

JESUS LOVES

God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life. For this reason, at every time and in every place, God draws close to man. He calls man to seek him, to know him, to love him with all his strength. He calls together all men, scattered and divided by sin, into the unity of his family, the Church. To accomplish this, when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son as Redeemer and Savior (CCC 1).

And we ourselves know and believe the love which God has for us. God is love, and those who live in love live in union with God and God lives in union with them (1 John 4:16 GNT).

Like a shepherd he feeds his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs, carrying them in his bosom, leading the ewes with care (Isaiah 40:11 NAB).

Goal of this Session:

To understand that we were created by God out of love, and that Jesus loves us and desires to have a personal relationship with us.

Scriptural References in this Session:

- Luke 15:4-7; the shepherd who leaves the 99 to look for one lost sheep
- Genesis 1:26-31; creation out of love
- Psalm 23:1; I have everything I need

Good Shepherd Trail Mileposts to Keep in Mind:

- Qualities of a good shepherd
- Our shepherds
- Psalm 23
- Home altar



Highs and Lows:

An Examen, or examination of consciousness, is a prayerful method of “checking in” on how well we are living out our Christian faith on a daily basis. Developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola more than four hundred years ago, the Examen invites us to reflect on how God has been present in our day and how we have responded to that presence in our thoughts, feelings, and actions. With the help of the Holy Spirit, a daily examination can draw us ever closer to God.

A simple way to prepare children for a lengthier, more involved Examen and get them in the habit of recognizing God’s presence in their lives is with Highs and Lows.

At the beginning of every session, give each child a turn to share the high point(s) and the low point(s) of their week. It may be helpful to go first as an example, use a talking stick or a small toy or stuffed animal to make sure only one person is talking at a time, or do this activity in a circle where everyone is at the same level, including you, and you can see every child's face.

Opening Prayer:

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Lord is my shepherd;

I have everything I need.

*He lets me rest in fields of green grass
and leads me to quiet pools of fresh water.*

He gives me new strength.

*He guides me in the right paths,
as he has promised.*

*Even if I go through the deepest darkness,
I will not be afraid, Lord,
for you are with me.*

Your shepherd's rod and staff protect me.

*You prepare a banquet for me,
where all my enemies can see me;
you welcome me as an honored guest
and fill my cup to the brim.*

*I know that your goodness and love will be with me all my life;
and your house will be my home as long as I live (Psalm 23 GNT).*

Jesus, you are a Good Shepherd and your love never gives up on us. You are with us in the highs and in the lows too. Thank you for holding us close, looking for us when we're lost, and making sure we have what we need. Help us to see how good you are and how much you love us.

Amen.

Fun Activity: Sheep Pen, similar to Port and Starboard

Commands

"A wolf is coming" - all players lay on their stomach

"Shearing time" - all players get in one line in the middle

"Pasture" - all players run to the back

"Gate" - all players run to the front

"Sheep and shepherd" - players get in twos, one player gets on their partner's back and says baa

"Grazing in the grass" - players get in threes, players get on their knees and pretend to eat grass

"Flock together" - players get in fours, players stand back-to-back in a square and link arms

Sheep Pen is a high-energy game that keeps children moving, running, and thinking like sheep! Make sure to go over and act out all six commands before beginning the game. If a player makes a mistake following a command or does not find a group in time, they are out of the sheep pen. If you are playing with less than five kids, "Grazing in the grass" can be done with one player, "Flock together" can be done with two, and group commands should be used sparingly. To make the game less competitive for elementary-age children, players can sit out for 20 seconds before rejoining the game. Play until there is one group left or whenever you feel like stopping.

Teaching:

- *Read Luke 15:4-7.* What is happening in this story? Are there any words you don't understand? What does it mean to repent? What does it mean to celebrate?
- *Now act out Luke 15:4-7.* Give everyone a role. Here are some ideas: narrator, shepherd, lost sheep/sinner, other sheep, friends and neighbors/angels and saints in Heaven. You can even bring some props, such as a shepherd's costume, party hats, or sunglasses!
- Open-ended questions you can ask: What makes the shepherd in this story a good shepherd? What does the good shepherd do when he finds his sheep? How does the shepherd feel in verses 5-6? What do you do when you feel happy? How are we like the lost sheep? Who is the good shepherd? What about this story stuck with you the most?
- In this story, Jesus is the Good Shepherd and he leaves the 99 to look for one lost sheep. In the same way, Jesus looks for us and seeks us out because he wants to be close to us!

