

How Can I Recognize God's Signs?



Session 1



Acts 2:37-47

Session Objective

Youth want the assurance only extraordinary signs can give to the meaning and purpose of their lives. Help the young people recognize God's signs in the ordinary means of grace. One of God's signs of grace is God's gift of the Christian community gathered around the Word, praying, breaking bread, and sharing with the poor. As we are engaged in faith community, we live in relationship with God and live out the life God intends for us.

Faith Statement

The same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture, engages us through the Word proclaimed, claims us in the waters of baptism, feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation, and calls women and men to all ministries of the Church.

—A Brief Statement of Faith

Session Overview

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 Exit	Thank You



Enhancements

Family Connections
Breath of God
Explore the Importance of Congregational Life
Movie Connection
Serve as Worship Leaders



For instructions to download Web Resources and the coffeehouse version, see page 1.

Spiritual Reflection for Leaders

Do you ever wonder how a small group of Jesus' followers grew into a large church community that still exists two thousand years after he died? With the power of the Holy Spirit, a small group began to do things that attracted the attention of many others.

Imagine that you are living in Palestine. You have heard about the teacher named Jesus who was recently put to death on the cross. Then you visit a place where Peter, one of Jesus' followers, is giving a speech. Something exciting is in the air. Many people are gathered around him, listening. Later, you learn that many of the listeners have joined the followers of Jesus. They have sold their possessions and given the money to the poor. You are curious and decide to keep an eye on this group. You can't help but want to be a part of it.

How would being part of that early faith community be like the church you are in now? How would it be different? Reflect on the group of youth you meet with each week. What kind of environment do you want to create for them? Pray that you and the church will bear witness to God's power and love.



Understanding the Scripture

Jesus taught us to love God and to love one another. To belong to Christ is to be in relationship with God and with others. This session explores relationships within and among the people of God called the church.

The first experience of the new converts to the church was that the Word was spoken to them in a powerful way. Acts 2:37–47 describes the first experience, explaining that those who heard the Word for the first time “were cut to the heart” (Acts 2:37). The Word spoke to them with such conviction that they knew the covenant was meant for them and they wanted to know what to do to respond to this Word.

The early church practiced ordinary means of grace to help newly baptized Christians grow into the promises of God. The new converts devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, that is, to hearing about Jesus: who he was, what he said, and how the apostles were different people because of their commitment to Jesus. They joined together in fellowship; there was no “I can be just as good a Christian without going to church” attitude. The breaking of bread refers to both ordinary meals and the Lord's Supper (Eucharist), since the Lord's Supper was always celebrated as part of a meal. They joined together in prayer. Praying together included going to the temple at the traditional hours for prayer (roughly 9 a.m. and 4 p.m.). They went in groups and joined with their people in common prayers. In their teaching and in their prayers, they embraced the faith heritage of both their Jewish roots and their new experience in Christ.

We study together the Bible, ethical issues, contemporary concerns, the life of Christian faith, growing in spirituality, and living in families. We have fellowship with one another—eating together, playing sports together, going on picnics, having retreats. We break bread together—sharing the bread and wine, pouring the waters of baptism, and joining for worship every Sunday morning. We pray together—starting every meeting in prayer and praying many times in every worship service.

Studying, engaging in fellowship, breaking bread, and praying together allow us to experience God's Word as a sign of God's grace with us.



Understanding the Faith Statement

One sign of grace is the common life of the congregation. Taking part in the common life of the congregation is essential for all who follow Christ. Through life together with others, God empowers us to live in the world as faithful disciples. Within the fellowship, we learn and practice the kinds of relationships God intends us to demonstrate everywhere. Through the fellowship, we have opportunities to serve others. From the fellowship, we receive the support and care we need to continue as faithful disciples. In the midst of our life together, the Spirit of God "rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture, engages us through the Word proclaimed, claims us in the waters of baptism, feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation, and calls women and men to all ministries of the Church."



