**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 4  | FEBRUARY 3 | IS CHRISTIANITY TOO NARROW?**

**Scripture: John 14:1-7, Acts 4:8-12, Luke 15:11-32**

**MESSAGE BIG IDEA**

God provided a way for everyone to find their way back to him. Most religions boil down to humanity trying to reach God, but Christianity is about God reaching humanity.

*“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. 2 My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. 4 You know the way to the place where I am going.”* *5 Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”* *6 Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. 7 If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.” -John 14:1-7*

*8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: “Rulers and elders of the people! 9 If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, 10 then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth,whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. 11 Jesus is*

*“‘the stone you builders rejected which has become the cornerstone.’*

*12 Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.” -Acts 4:8-12*

*The Parable of the Lost Son. -Luke 15:11-32*

**Message Description**

The “coexist” graphic describes how much of our culture thinks. Essentially it takes what are the identifying symbols for major world religions or belief systems and combines them into a message that says, *“Regardless of what we believe, can’t we all just get along?”* The intent of the message is good. To stop fighting and killing and oppressing is a good goal..we would all agree to that! Yet the message of our culture doesn’t stop there. It quickly jumps to relativism - the idea that there is no one way. Relativism says, *“Pick your own way! Just be nice and kind to other people and then whatever works for you...works!”*

A Lot of people believe there are many paths to God...that all religions are basically the same. One problem: It’s not true.

Key to Christianity is what one believes about Jesus.

* ***Jews*** believe Jesus was Mary’s son, a teacher (Rabbi), had many disciples, was respected, performed miracles, claimed to be the Messiah (acknowledge he said it, don't believe it), and was crucified on the cross. They also acknowledge Jesus’ followers reported that he was raised from the dead (but don't believe it themselves).
* ***Muslims*** believe Jesus was born of a virgin, is to be revered and respected, was a prophet, a wise teacher who worked miracles, ascended to heaven, and will come again as a follower of Mohammed.
* ***Hindus*** believe Jesus was a holy man, a wise teacher, and is *a* ‘god’.
* ***Buddhists*** believe Jesus was an enlightened man and a wise teacher.

Major religions see Jesus very differently. Central to Christianity is the belief that Jesus is God and the only way to God (John 14:1-7). The early Christian community echoed this belief (Acts 4:8-12).

This claim that Jesus is the only way is what often turns people off in our culture. They feel it excludes people, but it is actually GOOD NEWS for all people.

In every other major religion, the emphasis is on DO. Do enough, and you’re in.

* ***Orthodox Judaism*** – has it’s 613 commands to obey.
* ***Islam has the 5 pillars*** – this is how you work your way to Heaven.
* ***Buddhism*** – the ultimate goal is Nirvana and you get there by working toward a distinction of desire.
* ***Hinduism*** – work your way to heaven by becoming one with Brahma, the all-prevailing force of the universe; achieved by living a moral life. Live life over and over until you get it right.

Only in Christianity is the emphasis on DONE! Receive what has been done for you. Every other religion says only those who work hard and do enough can reach God. Christianity says the doors are wide open to all who will accept Jesus’ invitation.

However, Christ-followers have to acknowledge they aren’t able to reach God on their own. There is no room for arrogance over those of another religious faith. Make sure and stress this! We are not “better” than anyone else. Christ-followers recognize they aren’t better, that’s why we need the saving grace of Jesus.

Christianity is unique in that it is the only religion in which God says, “I’ll come and get you” (John 14:3) as opposed to, “Work your way to me.” Could consider closing with the parable of the lost son.

When Jesus says, “I am the way,” that’s not bad news. It means the way is open to everyone to find their way back to God.

**Docent Research**

* Commentary on John 14:1-7.
* Current statistics on what Americans (and American Christians) believe about the exclusivity of Christianity.
* Examples from pop culture that illustrate relativism.
* Summaries about what major religions believe about Jesus from other sources (we drew what we have from a partner church’s message).
* Summaries from other sources about what major religions teach you have to “do” to reach God (we drew what we have from a partner church’s message).
* Find the Buddhist version of the story of the prodigal son. We think in this story the son stumbles home and is invited back as an employee whose job it is to shovel excrement, which he does for 20 years to get back into the Father’s good graces. Can you find a summary of this?