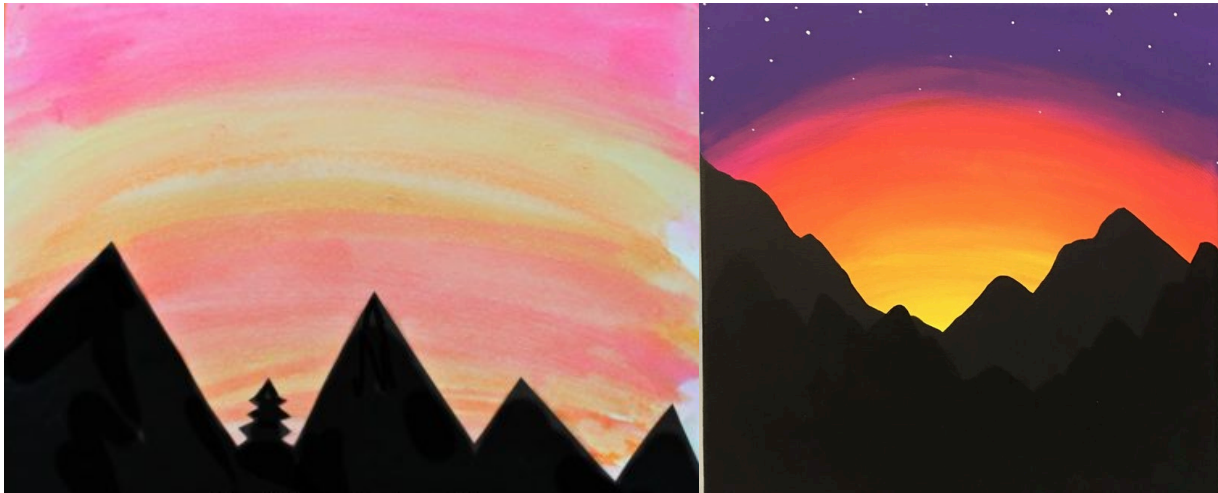
- *Read Genesis 1:26-31.* What is happening in this story? Have you heard this story before? How did God make human beings in verse 26? (To be like him, and God is good and God is love) How did God feel after he had created everything? (Very pleased) What does God do in verses 27-28? (He blesses the people and tells them to take care of his Creation) How does God take care of people and animals? (He gives them food to eat)
- We see that God made us and the world out of love. How do we know our parents love us? How do we know God loves us? (He takes care of us and gives us what we need)
- Have the children make a list of everything they would need for _____ (throwing a party, going on a camping trip, baking a cake, etc). You can do this individually or as a group verbally or on a whiteboard or sheet of paper. You usually need food and supplies for what you need to do. God gives us everything we need to grow close to him and have a relationship with him, like Mass, the Sacraments, parents, and teachers.

- *Read Psalm 23:1, then have everyone repeat after you 2-3 words at a time ("The Lord... is my shepherd... I have... everything I need"), then say the whole phrase together as a group.*
- Jesus wants to keep us close to him because he loves us, just like we want to spend time with and be near our family and friends! He also loves us by showing how much he cares for us and making sure we have everything we need, like a shepherd with his sheep.

Hands-On Activity: Mountain Silhouette Craft

Pass out blank sheets of paper and instruct children to draw the sky at sunrise or sunset with markers or colored pencils. It may be helpful to show photos of the beauty of God's Creation in nature, talk about alpenglow, or ask children what colors they've seen the sky change to. Once finished, children will glue mountain silhouettes along the bottom halves of their papers.

Here are some examples of what that could look like.