Teaching Today's Question

Sometimes youth seek a personal relationship with God that is immediate and direct, that bypasses any dependency on other humans. The common life of the congregation is regarded as unnecessary, or at best, as an optional convenience. In seeking self-identity, youth at times try to distance themselves from others, especially from those upon whom they have been dependent in the past. This includes their parents, and at times, the congregation. Help youth see the essential relationship between loving God and loving others and to help them discover the common life of the congregation as the arena in which they receive the love of God through others and offer God's love to others.



Enter

Option A: Signs Scavenger Hunt

- Copies of "Signs Scavenger Hunt" (Web Resource 1a), pencils

Begin the session with a scavenger hunt. As the youth arrive, have them move into groups of at least two and send them to scavenge your church for signs of God's grace. Ask them to answer the questions on Web Resource 1a.

When the youth return, have them share their discoveries with one another. Explain that today's lesson is about the early church and its development into a spirited community that showed signs of God's grace in ordinary ways.

Option B: Team Poster

- Paper, markers

Give each youth a piece of paper along with markers. Invite them to create a team poster for your class. They can make up a name, color(s), team motto, mascot, or whatever else they can think of to describe and inspire their class.

Youth are welcome to work with a partner or develop this on their own. When all have arrived and had a chance to put some ideas on paper, invite them to tell about their poster. Ask:



- What teams or groups have you belonged to? How did your team or group develop spirit or cohesion?
- How did your team or group show signs of its purpose?

Explain that today's lesson is about the development of the early church into a spirited community that showed signs of God's grace in ordinary ways.



Engage

Option A: Resting with the Question

- Newsprint, markers

Write the following question on newsprint and post it: *How can I recognize God's signs?*

Encourage participants to ask and discuss their own questions that relate to this question, or use the following questions to guide the discussion:



- What is a sign?
- When have you wondered about recognizing God's signs?
- Do you think God sends signs to show us how to live and what to do with our lives?
 - Have you experienced extraordinary signs? Like what?
 - What about ordinary signs?

Introduce today's session by stating that God sends signs of grace through our ordinary practices of living together as church. The Spirit transforms the world through ordinary, everyday ways. Invite the youth to reflect on ordinary signs of God's grace.

Pray the opening prayer.

Option B: Opening the Scripture

Bibles

Hand out Bibles and ask participants to locate Acts 2, the story of Pentecost. Using the Acts 2 section headings in the Bible, encourage the group members to recount the story. Have them suggest sights, sounds, smells, and emotions that the biblical characters might have experienced. Explain that the day of Pentecost began with extraordinary happenings of the Spirit. The same day ended with the church community committing to certain practices that serve as signs of God's grace to the world. Invite the youth to reflect on these signs during the session.

Pray the opening prayer.

Opening Prayer

Dear God, as we gather to study your Word this day, we ask that you give us minds and hearts open to hearing and believing. Show us signs that you are with us, so that we may live the Christian life today. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.



Explore

Option A: Rainbow Bible Study

Bibles, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet paper, cut into strips, pencils

In studying the Bible for signs of grace, you can lead the group member's through the Rainbow Bible Study. Do this activity as a whole group and discuss as you go through each step. Ask the group to think of a rainbow with seven colors.

Red, orange, and yellow are on top. They are signs of God's revelation to us. Read Acts 2:37-47 and have the group pick out the three most important ideas being presented through the Scripture reading. Have members of the group write one idea on each of the red, orange, and yellow bands of light (strips of paper).

Green is the middle band of color, a symbol for the message of life in the reading. Ask the group to look back at the ideas you have written down and form them into one sentence that states the meaning of the passage. Write this sentence on the green band.

Blue, indigo, and violet bands follow. Explain that they are signs of our action in response to God’s Word to us. Ask:



- What would following the message you have discovered in this passage lead you to do?

Have members of the group write one possible action on each of the blue, indigo, and violet bands.

