



BIBLE STUDY ALONG THE WAY SESSION 1

# TRAVELS WITH JACOB

by Julie A. Kanarr



## Materials you will need

- Postcards (or blank 3x4 or 4x6 index cards)
- Optional: paper and colored pencils/pens/markers for faith/life map activity
- Bible
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)*

## Theme Verse

*“Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” – Genesis 28:15*

## Road Map

In this session, we will accompany Jacob as he leaves home to escape his brother Esau’s wrath. He spends several years living in Haran and working for his uncle Laban, until he finally returns home and faces his brother. Along the way, Jacob experiences the presence of God. In our study, we will ponder the intersections between Jacob’s journey and our own paths. What has been your experience of

leaving home? When have you wrestled with fears and doubts? How has a time of returning home brought an opportunity for change? (See “Going Home Again,” p. 38.)

## Preparing the Way

Sing “Lord Jesus, You Shall Be My Song As I Journey” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 808)

Reflect on a time when you have begun a journey. Where did you go? What was the occasion for your trip? What emotions and thoughts did you experience at the outset? What surprised you along the way? What did you discover about yourself and others as you traveled? (See “Crossing Borders,” p. 12.)

## Leaving Home

### READ GENESIS 27:41–45.

The study texts for this session are part of the larger story of the conflicted relationship between Jacob and Esau. Although Jacob and Esau were twins, Esau had been born first, which entitled him to the inheritance rights of the first-born son. While it might strike modern readers as unfair, it was customary for the first-born son to receive a significantly larger portion of the inheritance than his siblings.

Jacob and Esau's sibling rivalry began in their mother's womb, as she felt them kicking and wrestling one another (Genesis 25:22–23). Jacob had been born with his hand grasping his brother's heel, as if to pull Esau back into the womb so that Jacob could be born first. Jacob's name, literally "heel grabber," means "the one who supplants" (Genesis 25:26). Jacob's name and reputation are interwoven.

Jacob parlayed Esau's hunger into a deal in which Esau yields his birthright in exchange for a bowl of lentil stew (Genesis 25:29–34). Later, in collaboration with his mother Rebekah, Jacob dressed up in Esau's clothing. He presented himself to his blind, dying father to receive the irrevocable blessing meant for Esau (Genesis 27:1–40).

Esau is furious that Jacob's trickery has essentially supplanted his status as first-born, and threatens to kill him. Rebekah protects Jacob by having him flee to their ancestral homeland of Haran to take refuge with her brother Laban. This is where Abraham and Sarah had heard God's call to go to Canaan, the land of promise (Genesis 12:1). While Jacob runs away from his problems by leaving home, his departure also marks a new beginning and a new opportunity.

#### REST STOP

1. What do you think Jacob might be feeling or thinking as he prepares to leave home?

2. Remember a time when you left (or considered leaving) a place in order to get away from a difficult situation or to begin a new venture. What were your hopes? What were your fears? What were your dreams?

## A Dream and a Promise

### READ GENESIS 28:10–22.

Jacob's route reverses the path of his grandfather Abraham, who had come from Haran to Canaan, in response to God's promise of land, descendants, and blessing (Genesis 12:1–3). As Jacob leaves Beersheba on his way to Haran, he stops for the night in Bethel. He has a dream of a ladder connecting earth and heaven, with angels ascending and descending on it. Through this dream, he experiences God's presence. God re-affirms the covenant God had made with Abraham.

Jacob, who had once taken advantage of Esau's hunger to barter for his birthright and later deceived his father to claim the blessing meant for Esau, now receives God's covenant blessing. Through this act, Jacob becomes an heir to the promise, confirming the blessing that he had received from his father. But in contrast to God's unconditional promise, Jacob's response is conditional. Jacob vows that if God will provide for his sustenance and safety, then he will respond with loyalty and by offering a tithe upon his return.

Jacob, who has already demonstrated his capacity for shrewd deals, continues that pattern by bargaining with God. Jacob names this place of sacred encounter "Bethel," formed from the Hebrew words *beth* (house), and *el* (God). Later, as Jacob returns to the promised land, he himself will be renamed Israel, meaning "the one who strives with God" (Genesis 32:28), at a place that Jacob names "Peniel," which means "the face of God" (Genesis 32:30). These two naming events, each set within a nighttime encounter between Jacob and God, serve as spiritual landmarks in his journey of leaving and returning to the Promised Land. (See "Walk Through Your Life," p. 6.)

**REST STOP** -----

3. Jacob's dream comes as he leaves the familiarity of home to face the unknown challenges and opportunities awaiting him in Haran. In what ways might his encounter with God encourage him? Challenge him?
4. In what ways have you experienced signs of God's presence and/or blessing in your own journey of life and faith?

