



Exploring tough questions
facing youth today

DO MIRACLES HAPPEN?

Signs and Wonders in the Gospel of John



The Pastoral Center

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Bible-based Explorations of Issues Facing Youth

» OVERVIEW

When conversing online, the acronym IRL stands for “in real life.” The virtual world of social media, text chats, blogs, and more have the power to remove us from the real world. What we experience online can skew our perspective on what it means to be human. It can numb us, incite us, distract us, depress us, confuse us, and make us rude or impatient. Strangely, this supposedly “social” and “connected” technology can profoundly disconnect us from others.

Religious faith can also place us in a bubble, especially when it distances us from others. When we keep the prophetic message at a safe distance, obscured in theological language and abstractions, we are missing the whole point. And when we see our parish as an insider club that serves itself, we can forget the radically inclusive message entrusted to us: God’s love is for *everyone*, and God expects us to transform the *whole world* through that love.

Through the incarnation, God showed up in the real world to show us that our faith is not just about talking the talk, but also walking the walk. It can be risky. It can be confusing. It can hurt. But living out our faith can also bring us great purpose, peace, and joy.

This series connects the Bible with the tough questions that youth (and adults) encounter in their neighborhood, in school, among friends, and even online. This process will help you as a leader break open these issues in a fun and meaningful way, sparking conversation and the kind of life change Jesus invites us to embrace.

» THE ROLE OF PARENTS

As children enter middle school and high school, they become more independent, self-reliant, and, well, self-centered. This can bring parents to make assumptions that this is the time to step back, giving their child more space to form their identity. While there is truth to that at some level (adolescents definitely shouldn’t be smothered), this is a stage of life when parents should in fact *lean in*. The apparent confidence and bluster youth show on the outside can mask the insecurity and confusion on the inside. Youth need their parents to be involved more than ever.

» WHOLE FAMILY FORMATION

Parents are the primary teachers of their own children, and parishes are waking up to the fact that faith formation programs need to bring parents into the process if they hope to see faith passed on to the next generation. Recent studies give us more and more evidence that the role of parents is the most important factor in determining whether a child will embrace faith as they move toward adulthood. Research from the Center for the Applied Research on the Apostolate shows that parents who talk about their faith and show through their actions that their faith is important to them are more likely to have children who remain Catholic.

More about Whole Family Formation >>>

To learn more about how your parish can take a comprehensive whole family approach to faith formation, visit GrowingUpCatholic.com.



While whole family events with elementary-aged children are on the rise, the role of parents can be an afterthought in youth ministry. We have designed the sessions in this series to work with or without parents present, and we encourage you to offer them as parent-child events.

If you choose to involve parents, it is important to consider before each session how to best do so. Many of the activities in this series are high-energy, creative, or silly. Some parents may need some encouragement to get out of their heads and have fun with the group. A few activities involving physical contact would be inappropriate for parents and youth to participate together, and we have noted them as such.

There are a number of ways to approach discussions with parent participation. Unless you have a small group, you will likely want to break into smaller groups for conversation. Some youth may be self-conscious and unable to be completely honest and open in a group situation with a parent present. For this reason, you may choose in some cases to assign parents to different groups from their own children, or to have separate parent and child groups altogether. Be sure to cover expectations around confidentiality. It is inappropriate for a parent (or youth) to share with another parent what their child said in a small group.

Note that even if parents and their children do not share all conversations together in the session, they will still have a valuable shared experience and can have extended conversations about it later.

>> **THANK YOU**

The role you play in gathering, animating, praying with, and forming youth is a valuable one. Thank you for all you do to serve the church and its families!

Bible-based Explorations of Issues Facing Youth

DO MIRACLES HAPPEN?

Signs and Wonders in the Gospel of John

INTRODUCTION

Are “signs of the times” visible today? Can we ourselves experience “miracles” like those in the Gospel of John? Not unless we approach the topic of miracles with hearts open to mystery and wonder in the realm of a living, active, loving God will we be able to.

The greatest miracle might be summed in John 1:14 and 3:16—the miracle of God’s love that became flesh and lived among us. But John also included examples of what we more traditionally think of as miracles: the wonder of abundance from little; healing and restoration; signs of impossibility and faith; and the resurrection. In this particular Gospel, miracles are always referred to as “signs.”

