faith Colors

Leader preparation: Gather your materials and take five minutes to read your favorite psalm. Review the following: Psalms 8, 23, 42, 63, 96. Based on the mood and characteristics of your group, chose several psalm selections for this activity that depict different moods.

Supplies:

- tables covered with newsprint or waterproof covering
- Bibles
- watercolor paints, one set per person or for every two people
- bowls of water
- paint brushes
- plenty of watercolor paper

The psalms are a treasury of human experience and faith. Almost every emotion or circumstance in life is shared with God in the psalms: anger, joy, despair, contentment, fear, delight, pride, and humility. Distribute the art supplies. Invite learners to make abstract watercolor paintings that express a particular mood or emotion that comes to them as they listen to a variety the psalms being read aloud.

Members of monastic communities often are silent during meals while they listen to one brother or sister reading aloud. Take turns reading a part of a psalm while everyone else paints quietly. Decide who will read the passages. Take time between each reading to allow the verses to sink in. Artists can continue with the painting they have begun, or start a new one with each new psalm.

Invite youth to show one another their paintings and describe one mood or idea that they tried to convey. When paintings are dry, post them in your meeting space.

Sending & Serving Activities

7 The Word: Texts and Texting (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Young people today communicate using technology in ever-changing ways, making use of all kinds of clever abbreviations. Twitter is one form of quick communication in which messages are limited to 140 characters. If you are not familiar with Twitter, let your learners lead the way. Be prepared for some youth to be very knowledgeable while others do not use this “language” at all. You can learn some abbreviations at http://www.webopedia.com/quick_ref/Twitter_Dictionary_Guide.asp.

Option: Let youth suggest other abbreviated forms of communication they use.

Supplies:

- paper
- pens
- Bibles

Ask group members if they send text messages. *What other instant communication do you use? What are examples of some common abbreviations you use?* Discuss with your group the advantages and disadvantages of this method of communication. Talk about scripture as word-based communication that was first shared orally and later written down. Scripture has been studied, memorized, and pondered by people for thousands of years.

Take a very familiar passage of scripture, Psalm 23, and translate it into a very modern form, a 140-character message.

Offer three steps to do this:

1. Read the psalm carefully in your Bible.
2. Think about what Psalm 23 means for you here and now.
3. Capture the essence of the psalm in 140 characters using texting conventions and abbreviations.

Participants will work in pairs. Have those familiar with texting work with those who are not. Give 10 minutes to come up with their text message version of Psalm 23, and then share all the versions with the group. Assign those with cell phones or computers to send this text to someone they love or to someone who needs its comfort.

8 Dear Tim

Leader preparation: Write the letter described below to someone who needs encouragement.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- lined paper and envelopes
- pens
- stamps

Explain that you are going to look at a letter written during the days of the early church. This Bible passage is a sermon written in the form of a letter from the

apostle Paul to Timothy, his young friend and co-worker. Count off the group by fours and assign each number to look for something different in 2 Timothy 1:1–10.

1. Find phrases that express love or gratitude.
2. Find phrases about God's presence or blessing.
3. Look for words that offer encouragement
4. Find phrases that recall hard times, good times, or family history.

After three minutes, reassemble the group and read aloud 2 Timothy 1:1–10, pausing after each verse to let the group identify the items named above. Talk about how God calls us today to offer words of blessing and encouragement to one another. These are powerful acts of discipleship. Provide stationery, and ask the participants to each write a brief letter to a younger family member, an elderly or absent family member, or a friend (perhaps someone who is struggling or discouraged).

Include some of the following elements in the letter:

- express your love
- tell the person you pray for him or her
- remember shared good times, hard times, your family legacy
- offer encouragement
- remind the person that God is there

Have participants address the envelopes and give them to you to mail. If they don't know the address, provide stamps so they can look up the address and mail the letter themselves.

9 Hearing Voices

Leader preparation: This activity may stretch the comfort zone of your group in two ways. First, the genre of music may not be to everyone's taste. It may help to tell the group that the song was chosen for its content. Second, the silence at the end may not be easy for some youth. Consider what you can do to make them comfortable. If they have difficulty sitting still or being quiet, you can make that discomfort part of the activity by discussing how this kind of listening is hard for many of us.

Supplies:

- video: "I Hear Them All" by Old Crow Medicine Show <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ug7IgB8MfW>. This song is also available on I-tunes and other downloads. Lyrics may be found at <http://www.cowboylyrics.com/lyrics/old-crow-medicine-show/i-hear-them-all-17586.html>.
- computer or TV monitor hooked up to a computer
- Bibles

Ask group members to visualize God watching and listening as they read silently Psalm 34:15–22. When all are done, ask them to share images that came to mind. *According to these verses, what are some circumstances in which God is listening? How does God respond?*

Play the video of "I Hear Them All," asking your group to listen for specific people and situations named in the song. Play the video or song again and ask what new voices they heard the second time. *Where is the video made? Who is the "I" in the song? (Note: there are many possible answers). Who or what does the bus driver*

symbolize? Explore additional meanings suggested by the visuals in the video.

Look at the lyrics (or play the video a third time) and ask learners to identify images of suffering, promise, and hope. Ask: *Why does it matter if God hears all these voices? Why does it matter if we hear them? Can listening be an act of faith?*

Quakers use the practice of silence to listen for divine guidance. Some Quaker meetings are completely silent; in others, people who feel moved will speak about a concern or insight that arises from their attentive listening. Invite the group to take a full minute of silence, or two minutes if the group can handle it. Ask people to listen for voices that they don't usually hear or pay attention to. At the end, invite learners to say "I hear . . ." (naming voices they feel they need to pay more attention to). The group responds after each: "I hear them all, and God hears them too."

Challenge group members to commit this week to listening attentively to others in their schools, families, and neighborhoods.

Reflect

Which activities stretched or challenged your group? Where were the moments when you felt the presence of God? Consider some of the group dynamics that arose in the course of these activities. Did any issues emerge that concern you? Identify who you will talk to about your concerns and commit to doing this. Thank God for the moments of quiet and beauty that you experienced with your group. Thank God for the times of noise, laughter, and confusion.

Attachment: Activity 1

Psalm 96 from *The Message*

Sing God a brand-new song!
Earth and everyone in it, sing!
Sing to God—worship God!

Shout the news of God's victory from sea to sea,
Take the news of God's glory to the lost,
News of God's wonders to one and all!

For God is great, and worth a thousand Hallelujahs.
God's terrible beauty makes the gods look cheap;
Pagan gods are mere tatters and rags.

God made the heavens—
Royal splendor radiates from God,
A powerful beauty sets God apart.

Bravo, God, Bravo!
Everyone join in the great shout: Encore!
In awe before the beauty, in awe before the might.

Bring gifts and celebrate,
Bow before the beauty of God,
Then to your knees—everyone worship!

Get out the message—God Rules!
God put the world on a firm foundation;
God treats everyone fair and square.

Let's hear it from Sky,
With Earth joining in,
And a huge round of applause from Sea.

Let Wilderness turn cartwheels,
Animals, come dance,
Put every tree of the forest in the choir—

An extravaganza before God as God comes,
As God comes to set everything right on earth,
Set everything right, treat everyone fair.

Attachment: Activity 4

Brothers

a drama based on Luke 15

Part One

Younger: I was afraid I wouldn't get my share.