Write a postcard from Bethel. This may be a note to yourself that contains a question, thought, insight, or reflection that has arisen for you out of this study (for example a postcard addressed from you to God, from God to you, or from Jacob to those whom he has left behind in Canaan).

### Visiting Haran: Jacob Meets his Match

**READ GENESIS 31:17–55.**

(Optional: **READ GENESIS 29:1—31:16.**)

When Jacob arrives in Haran, he meets Rachel, his uncle Laban's younger daughter, and falls in love with her. He agrees to spend seven years working for Laban in order to marry Rachel, but when the time arrives for the marriage, Laban tricks Jacob into marrying her older sister Leah instead. Laban then offers Jacob the opportunity also to marry Rachel in exchange for another seven years of labor. Cunning and deceit runs in the family. All of Jacob's relationships are contentious and complicated. Jacob's time in Haran is marked by his and Laban's repeated efforts to out-deceive each other, by jealousy between his two wives, and by Laban's other servants accusing him of stealing.

Despite all of the challenges he has faced, Jacob has been blessed, and is wealthy, measured in terms of his herds and his sizeable family. Jacob decides that it is time to leave and return to Canaan. He sneaks away with his wives, children, and herds of livestock. Laban, suspecting Jacob of treachery, follows in hot pursuit.

The pattern of deception and trickery continues, with Rachel stealing statues representing her father's household gods or ancestors and sitting on them when Laban enters her tent to search for them. Laban and Jacob create a covenant that protects them from each other by establishing clearly marked boundaries to keep them separated, invoking God as their solemn witness, saying "The Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from another" (Genesis 31:49).

**REST STOP** -----

5. How has Jacob grown and changed during his time in Haran? How has he stayed the same? What challenges does he face?
6. What intersections do you see between Jacob's story and the story of your own life and faith?

### Wrestling With God

**READ GENESIS 32:22–32.**

As Jacob prepares to return home and meet his brother Esau, he is concerned for the safety of his family and flocks. Having been out of contact with his brother for years, Jacob does not know how he will be received—as a friend or as an enemy. He does not know whether his brother's anger against him has grown or dissipated. Jacob sends his family ahead of him, employing a strategy of spreading out to minimize loss in case they are attacked. Jacob also sends waves upon waves of flocks to Esau, an impressive gift and demonstration of Jacob's wealth. Jacob seeks to protect himself by making Esau more receptive to his return.

As Jacob camps alone by the ford of the Jabbok river, he finds himself in a nighttime wrestling match with a mysterious figure. Unlike his previous battles of wits with his brother and his uncle, Jacob is not able to outmaneuver his opponent. In contrast to his dream at Bethel, here he is no casual bystander. Here, Jacob is an active participant. As Jacob wrestles the angel, he is also

wrestling with himself, his past, his future, and with God. By refusing to tell Jacob his name, the mysterious opponent demonstrates that he is not in Jacob's power.

The whole of the story has been leading toward this moment. Jacob had contended against Esau, outwitting him. Jacob had contended against Laban, in a contest of wits that ends in a draw with a mutual truce. Now Jacob contends with a mysterious figure who refuses to tell Jacob his name, but blesses and renames him. Now Jacob is Israel, a name that means to strive or contend with God. Jacob is left humbled and limping. He neither fully wins, nor completely loses. He has seen the face of God and lived.

Jacob greets the dawn as one who has been blessed and transformed. He names the place Peniel, which means "the face of God." Having contended with God face-to-face, now he is ready to meet his brother face to face. (See "Gospel Blind Spots," p. 34.)

#### REST STOP

7. Who, or what, do you think Jacob is wrestling with?
8. What have you wrestled with over the course of your life and faith?

Write a postcard from Peniel, noting your reflections, insights or questions. (For example you might write from Jacob to his family, talking about his name change).

### Home Again: Reconciliation with Esau

#### READ GENESIS 33:1–17.

The climax of the story is Jacob's meeting with Esau. In a scene fraught with danger and potential for violence, Esau approaches the returning Jacob with an army of 400 men. But the result is reconciliation, not revenge. Jacob presents Esau with gifts (literally, "blessings," the same term used in 27:35–36), that are not travel souvenirs, but restitution of what Jacob had stolen when he

had received Esau's blessing. Jacob recognizes that, in being graciously received by and reconciled with Esau, he has seen "the face of God."

#### REST STOP

9. In what ways are Jacob and Esau reconciled?
10. Where have you seen the "face of God" in the actions and presence of another?