It is important in the beginning of this study to establish the role and purpose of signs in the Gospel of John. They point to the great act of the resurrection and the divinity of Jesus. It is from this backdrop that we must view the other signs and discover *why* they were performed. Then we can ask what they pointed to.

How does one *respond* to a miracle or a sign? One impulse is to try to reproduce it ourselves. But that’s pushing God aside. The better response is to *follow the direction the sign is pointing to*, like the magi who followed the star to Jesus’ crib. We will not necessarily answer all the questions, but we will wrestle with the possibilities. Sometimes, the greatest learning comes not from finding answers, but in struggling with the questions themselves. In examining the possibilities, we may find miracles we overlook every day. Looking at not only the wondrous signs themselves, but also examining the *why* behind Jesus’ use of these signs will be what we explore through this unit.

In the end, either you are open to belief that Jesus performed miracles, or you aren’t. There isn’t much room for a middle ground. And it can be very scary to come face-to-face with a sign pointing to the living God, a miracle. From C. S. Lewis’ classic, *Miracles*:

It is always shocking to meet life where we thought we were alone. “Look out!” we cry, “it’s alive.” And therefore this is the very point at which so many draw back...and proceed no further with Christianity. An “impersonal God”—well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth and goodness, inside our own heads—better still. A formless life-force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap—best of all. But God ... alive, pulling at the other end of the cord...that is quite another matter....



“Those who assume that miracles cannot happen are merely wasting their time by looking into the texts: we know in advance what results they will find for they have begun by begging the question.”

C. S. Lewis,
Miracles





EXTENDER SESSION

Extender sessions suggest special activities related to the issue of the unit. They help accommodate the diversity of parish schedules. Since each unit is undated, youth may study units in their entirety and still participate in special events of the parish that get scheduled simultaneously with youth group time. Extender sessions can be used anytime, but the one for this unit best follows **Session 2 (Option A)** or **Session 3 (Option B)**. Calculate now whether or not you will be using the extender session.



*So it is a sort of Rubicon. One goes across; or not. But if one does, there is no manner of security against miracles. One may be in for **anything**.*

» PREPARATION ALERT

Responding to a miracle or sign starts with prayer; each of the Respond sections of this unit will involve praying the miracle/sign highlighted in the session. Prayer is available at all times, not just to ask for hearts to see miracles, but to invite God's presence into the situation.

You may wish to set aside a corner of the room, a sort of prayer closet, especially for this time during each session. Use a privacy screen, or even move to another room, a chapel perhaps. Try to create an atmosphere conducive of prayer.

Be aware, too, that an option in Session 3 depends on arranging with the pastor to come into your meeting to talk with the group about healing.



THE TEACHING PLAN: The parts of the session guide

» **Faith story.** The session is rooted in this Bible passage.

» **Faith focus.** The story of the passage in a nutshell.

» **Session goal.** The entire session is built around this goal. What changes—in knowledge, attitude, and/or action—do you desire in your group?

» **Materials needed and advance preparation.** This is what you will need if the session is to go smoothly. You'll feel more at ease if you've taken care of these details before you meet your group.

» FROM LIFE TO BIBLE TO LIFE

The teaching plan we use is called *life-centered*. However, when we write each session, we always begin with scripture. We ask, what does this particular passage say, especially to youth? Each session moves from life to Bible to life. So the Bible is really at the center of this way of teaching.

In every session we try to hit upon a tough question that youth might ask. Find out what questions on this issue are important for your group. Feel free to bring your own input and invite your group members to add their own experiences.

» TEACHING THE SESSION

The five step-by-step movements will carry you from *life to the Bible and back to life*. Each session takes about 45 to 50 minutes. If there is a handout sheet for the session, take note of any complementary activities and stories.

1. **Focus.** Intended to create a friendly climate within the group and to *draw attention* to the issue.
2. **Connect.** Invites participants to *express* their own life experience about the issue, through talking, drawing, role playing, and other activities. Also use memory, reason, or imagination to get the group thinking about *why* they view the issue the way they do.
3. **Explore the Bible.** What does the Bible say about the issue? With a minimum of lecturing, dig into the faith story and search for answers to questions raised in the first activities. The Insights from Scripture section will help clarify the faith story. Help participants discover how the faith community understands the Bible passage.
4. **Apply** the faith story. What does the Bible passage *mean* for contemporary life? This is the “aha!” moment when participants realize the faith story has wisdom for *their* lives.
5. **Respond.** Why does the Bible passage *matter*? What will the group do about the issue in light of what they have learned from their own experiences set alongside the faith story? How can we *live* the faith story rather than pass it off as a mere intellectual exercise?

