DIVINE INNOVATION

How is God making all things new?

A Duke Youth Academy and Faith & Leadership curriculum

FACILITATOR’S GUIDE

Meet Ella Russell, Joshua Bingaman, Jillian “JJ” Simmons and Anthony Suber. Like you, they are navigating challenge, suffering and mess in their lives. They are seeking to understand how God is at work in their daily lives. They are discerning God’s call on their lives.

Their honest and relatable personal stories, designed for small groups to explore over four weeks, invite participants to wonder: How are we called to live our faith? How is God making all things new? How do some of the practices of our faith, such as baptism and communion, invite us into ongoing discernment?

The stories of Ella, Joshua, Jillian and Anthony are told as visual poems, a unique form of filmmaking that combines creative videography, storytelling and music. This evocative style is unlike other available resources for Christians seeking to study Scripture together.

“Divine innovation” leads groups to discover how God takes the old and makes it new in Scripture and in our lives. Each session features one of the films, Scripture study, and creative practices for participants to do both as a group and on their own. Sessions are designed for high school youth, college students or adults.

This curriculum has been designed in partnership with the Duke Youth Academy for Christian Formation, a yearlong program that invites high school students to live in Christ and to think deeply about being Christian. It combines a weeklong residency on the Duke University campus with a year of continuing mentorship, practice and online community.

The curriculum appears on Faith & Leadership, the online magazine of Leadership Education at Duke Divinity, which designs educational services, develops intellectual resources, and facilitates networks of institutions to strengthen the ecology of Christian institutions that enable U.S. congregations and pastors to flourish.

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INTRODUCTION

This curriculum set, including four visual poems, lesson plans and resource guides, invites your small group to consider God’s creative work in our daily lives -- even in the midst of limitation, lamentation, harm and mess.

“Divine innovation” is simply another way of naming the foundational Christian belief that God is making all things new. This creative force is active in every person’s life, church and community, even when we can’t quite see it.

With these visual poems, we meet four Christians who, even before they could discern the divine innovation at work, sensed that God had not abandoned them. Reflecting on the ways that God made things new in the lives of these ordinary Christians may inspire you and the small group you lead to a new way of seeing God’s work in your own daily lives.

In the first lesson, “Divine innovation in the face of limitation,” Ella Russell, the creator and owner of E-dub-a-licious Treats, shares her story of facing financial limitation and accidentally discovering a gift for creating cookies and other baked goods. Limitation and scarcity are common obstacles in discovering God’s work in our lives, whether they come from structural, social, relational or personal places. Ella challenges us to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit and see what God might be doing through us in our communities and churches.

In “Divine innovation in the face of lamentation,” we meet Joshua Bingaman, the founder and owner of Helm Boots. Joshua shares how God’s presence in other people has brought him peace and hope in his struggles with melancholy and addiction. As Joshua creates boots, he names them for people who have inspired or healed him. At the intersection of pain and healing, God makes Joshua new -- and we, too, are given an opportunity to lament, name our pain and discover where healing is possible.

Jillian “JJ” Simmons, a radio personality, motivational speaker and mother in Houston, Texas, tells her story of “Divine innovation in the face of harm” in the third visual poem. Jillian’s childhood was shaped by a difficult relationship with her mother and her mother’s understanding of beauty. Instead of following her mother’s lead, Jillian has sought to redefine beauty in her work in schools and as a mother. Jillian points to her relationship with Jesus as the source of her transformation and renewal.

In the final lesson, “Divine innovation in the face of mess,” sculptor Anthony Suber describes how he often chooses overlooked and ordinary objects to tell the story of being re-created and refined. He challenges others to embrace the messiness and imperfections of life as opportunities to experience divine innovation.

Accompanying each film, there is a guide for conversation, Scripture study, practice and prayer. The guides are designed to suit a broad range of audiences and ages, from high school youth to adults. Through open-ended questions, they allow facilitators to shape the conversation to meet the particular
needs of their groups. We encourage facilitators to watch the films ahead of time to become familiar with the people and themes in each.