Older: I was afraid I wouldn't get my share.

Younger: From the very beginning, my brother was smarter than me. He was everything a father could want.

Older: From the very beginning, my brother was cuter than I was. He charmed everyone with his jokes and his stories.

Younger: Dad said to me, "I love you with all my heart," but I was never sure he did.

Older: Dad said to me, "I love you with all my heart," but I was insecure.

Younger: I asked for my half of the inheritance as soon as I turned 16.

Older: He asked for half of everything the day he turned 16.

Younger: Dad was healthy—he might live for another 30 years—and I wanted to make my fortune in the world.

Older: Dad was a pushover, so of course he gave it to him.

Younger: When it comes right down to it, you have to decide what is important to you. In my mind, it's all about freedom!

Older: When it comes right down to it, you have to follow what's right. In my mind, it's all about responsibility!

Part Two

Younger: At first it was fun.

Older: At first it was hard.

Younger: I was everybody's best friend.

Older: I worked day and night to rebuild our flocks and bring in the crops.

Younger: We laughed and danced and feasted.

Older: I tried so hard to prove that I was a good son.

Younger: I tried so hard to prove I could make it on my own.

Older: I wanted everyone to know I'm not like my brother, who broke our father's heart.

Younger: I wanted everyone to know I'm not like my brother who never cut the apron strings.

Older: But sometimes, at night, when I stopped to rest, I wondered, "Does my father still miss my brother terribly?"

Younger: But sometimes, after a night of partying, I woke up missing home.

Older: I felt empty inside.

Younger: I felt empty inside.

Part Three

Older: After two years we had built the crops and herds back to their former levels.

Younger: After two years, suddenly it was all gone. My friends avoided me.

Older: I had no friends because all I did was work.

Attachment: Activity 4 (continued)

Younger: I was starving, and the only job I could get was feeding pigs.

Older: I was lonely, but I consoled myself with the thought that at least Father respected me.

Younger: They were unclean animals, and I fed them garbage. After a few weeks, I felt like an unclean animal myself.

Older: It was a great harvest that year, one of the best ever.

Younger: I was so hungry, that even the pigs' food looked good to me. Then one day I came to myself.

Older: I had no idea what was coming.

Younger: Maybe I could have a second chance. Maybe Dad would let me work for him as a servant.

Part Four

Older: I was in the farthest field that day.

Younger: I planned to throw myself on the ground and beg Dad's forgiveness. But he saw me coming.

Older: I heard a sound of distant cheering.

Younger: Dad ran out to meet me and threw his arms around me.

Older: There were three more rows to finish, so I stayed in the field.

Younger: I tried to tell him I had come back as a servant, not a son, but he put his fingers over my lips and shushed me. We were both crying—tears of joy.

Older: I was hot, sweaty, and thirsty. When one of the servants came running from the house to tell me the news, I cried too—tears of rage.

Younger: I couldn't believe the abundance of that family table. All my favorite foods from my youth!

Older: I couldn't believe the feast my father spread for that scoundrel. Did all my work count for nothing?

Younger: I couldn't believe he set a place for me at the family table. Did all my sins count for nothing?

Older: They invited me to come to the feast, but I refused. I had no appetite. My bitterness filled me with bile.

Part Five

Younger: But my father went to my older brother and led him by the hand to the table.

Older: "I have something to say to both of you," Dad said.

Younger: "All that you see here, this table, this house, this land—these are all gifts from God."

Older: "From God's fullness we have all received grace upon grace."

Younger: "There is joy in receiving an undeserved gift."

Older: "There is joy in sharing with one in need."

Younger: To me Dad said, "You are the son who was lost and now is found. You were dead, and have come back to life. I have loved you and delighted in you since the day you were born. Nothing you do can diminish that love."

Older: To me Dad said, "You are the one who has always been by my side. I rely on you, and you have never let me down. I have loved you and delighted in you since the day you were born. Nothing you do can increase that love."

Younger: And I felt blessed, returned to my home and the family.

Older: And I felt blessed by him, no longer empty, deep inside.

Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Context and Mission

About this Age Group

Many teens are natural idealists and activists. They want to make a difference in the world. They seek a faith that can make a difference for them. Many youth seek a biblical foundation for faith in the real world. Others question how scripture and faith can be meaningful for today's world. They may doubt that ancient texts can speak to their lives. This Exploration offers youth a deeper understanding of how scripture can connect with daily life. They may gain inspiration and hope, a grounding for their generous impulses, practical channels for their energy, and help with follow-through. Let their encounters with scripture spark awareness of both local and global needs, as well as ideas for community service.

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.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Mark 4:26–34
Esther 4:1–17

Leader Preparation

The Bible moves us. Its stories propel us from passive listening to acts of generosity, sacrifice, and transformation. God’s insistent call to mission is the fire by which the church keeps burning. Be on fire, so you can set fire to your participants’ imagination and faith. Jesus’ parables are open to a variety of outcomes and interpretations, but always God is at work calling followers to faith-filled response. Be ready to help youth experience the joy and satisfaction of serving others, even as they learn that “results may vary.”

Prayer: Like seeds scattered upon fertile ground, signs of your kingdom are everywhere, God. Help me to make room for your loving kindness to take root. Help me to tend slender green shoots of possibility and to expand the breadth of your compassion. Help me to discover your hidden kingdom, planted deep within my own soul. Help me celebrate seeds spread by the wind, sprouting in a global garden of hope and peace. Amen.

Session Development

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

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 Who’s Responsible? (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Recall a time when you worked very hard on a project and were successful. Recall a time when you could not control the outcome of a project. Consider one or two gifts in your life that you did not do anything to deserve.

Supplies

- Bibles
- masking tape

Read aloud Mark 4:26–34. Invite learners to offer ideas about what these two parables are about. *What was Jesus trying to tell us about how God works?* Explore the idea that most of the good things that happen in the world involve some partnership between God’s activity and human effort. Ask learners to respond to the statements in the list below. Tell them to:

- Move to the left side of the room if you think this is God’s gift.
- Move to the right side of the room if you think this is the result of human effort.
- Move to the center of the room if you think it involves a partnership between God and people.

Use masking tape to indicate the left (God’s gift), the right (human effort), and the center line. Note that youth can place themselves anywhere along a continuum from “mostly God’s gift with some human effort” or “mostly human effort with some of God’s gift.”

Use the following list, or alter it to fit the experiences and context of your group. After each item, invite group members to explain their choices.

- a juicy, sweet apple
- a bright blue wildflower
- rain during a drought
- a friend who makes you laugh
- cleaning up an environmental mess
- getting an A on a test at school
- a shade tree on a hot day
- making friends with a former enemy
- peace
- the birth of a baby
- the downfall of a brutal government
- forgiveness
- the spread of good government
- a doctor curing a patient of cancer
- your good looks
- your basic personality
- a cell phone
- fried chicken
- ocean waves



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 Scrambled Scripture: The Story of Esther

Leader preparation: Print copies of the attachment, one per person. Read the story of Esther in your Bible and put the story in order from the scrambled pieces.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- “Scrambled Scripture: Esther,” Attachment: Activity 2
- scissors

Hand out the “Scrambled Scripture” text. Explain that this is a retelling of the Bible book of Esther. Esther is an adventure drama, with villains, heroes, and a complicated plot. The story has been scrambled, and our job is to try and figure out what happened in what order. Divide your group into teams of two to four people and give them 10 minutes to come up with an order that makes sense. Youth may want to cut apart the segments to rearrange them.