Option B: Acts Skit

- Bibles, Script (Web Resource 1b)

Form five groups. (If you have a small group, one person can be a team.) One team will focus on baptism, one on Bible study, one on fellowship, one on communion, and one on prayer.

Ask each team to read Acts 2:37–47 and prepare a brief skit or song in which they express the topic (such as Bible study) they have been assigned. Be prepared to circulate among the groups. If they need more information, share with them some of the insights in Understanding the Scripture (pages 4–5). If they have trouble getting started, make a suggestion or two to get the creative juices flowing. Encourage being creative and pushing the edges.

When the teams are ready, have a youth read the narration on Web Resource 1b, with pauses for each of the teams to make their presentations. After the skits, ask:



- Have you ever had the experience of daily living in this way? Where? (camp possibly?) What was it like?
- How was the church in Jerusalem like or unlike our church?

Option C: Jerusalem Day Planner

- Bibles, copies of “Jerusalem Day Planner” (Web Resource 1c), pencils

Distribute copies of Web Resource 1c. Ask youth to read Acts 2:37–47 and fill in the left side of the day planner, as if they were Christians in the Jerusalem church. (They will be able to complete the planner in Express, Option B.) Be sure they include the traditional times of prayer in the temple (see Understanding the Scripture).

Encourage them to include the activities of the Jerusalem community and details from their own lives, such as specific ways to enjoy Christian fellowship, persons for whom they need to pray, what they need to learn to become more faithful disciples, and so on. When all have finished, ask:



- What did you learn about the Jerusalem church?
- What would you have to give up to keep a schedule like that?
- What would you gain? What would the church gain?

Be sure to discuss why the Jerusalem church thought these activities were so important.



Express

Option A: Rainbow Bible Study, continued

- Multi-colored strips from Explore Option A, modeling clay

Give the youth an opportunity to think about one of the three actions from Explore Option A: Rainbow Bible Study that would be an important action for them to take.

Ask them to remember the way God uses signs to remind us of things that are important in our faith, such as bread reminding us of the body of Christ and the cross reminding us of the sacrifice of Christ.

Have the youth use clay to form an object that symbolizes the action they have decided is important for them to take. Have the youth share their symbols with one another and tell how they intend to take action this week.

Option B: Jerusalem Day Planner, continued

- Copies of "Jerusalem Day Planner" (Web Resource 1c), pencils, dark construction paper, gel pens, light chalk or oil pastels

Ask youth to complete the day planner page they began in Explore, Option C: Jerusalem Day Planner. They should focus on the area labeled, "Member of My Church." Encourage youth to think about how they do the things in their lives today that the early Christians did: prayer, fellowship, and so on. They should not focus on the amount of time they take to do these activities. Instead, ask them to record how and when they do these activities.

After all have had sufficient time to complete the page, challenge them to look critically at their practices to determine if there's anything they'd like to change. Wonder how the youth are signs of God's grace to others by participating in the church.

Option C: My Church

Help the youth name ways the Spirit transforms them into signs of God's grace through active participation in the church. Invite the youth to examine their church. Ask:



- What sights, sounds, smells, and emotions do you associate with your church?
- What do you participate in at church? Bible study? Fellowship? Shared meals? Prayer?
- How has your participation in these actions and gatherings affected your life?

Invite the group members to name one action or gathering that helps them recognize the signs of God's grace in their lives. Then, invite the group members to name an action or gathering they could begin in order to open their hearts and lives to being signs of God's grace in the world.

Option D: Improve Participation in Our Common Life



Newsprint, marker

On newsprint, ask the group to list all of the ways a young person could participate in the life of the congregation. Remember to include both planned and unplanned activities and relationships. Read the list, asking each person to indicate activities in which he or she participates. Circle the three or four activities in which most of the youth participate.

In a group of fewer than eight, invite youth to name their top congregational activity or relationship and to tell what makes it so significant to them. In a larger group, form smaller groups for sharing and conversation.

Challenge members of the group to identify ways they will improve their participation in the life of the congregation as a group or as individuals. This discussion may lead to one or two specific group projects or to a list of individual possibilities.