The lessons follow a basic pattern:

- Gathering conversation, introducing the theme
- Visual poem viewing and discussion
- Scripture study, exploring the intersection of the poem and God’s word
- Practice
  - In the room – kinesthetic or creative exercises to engage group participants in a deeper way
  - In the community – challenges to take the conversation about the poem and Scripture into participants’ daily lives
- Closing prayer

We have provided brief commentaries on the Scripture passages. If you would like deeper scriptural commentary, we recommend the Resource Library on Ministry Matters.

Interested in further reflection on the idea of divine innovation? Please see our resources section below the lesson plans.
Lesson 1: Divine innovation in the face of limitation

FACILITATOR’S INTRODUCTION

This visual poem features Ella Russell, the creator and owner of E-dub-a-licious Treats in Houston, Texas. It highlights how God meets Ella at a point of limitation, in the midst of her lack. Ella could have chosen a number of ways to respond, but she ultimately elected to trust in the Lord’s sovereignty, which opened her up to innovation and creativity.

In John 6:1-15 and Luke 21:1-4, we discover God’s tendency to meet us in places of limitation and prompt this same kind of innovation and creativity. In John 6, Jesus blesses the disciples’ meager find of five loaves and two fish -- which then miraculously feeds a hungry crowd. In Luke 21, Jesus commends a widow’s meager offering of two small coins -- all that she has -- which then becomes for his followers an exemplary act of trust in God’s abundance.

These two stories from the Gospels, along with Ella’s visual poem, challenge us to trust in the ways God can make the impossible possible. Where societal structure and all signs point to lack and limitation, God divinely innovates and makes a way.

MATERIALS

- Homemade or locally made cookies
- Pens, colored pencils or markers
- Journals for participants (optional)

GATHERING

You may wish to begin with a prayer of your own or the one provided:

Gracious God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are a God who makes new and beautiful things out of the empty, dry and forgotten places in our lives. Be with us today as we explore the ways you are innovating in us, in our communities and in our world. Help us to see with your merciful and loving eyes. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Share homemade or locally made baked goods with the group.

Introduce the theme using the information in the description for this track. Ask:

- What comes to mind when you hear the phrase “divine innovation”?
- What do those words mean separately and together?
VISUAL POEM

Watch the film. Ask:
• What did you notice about Ella or the poem?
• What struck you as unique, relatable or significant?

SCRIPTURE STUDY

Read the passages aloud, either in unison or with one reader.
Give the group five minutes or so to reread the Scripture, noting significant words or ideas, connections to Ella’s poem, and other thoughts that may arise. Then share with one another.
Discuss these questions:
• What limitations can you identify in Ella’s story? In the Scripture passages?
• What posture does Jesus take in the face of limitation in John 6:1-15? What is the posture of the widow in Luke 21? What parallels exist between Ella’s limitations and response and the ones from the Scripture passages we just read?
• When Ella faced financial limitation, she could have given up, but instead she offered what she had with gratitude. Have you faced a similar circumstance? How did you respond?
• What signs of the Holy Spirit’s prompting can you see in Ella’s story? In the Scripture passages? What’s the Holy Spirit’s role in prompting innovation in our lives?
• How do these Scripture stories and Ella’s story challenge the ways we trust God to make all things new or the impossible possible in our lives and communities? Where have you seen God’s innovation in your life or in your community?

PRACTICE

Spiritual practices are an opportunity to go more deeply, embodying what the group is discussing. Invite your group to engage in this work together, in the room, and independently throughout the week, in the community.

In the room

When Ella got bored making chocolate chip cookies, her creativity was sparked and innovation began.

Break the group into pairs. Invite each partner to share a goal or desire in which he or she is facing limitations or boredom. Ask the partners to pose the following questions to each other:
• What do you need to see this happen?
• What do you lack?
• What do you already have?
• How can you use what you already have to move toward your goal?
• Where do you see God’s innovative work in your partner’s story?

In the community

Ella uses her everyday experiences as inspiration for new, original recipes. For instance, she created the “Cole World” cookie after experiencing hip-hop artist J. Cole in concert. Its color recalls his golden complexion; its mintiness, the refreshing effect of his music.