### Optional: Further Exploration

Draw a map of your faith/life journey in whatever way you choose. You may wish to note the major milestones of your life, and sketch the spiritual landscape you have traveled through, and give names to the places of significance.

### Closing

Review the postcards you have written during this session. If you wish, share them with others in your group.

After a time for silence, pray together:

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (*ELW*, page 304).

### The Road Ahead

In session 2, we will walk first with the Israelites and then with the prophet Elijah, after each has made their great escape from danger and learn to trust in the divine promise to provide them with daily bread. 🌿

**The Rev. Julie A. Kanarr**, an ELCA pastor from Port Townsend, Wash., is a pilgrim-student of the Bible who has journeyed extensively by car, bicycle, kayak, foot, boat, and airplane.



LEADER GUIDE ALONG THE WAY SESSION 1



# TRAVELS WITH JACOB

by Julie A. Kanarr

## Road Map

During this three-session Bible study, we will meet a variety of biblical travelers. As we enter into conversation with them, we will explore our own journeys of faith. This study is designed so that those who have little prior biblical knowledge and those who have been studying Scripture for years can all participate fully.

Each session includes periodic “Rest Stops.” These are opportunities to pause and ponder, to listen and share with others in your group. Each resting place includes two questions. The first is intended to guide participants in reflecting on the meaning of the text, and the second invites participants to reflect on their own life and faith journey in light of the text. While the leader guides provide some suggested responses to the questions, there are no incorrect answers.

Each session also includes opportunities to write “post cards.” You may use blank index cards, create your own postcards, or use postcards from your city. The postcards serve as a short journaling exercise. They offer participants an opportunity to write down their thoughts, insights, feelings, and questions that emerge during this study. There is time at the close of each session for par-

ticipants to share from their postcards if they so desire.

Each session has an optional activity of drawing a faith/life map to help participants further reflect on their own life and faith journeys. If time does not allow for this activity within the study itself, you may encourage participants to use it as a take-home activity. If you are using this study as part of a retreat, you may wish to allow time between sessions for participants to work on their maps.

This study may be adapted to fit the needs of your group. Let the journey be your own, with openness to where it leads. You may find room for side trips, lingering, and further exploration.

## Preparing the Way

Whether you are using this session as part of a group, or on your own, surround your study with prayer. If you are part of a group, spend a few moments at the beginning of each session to welcome all participants, and provide an opportunity for them to introduce themselves to one another by name. In addition to the suggested hymn and reflection questions, you may wish to read the key verse aloud together.

## Leaving Home

1. Jacob may be feeling a wide range of emotions, such as fear, guilt, apprehension, relief, and/or sadness.
2. Some participants may connect with Jacob's experience of running away from a conflicted, uncomfortable, even dangerous situation. Some may reflect on the experience of moving to a new community because of a job or a new relationship. Others may find a point of intersection with their own lives in terms of Jacob's experience of leaving home as a young adult.

## A Dream and a Promise

3. Participants may note the differences between how God acts and how Jacob responds. Jacob had obtained the blessing from his father, Isaac, under dubious circumstances. Here, God freely bestows the covenant upon Jacob. What Jacob had tried to gain by deceit, God freely offers as a gift, even as Jacob responds with a conditional promise. Jacob's challenge is to embrace and live into the covenant promise.
4. Some participants might choose to describe specific instances of feeling blessed or experiencing God's presence in their lives through specific events or people. Others might talk in more general terms about experiencing God's presence through prayer, worship, the sacraments, and Scripture reading. Some may even have a surprising story to tell.

## Visiting Haran: Jacob Meets His Match

The optional text (Genesis 29:1–31; 16) describes Jacob's time in Haran. Jacob and his uncle Laban each seek to gain the upper hand in their relationship. There is also friction between Jacob's wives Leah and Rachel. The jealousy spreads into the next generation, as Leah has many children and Rachel does not. Jacob's conflict with Laban reaches its climax in Jacob's departure.

5. While in Haran, Jacob has had the experience of being outwitted. He has also had opportunity to hone his skills of both deceit and negotiation. He is accused of stealing and struggles with the

decision about when to leave, balancing the desire to increase his wealth with the desire to protect his family.

6. Some participants may identify with Jacob's experience of being part of a complicated and conflicted family. Some may share his experience of being treated unfairly. Others may reflect on their experience of having to deal with a character like Jacob in their lives.

## Wrestling With God

7. This question invites participants to consider the spiritual aspects of Jacob's wrestling match. Jacob wrestles with his past, his fears and doubts, the choices he has made in his life, his family relationships, and his reputation.
8. Participants may choose to reflect on their own spiritual and emotional wrestling with times of doubt, fear, anxiety, life choices, work issues, upcoming decisions, personal values, and relationships.

