



Exploring tough questions  
facing youth today

# WHO IS GOD?

**Engaging the Mystery**



The Pastoral Center

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## » 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](http://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**

# » WHO IS GOD? «««

## Engaging the Mystery

### » INTRODUCTION

To discover someone's identity—to get to the essence, beyond the basics of name, age, occupation, and a few hobbies—is a complex and difficult task. When God is the “someone” whose identity is sought, the task is quite impossible. Moses had a difficult time even finding out what God wanted to be called. In Exodus 3, when Moses asked after God's name, God responded cryptically, “I AM WHO I AM” (or “I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE”).

Where can we find clues about who God is? God is, essentially, indescribable—beyond space, beyond time, beyond human comprehension. Yet God desires to be known and to relate to humanity. These sessions focus on a few of the ways we glimpse the character of the divine: in what God created, in the biblical record of God's faithfulness, through the psalmist's witness, in the images and metaphors the biblical writers use, and through church tradition.

It is tempting to want full knowledge and absolute certainty. When leading the sessions, remember that no one can or should know everything about God. Pray for wisdom in responding to questions participants will ask—questions that have no answers, or at least no easy answers. It is impossible to hand anyone a comprehensive understanding of God. But it *is* possible to invite participants to explore how the Bible and church tradition witness to how humans have wrestled with trying to know God. It *is* possible to help participants understand the complexity and difficulty in trying to answer questions about God. It *is* possible to encourage participants to get to know God, by inviting them to experience God's presence and to wrestle with the Mystery in their own lives.



**God is, essentially, indescribable—beyond space, beyond time, beyond human comprehension. Yet God desires to be known and to relate to humanity. Yet we glimpse the character of the divine in what God created, in the biblical record of God's faithfulness, through the psalmist's witness, in the images and metaphors the biblical writers use, and through church tradition.**



### Preparation Alert »»»

Sessions 1, 3, and 5 suggest as an option contacting people or groups ahead of time to do specific tasks. In Session 2, there is an option of planting a tree for a future generation. You may need to order a seedling ahead of time and get permission to plant it somewhere on the church property.





## 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, participants 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 5**. Calculate now whether or not you will be using the extender session.



## 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 session plan 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 participants might ask. Find out what questions on this issue are important for *your* group. By all means, 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 uses 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

SAMPLE - DO NOT REPRODUCE



## »» SESSION 1

# GOD CREATES »»

### »» KEY VERSES

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world [the] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things [the Creator] has made. (Romans 1:19-20a)

### »» FAITH STORY

Romans 1:19-20a; Psalm 104:10-32

### »» FAITH FOCUS

In this passage, Paul admonished the Romans for denying knowledge of God while at the same time saying they had seen and experienced the wonder of nature. According to Paul, if the Romans had seen the world God created, they had also seen God, the Creator. What can be known about God, in addition to divine revelation to Israel, through the Bible, and in Jesus Christ, can be known by looking at what the Creator made. At the very least, creation reveals that God is loving, awesome, beautiful, and powerful.

### »» SESSION GOAL

In a culture that is sometimes suspicious of the relationship between nature and God, invite participants to clarify what we can discover about God in creation, as well as what creation cannot tell us about God.



## TEACHING PLAN

### 1. FOCUS 5-15 minutes

»» **Option A:** Give out paper and markers. Tell participants they will have about 10 minutes to draw or sketch one of their favorite places in nature. Emphasize that it need not be an artistic drawing, but simply a sketch. Markers may help. Allow people to converse as they draw. Some will be faster than others. Allow time to come to a point where they think they are finished. Go to Connect, **Option A**.

»» **Option B:** Divide the group into pairs. Give out index cards and pencils. Tell participants they will have about 10 minutes to write a three-sentence biography of God. Go to Connect, **Option B**.

### »» Materials needed and advance preparation

- Unlined paper and markers (*Option A*, Focus)
- Index cards and pencils (*Option B* and *C*, Focus)
- Copies of the handout sheet for Session 1
- Bibles
- Writing paper and pencils; chalkboard/ chalk or newsprint/ markers
- Team prize for memory game (Variation in Explore the Bible)
- Pick an outside location to meet after participants find things not human made (*Option A* and *B*, Apply).
- Basket or box (*Option C*, Apply)
- Invite a church leader to spend time with the group, exploring questions about God (*Option C*, Apply).
- Song books, words to songs, instruments (*Option D*, Respond)





**“...[E]very creature can be called a theophany. It is the manifestation of the hidden... the visibility of the invisible. This is not to say that what is shown in a creature is the essence of God, for God is essentially unknowable. Rather, what is manifested is an expression of God’s essence... the soul of every creature is derived from the one Soul. God therefore, is not simply in every creature, but is the essence of every creature. At heart, creation—including our creatureliness—is a showing forth of the mystery of God.”**

John Scotus Eriugena,  
9th-century Scottish teacher,  
summarized by  
J. Philip Newell  
in *The Book of Creation*



» **Option C:** Give out index cards and pencils. To introduce the topic “Who is God?” invite participants to write any question(s) they have about God on an index card. They do not need to write their names. Collect the questions for later use. Go to Connect, **Option C.**

## 2. CONNECT 5-10 minutes

» **Option A:** Invite sharing in pairs, small groups, or in the entire group what they like about the place they drew.