Reconvene the larger group and have each team share their proposed order. Refer to the book of Esther to see who came closest to the actual order of events. The correct order is C, I, D, J, F, G, A, B, E, H. *What surprises you about this Bible story? Where is God at work in this story? Does this story remind you of any situations in today’s world?*

3 This Is the (World) Day

Leader preparation: Find out how much money your church sends annually to support the work of the wider church, including global ministries. View the video a few times and notice what moves you in the profiles. Where do you see joy? Commitment? Freedom? If someone made a video of your church praising God, what would it look like?

Supplies:

- world atlas, globe, or world map with time zones noted
- computer with Internet access
- song: “This Is the Day” http://mp3skull.com/mp3/this_is_the_day_maranatha.html
- (optional) drums and tambourines, or other rhythm instruments
- map of southeast Asia; good one can be found at http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map_of_southeast_asia.htm
- Southern Asia Spiritual Music Montage from Global Ministries <http://globalministries.org/resources/multimedia-resources/index/general-videos/southern-asia-spiritual-music.html>
- Bibles

Sing “This Is the Day,” adding instruments if you have them. Open Bibles to Psalm 92 and read verses 1–4 in unison. *What time of day are you most likely to pray? What time of day are you most likely to praise God? Invite the youth to imagine these verses being brought to life in many different languages and modes of expression around the world today. If you have any bilingual learners, ask them to translate the verses into their second language.*

Look at the world map and explore time zones. Talk about what time it is where you are, and have group members figure out what time it is in France, Thailand, Indonesia, and India. Invite them to imagine a single day and the various ways people of faith “declare God’s steadfast love” as the sun rises and sets around the world.

While looking at the map of Southeast Asia, ask people to share what they know about the countries of this region. Affirm their answers, offering gentle corrections if necessary. Collectively you may not know much about this region, but the goal is to pool your knowledge. People in Southern Asia worship in many different styles, modes, and moods. It's all part of God's day around the world. Introduce the montage by explaining that these are global ministries partners of the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Together, these denominations work to provide education, poverty relief, health services, and refugee assistance. Tell how your church sends a portion of its resources to support ministries such as these. Watch the Southern Asia Spiritual Music Montage.

Sing "This Is the Day" once more, as if you were being filmed for a global montage.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Action Plans (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Your service as leader of this group is appreciated by God. You are a disciple sowing seeds of God's realm in this field. Give yourself credit for the ways you help God's realm along. Give thanks for all the ways God works while you are asleep. Find out about some mission activities in which your church is currently involved.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Jesus used farming images to talk about God's realm. In the passage from Mark there are several steps between the planting and the harvesting. With your group, read Mark 4:26–29 twice. First, ask youth to listen for the overall flow and meaning. The second time, have them identify the verbs or action words they hear. Have one person write these words in a vertical column on newsprint or whiteboard. You should end up with the following words or variations, depending on your translation: "scatter, sleep, sprout, rise, know, produce, go."

Suggest that some steps have been left out of this agricultural story, and ask for possible omitted actions. (The farmer tilled the soil, added fertilizer, weeded, removed pests; it rained, the sun shone; the farmer watered the crop, protected it from predators.) Any or all of these can be added to the list. Now ask the group to consider each action and decide whether the farmer had control over the action or if it was primarily in God's hands. Write "God" or "farmer" next to each action.

Name some mission projects in which your local church is currently involved, such as a soup kitchen, a homeless shelter, mentoring, or advocacy work. If your youth are not familiar with these ministries, describe them briefly. Help the group to realize that every act of discipleship involves aspects we can control and some we need to leave in God's hands. With reference to the mission projects you named, identify aspects of human effort and achievement and outcomes that have to be left up to God.

Close with this or a similar question: *What does this passage from Mark tell us about being disciples?*



5 The Go-Between

Leader preparation: Research the specifics of the Arizona laws enacted in 2010 that target undocumented aliens. Find out why so many people opposed these laws. See <http://www.ucc.org/news/religious-leaders-call.html> or <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/26/AR2010042602595.html>. Familiarize yourself with the whole story of Esther.

Supplies:

- “The Go-Between,” Attachment: Activity 5

Recruit four learners to read the parts of Narrator, Esme, Javier, and Miguel. Have them perform the drama, and thank them with applause. Have others in the group read Esther 4 with different people taking the parts of the Narrator, Esther, and Mordecai. *When have you ever felt you had to hide who you really were to fit in? To be safe? Describe a time when you risked your own safety or social status to help others. What affected your decision? Who are the refugees in your community or region? Share with the group what you have learned about the immigration laws in Arizona. What is similar or different about the situation Mordecai and Esther faced in Persia?*

6 It’s Like This . . . (Kingdom of God)

Leader preparation: Using index cards, make three category cards labeled: “Heaven,” “Faith,” and “The Kingdom of God.” Make 30 smaller comparison cards labeled: penny, iPod, soccer game, jumbo box of crayons, alarm clock, three grains of rice, blackbirds, fishing net, pearl, hot sauce, bungee cord, shopping mall, housekeeper, farmer, thunderstorm, restaurant, a frog, soil, rock band, wedding, ants, leafy tree, school, dolphins, weeds, Internet, vacation, your mother, ice cream sundae, and computer programmer.

Supplies:

- index cards prepared as described above

Jesus used everyday objects and activities like farming and housecleaning to talk about God’s activity. Sometimes these comparisons were surprising or made people think about God in new ways. If Jesus were with us today, what might he use to talk with us about God?

This activity has rules similar to the game “Apples to Apples.” Divide the group into three teams: Team A, Team B, and Team C. Deal the comparison cards, 6 per team.

Team A puts aside its comparison cards and turns over one of the category cards. Team B and Team C each have to select one of its comparison cards that members think Team A might choose to fit the category. They can move away from the group to discuss their choices. When Team B and Team C have each selected a card, the two cards are placed face up in front of Team A. Team A decides which card best matches the category. The other teams can offer arguments for which card is the best match. Team A chooses a match and the team that offered that card gets 100 points.

For round two, Team B turns over a category card while the other two teams pick two more cards that members think fit the category. Again, they select two comparison cards, to match the category, and the round continues as before. Follow same pattern for further rounds. Total the points and declare a winner.

Invite the group to ponder how this activity made them think about God in new ways.

To extend the activity, look up some of the following comparisons from the Bible: Matthew 13:24, 31, 33, 44, 52; 20:1; and 25:14. Some of these things are included in the comparisons cards.

Sending & Serving Activities

7 **Cut, Cover, Color or Connect? Interpreting God's Word (Easy Preparation)**

Leader preparation: Think of a passage of scripture that makes your heart expand with joy. Think of a passage of scripture by which you feel judged. Think of a passage that could be heard in more than one way, depending on the context in which it was used. Think about how you can assist learners to discover that scripture is open to interpretation. Indeed, it requires interpretation in order to be the word of a still-speaking God. Help them understand that scripture should not be used to judge or condemn others.