» LOOK AHEAD

Here are reminders for what you need to do for the next session or two.

» INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE

Here is a resource for Explore the Bible. Don't try to use all the material given. Take what you need to lead the session and answer questions your group may have. Let the Insights section inspire you to think and study more about the passage for the session.

» HANDOUT SHEETS

Occasionally, there will be a handout sheet to complement your session. If you choose to use this, make enough copies for the group in advance of the session. These sheets may include questions, stories, agree/disagree exercises, charts, pictures, and other materials to stimulate thinking and discussion.

Generally, no participant preparation is required unless the session plan calls for you to contact selected group members for specific tasks.

SAMPLE - DO NOT REPRODUCE

»» **SESSION 1**

TALES OF WONDER... FACT OR FICTION? »»»

»» **KEY VERSE**

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." (John 3:16)

»» **FAITH STORY**

John 3:1-17

»» **FAITH FOCUS**

Nicodemus, a Jewish theologian, went to Jesus trying to find out for himself who Jesus was. In the Gospel of John, all "signs" that Jesus performed had to do with revealing who Jesus is, the Son of God. These signs and tales of wonder point to the miracle of incarnation—God sending Jesus into the world.

»» **SESSION GOAL**

Help participants establish the role of signs in the Gospel of John, so they can begin to redefine what to expect from a miracle—a sign of God's presence in our world.

»» **Materials
needed and
advance
preparation**

- Box of wooden matches, 15 for every two people in the group (*Option A* in Focus)
- Video camera and media player (*Option B* in Focus)
- Chalkboard/chalk or newsprint/marker
- Copies of the handout sheet for Session 1 (*Option C* in Focus)
- Bibles
- Writing paper/pencils
- Kitchen timer



TEACHING PLAN

1. FOCUS 12-15 minutes

»» **Option A: Many a Miss.** Pair up. Each set of players lays out 15 matches in a row. Players decide who goes first, and then take turns picking up 1, 2, or 3 matches at a time, until they are all gone. The object of the game is to *avoid* picking up the last match; that is, to force the opponent to do it.

Tip (*but don't give it out!*): In order to ensure picking up the 14th match, the 10th match must be taken, so players must count carefully.

Play a few rounds, then ask: *Is this a game of chance? Is it a game of probability? Is it a game of skill?* Point out that different people may also see miracles in this light: a chance, a probability (associated with scientific theory), or feats of skill or trickery.





“The logical man must either deny all miracles or none.”

Charles Alexander Eastman
(Native American writer and physician, 1858-1939)



“There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.”

Albert Einstein
(German-born theoretical physicist, 1879-1955)



» **Option B: Reporter on the Street.** Interview people, asking, *What is a sign, biblically speaking, that is?* As you make note of the responses, get as creative as you like, perhaps even video-recording responses of people not only in the study group, but also of others in the faith community. If you choose to interview others before meeting time, make sure a media player and screen are available for playback. If you wish to do this with just your group, ask each one to write or draw answers on a chalkboard or newsprint. Review the responses.

» **Option C:** Divide into two groups, the **realists** and the **dreamers**. (These divisions need not apply to the actual mental state of the participants.) Distribute copies of the handout sheet. The realists will argue that miracles may have happened in Jesus’ time, but do not and probably cannot happen today. They must present convincing evidence in favor of their position. The dreamers will present the opposing side: that miraculous events happen every day in our world, and were not just a phenomenon of Jesus’ day. They argue that the reason the realists do not see miracles is because they either do not want to, or they just don’t know where to look. Allow 10 minutes for preparation, and each side two minutes to present. Follow up the debate with a discussion of which side seemed more convincing, and why. Also discuss whether the titles “realists” and “dreamers” were appropriate. Should the realists have been the ones who argued that miracles are a reality? Use a chalkboard or newsprint to keep track of relevant points.