**WEEK 5  | FEBRUARY 10 | IS JESUS REALLY GOD?**

**(FYWBTG ASK)**

**Scripture: John 1:1-4,14; John 2:13-22, John 10:22-30, 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, 1 Corinthians 15:12-19**

**MESSAGE BIG IDEA**

With intention or by default, every person answers the question, “Is Jesus really God?” and the overwhelming evidence points to the truth of his divinity.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4 In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. 14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. -John 1:1-4,14*

*13 When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem.14 In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. 15 So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. 16 To those who sold doves he said, “Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!” 17 His disciples remembered that it is written: “Zeal for your house will consume me.”18 The Jews then responded to him, “What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?”19 Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”20 They replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” 21 But the temple he had spoken of was his body. 22 After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken. John 2:13-22*

*22 Then came the Festival of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, 23 and Jesus was in the temple courts walking in Solomon’s Colonnade. 24 The Jews who were there gathered around him, saying, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.”25 Jesus answered, “I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father’s name testify about me, 26 but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. 27 My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. 30 I and the Father are one.” -John 10:22-30*

*3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. 6 After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, 8 and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. -1 Corinthians 15:3-8*

*12 But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? 13 If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. 14 And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. 15 More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. 16 For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either.17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. 19 If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. -1 Corinthians 15:12-19*

**MESSAGE DESCRIPTION**

John, perhaps the person who knew Jesus best, writes his Gospel to convince people that Jesus is God who came in the flesh, lived among us, died and rose again to restore our relationship with him.

***Eternal Existence***: Right from the start, John states that Jesus is God who came in the flesh (John 1:1-4,14). Jesus did not come into existence when he was born into this world, John argues. Jesus was with God and is God who was present at creation.

***Self-Declaration***: Lots of people consider Jesus a “good teacher” or even “a prophet.” Yet, John records that Jesus, himself, claimed to be God (John 10:22-30).

C.S. Lewis, in what is called “Lewis’ Trilemma,” argues that when you examine the historical Jesus, there are three distinct possibilities about the claims Jesus made.

* One, Jesus could be a liar. Everything he did and said could have been a ploy to gain followers.
* Two, Jesus could have been insane, a lunatic, and somehow no one seemed to notice.
* Or…three, the only possibility left, was that Jesus was who he said he was. He was God.  He was, in fact, the way, the truth, and the life.

Lewis, who incidentally was an atheist before examining the claims of Christ, writes:

“You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God…but let us not come with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God.” –Mere Christianity

**Resurrection**: Jesus predicted his own death and resurrection (John 2:13-22), and then pulled it off! Jesus did what no one else had ever done and ever will do again: He came back to life from death... after 3 days, he came back to life. The resurrection is central to the Christian faith (1 Corinthians 15:12-19).

There are lots of solid reasons to believe in the resurrection.

* The Bible contains 4 historical accounts of the resurrection.
* The eyewitness accounts of the resurrection are substantial (1 Corinthians 15:3-8).
* The only thing that explains the transformation of Jesus’ disciples from scared deserters to bold proclaimers is the resurrection.
* Not one person recanted even when faced with martyrdom.

Now here’s the thing, every other great religious leader who claimed they were a way to god or a god... they died. They were buried. No other world religion claims their way is based on a leader who resurrected. This is just me talking, but if I have to base my life and eternity on one religious figure, I’m staking claim to the guy who said he would die and rise again three days later…and actually did it.

There is overwhelming evidence that Jesus is who he said he was...God come in the flesh who died and rose again to save the world.

The question every one of us has to ask ourselves is this: Will we believe him? Every person must decide what they believe about Jesus. This message should lead into a FYWBTG ask and an invitation to get baptized in 2 weeks.

*Quote:*

Aquinas: “If the incarnation did not really happen, then an even more unbelievable miracle happened: the conversion of the world by the biggest lie in history and the moral transformation of lives into unselfishness, detachment from worldly pleasures and radically new heights of holiness by a mere myth.”

**Docent Requests**:

* Commentary John 2:13-22 and John 10:22-30.
* Current statistics on what Americans believe about Jesus’ divinity.
* Insights/arguments from spiritual writers on the divinity of Jesus (i.e. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*).
* Summary of the argument from Andy Stanley (or others) as to why the resurrection stands at the center of our faith.
* What are the key stumbling blocks to people believing in the divinity of Jesus?
* Humorous misconceptions about Jesus.
* N.T. Wright - Resurrection2

**WEEK 6  | FEBRUARY 17 | IS THE BIBLE RELIABLE?**

**Scripture: 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Hebrews 4:12, John 7:17**

**MESSAGE BIG IDEA**

The Bible can be shown to be a reliable document, accurately recorded and transmitted through history, and relevant to life in the 21st century.

*16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. -2 Timothy 3:16-17*

*12 For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword,it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. -Hebrews 4:12*

*17 Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own. -John 7:17*

**MESSAGE DESCRIPTION**

The Bible is unique, set apart from any other piece of literature in the history of humankind.

* The Bible is unique because of its circulation. It is the most published book and continues to be the bestselling book of all time.
* The Bible is unique because of its translation. It has been translated into over 1200 languages with the work of translation into more language continuing.
* The Bible is unique because of its preservation. It has survived the most rigorous efforts to destroy a book in the history of the world. Yet, it is still here.

Yet, so many people have questions about the Bible. Is it reliable? Can it be trusted? Is it still applicable to modern life?

For this message, we have a lot of previous material to draw from. We can draw from:

* The previous COMMUNITY Message - Can I trust the Bible?
* This great video from the Canadian Bible Society that we might be able to use in some way in the message. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPaeo19sQXw

In this message, we’ll argue that the Bible is...