Supplies:

- paper
- crayons or colored markers
- scissors (several pairs)
- transparent sticky tape or a stapler

Ask the group whether they have ever heard a Bible verse used as a weapon? As an affirmation. Describe some challenges of understanding and interpreting the Bible, such as:

- It's made up of many different kinds of writing (poetry, history, letters, prophecy, laws), and does not speak in one voice. There are many different writers.
- Sometimes the Bible contradicts itself.
- People interpret and use the Bible very differently, according to their theology and their life situations.
- Parts of the Bible are challenging and hard to understand or make us uncomfortable.
- The Bible was written over many years and a very long time ago. The first audience of the scriptures was in a culture very different from our own.
- The Bible was translated many times. Much of the original language has been lost and is, therefore, difficult to translate.

This activity helps us think about the ways scripture might be used. Place the paper, crayons, tape and scissors on the table. Ideally, you will have multiple items of each, enough for all in your group. While picking up each item, say something such as:

- Bible passages can be used to hurt—to “cut” other people (scissors).
- Bible passages can be used to discourage questions,—to “cover” over disagreements (paper).
- Bible passages can be used to brighten the world—to “color” it with God's blessing (crayons).
- Bible passages can be used to bring God's people together into beloved community—to “connect” (tape or staples).

You, or a group member, will read each passage of scripture, and then ask everyone to pick up an item from the table to express how this verse might be heard or used. For most of the verses, there is more than one possibility.

Let learners explain their choices and reasoning behind each choice. Adapt the activity by using fewer or more verses, according to the flow of the conversation. Before you begin, remind the learners of their choices: Scissors to “cut,” paper to “cover,” crayons to “color,” tape to “connect.”

Use these verses:

- God said, “Do not eat of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, for the day you eat of it, you will die.” (Genesis 2:17)
- Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep, and live in harmony with one another. (Romans 12:15)
- Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can it be restored? It is no longer good for anything.” (Matthew 5:13)
- Jesus said, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will see God.” (Matthew 5:5, 9)
- Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me.” (John 14:6)
- Now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who is sexually immoral or greedy, who is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber. Do not even eat with such a one. (1 Corinthians 5:11)
- Jesus said, “Do you love me? Feed my sheep.” (John 21:17–18)
- Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes in the morning. (Psalm 30:5)
- If I take the wings of the morning, and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me. (Psalm 139:9-10)
- Jesus said, “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown in the fire.” (Matthew 7:19)
- Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God. Micah 6:8
- I permit no woman to preach or have authority over men. She is to keep silent. (1 Timothy 2:11)
- There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)
- No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. (1 John 4:12)
- Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything. (Colossians 3:22)

Why did we not always agree in our choices? Is there one right way to interpret scripture, or are there many possibilities? What are some things you considered as you tried to decide about these texts? Although the contents of the Bible were decided by people between the 3rd and 4th centuries, in each generation Christians need to figure out the meaning of biblical texts for our own time and place. We learn about ancient near Eastern cultures in order to understand particular teachings. Our own culture and personal experiences lead us to hear or to use scripture in particular ways. We have a responsibility, as people of faith, to use scripture in ways that build up and do not hurt others. The “living Word of God” is more than words on a page. As we live the text, we bring the word of God to life.

8 Windowsill Herb Gardens

Leader preparation: Read Mark 4:26–34. Meditate on the hidden work of God beneath the soil. Give thanks for the blessing of herbs and spices that give flavor to life.

Supplies:

- a 6" pot and saucer for each participant (new or recycled)
- potting soil
- assorted packets of herb seeds such as basil, cilantro, chives, parsley, thyme, and mint
- wooden craft sticks and permanent markers for labeling
- water
- newspaper or plastic sheet to protect your work table
- (optional) recipe books

Cover work tables with newspaper or plastic. Each participant chooses two herbs for a mini herb garden. Ask the group to share what they know about recipes that might include these herbs. If available, check out some recipes. Have them fill their pots with soil, make labels on the craft sticks, plant, and water the seeds. Follow the directions on the seed packages for depth and spacing. Tell the group that they may take home their herb gardens to care for them until the seeds sprout. This means they have to put them in a sunny place and water them when the soil is dry. Note how long this stage may take.

After the herbs sprout, youth can give the herb garden to a family member, neighbor, or friend. While they are waiting for the seeds to sprout, they can be thinking about who will receive their gift. Explore with the group the uncertainties of this project. You might forget to water or over water and your plants will die. Your seeds might not sprout. The sunny location you choose might be too hot and the seeds might wither. Or the recipient of your gift might not take care of it.

Ask them to identify parallels with the life of faith. (Possible ideas: Our efforts don't always yield consistent results. We initiate acts of faith, then pass them on to someone else to finish. We only do part of the work; God does the rest.) Read Mark 4:26–28 as your gardeners hold the pots in their hands. Pray for the successful growth of these seeds and for the gardens' intended recipients.



9 Children's Work, Women's Work

Leader preparation: Think about the lives of the young people in your group. Some may be economically at risk, while others may be financially comfortable and quite secure. Their situations will impact their response to Patricia's story. This activity also demonstrates the potential of even young youth to be world-changing leaders. See and celebrate that potential in your group.

Supplies:

- artwork: "Two Women and a Child" by Diego Rivera
<http://affiliates.allposters.com/link/redirect.asp?item=1813781&AID=1413628417&PSTID=1<ID=1&lang=1>
- Bibles
- (optional) video: <http://globalministries.org/resources/>

Invite a strong reader to read the following story. Help, if needed, with Spanish pronunciation of Patricia. (Pa-tree-see-a).

Patricia grew up in the slums of Lima, Peru, and began working while she was just a child. In the 1990s she attended a program to help child workers. She quickly became a leader there. At the age of 12, she participated in a regional conference for child workers and organizers. The next year, at age 13, she traveled to the United States with Church World Service to speak about her life and her efforts to create better working conditions for children in Latin America. While many people in North America assumed that child labor should be abolished so that children could go to school, Patricia saw things differently. She believed that if child labor laws were tightened, more children would be forced into dangerous work and exploited sexually or physically. She argued that some children will always have to work. They take pride in helping their families. Reform should be aimed at improving child labor conditions, ensuring that children receive fair wages, and providing education for working kids.

Ask group to reflect on Patricia's story. *What stands out for you, from her story? What adjectives come to mind, as you picture her?*

Ecclesiastes 3:12–13 and Lamentations 5:1–5 offer contrasting ideas about work. Enlist two readers to read these verses. *Which image of work is reflected in Patricia's story?*

Look at Diego Rivera's image of "Two Women and a Child." Ask your group to enter into this scene through their imaginations. Offer some of the following questions for reflection, as participants quietly look at the image. Pause between each question to allow time for wonder.

- What do you see in the face of the woman looking toward us?
- What do you see in the postures of both women?
- Why is the bowl empty?
- Is the child sick?
- Is the child hungry?
- Is the child contented? Sleepy?
- Where do you see strength in this scene?
- What else do you see?

Option: Show the group a video of UCC/Disciples Global Ministries projects in Latin America. Go to <http://globalministries.org/resources/multimedia-resources/index/connecting-threads-series/connecting-threads-out-of.html>. Select Video resource "Connecting Threads: Out of the Shadows, Into the Sun." Invite your group to plan a fund-raiser to support one of these projects.