» **Option B:** Stay in pairs, and make a list on the back of the index card of every source they can think of from which they get information about God. (If people have trouble with this, remind them to consider where they got the information used in the biography from Focus.)

» **Option C:** Have participants pair up. On the back of one of the index cards, direct the pairs to list every source they know from which the group might find information to answer the questions they wrote about God.

## 3. EXPLORE THE BIBLE 15-20 minutes

**Shift to this activity by saying:** *The Bible suggests that we can find out about God by studying and experiencing what God made. Let’s consider what this is...*

Distribute the handout sheets. Working as individuals or in small groups, have people listen for all the things God made, as you read Psalm 104:10-32 (read slowly, and meditatively, repeating phrases that speak to you). Tell them that after you read the psalm, each group will have 5 minutes to write down as many things as they can remember named in the psalm that were created by God.

Have one group write all the things they remembered on the chalkboard or newsprint. Have a second group add ones they remembered that the first group did not (sort of like the games Boggle or Scattergories). Continue this way until all groups have shared. You as leader should add any items that are still missing. Invite additions that group members have experienced.

**Variation:** Get participants to listen to this long psalm by turning the above activity into a competition between two teams (boys vs. girls; curly hair vs straight; other combinations). Offer a prize to the team that remembered the most created things.

Here is a nearly comprehensive list of created things named in Psalm 104:10-32. Read over it ahead of time, since you may want to add or subtract things:

springs	human heart	water	Leviathan
people	young lions	wild goats	plants
darkness	wild asses	sea	sun (sunset)
dust	trees	mountains	breath
valleys	sunrise	rocks	
food	streams	creeping things	
night	cedars of Lebanon	earth	
death	work	cones	
hills	birds of the air	living things	
wine	stork	grass	
all animals of the	evening	moon	
forest	branches	ships	
smoke	fir trees	cattle	
every wild animal	creatures	seasons	

Read Romans 1:19-20a aloud. Say something like: *The Bible suggests that all these things can tell us something about God. What might the sun tell us about God? The birds? The trees? What might we learn about God from studying people (children, youth, elderly)? Creation depends on God to sustain it; what does this tell us about God?*

#### 4. **APPLY** 10-15 minutes

» **Option A and B:** (if you used *Option A* or *B* in Focus and Connect): Invite the group to go outside and find something *not* human made. Give the group a time limit (5-8 minutes), and a signal for when they should return to the room or to some appointed spot outside. When everyone is back, invite sharing what they found and what it might reveal about God.

**Variation:** (In case of bad weather): Do the above activity using photos, video, recorded music, or in imagination—imagine walking outside, looking around, finding something.

Ask: *What things in nature are hard to learn something about God from? Could even these things tell us something about God? What do thunderstorms, tornadoes, or earthquakes tell us about God?*

» **Option C:** (if you used *Option C* in Focus and Connect): Pick questions from the Connect activity out of a basket and see if the list of created things from Psalm 104 can help answer any of those questions. (Some things in nature will give clues to the answers; some will give no clue.) One thing this tells us is that there is even more to God than what God created. Nature teaches about the Creator, but is not the Creator.

**Variation:** Invite your pastor or other church leader to spend some time with the group trying to discover what the Bible says about the questions raised on the cards.

#### 5. **RESPOND** 5-10 minutes

» **Option A:** (if you used *Option A*, Focus): Put all the drawings from the Focus activity into the center of the group. Ask people to bring into focus their special place in nature, then pray and meditate silently on what their special place might tell them about God. Offer (aloud) a prayer of praise for all these places in nature and what they tell people about God.

» **Option B and C:** (if you used *Option B* or *C*, Focus): Invite the entire group to come back together and plan a service project to take care of God's creation—the earth or people.

» **Option D (pair with any option chosen earlier in the session):** As a group, give God names: Grower of trees, Builder of mountains, farmer, nursing mother. Address God this way for a least a week. What do we learn about God when we focus on God in a new way? If the group enjoys singing, close the session by singing some songs that celebrate nature and God as Creator.



**“Ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds, of the air, and they will tell you.”**

Job 12:7



**“The entire material universe speaks of God’s love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God.”**

Pope Francis

*On Care for our Common Home*, 84.





**“Earth’s  
crammed with  
heaven,  
And every  
common bush  
afire with God;  
But only he who  
sees takes off  
his shoes;  
The rest  
sit round it  
and pluck  
blackberries.”**

Elizabeth Barrett Browning,  
*Aurora Leigh*



## **LOOK AHEAD**

Session 2 offers the option of honoring future generations with a faith-forward project, such as planting a tree. Plan ahead.



