**Series OVERVIEW**

 Explore God Chicago 2019 is a city-wide community outreach initiative. We all have questions about God, faith, and purpose. Explore God is a unique effort to come together to look at these questions in an open, authentic way. During this 7-week series, we will explore 7 big questions.

There is a sermon outline provided by Explore God that might spark some ideas for each message.

**Week 1 | January 13, 2019 | Does Life Have a Purpose?**

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 1:1-2, Ecclesiastes 1:16-18, Ecclesiastes 12:13-14, Matthew 6:25–34

**Message Big Idea**

We were created to live in a relationship with God. Life is meaningless without God, but God gives everything meaning.

The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem: 2 “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” -Ecclesiastes 1:1-2

16 I said to myself, “Look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge.” 17 Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind. 18 For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief. -Ecclesiastes 1:16-18

4 I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. 5 I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. 6 I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. 7 I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. 8 I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers, and a harem as well—the delights of a man’s heart. 9 I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me. 10 I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor, and this was the reward for all my toil. 11 Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind, nothing was gained under the sun. -Ecclesiastes 2:4-11

10 I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. 11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. 12 I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. 13 That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God. 14 I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will fear him. -Ecclesiastes 3:10-14

10 Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless. -Ecclesiastes 5:10

13 Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. 14 For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil. -Ecclesiastes 12:13-14

25 “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? 27 Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? 28 “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. 29 Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. 30 If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? 31 So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ 32 For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. 33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. -Matthew 6:25-34

**Message Description**

Most of us do not spend a lot of time thinking about our purpose, at least on a cosmic scale. But the times we do can be pretty troubling, especially if we suspect that there is no purpose. On the other hand, even for those who believe that our lives are heading somewhere—who believe there is an ultimate meaning—finding answers to life’s simple, everyday questions can be difficult.

What career should I pursue?

How should I spend my money?

What relationships should I invest in?

The first person to write, in detail, about this search for meaning was king over the ancient nation of Israel. King Solomon was more rich, powerful, and wise than any living person. He had it all, tried it all, and discovered some profound things as a result.

His introduction in Ecclesiastes 1 (and eventual conclusion) implies that riches, power, status, education, sex, adrenaline, knowledge—you name it—are not the things that will give us meaning. They can temporarily distract us from the question, and even give us some temporary satisfaction. But they will not reveal to us our purpose. Solomon’s conclusion? Life is meaningless without God. But God gives everything meaning. Every person on earth was created to know and love God personally. Without him, the very purpose for which we are alive is missing.

In this message, we’ll invite people to consider how they live—as if there is a God, or as if there is no God. We’ll note that there is a difference between believing God exists and living as if he exists. (One of the fastest growing religions in America is “practical atheism,” which is populated by those who claim to believe in God but live as if he doesn’t exist.) We’ll encourage one another to consider how this view of God affects our sense of meaning and purpose.

In Matthew 6:25–34, Jesus challenges people to seek first God’s kingdom, saying that then the rest of life will have meaning and purpose.

“Jesus came to wake us up, make us aware of what we already have so we don’t spend our whole life pursuing that which won’t bring us purpose. We often spend our lives on vapor management.”

“I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it's not the answer.” ― Jim Carrey

**Docent Requests**

Overview of Ecclesiastes.

Commentary on key passages.

Unpack the meaning/usage of “meaningless.”

Meaningless = “vapor”?

Unpack the meaning/usage of “chasing after the wind.”

Quotes that give insight regarding the purpose of life.

Psychological reasons we pursue purpose and meaning.

**Week 2 | January 20, 2019 | Is There a God?**

Scripture: Psalm 19:1-4, Romans 1:19-20, Romans 2:14-15

*NOTE – this is BLAST Weekend*

**Message Big Idea**

When we are open to the possibility of God’s existence, we’ll discover there are many indicators of his presence.

1 The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. 2 Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. 3 They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. 4 Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun. -Psalm 19:1-4

19 since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 20 For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. -Romans 1:19-20

14 (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. 15 They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.) -Romans 2:14-15

**Message Description**

Even people who don’t believe in God think about him from time to time. It’s nearly impossible not to consider it occasionally. Also, it’s very common for people who want to believe in God or even say they do believe in God to go through seasons of doubt. The question of God’s existence is something people have been struggling with for thousands of years. If you wrestle with this question, you’re not alone.