2. CONNECT 6-8 minutes

Explore attitudes about miracles by relating the following scenario:

Some scientists in a rural town managed to make it possible for a cow to be able to carry a human fetus to term. In other words, cows were giving birth to human babies (with a lot of help from some test tubes and scientists sporting long rubber gloves). At least one teenage girl, Kimberly, experienced a definite crisis of faith because of this. She even tells her youngest brother that there probably is no God and miracles don’t happen.

Their mother, a physician, overhears this and wants to know why she doesn’t believe in God or miracles anymore. Kimberly tells her that there’s no sense of wonder in the world anymore. Babies are grown inside of cows. Scientists disprove things that were always thought of as miraculous every day. There’s no reason to believe in anything, because there isn’t anything to believe in.

Now ask:

- Do you agree with Kimberly? Why or why not?
- It’s true that scientists discover more and more every day about the universe. How do you think these discoveries affect your feelings about the miraculous?
- How do they affect your experience of God’s presence in the world today?

3. EXPLORE THE BIBLE 8 minutes

Shift to this activity by saying: *In a world where we’re taught that anything not proved in the laboratory is merely speculation, believing in the miraculous is tough. John’s Gospel shows us signs and tales of wonder that point to the miracle of God sending Jesus into our world.*

Distribute Bibles and read John 3:1-17. Give a mini-lecture (no more than 5 minutes) based on information provided in the Insights from Scripture section, allowing room for unique and applicable responses from the group. Explain how and why John emphasized signs in his Gospel. Point out how John is different from the other three Gospels. His purpose was to show how the things Jesus said and did all pointed to who he was: God’s Son. Looking at not only the wondrous signs themselves, but also examining the *why* behind Jesus’ use of these signs will be what we explore through this unit.

4. APPLY 5-6 minutes

Pair up, and hand out paper and pencils. Set the timer, and tell participants they have 1 minute to write down **everything they know about God**. Remind them that what they know about *Jesus* gives us clues as to who God is. When a minute is up, have one pair read their list. If any other pair lists that same thing, they cancel each other out. Any unique answers must be accompanied by an explanation: *How* do they know that about God?

Tip: Participants will likely write concrete things: loving, generous, etc. Point out that the miracles Jesus performed tell us who God (and Jesus) is.

5. RESPOND 8-10 minutes

How does one *respond* to a miracle or a sign? One response is to try to reproduce it ourselves. But that's pushing God aside. The better response is to *follow the direction the sign is pointing to*, like the magi who followed the star to Jesus' crib. Following God-in-Jesus starts with prayer; each of the Respond sections of this unit will involve praying the miracle/sign highlighted in the session. Prayer is available at all times, not just to ask for miracles, but to invite God's presence into the situation.

You may wish to set aside a corner of the room, a sort of prayer closet, especially for this time during each session. Use a privacy screen, or even move to another room, a chapel perhaps. Try to create an atmosphere of prayer.

Pray the miracle. Move to your prayer space. First, read John 3:1-17 again. Then ask participants to close their eyes and try to see themselves in each of the characters of the Bible passage (go slowly): Nicodemus, Jesus, Moses lifting the serpent so that the people bitten by snakes might live (Num. 21:8), the people who were bitten (i.e., the hurting world).

Next, read again (slowly) John 3:17: "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

Next (with eyes still closed), name each person in the room in turn. As you speak the names, ask participants to think of that person as the image of God. Because they are created in the image of God, this person has the capability to help us know who God is! Finally, end with the benediction suggested below, or depart in a way you choose.

Suggested benediction: Be miracles yourselves—signs of God's presence in the world.



INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE

John's Gospel takes a different approach to the idea of signs (miracles) than do any of the other three Gospels. In fact, John takes a different approach to the entire story of Jesus. None of the signs (a.k.a. miracles) in the Gospel of John can ever be seen separately from the Son of God, Jesus. Every one of the signs in John has to do with revealing who Jesus is. John is not particularly concerned with the actual events, spectacular though some of them may be. John's concern is communicating that Jesus is the Son of the one and only God, and that the one and only God sent Jesus here to save us from ourselves.

John 3:16 is one of the most oft-quoted verses in the Bible. During the Reformation in the 16th century, Martin Luther (the man credited with starting the Reformation) made a powerful statement about this verse. He said that it contains the entire gospel story in just those few words. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone



"Jesus' self-revelation in John is actually the whole of his 'ministry.' Everything he says and does is calculated to make known to potential disciples who he is, where he comes from, and who it is who sent him."