* Accurate - The Bible conveys the original message of its authors. In comparison to other historical literature, the Bible is the most accurately preserved and verified document of the ancient world.
* Reliable - The Bible is a reliable (although not always literal) source of historical information.
* Relevant - The Bible can still speak into our lives today. It’s message continues to bring inspiration, challenge, and hope to those who read it (2 Timothy 3:16-17, Hebrews 4:12).

We may want to address the reality that some people still struggle with the Bible. They read stories about a flood destroying the earth and a giant fish swallowing a man and can’t accept the Bible as true. Might want to draw from some of the stuff Andy Stanley’s been talking about (without getting too controversial!)… the earliest Christ-followers didn’t have the Bible as we have it. They certainly didn’t have the New Testament and many had never seen or read the Old Testament. Yet, they believed in Jesus. We don’t “believe” in the Bible, we believe in the risen Christ.

In John 7:17, Jesus challenges us with these words:

“Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.” –John 7:17

In essence he’s saying, “Do you want to find out whether my teaching is really from God? Do you want to see what it could do in your life? Then live it out.”

We’ll conclude this message by challenging one another to test the reliability of the Bible by living it out.

**Docent Requests**:

* Commentary on 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Hebrews 4:12, John 7:17.
* Statistics about what Americans believe about the Bible.
* Summary of Andy Stanley’s argument that you don’t have to believe in all the “hard-to-believe” stories in the Bible in order to still believe in Jesus (see recent interviews, articles, new book *Irresistible*). Think of the person who really struggles with the story of Noah or Jonah. How could you help them move beyond their intellectual hang ups?
* Humorous material about how the Bible is misunderstood or misused.

**WEEK 7  | FEBRUARY 24 | CAN I KNOW GOD PERSONALLY?**

**All-Church Baptisms**

**Scripture: Jeremiah 31:33-34**

**MESSAGE BIG IDEA**

The way to knowing God is not by striving and trying harder. It’s through knowing and following Jesus.

*33 “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel* *after that time,” declares the Lord.* *“I will put my law in their minds* *and write it on their hearts.* *I will be their God,* *and they will be my people.* *34 No longer will they teach their neighbor,* *or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’* *because they will all know me,* from *the least of them to the greatest,”declares the Lord.* *“For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” -Jeremiah 31:33-34*

**MESSAGE DESCRIPTION**

Newton’s law says that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. A lot of how we try to balance things out in life follows this pattern. For example:

* You drive too fast and get a ticket. So you pay the speeding ticket and as a result things are balanced out and you can keep driving.
* You blow a presentation at work. So you put in extra hours and hit the next project out of the park and as a result you can keep your job.

The reality is, this is often how we approach relationships as well.

* You have a rough morning and lose your cool with your kids. So you take them for ice cream after school to balance things out.
* You say the wrong thing to your significant other. So you make special arrangements for a dinner out to balance things out.

It’s a way of living that constantly asks, “What do I have to do to undo what I just did? How can I balance things out?” Of course, the hard part is not everything can be made up for. Sometimes there are things that we don’t know how to balance out.

Many of us bring this “balancing” way of life into our relationship with God. And this puts a big weight on our shoulders. It leaves us feeling like 1) We have to be perfect. Or, when we realize that is impossible, 2) We have to constantly church out good deeds to balance out our bad ones.

No wonder we are so tired.

Ultimately, all this effort to balance things out leaves us exhausted...and often, somewhere down the road, we will likely walk away from God.

If you have walked away from a god who demanded perfection...good. Because that’s not the real God.

The reality is we assume God operates the way we do, but God is not like us. God doesn’t relate to us with a scale of good and bad deeds. No, Jesus came to tip the scale forever in our favor. He saved us not because of the righteous things we have done, but because of his great mercy (Titus 3:3-7)

What God is really after is your heart. He wants you to know him personally. To live in an intimate relationship with him where he is the center of your world, the center of your heart (Jeremiah 31:33-34).

We are so busy trying to do things for God, yet the imagery we see in Revelation 3:20 paints the true picture. Jesus stands at the door of our lives knocking and saying, “I just want to be with you.”

Maybe today you need to stop trying to balance life in your favor and simply choose to trust that Jesus has done for you what you could not do for yourself.

This will lead into the All-Church Baptism ask as we confront many of the questions that hold people back from giving their lives to Jesus and being baptized.

In the conclusion, we’ll help paint a picture of what awaits the person who chooses Jesus. What difference does it make if I know God personally?

* He gives me forgiveness for my past
* He gives me a purpose for my present
* He gives me a hope for my future

**Docent Requests:**

* Commentary on Jeremiah 31:33-34
* “Knowing” word study
* When God says “they will know me” in Jeremiah, what is the word he uses for “know?” What does that word mean?
* Quotes from spiritual writers on what it means to “know God.”
* Humorous examples of how we try to “balance” things and fail.
	+ Void of relationship equals religiosity.