Reflect

This Exploration looked outward to ways of serving neighbors, elders, and global partners. What new ideas for mission surfaced during your time together? How can you carry them to the next level of implementation? How did you balance global and local concerns? Name concrete outcomes that flowed from these activities, as well as the impact on the learners. Pray for God's spirit to work in and through your group to bring your plans to fruition.

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Attachment: Activity 2

Scrambled Scripture: Esther

A. Lovely Esther put on perfume, her best clothing, and her jewels and went to the king's hall. She invited King Aha and his top assistant Haman to a private banquet just for the two of them. The king said, "I'll be there, baby." Nasty Haman was flattered to be invited to the party.

B. Mordecai still wouldn't bow to Haman, so Haman built a gallows near the city gate, planning to hang Mordecai. That night, King Aha couldn't sleep. He began looking over old records. He discovered how Mordecai had saved his life by uncovering the plot against him. In the morning, the king found Mordecai, dressed him in rich robes, gave him a fine horse, and thanked him for his service. Haman was furious.

C. Once upon a time, there was a king in Persia named Ahasuerus (known here as King Aha). He gave a big party for his friends and invited his wife, Queen Vashti, to entertain them. But she refused. King Aha was insulted and said, "I'm going to find a new queen!"

D. Esther's Uncle Mordecai hung out near the palace, at the city gate. He heard all the gossip. He had once saved the king's life by uncovering an assassination plot and alerting Esther.

E. Esther organized a feast of all the king's favorite foods. Gratefully, the king asked her, "What favor can I do for you?" She said, "Save the lives of my people." And he did.

F. Mordecai heard about the decree and starting mourning. Esther, who was in her palace chambers, knew nothing about it. A servant carried messages between the two of them. Mordecai told Esther she had to do something to save her people. Esther told Mordecai she didn't have any power. "I can't even go visit Aha unless he invites me. If I show up without an invitation, I could be put to death."

G. Mordecai said, "This is your moment, Esther. Perhaps you are here for a time such as this." After three days of prayer and fasting, Esther finally decided to try to help. She would go to see the king.

H. Scheming, nasty Haman was executed on the gallows he had built for Mordecai. Mordecai got Haman's old job as the king's top advisor. The Jews of Persia were saved by Esther's bravery. They celebrate their deliverance to this day, every year on the feast of Purim. The End.

I. Mordecai, a faithful Jew, brought up his lovely cousin Esther, after her parents died. When she was a young woman she was taken into the king's harem. She was given beauty treatments for a whole year. King Aha checked out all the virgins in the harem and chose Esther to be his queen. No one knew she was Jewish. She pleased the king, and he offered to grant her a special request. But she didn't ask for anything.

J. Scheming, nasty Haman, King Aha's top advisor, demanded respect from everyone in the city. But Mordecai refused to bow to Haman because God alone is worthy. Haman was furious. So, Haman hatched a plot to kill all the Jews. He told King Aha that they were dangerous because they followed their own laws. He convinced the king to draw up a decree to destroy all the Jews in Persia.

Attachment: Activity 5

The Go-Between

Characters:

Narrator
Esme, the governor's wife
Miguel, Esme's cousin
Javier, a gardener at the governor's mansion

Scene 1: In the Governor's Garden

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

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

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

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

Esme: Shh, no one knows. But, yes, I was born in San Fernando, and I came across when I was seven years old. My mother died when I was 12, and my father was sent back to Mexico. I have not heard from him since. Miguel, my cousin, cared for me and helped me get through school. But I can't be seen talking to him now. My husband doesn't know about my past. I need to know if Miguel is all right. Can you talk to him and bring me news of my old friends?

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

Scene Two: On the Street

Javier *(quietly)*: Are you Miguel?

Miguel *(suspiciously)*: No comprendo.

Javier: I bring a message for you from the first lady, from Esme.

Miguel *(eagerly)*: Si, si, I am Miguel. Tell me, how is she?

Javier: She is beautiful and kind, but I am not sure she is really happy. She seems lonely.

Miguel: You must tell her that we miss her. Life is so hard for us. They have made a new law that says we can be stopped at any time, day or night. They will ask for our papers. If we cannot produce them, we'll be deported. I have been in this country for 22 years working the whole time! How can this be? She is the governor's wife. Surely she can do something.

Attachment: Activity 5 (continued)

Javier: I will tell her what you have said. I know she loves you.

Scene Three: Back in the Garden

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

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

Javier: But your people need you.

Esme: My people? Who are my people?

Scene Four: On the Street Again

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

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

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

Miguel: I know.

Scene Five: In the Garden

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

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

Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Future and Vision

About this Age Group

Living mostly in the present moment, youth experience life vividly. Yet, they are also aware of a rapidly approaching future when they think they will be free to pursue their individual dreams. They are increasingly aware of being asked to step up to adult challenges. However, they sometimes feel they are expected to do the work of adults while being treated as children. Many youth long for greater autonomy whether or not they are fully equipped for such independence. Some youth struggle against what they see as unreasonable expectations or unfair rules in their life. Encounters with scripture can shape their hopes and dreams, helping them to discover commitments that ground them, as well as gifts they have to share with the world. Faith can ease their fears about inheriting the world's messes or help them discover new solutions to the struggles and questions they face.

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. Engagement with the Bible nurtures our faith community from generation to generation.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Mark 16:1-8
Psalms 112

Leader Preparation

Where are you right now? Consider the many possible ways you might answer this question. The activities in this Exploration invite you and your group to:

- Locate yourself in the great sweep of sacred history
- Ponder your place in the universe
- Question where you fit in the unfolding Christian story
- Discover your place in the family of faith
- Dream new visions for your particular community and consider the impact of your decisions and actions on the world around you.

Prayer: Remind me, hope-filled and fearless God, that youth are not merely “the future of the church.” They are ready to choose life here and now and to build a new world beginning today. Help me believe in their potential and encourage them to dream big! Pull us along together into your irresistible future. Amen

Session Development

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

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Because I Said So! (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Reflect on ways youth are bound by rules with which they may not agree; reflect as well on how rules can also make them feel safe. They are moving from rote obedience to adult choices about values and commitments that will shape their lives. How has your life been shaped by the commandments and rules you have chosen to follow? On four separate pieces of paper, write these phrases in large letters (one phrase per paper):

Following God’s laws is a road to happiness.
I’ll be punished if I don’t.
Because I am a Christian.
Other

Supplies:

- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- four statements prepared as described above
- Bibles
- paper and pen
- masking tape

Say that there are some new rules the group must follow: All the people wearing glasses have to sit on the floor. People with long hair have to stand up for the whole activity. *What makes a rule a good rule?* (Possible answers: It makes sense; it’s fair; it was formed by consensus.) Agree that the new rules you just stated are arbitrary, unhelpful, and should be dropped.

In pairs, have learners come up with a list of:

- Two rules that are silly, unnecessary, or unfair
- Two rules that are impossible to follow all the time, but that are a good idea in principle
- Two rules that people should always follow

Reconvene the group and share answers. Record ideas on newsprint or a whiteboard. Invite discussion using these or similar questions:

- What makes the first set of rules hard to accept?
- What is the point of having rules that we sometimes break?
- Are the rules in the third category (people should always follow these rules) universal, or are they specific to our own culture or situation?