The good news is God is not intimidated by our questions or our doubts. And we want to be a church community that isn’t intimidated either. If you have questions about God, you are welcome here.

We all wonder about God. Is he real or not? What is he like? Why does he do the things he does? There are times when we wonder more than others.

Sometimes we wonder when life is at its best. Those moments in life that are full of so much goodness, they feel transcendent. At those times we can find ourselves thinking, “There must be someone behind all of this, someone responsible for all this goodness.”

Sometimes we wonder when life is at its worst. When life is dark and we are full of so many unanswered questions. At these times we can find ourselves thinking, “If there is a God, how could he let this happen?”

Today, our goal is not to convince anyone of anything. We simply want to have a discussion about the existence of God. We’ll ask people to be willing to be open.

Think of it this way… Many of us were picky eaters when we were kids. There were certain foods we decided we did not like even though we never tried them. Even after we became adults, we can still believe we don’t like a certain food that we’ve never tried. Have you ever thought you didn’t like a certain food, but then had a moment of openness and discovered that you enjoyed it?

Today we want to ask people: If you wonder whether or not God exists, would you be willing to give God a try? To be open to the possibility that he exists and is present?

Though God’s existence cannot be scientifically proven, he has given us lots of indications of his presence. In the bulk of the talk we’ll focus on these two indicators:

Natural Indicators (Psalm 19:1-4, Romans 1:19-20).

Ethical Indicators (Romans 2:14-15).

We’d love to tell a story of someone who came to believe in God despite their skepticism after considering these indicators. Possibly the story of Francis Collins, a leading DNA scientist (One video of his story: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w5bPbwkjKMM)

Consider challenging everyone to pray Pascal’s wager for the next 7 days: “God if you are real, make yourself real to me.” This prayer not only invites God to reveal himself to the skeptic; it gives God an opportunity to strengthen the faith of the believer. (See below for more on Pascal’s Wager.)

A. W. Tozer said: “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.” If each person here were truly to live not only as if God exists, but like he cares for us and has a plan for us, what would change in our lives? In our families? In our schools and workplaces? In our neighborhoods? In our city? Imagine if we lived as if God were with us always. Would that change our world?

**Additional Resources:**

Does God exist? https://www.everystudent.com/menus/existence.html

Does God exist? https://www.allaboutphilosophy.org/does-god-exist-c.htm

Quote: “The details differ, but the essential elements in the astronomical and biblical accounts of Genesis are the same… This is an exceedingly strange development, unexpected by all but the theologians. They have always believed the word of the Bible. But we scientists did not expect to find evidence for an abrupt beginning because we have had, until recently, such extraordinary success in tracing the chain of cause and effect backward in time… At this moment it seems as though science will never be able to raise the curtain on the mystery of creation. For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries.”—Robert Jastrow (NASA’s Goddard Institute for Space Studies)

**Information on Pascal’s Wager from COMMUNITY’s FYWBTG series:**

The seventeenth-century mathematician Blaise Pascal had one of the greatest intellects in the history of Western civilization. He grew up knowing about God, but NOT earnestly following him. Then, in a profound middle-of-the-night experience with God, he had a change of heart. That experience ignited Pascal’s passion to help others find their way back to God.

Pascal began to challenge his fellow intellectuals to a wager on God. He would dare them to step into a belief about God and see if it didn’t change their lives. Pascal explained his wager this way: “Make a bet that there is a God who loves you. If you are right you have everything to gain, and if you are wrong you have nothing to lose. Make a bet that God is real.”

It’s a gamble - where you have everything to gain and nothing to lose. If you find God, you will find the source of unconditional love for which you have always longed. Finding God will offer you a purpose for your life. And God is the one who can take your past and make sense out of it. That’s a big-time payoff!

The risk I want you to take is this—pray to God. If that’s not a common practice for you, it may seem awkward at first, but I want you to try it. For others, prayer is a regular part of your life. Maybe so regular that at times it becomes a little routine. Either way, I want you to open yourself up to finding God in a deeper and more life-changing way than ever before.

So, here is exactly what I am asking you to do: Pray as if God is real every single day for the next week. And here is the prayer I’m going to ask you to pray: “God if you are real, make yourself real to me.”