Exit

Thank You



Note cards, envelopes, church directory, phone book, offering basket

Challenge youth to write thank-you notes to people who have been important to them or to people who have organized and led activities that have been significant. Provide copies of the church directory and a phone book for addressing envelopes.

Gather completed notes in a basket or offering plate. Be sure the notes are mailed immediately.

Conclude with the closing prayer:

Closing Prayer

Copies of "Unison Prayer" (Web Resource 1d)

Distribute copies of Web Resource 1d and invite youth to pray in unison the prayer on it and to add their individual prayers at the appropriate places. Provide some time for the youth to either write or think of the prayer(s) they wish to offer.

Speak to each young person by name as they leave.



Enhancements

Other Ways to Connect with the Session

Family Connections

"Family Connections" (Web Resource) has a set of discussion questions for each of the four sessions in this course that families can talk about after class. Provide each family with a copy of this resource.

Breath of God

Distribute copies of "Breath of God" (Web Resource 1e) and pencils. Ask youth to rank from one to five how hard it would be to make changes in personal lifestyles in the areas that are listed. One would be the hardest to change and five would be the easiest. When all have finished, ask:



- Which would be the hardest things for you to change?
- Which would be the easiest?
- Would it be more important to have help in changing some of these areas than in others? Why?
- Which practices do you see in our church today?
- What might our church or class do to devote ourselves to these practices more fully?

Invite youth to reflect on their completed "Breath of God" (Web Resource 1e) and choose one area they want to change. Have each person find a partner, identify the area, and have the two persons work together on how to bring about change. Encourage them to consider ways Bible study, fellowship, shared meals, and prayer might play important roles in their steps to change. Then, the second person in the pair identifies an area and they work on it. Challenge the participants to take the actions for change in the coming week. Encourage partners to pray for each other.

Explore the Importance of Congregational Life

Invite the youth to visit and interview selected members of the congregation. “Conducting an Interview” (Web Resource 1f) suggests how to go about it.

Select interviewees carefully. Choose people who will be able to express their views about the church in ways the youth will understand and appreciate. Consider choosing people the youth may see often, but have little opportunity to know personally. Share the questions in advance with the interviewees so they can be prepared. Arrange for teams to visit in the homes of those being interviewed. You may send interviewers out in pairs or in small teams. Be sure to coordinate the times for the interviews. If possible, provide interview teams with a digital camera to take photos of themselves with their interviewees. Hear reports on the interviews. Instruct each team to describe what their interviewee thought important about participation in the congregation’s life. If photos were taken, share them also.

Movie Connection

Show the following clips from *We Are Marshall* (PG) DVD: 11:13–46 and 13:03–17:06 (crash and aftermath), 22:30–23:36, and 26:23–27:52 (cancellation of the football program and student body response). Compare the transformation of the Marshall University community to that of the early church after the resurrection and Pentecost.



- What event(s) caused transformation in each community?
- How did those events unify people?
- What effects did the transformation have on community members?
- If you have experienced that kind of group transformation, what was it like?
- How can we understand the transformation in our own lives as signs of God’s grace?

Serve as Worship Leaders

Assign youth parts in the liturgy of upcoming worship services. They may read a passage of Scripture, offer a prayer, or prepare a banner or bulletin cover. In a small group, all youth could be part of the same service. In a larger group, several youth could serve each Sunday for several weeks.

Give youth with speaking parts copies of what they will read in worship and copies of the order of worship. Practice reading in the sanctuary from the lectern, using the microphones if they will be used on Sunday. Help readers speak slowly and distinctively. Be sure they can easily pronounce all the words they will read. Practice going to and from the lectern from the places they will sit. A shy person may prefer to help in a nonspeaking role, such as ushering. Also ask youth to give their names as they want them to appear in the bulletin and to write one or two sentences telling where they go to school and listing something they like to do. Print these in the church bulletin as a way of introducing youth to the congregation.