## Home Again: Reconciliation with Esau

9. Jacob and Esau are reconciled as Esau is no longer angry. There has been forgiveness and restitution. And, they live at some distance from one another to help keep the peace.
10. Participants may choose to share their own stories of reconciliation and forgiveness. Some may share how they have experienced God's love by being welcomed and accepted by others.

## Optional: Further Exploration

Provide paper and writing/drawing materials for participants to draw a map of their own journey of life and faith. Some may choose to make a simple time-line drawing, noting important milestones (birth, baptism, confirmation, graduations, marriages, and other life transitions). Others may choose to make a more elaborate drawing, like a real map. Encourage participants to make note of places where they experienced intersections, detours, and curves.



BIBLE STUDY ALONG THE WAY SESSION 2

# FOOD FOR THE JOURNEY

by Julie A. Kanarr



## Materials you will need

- Postcards (or blank 3x4 or 4x6 index cards)
- Optional: paper and colored pencils/pens/markers for faith/life map activity
- Bible
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)*

## Theme Verse

*“Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” (1 Kings 19:7b)*

## Road Map

In this session, we will walk first with the Israelites and then with the prophet Elijah on their respective wilderness journeys. Hungry and complaining, the Israelites are fed by God as they travel from Egypt toward Mt. Sinai. Elijah, exhausted after his escape from Queen Jezebel’s wrath, takes refuge in the wilderness. Like the Israelites before him, Elijah also is a weary traveler who is fed by God and strengthened for his journey to God’s holy mountain. We will explore both Elijah’s and the Isra-

elites’ paths of discouragement and their experiences of God’s providing for them. Along the way, we will look for the intersections between their journeys and our own paths of faith.

## Preparing the Way

Sing “Will You Come and Follow Me” (*ELW* 798).

Reflect on a time when you have become restless during a journey. Perhaps you were wondering “are we there yet?” Perhaps you were tired and hungry and wanted to rest, or even quit. What fed you so you could continue? How did you cope with the frustrations, irritations, and challenges of traveling? (See “Six Lessons I Learned on the Road,” p. 26.)

## Are We There Yet?

### READ EXODUS 16:1–12.

The writer of Exodus looks at the Israelites' time in the wilderness as a time of theological and spiritual formation. Their escape from slavery becomes a pilgrimage to Mt. Sinai, God's holy mountain, where the commandments they receive flow out of the divine announcement, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exodus 20:1).

The hardships the Israelites face become opportunities for reflection on what it means to live as God's people, especially in difficult times. Each episode in their journey becomes an invitation to renewed trust in God's promise of redemption, protection, and provision. There is a recurring pattern: The Israelites complain, and God responds. God always remembers and keeps God's promises.

After being delivered from slavery in Egypt, the Israelites step out into the wilderness. Though they had worked under oppressive conditions, their life along the Nile River meant that they had not lacked for food or water. Now they face the hardships that accompany their freedom. Hungry and thirsty, they are wearied by their travels. Pleasant oases, such as they found at Elim with its abundant water and shade (Exodus 15:27), are few and far between.

As their discomfort level rises, they lash out against their leaders, blaming Moses and Aaron for their situation. The Israelites look back at their life in Egypt through the rear-view mirror of nostalgia. In the receding distance, their past looks more attractive than their present. With the long stretch of desert in front of them, they can only imagine their future as bleak. They would rather trade the unfamiliar challenges of the wilderness for the comforts of home, forgetting that those comforts had been far outweighed by their brutal oppression (Exodus 1:8–2:25).

Moses and Aaron recognize that although they

are the targets of the Israelites' anger, the Israelites' complaints are actually against God. In responding to their complaint, God announces both a test (16:4) and a promise (16:6). Their hunger raises a spiritual issue: God will faithfully provide food for them. Will the Israelites respond with obedience? Though the Israelites repeatedly fail that test, God steadfastly provides for their needs, with the gift of meat in the evening and manna in the morning. God's provision for their daily needs is coupled with God's relentless yearning that they be faithful, and "know that I am the Lord your God" (v. 12).

### REST STOP

1. What issues do the Israelites struggle with during their wilderness journey?
2. Where are the points in your life or faith journey where you find it difficult to trust?

## Give Us Today Our Daily Bread

### READ EXODUS 16:13–36.

Against the backdrop of the wilderness and its hardships, God's daily provision of manna offers the Israelites a lesson in trusting God and discovering what constitutes "enough." In God's wilderness economy, there is no scarcity, no surplus, and no room for greed. Those who gather a lot and those who gather a little all find that they have enough, but no more. Those who try to store up their manna for the next day discover that the excess rots. They learn that hoarding stinks, literally.