Likewise, we can see and hear God in ordinary spaces and receive inspiration to counter the stagnation and limitation of our lives. Go on an adventure today: visit a park or a shared public area and observe the space. In your journal, respond to the following questions:

• What does it look like?
• What does it feel like?
• What does it sound like?
• What are the people around you doing?

Think about the places where you have experienced stagnation or limitation:

• Is there a creative connection between what you’ve observed today and the stagnation or limitation you’ve experienced?
• How might your observations prompt innovation in these places?
• How might you integrate your observations into how you respond to stagnation and limitation?
• Where do you see God in these places?

CLOSING PRAYER

You may wish to close with a prayer of your own, or you can pray this verse from Charles Wesley’s hymn “Ah, When Shall I Awake”:

Let us in patience wait
Till faith shall make us whole;
Till thou shalt all things new create
In each believing soul;
Who can resist thy will?
Speak, and it shall be done!
Thou shalt the work of faith fulfil,
And perfect us in one.

Amen.
Lesson 2: Divine innovation in the face of lamentation

FACILITATOR’S INTRODUCTION

This visual poem features Joshua Bingaman, the creator and owner of Helm Boots in Austin, Texas, whose story highlights how the healing we receive from God is a divine innovation that enables us to provide spaces of healing for others. Joshua challenges us to attend to our places of pain and lament and to name the ways God and others have participated in our healing. His experience suggests that the spiritual practice of lamentation and naming has the power to reorient and transform us.

Genesis 16 tells the story of Hagar’s desperate plea for God’s help. Hagar, Sarah’s slave-girl, runs away after being mistreated by Sarah and meets God in this place of despair and isolation. It is here, in one of the most intimate interactions in all of Scripture, that God allows Hagar to give the Creator a name, El-roi, meaning “the God who sees.” She is the only character throughout Scripture who gives God a name.

Joshua and Hagar both commune with God through lament, and both use a practice of naming at the moment of divine innovation in their places of pain. Lamentation, as uncensored communion with God, is a visceral form of worship where we learn to be honest, intimate and humble before God. Lamentation is important because it is both an acknowledgment that things are not as they should be and an anguished wail, asking the Lord to intervene with righteousness and justice. As we name our own difficult experiences and places of healing, we can discover God’s presence with us in all seasons.

MATERIALS

- Baby names book or website (optional)
- Bibles
- Journals for participants (optional)

GATHERING

You may wish to begin with a prayer of your own or the one provided:

_Holy God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are a God with many names: Yahweh, “I am who I am”; Jehovah Jireh, “the Lord who provides”; Immanuel, “God with us”; and many more. As we draw closer to you in our conversation today, show us the ways these many names mark your faithful, healing presence in our world and in our lives. In the name of Jesus, the one who saves. Amen._
Invite members of your group to reflect on their own names. Ask:

- What is the story of how you got your name? What does your name mean?
- Are there ways that you have tried to live into your name? If so, how? What ways have you tried to walk away from the meaning of your name?

VISUAL POEM

Watch the film together and then invite the group to reflect on it. Ask:

- What stood out and what resonated with you or connected to your story of faith?
- Are there lingering questions or particular statements you’d like to address?
- What laments (or places of hurting) do you want to name today? Where are you stuck in a place of pain or hurting?
- There is a saying that “hurt people hurt people.” In this poem, Joshua says, “People hurt people, but people also heal people.” If you, like Joshua, feel that you have been healed or are in the process of becoming healed, how has the healing you’ve received prompted you to help lead others into healing?
- How is naming a part of Joshua’s healing process?

SCRIPTURE STUDY

Read Genesis 16 together. Ask:

- What harms have been done against Hagar? What is Hagar’s response? What is God’s response to Hagar? How is pain mixed with healing?
- How is naming connected to Hagar’s sorrow and healing? What does naming God El-roi (“the God who sees”) mean in the context of Hagar’s pain?
- In the midst of your lamentation and healing, what would you name God? Why?
- Joshua and Hagar both use a practice of naming at the moment of divine innovation in the place of pain. What is it about naming that empowers the transformation of pain into a place for healing? How does that work?
- How is our own healing connected to our ability to help others heal?

PRACTICE

These practices offer your group both shared and independent experiences to bring life to the discussions.