**Docent Requests:**

Brief commentary on Psalm 19:1-4, Romans 1:19-20, Romans 2:14-15.

Info on “Natural Indicators” for God’s existence. Provide summaries of these arguments. Suggested resource: Louie Giglio - “Indescribable.”

Astronomy/biology - data/images that make the case for natural indicators.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aVsqCLyoU3o

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\_J6yeIxKmJ4

Info on “Ethical Indicators” for God’s existence. Provide summaries of these arguments. Suggested resource: Ravi Zacharias - The End of Reason.

Current statistics on American beliefs about the existence of God.

Find high quality clips of Francis S. Collins (DNA scientist) telling his story of coming to believe in God.

Find other story examples of intellectuals/scientists/philosophers who came to believe in the existence of God.

**Week 3 | January 27, 2019 | Why Does God Allow Pain and Suffering?**

Scripture: Habakkuk 1:1-4, Psalm 73:12-14, Genesis 1:31, Revelation 21:1-4, Romans 8:28

**Message Big Idea**

While God does not provide the reason for each experience of pain, through Jesus he does provide a way to face suffering with hope and courage rather than bitterness and despair.

This is the message that the prophet Habakkuk received in a vision.

2 How long, O Lord, must I call for help? But you do not listen! “Violence is everywhere!” I cry, but you do not come to save. 3 Must I forever see these evil deeds? Why must I watch all this misery? Wherever I look, I see destruction and violence. I am surrounded by people who love to argue and fight. 4 The law has become paralyzed, and there is no justice in the courts. The wicked far outnumber the righteous, so that justice has become perverted. -Habakkuk 1:1-4 NLT

12 This is what the wicked are like—always free of care, they go on amassing wealth. 13 Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence. 14 All day long I have been afflicted, and every morning brings new punishments. -Psalm 73:12-14

31 God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day. -Genesis 1:31

“Then I saw ‘a new heaven and a new earth,’ for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’” –Revelation 21:1-4

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” –Romans 8:28

**Message Description**

Probably all of us have experienced a time when this question became important to us. It will be important in this message to demonstrate that COMMUNITY is a place where it is OK to wrestle with this question.

Here’s what we’re not going to do:

We’re not going to solve the issue of pain and suffering. We’re not going to minimize pain and suffering and provide simple platitudes like, “Everything happens for a reason.”

We’re not going to tell you that your situation will get better if you have enough faith, because that’s not how God works.

It might help to realize that if you ask this question, you are in good company. This is not a new question. Even people who God used to write the Bible struggled with this question:

Habakkuk (Prophet) - Habakkuk 1:1-4

Asaph (Psalmist) - Psalm 73:12-14

There are no easy answers to the question of why God allows pain and suffering. There are so many things we just don’t know. What we might do in this message is to invite people to look at what truths we do know by looking back at the past, looking ahead to the future, and seeing if we just might find some encouragement to help us navigate the present. We can draw from a previous COMMUNITY message from the “Reasons” series for this.

We’d love to include a personal story of someone who has faced difficult circumstances and wrestled with this question. Possible stories: DS from PLF, AP from NYB.

**Potential quotes:**

“God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” —C. S. Lewis

“The most beautiful people are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen.” —Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

“Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it.” —Helen Keller

"Creation cannot survive, and less so thrive, without its dark side. There is a quality of destruction, decay, and death that is essential to creation’s flourishing. . . . And the consequence of this destructive dimension is what we call evil, pain, and suffering. Obviously, I am not suggesting fatalistic acquiescence. Indeed, I am arguing for the very opposite: an enduring sense of hope, which it seems to me is not possible without first coming to terms with . . . the great paradox. It is . . . the unfolding cycle of birth-death-rebirth. And it transpires all over creation, on the macro and micro scales alike." -DIARMUID O'MURCHU (Incarnation: A New Evolutionary Threshold).

**Docent Requests:**

Background and brief commentary on Habakkuk 1:1-4, Psalm 73:12-14, Genesis 1:31, Revelation 21:1-4, Romans 8:28

Summaries / quotes of how spiritual writers address this question. Possible resources:

Where is God When it Hurts?

Walking with God through Pain and Suffering

Is God to Blame?: Beyond Pat Answers

Why Suffering?

Humorous ideas / illustrations / cartoons demonstrating how sometimes people can say things or give advice that just isn’t helpful.