The practice of Sabbath rest is woven into this story. On the sixth day, the Israelites are instructed to gather enough manna to last for two days, and assured that it will not rot. The absence of manna on the Sabbath underscores the lesson that God is the source of their daily bread. Those who go out to gather manna on the Sabbath anyway discover that God is faithful to the promise of what God will and will not do. They

look around, but there is no manna on the Sabbath. On this wilderness journey, the gift of Sabbath rest is not optional.

The Israelites are instructed to gather one jar of manna to carry with them, as a reminder of their journey. More than just a souvenir keepsake from their trip, this jar is to be a tangible reminder of God's care for them and of what they have learned during their time in the wilderness.

Despite their complaints and repeated failures to obey God's commands, God remains faithful to God's promises. God sustains the weary travelers with the rhythm of daily food and weekly rest. Thus strengthened, they journey through the wilderness on their way to Mt. Sinai, and then to the Promised Land.

#### REST STOP

3. What lessons do the Israelites learn from the gift of manna?
4. Where are the intersections between the Israelites' experience in the wilderness and your own life and faith?

Write a post card from the wilderness, noting your thoughts, feelings, questions, and reflections about this place and your journey through it. You may wish to write from the stance of the Israelites, or of Moses, or from your own perspective of being with them on their journey.

### Food for the Journey

#### READ 1 KINGS 19:1–10.

The prophet Elijah's journey into the wilderness comes after his protracted conflict with Ahab, the king of Israel. Elijah was outspoken in proclaiming God's judgment against Ahab for his unfaithfulness to God. One of the recurring issues throughout the time of ancient Israel's history was that of religious syncretism (the merging or combining of different beliefs). Given that their Canaanite neighbors were polytheistic, it was difficult for the Israelites to maintain the practice

of monotheism with exclusive loyalty to Yahweh, the God of Israel.

Despite the commandment "you shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3) Ahab had built a temple for Baal, the Canaanite fertility god associated with rainfall and creation's rebirth, and a shrine to Ash-toreth, a Canaanite goddess. Ahab had also married Jezebel (the daughter of a neighboring king), who practiced the Canaanite religion with its worship of Baal.

Elijah (whose name means "my God is Yahweh") arranged a public contest with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. The deity who sent fire down from heaven to kindle the sacrificial offering would be acclaimed as a true God. Elijah wins with an impressive demonstration of God's power, and has the priests of Baal seized and put to death as false prophets (1 Kings 18:20–40).

When she hears that Elijah had defeated and killed the 450 prophets of Baal, Jezebel is angry and seeks vengeance against Elijah. Elijah flees into the wilderness, sits down under a broom tree (a large desert shrub) and sinks into despair. Despite all of his successes, he feels like a failure, persecuted and alone. Physically spent and emotionally exhausted, Elijah is at the point of collapse. He lies down for a nap. Elijah wants to die.

God's response to Elijah's prayer does not grant his death wish. As God had once fed the Israelites in the wilderness with manna, now God provides food and water to nourish Elijah, to strengthen him for his upcoming journey. Twice, Elijah is awakened by an angel who urges him to get up and eat.

In a journey reminiscent of the Israelites' 40 years in the wilderness, what had become as an escape from danger becomes a pilgrimage to God's holy mountain. Elijah travels 40 days and 40 nights to Mt. Horeb, another name for Mt. Sinai. There he takes refuge in a cave. God asks, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" God listens as Elijah pours out his story, lamenting Israel's unfaithfulness and his own plight. Elijah

laments that he is the only faithful one left, and that his life is in danger.

#### REST STOP

5. What is Elijah's experience like on his journey into the wilderness? In what ways is it similar to that of the Israelites?
6. Where are the intersections between Elijah's path and your journey of life and faith? Have you ever had similar highs and lows?

### Elijah Encounters God

#### READ 1 KINGS 19:11–18.

Elijah stands on the mountain at God's direction. He experiences a series of dramatic signs commonly associated with divine power: an earthquake, wind, and fire. God, however, is not found among them, even though God's mighty rush of fire from heaven that had consumed the offering during the showdown with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel (see 1 Kings 18:38). Instead, God is found within the sound of "sheer silence" (sometimes also translated as "still, small voice.") God's absence from the expected places opens Elijah, and us, to receive God where we do not expect God to be. (See "At Every Table," p. 16.)

God repeats the question "What are you doing here?" Again, Elijah pours out his story of faithfulness, and weariness. God listens, but does not let Elijah remain stuck in his place of despair. God sends Elijah back out of the wilderness with a specific action plan, telling Elijah where to go and what to do next. God assures Elijah that he is not alone, because there are still many others, 7,000 in all, who continue to be faithful.