Some people view the Bible as a rulebook outlining principles for what makes a good life. This can pose problems. Some of Bible’s laws reflect a time and place very different from our own. The Bible also includes lots of other kinds of writing besides laws and commandments. Nonetheless, the Hebrew people believed that God cared about every aspect of their daily lives. The Law of Moses gives specific guidelines for family life, trade, faith, and community. Deuteronomy 30 is a summary statement about the value of God’s commandments. Read aloud Deuteronomy 30:19–20. *According to this text, what promises are offered to those who follow God’s commands? What are the consequences of disobedience?*

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.

Post the four pieces of paper with the phrases you prepared earlier. Read the phrases aloud. Pose the question “Why do you follow God’s way?” and ask learners to move to the paper with the way they would answer the question. For the paper with the word “Other,” learners must come up with another reason why it might be important for them to try to follow God’s way.



2 Strangers and Sojourners

Leader preparation: Find out about refugees who live in your community. What challenges do they face—linguistically, economically, socially? Think about the various groups that make up middle schoolers’ universe. Teens often feel like outsiders or exiles. Spend time with the artwork, and explore feelings of awe, loneliness, beauty, and wonder it may invoke in you.

Supplies:

- artwork: “No Traveller’s Borne” by Jess
https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1282230595?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=17101&store_id=1401
- modeling clay or play dough
- Bible

Place the artwork “No Traveller’s Borne” on a table in the center of your meeting space, with group members seated as close to it as possible. Ask everyone to take a pea-sized ball of modeling clay. Invite youth to look at the poster for a moment in silence. Then pose the following questions, pausing between each question. Part way through, turn the picture around to give participants another angle of view.

- Look at the textures of the paint. What does it suggest to you?
- What do the colors suggest?
- Where do you see beauty in this picture?
- What emotions do you see in this poster?
- Where do you see mystery?
- In the imaginary universe of this painting, where are you right now?
Place your bit of clay somewhere on the poster, in any place that feels like where you are.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews described people of faith as strangers and sojourners who are traveling in search of a homeland. A sojourner is like a refugee—someone who lives and works in a country not his or her own, usually because that person has fled from poverty or war. Ask learners to take another small ball of clay to represent a refugee or sojourner. Ask them to place it somewhere on the poster to represent how a stranger or sojourner might feel. While they are doing this, read Hebrews 11:13b–16.

- While youth are still looking at the poster, offer questions for further reflection.
- Where is the better country that we all desire?
- Where is the homeland promised by God? Move your piece and your sojourner’s piece of clay to the part of the picture that feels like that kind of place.
- What does God promise in the passage from Hebrews? Is there anything we can do to help make this possibility real?

Share concrete suggestions for helping “strangers and sojourners” at school or in your community.



3 Hero Hunt

Leader preparation: Recruit five adults in your church who like to act and who are willing to improvise. Print the summaries for Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Sarah and give them to your actors. Tell them that learners will be asking them questions about their characters in order to discover why they are good faith role models. Prepare these volunteers by giving the questions they may be asked. For each character, devise a simple costume, with draped fabric and a sash, and a name tag with their biblical name. Have the adults wear costumes and name tags. If this activity takes place during worship, have them be seated in worship, and let the youth go and find them and bring them to their meeting room. If the activity takes place at another time, have the role players hide near the meeting place for youth to discover.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- fabric pieces for hero costumes
- “Hero Hunt Roles,” Attachment: Activity 3

What is faith? Ask youth to find Hebrews 11:1 in their Bibles. Read aloud the verse. *How does the writer of this letter define faith?* In chapter 11, the letter names people who are examples of faith from the Hebrew Bible. *Some of these heroes of faith have come back to life and are hiding nearby today. Let’s find them and ask them a few questions about what faith meant to them. Our hidden heroes are Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Sarah.*

Send group members out to find the heroes and invite them back to your meeting area. Once everyone has returned, learners may ask the following questions. Encourage the group to add their own ad lib questions.

- Who are you?
- In what way did you please God?
- Describe a time when you doubted God.
- What did you do when you had trouble seeing the future God had in store for you?
- What does faith mean to you?

Ask the heroes to step out of role and continue conversation as “themselves.” Ask both youth and adults to consider which biblical hero they would choose as an example of strong faith. Why?

Thank the heroes for visiting your group, and close by reading Hebrews 11:1–14 together with learners and guests.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Sarah’s Circle (Easy Preparation)

Leader’s preparation: Clear the meeting space so you have room for your group to stand in a circle without crowding. This is a good activity to take outside, weather permitting. Post the words to “We Are Dancing Sarah’s Circle” where all can see. Decide when you will teach the song melody and the grapevine step. If your group is timid, you’ll want to teach the song and the movement separately. But if your group already knows the tune to “Jacob’s Ladder (Sarah’s

Circle),” begin singing and ask them to follow your steps. Do what will be most comfortable for your group.

The grapevine step: Learners stand in a circle, holding hands. This step is easier to demonstrate than to describe, so you can just show it. Step to the left. (“We are . . .”), move right foot behind left foot (“dancing”), step to the left again (“Sarah’s . . .”), bring right foot beside left foot (“circle”). Continue to move in the same direction every two beats for the rest of the verse. On verse two, reverse direction to move to the right. Repeat direction changes for each verse. Watch the following video to learn the grapevine step: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7GS2CLo7NYw>.

Supplies:

- Bibles, bookmarked at Genesis 18 and Hebrews 11
- song: “ We Are Dancing Sarah’s Circle” (tune: Jacob’s Ladder, 8.8.8.5.)
<http://www.theinterpretersfriend.org/songs/w-r-dncg-srh%27s-crcl.html>

Read Genesis 18:1–15. Have a girl read Sarah’s words, a boy read Abraham’s words, and another reader everything else. Then ask another reader to read Hebrews 11:8–12.

Explain that all the people who now make up the Jewish and Christian faith traditions have a faith ancestor who came from this unlikely pregnancy to elderly parents. Abraham and Sarah’s “children” are indeed “as many as grains of sand on the seashore.” There are a great many people in Sarah’s circle.

Explain that we are going to explore some of the people in Sarah’s circle through a song. Invite the group to make a close circle, holding hands. Explore who is in each circle prior to each verse:

The first circle is the circle of the people closest to us, the ones we know and love the best. It might be a very small circle. Think about who is in that circle. (Allow time for naming them out loud.) We dance the first verse with them.

Sing and dance verse 1:

We are dancing Sarah’s circle
We are dancing Sarah’s circle
We are dancing Sarah’s circle
Sisters, brothers all.”

The second circle is the circle of our history. In this circle we include people who have loved us or taught us in the past, or people who are our ancestors. They may no longer be a part of our lives, but we carry them with us. (Allow time for naming these people.) We dance the second verse with them.

Sing and dance verse 2:

Here we seek and find our history (3x)
Sisters, brothers all.

The third circle is our group here and now. These are the people God has given us to be companions on our spiritual journeys. As we say our names, we know that each of us is valued and important in this circle. (Go around the circle and let each one say the name of the person to the left.) We dance this verse in honor of one another.

Sing and dance verse 3:

We will all do our own naming (3x)
Sisters, brothers all.

For the fourth verse, we bring our whole church into the circle. We celebrate the community to which we belong and all the varied parts of it, working, sharing, grieving, and growing together. (Invite group members to name people in the church who are significant to them.) We bring our whole church into the dance for verse four.