In the room

Joshua names his boot designs after individuals who have been key to his development and healing. Ask your group members to take off their shoes and consider for a moment where they have traveled while
wearing those shoes, and who has accompanied them on the journey. In groups of three or four, invite each person to answer:

- To whom might you dedicate your shoes? Tell a story that demonstrates why this person has been a part of your journey through pain and healing.
- Did you perceive this person’s presence in your life to be God’s presence? Why or why not?

**In the community**

Is there a place in your community that is a memorial or a monument to someone who has played a major role in the life of the community? Choose such a place and make plans to visit by the end of the week. In your journal, respond to the following questions:

- For whom is this memorial named? Why was this memorial constructed (what is the story)?
- To what pain in the community did this person respond? What healing did he or she prompt?
- How is life different because of this person?
- Do you perceive this person’s presence in your community to be God’s presence? Why or why not?

**CLOSING PRAYER**

You may wish to close with a prayer of your own, or you can offer this poem, “He’s There,” by Katie Nicole Aquino, from “Women’s Uncommon Prayers”:

> When I feel I cannot go any farther,  
> He picks me up and tells me he knows.  
> When I feel I cannot sink any lower,  
> He pulls me out and tells me he sees.  
> When I feel that the pain can’t hurt any worse,  
> He takes it away and shows me he cares.  
> When I feel that I cannot open my heart,  
> He reaches in and shows me he can.  
> When I think that my life can’t get any harder,  
> I turn to him.  
> He’s always there.

_Amen._
FACILITATOR’S INTRODUCTION

This poem features Jillian Simmons, a Houston radio personality, motivational speaker and philanthropist dedicated to investing in the emerging generation of her city. Jillian experienced a neglected childhood without the privilege of strong adult or female role models. Even so, as her relationship with God has grown deeper, she has come to understand God as the source of her strength and the motivation behind her love for others.

In Romans 12, Paul exhorts the Roman readers to be transformed by the renewing of their minds. This is not an individual endeavor but one that takes place within Christian community (12:3-8). Such renewal is also deeply active. Paul charges the Roman church to live out the renewal through specific postures and practices in everyday life.

Through faith, Jillian’s sense of identity and beauty has been transformed. That transformation is evident in her role as a mother and leader of a nonprofit organization that challenges and reshapes the definition of beauty for young girls. In Scripture and in Jillian’s poem, we see the power of God’s transformation and innovation in our lives, making us new again to go about the work of transforming our communities.

Jillian’s visual poem discusses an emotionally abusive relationship with her mother, and the conversation questions attend to places of neglect, abandonment and pain in participants’ lives. You may wish to offer participants an opportunity to excuse themselves. Please be mindful of the space survivors of such experiences may need. Resources for survivors are available in the resource section.

MATERIALS

- Bibles
- Hand-held mirrors
- Small pieces of paper
- Pens
- A small cross or simple container
- Dry erase markers
GATHERING

You may wish to say your own opening prayer or the one provided:

_Loving God, in our darkest, most broken places, you make us whole; you make us beautiful. As we explore how you make us whole and beautiful, grant us the grace to listen to your word and one another with open hearts and to see one another with your eyes. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen._

Begin your time together reflecting on the idea of beauty.

- Who taught you about beauty? What did you learn about the definition of beauty?
- Do you still subscribe to that definition of beauty? What has changed in your definition of beauty? Why?

VISUAL POEM

[Watch the film.] Invite the group to reflect on the visual poem. If needed, offer these questions:

- What resonated with you from Jillian’s poem? What created dissonance for you?
- What were the destructive dynamics of Jillian’s relationship with her mother? Have you experienced destructive or unhealthy dynamics? Does Jillian’s story invite you to reflect differently on any relationships in your life, past or present?
- How has Jillian responded to her upbringing? What role has her faith in Jesus had in her response?

SCRIPTURE STUDY

Read Romans 12:1-8 aloud. Ask:

- How does Jillian express her transformed definition of beauty in her relationship with herself, her daughter and her community? How is that a divine innovation?
- Why does Paul make this connection between the work of individuals and the community? Why does Jillian take her transformation out into the community and culture? Why and how can we do likewise?
- What is something in your life that you do not know how you could have done without Jesus?