#### REST STOP

7. In what ways does Elijah's meeting with God strengthen him and renew him in his faith and mission?
8. Have you had times when you felt God strengthened and renewed you and your faith? Can you share some examples?

Write a postcard from Mt. Horeb, noting your thoughts and reflections. You may wish to write from Elijah's perspective.

### Optional: Further Exploration

Continue to work on the map of your faith and life you began in during Session 1. You may wish to focus on the spiritual "landscape" that you have traveled through (for example, wilderness, mountaintops, places of rest, and refuge). You may wish to create landmarks representing times and places of questions and doubts, complaints, and reassurance.

### Closing

Gather your postcards. Re-read them and share them with your group if you desire.

### After a time for silence, pray together:

O God, full of compassion, we commit and commend ourselves to you, in whom we live and move and have our being. Be the goal of our pilgrimage and our rest along the way. Give us refuge from the turmoil of worldly distractions beneath the shadow of your wings. Let our hearts, so often a sea of restless waves, find peace in you, O God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (*ELW*, page 86)

### Looking ahead

In session 3, we will travel with those who encountered Jesus along the way. We will join in the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well and walk with the disciples who met the risen Christ along the road to Emmaus. We will reflect on how we experience Christ with us in our own journey of faith. 🌿

**The Rev. Julie A. Kanarr**, an ELCA pastor from Port Townsend, Wash., has served parishes in Montana and Washington.



LEADER GUIDE ALONG THE WAY SESSION 2



# FOOD FOR THE JOURNEY

by Julie A. Kanarr

## Road Map

While the three sessions of this study share the common theme of a journey, each session stands on its own as an independent unit. There are two questions at the end of each section. The first is intended to guide participants in reflecting on the meaning of the text, and the second invites participants to reflect on their own life and faith journey in light of the text.

While this leader guide provides some suggested responses, there are no right or wrong answers. The responses in the leader guide may serve to jump-start stalled conversations among participants or open up new avenues for reflection. For a more detailed introduction to the study, see the leader guide for session 1 in the June issue or at [gathermagazine.org](http://gathermagazine.org).

## Are We There Yet?

1. The Israelites had forgotten the oppression they had experienced as slaves. Their nostalgia skews their vision (like looking through a curved rear-view mirror, where “objects may be closer than they appear.”) The past looks better and their

present situation seems worse. Having forgotten what God has done for them in the past, they are unable to trust that God will care for them in the present, and into the future.

2. Participants may reflect on their faith journey, their personal lives, or relationships with family, friends, co-workers, or others. Some may find it difficult to trust when past promises have been broken. Others may find it difficult to trust when the one making the promise is someone they have little previous experience with. Some may have more difficulty trusting when the promise seems to be “too big” or too good to be true.

## Give Us Today our Daily Bread

3. No matter how much manna is gathered, everyone has the same amount, an *omer* (a measure of approximately one to two liters, the size of a large bottle of soda). Those who try to store up their manna for the next day are doing so in direct disobedience to God’s command and in flagrant lack of trust in God’s will and/or ability to keep promises. The absence of manna to gather on the Sabbath underscores its nature as a divine gift.

4. Participants may relate to one or more of the themes in Israel's wilderness journey. Some may reflect on their experiences of complaining, fear, weariness, or uncertainty. Others may describe a time when God has provided for their needs. Some may talk about what keeping the Sabbath might mean in the context of their own lives. Others may wrestle with what it means to have enough in a world where both scarcity and greed are a reality. The experiences of the Israelites help us to recognize that there is room in our faith walk for times of doubt, despair, frustration, questions, and difficulty.

### Food for the Journey

5. Participants may see a variety of connections between these two stories. The Israelites were escaping from oppressive slavery; Elijah was escaping from a threat to his life. The Israelites complained. Elijah despaired. The Israelites spent 40 years in the desert; Elijah, 40 days. Both journeyed to the same mountain. Both were fed by God, and strengthened for their journey ahead.
6. Some participants may identify with Elijah's weariness. Some may describe times when they have felt fear or despair, or simply wanted to give up. Some may share his experience of success turning to failure. Some might identify with Elijah's experience of being threatened for speaking the truth. Others may identify with his feeling of being alone and that others are against him. Some may yearn for a chance to take a nap in the shade. Some participants may describe how God has strengthened them, fed them, and encouraged them so that they can continue on. Some participants may reflect on the connections between God's invitation to "get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you" and what it means for them to receive Holy Communion.

### Elijah Encounters God

7. God summons Elijah out of the cave and tells him to stand on the mountain. God doesn't let Elijah hide or leave him to wallow in his despair forever. (Participants may note that God did not leave Elijah alone and despondent under the broom tree either.)