Sing and dance verse 4:

Every round a generation (3x)
Sisters, brothers all.

In the last verse, we expand the circle to its widest reach. We bring into our circle people from around the world, animals, plants, even the earth itself. (Invite the group to name what and who they want to add to the circle.) Our final verse includes these, as well as all the other circles we have named. It encompasses past, present and future.

Sing and dance verse 5: “On and on the circle’s moving . . .” (3x) “. . . Sisters, brothers all.”



5 Rules, Rules, Rules

Leader preparation: Can you sum up your personal ethical commitments in a single sentence? How is divine grace necessary as you attempt to be a faithful and obedient Christian? Youth are in the process of figuring out these questions. Many rules are imposed on them by parents and school authorities. Yet they are also idealists, seeking principles for living that will move them toward holiness and meaning. This activity affirms that journey.

Supplies:

- post five large papers around the room with the following headings, one on each: Universal, Ideal, Rule at home, Outdated, Other
- “Rules, Rules, Rules,” Attachment: Activity 5
- pens or markers
- Bibles

Read Deuteronomy 30:15–20 with your group. Ask them to restate the reading in their own words, inviting a few different expressions of this. Notice how this passage is broad, referring to God’s commandments as a whole without specifically listing them. Invite learners to suggest where they might find specific lists of God’s commandments (the Ten Commandments, teachings of Jesus).

Talk about how rules and commandments fall into several categories. Point to the five pages you have posted, and explain each one briefly.

- *Universal:* It should apply to everyone in the world.
- *Ideal:* It’s a good thing to aim for, but it’s impossible to do it perfectly.
- *Rule at home:* This rule only applies in some situations (for example, at home, in cities, in some cultures).
- *Outdated:* It might have been a good rule once, but it’s no longer important.
- *Other:* You’re not sure, or it fits in another category.

Hand out “Rules, Rules, Rules” pages and ask your learners to assign each rule to one of the five categories. When they have finished their personal list, invite them to create a group list by writing the numbers of the rules on the appropriate pages that you posted. Discuss agreement and differences. *Which rules were easily assigned to one of the categories? Which were harder? Would you rather follow commands that are achievable, or ones that are impossible but inspiring? Which of these commands are life-giving, and which are stifling or unnecessary? How can we know if a rule helps us to God’s way?*

⑥ Language of God

Leader preparation: Download the video “The Language of God” and view it several times with the discussion questions in mind. If possible, set up the video in your meeting space, so that it can be viewed on a large screen.

Supplies:

- two Bibles marked at John 1
- video: “The Language of God” <http://www.ucc.org/god-is-still-speaking/ads/>
- screen or large computer for viewing
- (optional) song: “Bring Many Names” <http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/b/r/i/bringman.htm>

Before the first viewing, introduce the activity by saying that this video was released in 2010 as part of the United Church of Christ identity campaign: God Is Still Speaking. It’s only 90 seconds long, so the group will view it several times.

After first viewing, invite the group to discuss: *What language does God speak? Why do you think the video is called “The Language of God”?*

Ask someone to read John 1:1–5. *How do you describe God? Through words, images, or a combination of the two?*

During the second viewing, invite learners to list specific words used in the video. After the second viewing, have them share the words they noticed, both the headers and those embedded in the photos. Ponder and discuss: *How are these words the language of God? What other words would you add?*

Invite someone to read John 1:10–12. Ask the group to reflect on what it means that Jesus gives us power to become children of God. Invite them to identify images from the video that show this power.

During the third viewing, ask learners to notice: *Which images surprise you or puzzle you? Why did the filmmaker include these things? Does God’s language (God’s Word) change over time?*

Option: Sing the hymn “Bring Many Names.”

Sending & Serving Activities

7 Perimeter Walk (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Do you tend to think about God mainly at church? Consider the neighborhood or environment around your church. How is God visible there, in the struggles or joys of your setting? Determine a route to take with your group: a perimeter walk around the outside of your church building, or a larger walk of a several blocks around the neighborhood.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- appropriate clothing for the weather

We often assume that God’s activity takes place mostly inside the church. But faith is meaningless unless it also goes beyond church walls. The Bible’s intent is to move us to look at the world differently, and to move through the world differently. Invite three readers to read the following passages. After each one, ask: *How does this passage ask us to look at the world differently?*

- Jeremiah 29:7, from a message sent by the prophet to the Jewish people when they were in exile in Babylon
- Revelation 22:1–2, from John’s vision of the heavenly city
- Matthew 25:34–40, from Jesus

Explain that, as these passages suggest, sometimes scripture opens our eyes to the beauty and blessings of daily life. Sometimes scripture helps us see suffering that we need to fix. Sometimes our faith gives us visions of changes that are needed in the world. Tell the group that they are going to take a walk outside, around the church (or the neighborhood). As they walk, ask them to try to look at everything they see through God’s eyes. Offer the following prompts before you go out, or along the way:

- What does God see here that is beautiful?
- What does God see here that needs changing?
- What future possibilities is God showing us?

Upon your return to your meeting area, talk about what you saw, reviewing the responses to the prompts. Pray for your neighborhood, and identify a further action that the group can undertake together.

8 One Thing Leads to Another

Leader preparation: Amid life’s complexity, our actions matter, yielding outcomes that can either destroy the natural balance of the earth or repair broken systems. Middle schoolers are ready to ponder their own moral power as they think about the world’s problems. Not every positive act leads directly to a positive outcome, but they can make a difference by their choices. For yourself, consider how the Word of God informs your decision making and your care for the earth.

Option: Search the web for information about the reintroduction of wolves into Yellowstone National Park, or go to <http://www.nps.gov/yell/naturescience/wolves.htm>.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- “Wolves in Yellowstone National Park,” Attachment: Activity 8

Share with your group the story of wolves in Yellowstone (from the attachment). Invite the group to consider whether the reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone was a good idea or a bad idea. It all depends on your perspective, whether you are a nearby rancher, a fisherman, or a wildlife biologist. This story illustrates two points—the complex interconnectedness of nature (if you change one part of an ecosystem, other parts react and change as well) and the role of humans as agents of harm or help. Ask learners where they see God’s will in this scenario. Affirm the variety of responses. Ask someone to read Isaiah 55:10–11. Invite learners to suggest how God’s word can trigger a positive chain reaction.

Divide into pairs and have each pair complete a possible chain of outcomes with at least five steps from the following initial actions. The chain may either be a negative or positive feedback loop.

- You and your friends clean up a vacant lot that was full of trash.
- You sit down at a lunch table at school with kids you don’t know.

Share chains of outcomes, and invite group members to commit to one act of environmental activism or personal peacemaking this week. Keep track of where it leads.

9 Cascarones Blessings

Leader preparation: Count your blessings, and look forward to a time of laughter and fun with your kids. Cut a 1” diameter circle in the end of raw eggs by pricking the shell with a needle or cake tester. Carefully remove the small circle of eggshell, discard it, and pour out the egg. Save the eggs for cake or omelets. Wash the shells, and put them back in the egg carton for drying and transport.