Divide participants into five groups and assign each group one of the following segments of Romans 12: verses 9-10, 11-13, 14-15, 16, 17-18, 19-21. Each group should read its verses several times and then respond to the following questions:

- How do you hear or see Jillian responding to the charges in this passage?
- What do you hear or see God compelling you to do or be in this passage?

Share reflections from the small group conversations with the larger group.
PRACTICE

Encourage your participants to practice what they are learning in two ways -- together in the room and independently in the community.

In the room

Distribute hand-held mirrors, small pieces of paper, pens and dry-erase markers to the group members. Direct each participant to spend 30 seconds or longer in silence looking in the mirror.

Ask the group to write on the slips of paper the lies we tell ourselves and hear from our culture about beauty, who we are and what our purpose is.

Invite the participants to place the papers at the base of a cross or in a simple container as you read Romans 12:1-2.

Prompt the group to write on the mirrors with dry-erase markers who God says they are. Spend another period of silence looking into the mirrors with God’s eyes. Share:

- In what ways does this passage encourage you to see yourself differently?
- What is God divinely innovating in you?

In the community

Ponder your personal experiences with maltreatment and neglect and how God has divinely innovated you. What places in your community suffer from similar ills?

Go online and identify an organization in your community that addresses some form of maltreatment (a women’s shelter, community center, hospital, school, community gardening initiative, etc.). Observe the institution’s mission, services and practices.

What is one way the organization innovates in response to maltreatment or neglect? What is one way for you to support this work? Dare to support through volunteering time, resources or items of need.

CLOSING PRAYER

You may wish to close with a prayer of your own, or you can offer this prayer-poem from the Masai tribe in Tanzania, from “An African Prayer Book,” by Desmond Tutu:

_Father, thank you for your revelation_

_about death_
_and illness_
_and sorrow._

_Thank you for speaking so plainly to us,_
_for calling us all friends_
and hovering over us;
for extending your arms out to us.

We cannot stand on our own;
we fall into death without you.
We fall from faith, left to our own.
We are really friendless without you.

Your extended arms fill us with joy,
expressing love,
love caring and carrying,
asking and receiving our trust.

You have our trust, Father,
and our faith,
with our bodies
and all that we are and possess.

We fear nothing when with you,
safe to stretch out and help others,
those troubled in faith,
those troubled in body.

Father, help us to do with our bodies what we proclaim,
that our faith be known to you
and to others,
and be effective in all the world.

Amen.
Divine innovation: How is God making all things new?

Lesson 4: Divine innovation in the face of mess

FACILITATOR’S INTRODUCTION

This visual poem features Anthony Suber, a sculptor based in Houston, Texas. Anthony uses found objects, wood and metal to tell a new story about the materials and his own life. Through his art, Anthony illustrates that mess and imperfection are something to embrace rather than avoid.

In 2 Corinthians 4:1-15, Paul writes to the church in Corinth encouraging them to see God’s power and hold on to the gospel, even in the midst of afflicting and perplexing times. God chooses us -- ordinary, fragile jars of clay -- to store the treasure of “the light of the knowledge of God’s glory” (4:6 NIV), provoking us to trust in God’s power and not our own. This power comes from Jesus’ death and resurrection. When we carry in our bodies Jesus’ death -- that is, connect to the sufferings of Jesus and the messiness of the world -- we also carry in our bodies the hope of the resurrection.

The Scripture passage and Anthony’s visual poem point us to the ways in which God is re-creating us from our messiness: we are being refined and transformed by God into new creations, into the likeness of Christ. As we embrace the messiness of our life, faith and world, we meet a God who innovates and makes all things new.

MATERIALS

- Bibles
- Paper and pens
- Aluminum foil
- Wire hangers
- Clay

GATHERING

You may wish to begin with a prayer of your own or the one provided:

Merciful God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, much of our world, our community and our lives is a mess. Help us to see our imperfections as places for your love and grace to come alive. As we dive into our conversations, reveal to us again your divine innovations, how you are making all things new. Amen.
Distribute paper and pens to the participants. Explain that you will supply a word and they are to respond by writing any words or ideas they associate with that word. Share the following words one at a time, pausing for responses in between:

- Mess
- Perfection
- Creation

Invite the group to share their responses.