God's presence in the sound of sheer silence brings reassurance to Elijah that God is present in unexpected places. Twice, God asks "What are you doing here, Elijah?" God listens with patience and compassion as Elijah tells his story. The very act of telling one's story can sharpen one's sense of understanding and bring a renewed sense of purpose. God responds to Elijah's lament and corrects Elijah's misperception that he is the only faithful one left. The mission plan that God lays out for Elijah is a plan for his prophetic successors, which assures Elijah that his life and work are not in vain.

8. Participants may consider how God meets them in surprising, unexpected ways. Elijah experienced God in the "sound of sheer silence." Some may reflect on how they encounter God in quiet places. As God was not in the dramatic events of the earthquake, wind, or fire, some participants may also be keenly aware of places where they feel God's absence. Some may describe how they recognize God listening to them in prayer. Some may consider how the act of responding to God's question "what are you doing here?" can lead to a greater sense of clarity and renewal of purpose and mission. (You may want to look at Women of the ELCA's free, online resource "Sacred Spaces." Download it at [www.womenoftheelca.org](http://www.womenoftheelca.org).)

### Optional: Further Exploration

Provide paper and writing/drawing materials for participants to map their journey of life and faith. Some may desire to continue to work on the map they began in the previous session. Some may wish to create a new map (such as topographic, showing mountains and valleys, rivers and roads).

Invite participants to reflect on the spiritual geography of their lives, including times of difficulty and joy. Encourage participants to be attentive to times when they have experienced wildernesses and places where they have encountered God. 🌸



BIBLE STUDY ALONG THE WAY SESSION 3

# ENCOUNTERS WITH CHRIST

by Julie A. Kanarr



## Materials you will need

- Postcards (or blank 3x4 or 4x6 index cards)
- Optional: paper and colored pencils/pens/markers for faith/life map activity
- Bible
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)*

## Theme Verse

*Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.*

(Luke 24:35)

## Road Map

Throughout this study, we have been traveling with a variety of biblical travelers. In this final session, we explore two different journeys of faith, listening in on two different conversations with those who met Jesus “along the way.” First, we will join the woman who met Jesus as he traveled through Samaria. Then we will walk along with Cleopas and his companion as they make their way to Emmaus. Along the way, we will ponder how Christ meets us in our journey of faith. In what places are we surprised to dis-

cover how Christ has come among us? Among whom are we led to share the good news of Jesus Christ?

## Preparing the Way

Sing “Let us ever walk with Jesus” (*ELW* 802)

Reflect on a time when you have been surprised by someone you have met along the way. Perhaps it was a casual conversation that went deeper. Perhaps you participated in an unexpected act of hospitality that resulted in you seeing another person in a whole new way. What happened?

## Conversation at the Well

**READ JOHN 4:1–26.**

Jesus meets the Samaritan woman as he journeys through Samaria on his

way from Judea to Galilee. She—like many others in John’s Gospel—serves as a representative figure. Jesus not only speaks to her, but speaks through her to us, as we listen in on their conversation.

The mutual dislike between the Judeans and the Samaritans was rooted in the ancient political, tribal, and religious divisions between northern and southern kingdoms of Israel that began centuries before the time of Jesus. While they shared a common ancestry and a common faith, significant religious differences held them apart.

The Samaritans honored Jacob as their great patriarch, believed that the Messiah would be a prophetic figure like Moses, and viewed Mt. Gerizim as their sacred mountain and place of worship. In contrast, the Judeans (“the Jews” of John’s Gospel) centered their hopes on the Messiah as a kingly figure like David who would restore Israel’s monarchy and centered their worship life in the Temple at Jerusalem.

Throughout their conversation, the Samaritan woman is exploring whether this man at the well may be the Messiah. When he offers her living water, she playfully challenges him that he doesn’t seem to have the necessary tools to deliver on his promises and questions his underlying claim that he is greater than their ancestor Jacob.

When he asks her to call her husband, she acknowledges that she doesn’t have one. While many interpreters of this passage have assumed that Jesus is passing judgment on her personal life, one can also hear his statement about her five husbands as a reference to Samaria’s history. The prophet Hosea had indicted Israel for its adultery and idolatry for their intermarriages, political alliances, and religious syncretism (see Hosea 2:2).

When the Assyrians had conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 721 B.C., they had brought people from five different nations into Samaria to colonize it (2 Kings 17:24). These foreigners occupied the land and

intermarried with the local people. The status of having had “five husbands” and now committing adultery with a sixth would sum up the Judeans’ low opinion about the Samaritans.