## **INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE**

Romans declares that people cannot say they have seen and experienced the majesty of nature, and then claim they do not know God. God is invisible, yet God can clearly be *seen* and *understood* in creation.

Creation reveals how great, how awesome, and how loving God is. The psalmist expressed this with: “The heavens are telling the glory of God” (Psalm 19:1). But more than that, according to Psalm 104, God’s continuing care for what was created reveals that God loves the created world, whether that is cats, snakes, trees, grandparents, or youth.

### **» CREATION IS THE CLOTHING OF GOD**

All people in all times and places have access to knowledge of God through the creation that surrounds them. They have no excuse for not knowing and honoring God. But some people today, as in Paul’s day, have equated God with nature. The Bible does not offer us pantheism. God is not nature; God is *revealed* in nature.

As Bible commentator George A. F. Knight suggests, creation is the garment of God (*Psalms: Volume 2*). Like the purple or red robe of a monarch, creation reveals God’s greatness to humanity. However, just as there is more to people than what they wear, so it is with God. Clothes tell a lot about a person, but are never identical to or a substitute for the total person.

### **» LEVIATHAN**

The presence of Leviathan (the sea monster) in the psalm presents the larger question of how monsters fit in creation. Some say Leviathan represents the chaos that was present before creation; others say Leviathan is a mythological monster. What about things in creation that are destructive, like hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, volcanoes, viruses and bacteria? What do monsters and tornadoes tell people about God?

These questions bring up fundamental questions that are difficult to answer: How can God be all-loving, all-good, and all-powerful, yet allow destruction in the world? “Part of its reverencing of the natural world,” writes spirituality scholar J. Philip Newell in *The Book of Creation*, “is a respect also for creation’s wildness and power....The naming of these as part of the mystery is neither to negate their fierceness nor to attempt to tame their wildness. It is to be aware of their power.”

Another way to engage this tension is to observe how a “bad” event in one place and time may actually lead to good happening elsewhere. The disease of a grandmother causes a prodigal grandson to change his life; a massive flood inspires thousands of people to care for and serve each other. But such answers are not entirely satisfactory. People have free will, and sometimes bad things bring out the worst in people, not the best.

Perhaps tornadoes, earthquakes, and disease are divine reminders to people that they must lean on God, and demand that humans acknowledge who is truly Creator. Caught on a mountain hike during a massive thunderstorm, one youth group was not so much shocked that such things could happen, but reminded again that God is God, and humans are human. A further lesson about God is suggested in Psalm 104:26. The monster that is so fearsome (maybe even evil) in people’s eyes, appears as a sporting, frolicking child to the all-powerful, all-knowing God. Could it be that God’s perspective is so differ-

ent, so much larger than ours? Could it be that God has a sense of humor and enjoys play? At the same time, it would be an error to think that God is capricious and somehow revels in human fear, pain, suffering or tragedy.

A classic treatment of these difficult questions that crop up again and again in life is this one by Rabbi Harold Kushner from his book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*: "Is there an answer to the question of why bad things happen to good people? That depends on what we mean by 'answer'. If we mean 'Is there an explanation which will make sense of it all?'... then there probably is no satisfying answer.... But the word 'answer' can also mean 'response' as well as 'explanation,' and in that sense, the response would be to forgive the world for not being perfect, to forgive God for not making a better world, to reach out to the people around us, and to go on living despite it all."

## » EASY ACCESS

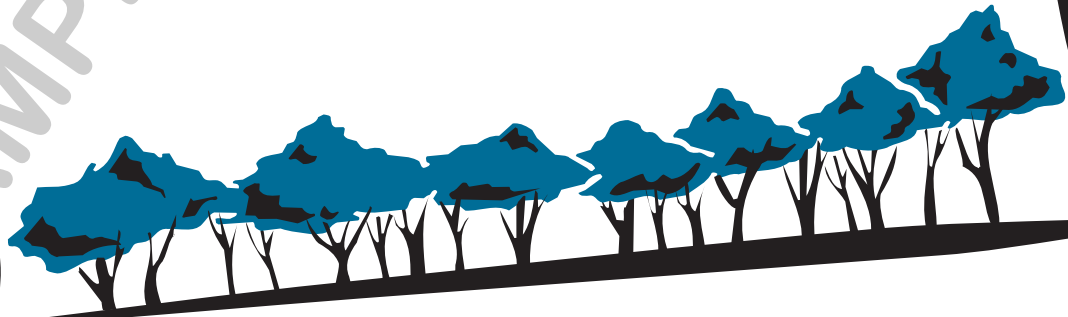
Nearly all youth have at one time or another been awestruck by the beauty of nature. Many enjoy sports, activities, and hobbies that involve the outdoors. Among those who report that they have experienced God's presence, many say the experience occurred in nature. Beginning this unit with a session that invites participants to learn about God through creation provides an accessible place for them to open up to how and where they experience God.

# The World According to Psalm 104



Listen as Psalm 104:10-32 is read, then write in the space below ALL the things created by God that were named.

Who Is God? : Session 1



Permission is granted to photocopy this handout for use with this session.