**VISUAL POEM**

*Watch the film.* Reflect on the visual poem as a group, using these questions to seed conversation:

- Where did you see messiness or imperfection in Anthony’s story?
- What kind of story does Anthony tell about imperfection, flaws and weakness? What changed his story?

**SCRIPTURE STUDY**

Read *2 Corinthians 4:1-15*. Ask:

- Why does Paul offer the image of clay jars? What do Anthony’s chosen materials communicate? What do Paul’s clay jars and Anthony’s materials have in common?
- What does it mean that we are “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies” (4:10 NRSV)? How does Anthony’s artwork carry both death and life? How is it a divine innovation that our bodies carry both death and life?
- How is your faith imperfect? How do you find yourself carrying both death and life?
- What messes, afflictions, persecutions, or places of despair and destruction can you identify in your community? In your school? In your church? How can this mess be transformed into beauty?
- Share about a place in your story where you have seen mess redeemed, made beautiful or reordered. How do you see it as divine innovation?

**PRACTICE**

Conclude this series on divine innovation by leading your participants in a shared experience, embodying the discussions. Then invite them to take a practice home to continue to reflect about divine innovation and its place in their lives in the community.
In the room

Anthony’s sculpture exhibit “My Addiction Machine” uses found materials to create new imaginations about addiction, behavior and culture.

Set out paper, aluminum foil, wire hangers and clay. Invite the participants to choose one medium to model artistic machines that will tell new stories about the (imagined) raw materials, the artists or the viewers. Have them describe their machines to the group in the style of 15-second commercials.

After everyone has shared, discuss:

- What are the raw materials you imagine going into your machine? How will your machine change or perfect them? What imperfections will remain in the new creation?
- How does your machine mimic divine innovation? How does it fall short?

In the community

Find and take a picture of something in your city that has been repurposed for active use. This may be a recycled item you’ve purchased, something you personally repurposed or something that was publicly repurposed. Post this image to any social media accounts you have, telling the story of the new creation and divine innovation.

CLOSING PRAYER

You may wish to close with a prayer of your own, or you can offer this poem, “Blessing the Body,” by Jan Richardson, from “Circle of Grace”:

This blessing takes
one look at you
and all it can say is
holy.

Holy hands.
Holy face.
Holy feet.
Holy everything
in between.

Holy even in pain.
Holy even when weary.
In brokenness, holy.
In shame, holy still.
Holy in delight.
Holy in distress.
Holy when being born.
Holy when we lay it down
at the hour of our death.

So, friend,
open your eyes
(holy eyes).
For one moment
see what this blessing sees,
this blessing that knows
how you have been formed
and knit together
in wonder and
in love.

Welcome this blessing
that folds its hands
in prayer
when it meets you;
receive this blessing
that wants to kneel
in reverence
before you:
you who are
temple,
sanctuary,
home for God
in this world.

Amen.
If you’re interested in exploring the topic of divine innovation more deeply, we invite you to engage these resources.

**BOOKS**


“Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer,” by Tracy Kidder

“Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith,” by Anne Lamott

“Red Bird: Poems,” by Mary Oliver

“The Second Coming: A Novel,” by Walker Percy


**FILMS AND VIDEOS**

“Babette’s Feast”

“Landfill Harmonic”

“Phil Hansen: The Art of the Imperfect”

“Phil Hansen: Embrace the Shake”

**WEB RESOURCES ON HARM**

Childhelp: Prevention and treatment of child abuse

FaithTrust Institute: Working together to end sexual and domestic violence

Help for Adult Victims of Child Abuse

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence
FAITH & LEADERSHIP

Andy Crouch: Love and the risk of innovation

Claire Wimbush: Broken people walking toward wholeness

Deanna Thompson: How to live like we’re dying

Dominique D. Gilliard: Reclaiming the power of lament

‘God answered our prayer’: Three refugees share their stories

Perfect match

Telling today’s resurrection stories

Welcome to the church of ‘holy chaos’