Sandra Schneiders, I.H.M.,
Written that You May Believe



LOOK AHEAD

For next session, you'll need food and drink for a "communion lunch" (see Apply).





In the Gospel of John, Jesus' miracles and words point us to who Jesus is, and where he comes from—the bosom of God.

Sandra Schneiders, I.H.M.,
paraphrased from
Written that You May Believe



who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life.” Just that first clause is amazing. God loves us, and loves us so much that Jesus, the Word of God, became flesh and lived among us (John 1:14). As Madeleine L’Engle writes, “The first of the gloriously impossible things that Jesus did was to be born—the power that created the universe come to live with us as one of us.”

These verses are not typically seen as a part of a miracle story, but consider the possibility. What a great miracle that God could love us so much! What a great miracle that the Word of God became flesh and *lived among us*.

In the Gospel of John, the writer consistently uses the verb “give” to describe God as the source of what Jesus offers the world. Jesus “gives” humans the opportunity to experience redemption and reconciliation with God. Jesus “gives” of himself to bring humanity into right relationship with God. But verse 16 is the only place in the Gospel of John where it says that God “gave” Jesus to us humans. John typically uses the verb “sent.” In other words, God is the source of Jesus. John wants to make sure in verse 16 that no one can mistake the origins of Jesus.

Another unique characteristic of verse 16 is the use of the word “world.” God gave Jesus to the “world.” John frequently uses the word “world” to refer to a specific group of people within humanity. Those at odds with God are the “world.” It could be argued that we are all at odds with God, but John was pointing particularly to the Gentiles who worshiped false gods instead of the one true God. John takes much time throughout his Gospel emphasizing that Jesus came to the Gentiles, those who were not considered “chosen people.”

» THE SEEKERS

In verses 1-21, John uses the example of Nicodemus to move from a general overview of God’s creation to the specific individual. Nicodemus symbolizes each of our individual hearts seeking God. Nicodemus sought out Jesus. This, for John, is the first sign of discipleship. But there was a catch. “[Nicodemus] came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.’” John portrayed Nicodemus seeking Jesus at *night* instead of during the day. One could say that Nicodemus did this to avoid detection or ridicule from Jews, but John may have had a different idea in mind. Nighttime is often used in the Bible as a metaphor for separation from God. Throughout Job, Proverbs, the Psalms, and even the Gospels, the darkness is the place where there is “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Nicodemus may have come to Jesus seeking a right relationship with God, but was not immediately willing to commit all he was and all he had to his search. He came under darkness of night, hoping to see if Jesus was indeed the real thing.

Youth today may feel the same way, with some resisting even looking in the very place that describes Jesus best: the Bible. They have yet to be convinced that the Bible is a worthwhile read, that it has any authority. In his Gospel, John was out to establish authority, the first step in gaining credibility. He was bent on establishing the authority of Jesus as God’s Son, so people would want to respond to him. In that motive lie all the miracles and signs described by John.

TALES OF WONDER... FACT OR FICTION?



Exploring tough questions
facing youth today

»»»
“The logical man
must either deny
all miracles or
none.”

Charles Alexander Eastman
(Native American writer
and physician, 1858-1939)

Debate: You have been selected to active membership in a group whose view you may or may not believe. Still, you and your group will come up with convincing arguments to support your point of view. You will have about 10 minutes to prepare, then each group will have two minutes to present. Feel free to use props, personal experience, quotes, or instant video, if you have Internet access.

Are you a **REALIST**?

Your group will argue that miracles may have happened in Jesus' time, but do not and probably cannot happen today. What convincing points will you make to support this position?

OR a **DREAMER**?

You will present evidence that miraculous events happen every day in our world, and were not just a phenomenon of Jesus' day. The reason the realists do not see miracles is because they either do not want to, or they just don't know where to look.

»»»
“There are
only two ways
to live your
life. One is as
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The other is
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miracle.”

Albert Einstein
(German-born
theoretical physicist,
1879-1955)

After the debate, discuss which side seemed more convincing, and why. Also discuss whether the titles “realists” and “dreamers” were appropriate. Should the realists have been the ones who argued that miracles are a reality?