For 3rd-5th graders, provide a few mountain silhouette templates for them to trace and cut out (you can freehand-draw these), and print this phrase for children to glue onto their craft:

"I would create the world just to hear you say you love me." - Jesus to St. Teresa to Avila

For K-1st, pre-cut silhouettes and print this phrase for children to glue onto their craft:

God made the world
and God made me!

Break

Game: Gathering Sheep

Set up two chairs back-to-back with about two feet of space between them as the start and finish line, and cones or other obstacles throughout the room for children to maneuver around. Blow up balloons to be the sheep. Give each child a sheep to take care of. The children will line up, go one at a time, and try to push their sheep around the obstacle course using a shepherd's rod (fly swatter or broom) and back between the gate (chairs) to be with the rest of the sheep.

Sheep are known for not being the best listeners. Sometimes they wander off from their shepherd and try to go their own way. This activity is an engaging and interactive way for children to work on their 'sheep herding' skills and see if they have what it takes to gather all of their sheep into one flock; it's more difficult than it looks! When you say go, the first person will use the shepherd's rod to guide the sheep in and out of the cones and back to the rest of the flock. Then it will be the next person's turn to go. Take turns until everyone has gone through.

Tying it Together

- We know that Jesus loves us because he looks for us and seeks us out. During Sheep Pen, we learned what it feels like to search for a partner across the room and sometimes what it feels like to be left out of a group. In the Book of Luke, the good shepherd leaves the other 99 sheep to look for the one that got lost. With Jesus, we are never left out. He always look for us and won't stop until he finds us. Like the shepherd in the story, he says, "I am so happy I found my lost sheep. Let us celebrate!" Jesus loves us so much he just wants to be with us and he celebrates whenever we are with him. One way we can stay close to him is through prayer and by making an altar at home to remind us to pray.
- We also know that Jesus loves us because God made us and the world out of love. When God created the world in Genesis, he said it was good, and when he made us, he said we were very good! God also gave us food to eat and made us in charge of the fish, of the birds, and of the wild animals. Being in nature is one way to see God's love for us, and in Alaska, God's love is all around us. The mountains, the trees, the lakes, the snow, and the alpenglow are God's love letters and gifts to us. Jesus once told St. Teresa of Avila in prayer, "I would create the world all over again just to hear you say you love me." When we look at how good and beautiful God's Creation is, we can see how good and beautiful God made us and how much he wants to have a personal relationship with us.
- In Psalm 23, we say, "The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need." We may want things, but we don't need anything else. A good shepherd takes care of their sheep. They lead them to green grass to eat, fresh water to drink, and a safe place to rest and they make sure they don't stray too far from the rest of the flock. When we practiced gathering sheep with our balloons, we realized how hard it was to make the sheep go where you want them. Sheep herding takes a lot of work, but Jesus is willing to put in that work because he loves us. He takes care of us and gives us everything we need.

Prayer and Petitions:

Faith is a living friendship with God that, like any other friendship, requires both talking and listening to remain healthy. Another word for this communication with God is prayer.

As you invite the children to enter into prayer, remember that you are both a model and a participant. At the end of every session, open with spontaneous prayer (if you are unused to this practice, begin with the Sign of the Cross and a simple "Thank you, God, for..."), then give children a turn to share who or what they would like to pray for. You may get prayer intentions that sound silly to you; do not laugh. Remain prayerful. Speak slowly, deliberately, and reverently. If possible, move the children to a special prayer space in the room during this time. In this space, place two or more of the following: a Bible, a small bowl of holy water, a crucifix, a religious image or statue, a Rosary, prayer cards, saint medals, a plant or flower, or a candle.

Try to mention this week's theme, Jesus Loves, when you pray out loud!



Family Discipleship Playlist for this Trail:

- "Reckless Love" by Cory Asbury
- "You Never Let Go" by Matt Redman
- "Shepherd of My Soul" by Rivers & Robots
- "Your Love Is Alive" by Housefires
- "Psalm 23" by The Corner Room
- "You Are Good" by Bethel Music Kids

Songs for family discipleship can be played during class time when children are playing games or doing activities and can be sent home with parents to play at home, in the car, or in prayer.