Supplies:

- two eggs for each group member, plus a few extras, hollowed out, washed, and dry
- tissue paper in bright colors
- birdseed or rice, enough to fill each eggshell about halfway
- funnels, not essential, but helpful to pour seed into eggshells
- tape for resealing cascarones
- felt tip markers
- Bible, marked at 1 Peter 3:8–9

Ask the group to share ideas about what the word “blessing” means. Hand out sets of scripture blessings, and invite youth to read them out loud. Explore the following topic with your group: *If God is the source of blessing, how does it make sense for us to bless one another?* (Possible answers: We bless one another to be reminded of God’s blessing. We serve as channels for the grace and mercy of God by offering blessings to one another. When we bless a stranger or an enemy, we change the dynamic of our relationship.) Remind your group that sharing God’s blessing does not always require spoken words. Blessings can be channeled through acts of joy, laughter, and kindness. Conclude your discussion by asking someone to read 1 Peter 8:9 from the Bible.

Explain that “cascarone” means eggshell in Spanish. Cascarones are used as party favors at Easter and other holiday times. Cascarones bring laughter, good luck, and blessing to those around us. The first cascarone will be shared today

with someone in our group. The second is for youth to take with them to offer a surprise blessing to anyone they choose.

Have each person fill and decorate two eggs. For each egg, choose a word of blessing to write on the outside of the egg. Then fill the eggs with birdseed or rice, and reseal the eggshell by taping a couple of layers of tissue paper over the opening in the egg. Don't cover the whole egg with paper, or it won't crack open later. After the egg is sealed, decorate it using felt tip markers.

When all the cascarones are filled and decorated, go outside to a grassy place where birds can enjoy the birdseed from the cascarones. Now the fun begins. *Crush them in your hand, while cracking them gently on one another's heads.* You can stand in a circle, so everyone cracks their egg over the person to their left, or choose recipients randomly. Remind everyone to read and enjoy their blessings amid the chaos. Sweep up extra seed if necessary. Take home the other cascarone as a surprise for someone else.

Option: View a YouTube video of middle-schoolers enjoying cascarones: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=taODSrpYMuk>

Reflect

As you think back over this Exploration, what gives you hope? How have relationships in your group deepened through your shared faith practices? What did you learn from the painful moments? Hold each of your young friends in prayer, and be thankful for their unique and lovely ways. Ask God to forgive you for the times when you were less than perfect. Together with your group you have embodied the Christian story, taking your place among generations of faithful ones who have responded to the gospel. What you have done here is still sending ripples outward. Blessings abound!

Attachment: Activity 3

Hero Hunt Roles

Cut apart these roles and give a role card to each actor.

Abel: You were Adam and Eve’s second son. You were a shepherd. Your brother Cain was a farmer. You offered God your best sheep while Cain offered God his first fruit harvest. For some reason, God liked your offering better. Cain was jealous and murdered you (Genesis 4:1–10).

Your character is named in Hebrews 11:1–14 as a model of faith, someone whom God approved. Youth will find you and bring you back to their room to ask you questions about your faith. Answer as you imagine your character might have, or give your own answers. To prepare for your role, read Hebrews 11:1–14, and the passage for your character in Genesis. (Some of these passages don’t give much of a story.)

Enoch: You are a seventh-generation grandson of Adam and Eve. You lived to be 365 years old, walking with God the whole time. You are the father of Methusaleh, who lived to be 969 years old (Genesis 5:21–24).

Your character is named in Hebrews 11:1–14 as a model of faith, someone whom God approved. Youth will find you and bring you back to their room to ask you questions about your faith. Answer as you imagine your character might have, or give your own answers. To prepare for your role, read Hebrews 11:1–14, and the passage for your character in Genesis. (Some of these passages don’t give much of a story.)

Noah: When the earth needed a new beginning, God asked you to build an ark and bring two of every animal onto it. You saved your family and all the creatures during the 40-day flood and made possible a new beginning for God’s creation (Genesis 6:13–22).

Your character is named in Hebrews 11:1–14 as a model of faith, someone whom God approved. Youth will find you and bring you back to their room to ask you questions about your faith. Answer as you imagine your character might have, or give your own answers. To prepare for your role, read Hebrews 11:1–14, and the passage for your character in Genesis. (Some of these passages don’t give much of a story.)

Abraham and Sarah: God led you from your homeland into uncharted territory, and you traveled by faith. God promised that you would become a great nation, telling you that your descendants would be as many as the stars in the sky and the grains of sand on the beach. But you couldn’t have a child for the longest time. Abraham doubted, and Sarah laughed. Finally, when both of you were senior citizens, you had a son and named him Isaac, which means “he laughs” (Genesis 12:1–8).

Your character is named in Hebrews 11:1–14 as a model of faith, someone whom God approved. Youth will find you and bring you back to their room to ask you questions about your faith. Answer as you imagine your character might have, or give your own answers. To prepare for your role, read Hebrews 11:1–14, and the passage for your character in Genesis. (Some of these passages don’t give much of a story.)

Attachment: Activity 5

Rules, Rules, Rules

Directions: For each rule below, decide which category it belongs in. Put a check in that column. The categories are as follows:

- **Universal:** It should apply to everyone in the world.
- **Ideal:** It's a good thing to aim for, but it's impossible to do it perfectly.
- **Rule at home:** This rule only applies in some situations (for example, at home, in cities, in some cultures).
- **Outdated:** It might have been a good rule once, but it's no longer important.
- **Other:** You're not sure, or it fits in another category.

	Universal	Ideal	Rule at home	Outdated	Other
1. Don't pick your nose.					
2. Love your neighbor as yourself.					
3. Welcome strangers.					
4. Feed the hungry.					
5. Tell the truth.					
6. Don't cross the street on a red light.					
7. Honor your father and mother.					
8. Show up for school on time.					
9. Do your homework.					
10. Clean your room once a week.					
11. Don't swear.					
12. Don't cut in line.					
13. Go to church every Sunday.					
14. Don't shoplift.					
15. Visit the sick and those in prison.					
16. Wear your best clothes to church.					
17. Pray every day.					
18. Don't work on the Sabbath.					
19. Hug someone every day.					
20. Don't get tattoos.					
21. Say grace before meals.					
22. Do not kill.					
23. Don't go near people with leprosy.					
24. Don't drink and drive.					
25. Don't stare or point at people.					

Attachment: Activity 8

Wolves in Yellowstone National Park

Wolves were part of the natural ecosystem in Yellowstone National Park. Their numbers were reduced by human hunting until, by the 1940s, they were rare. By the 1970s, there were no wolves left in the park.

Here is what happened:

1. Wolves were hunted to extinction in this region.
2. Native elk populations greatly increased because there were no wolves to keep their numbers down.
3. The elk ate the riverbank trees and grasses more heavily.
4. More elk needed more food. The riverbanks became less shady, and the water became warmer.
5. Trout couldn't live in the warmer water, so there became fewer and fewer trout.

This is an example of what biologists call a negative feedback loop. One bad thing leads to another.

Beginning in 1995, wolves were reintroduced into Yellowstone. They quickly multiplied and thrived, numbering fourteen separate packs by 2009.

Here is what has happened:

1. Wolves were reintroduced by people.
2. The elk population declined somewhat.
3. Trees and shrubs grew back along the riverbanks.
4. The water was shaded and became cooler.
5. Trout returned to the river.

This is an example of a positive feedback loop. One good thing leads to another.