Her recognition of Jesus’ prophetic voice is about his naming the truth, not his ability to perceive secrets. Her concern is not about personal morality or family values. She is not trying to distract him by flattery and changing the subject.

After connecting him with Jacob and identifying him as a prophet, now she quizzes this potential Messiah about worship. With this question, she has now addressed all three aspects of messianic credentials that were important to the Samaritans. Jesus transcends her either-or question and speaks of worship in spirit and truth. When she directly expresses her hopes for the coming Messiah, Jesus responds with the words “I am,” echoing the divine name God spoke to Moses from the burning bush (see Exodus 3:14). Their entire conversation has been leading to this point.

#### REST STOP

1. What are the surprising features of Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman?
2. Imagine that you have come to the well and found Jesus sitting there. What would your conversation be like?

### Come and See, Go and Tell

#### READ JOHN 4:27–42.

She runs back to the village and invites others to come and see, leading them to Christ. What began with the woman’s first-person confession (“I know that the messiah is coming”) broadens into the plural (“he will declare to us”) and in response to the woman’s testimony, stretches out to the Samaritans’ acclamation of Jesus as the savior of the world (4:42).

Although some have interpreted the Samaritan community’s response to her testimony as dismissive,

it follows a common pattern in John's Gospel. Those who first hear about Jesus from others are invited to come and see for themselves. There are no indirect disciples in John.

John the Baptist points Andrew toward following Jesus. When Andrew responds to Jesus' invitation to "come and see," he invites Simon to join him. When Jesus calls Philip to follow him, Philip invites Nathaniel, encouraging him to "come and see" (see 1:35–46). In John 12:21 some Greeks approach Philip, wishing to see Jesus. After the resurrection, when the other disciples tell Thomas that they have seen the risen Lord, he responds that he needs to see for himself (John 20:24–29). The Samaritan woman's invitation to her community shares this pattern. Her testimony forms the bridge for the Samaritan community to come to faith in Christ.

Jesus, who had to go through Samaria geographically in order to travel from Judea to Samaria, leads his followers to grasp the divine necessity of reaching out to Samaria. Samaria is not a place to pass through, but a destination for mission in its own right. Jesus notes that the fields are ripe and ready for harvest. Jesus' travels to Samaria where he initiates a conversation with the woman at the well, sets a pattern for the Christian community's pattern of missionary outreach. (See "Who? Me? A Refugee?" p. 12.)

#### REST STOP

3. In what ways is the Samaritan woman transformed through her conversation with Christ?
4. Where is Samaria for you? Is it a place that you go to, go through, live in, or avoid?

Write a postcard from Samaria, noting your thoughts, feelings, questions, and reflections. You might want to write from the stance of the Samaritan woman about the stranger she met at the well.

## On the Road to Emmaus

### READ LUKE 24:13–27.

Like the Samaritan woman at the well, the two disciples walking to Emmaus also serve as representative figures, through whom we are invited into the story to consider how Jesus meets us "along the way." They are Cleopas and a companion. Luke does not offer any information about the companion's identity or gender. The absence of detail leaves open the possibility that Cleopas' companion may be his wife, and that they may be on their way back to their home in Emmaus following a Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

As they walk along, they discuss the events which had led to the crucifixion of Jesus and the amazing story about his rising from the dead. They are joined by a mysterious stranger who meets them along the way. They speak of their dashed hopes.

Their traveling companion listens to their story, and in turn, offers them a fresh perspective. He leads them to a new, deepened understanding of the Hebrew scriptures that resurrects their hope. As they walk from Jerusalem to Emmaus, they also journey from despair to hope.

#### REST STOP

5. Imagine that you are walking with two disciples on the way from Jerusalem to Emmaus. What is their journey like? What are they seeing and hearing? How are they feeling? What are they thinking about?
6. In your own journey of faith, what do you struggle with or wonder about?

## In the Breaking of the Bread

### READ LUKE 24:28–35.

As they arrive in Emmaus, Cleopas and his companion invite the stranger to stay with them, a customary gesture of hospitality. (See "Traveling Mercies: Hospitality," p. 6.) On the road, this stranger had become the

guide and teacher. Now he shifts from the role of guest to that of host, taking bread, blessing it, and giving it to them.

They recognize the presence of the risen Christ in the breaking of the bread, and reflect back on their conversation with him on the road, how their hearts had burned within them as he opened the scriptures to them. The two disciples rise from the table, and quickly retrace their steps. They return to Jerusalem to share the good news with the others. They follow the same path, but on a different journey, as they joyfully tell their story to the rest of the gathered community.

Although the risen Christ has “vanished from sight,” he is not absent. In their conversation on the road, and in sharing in the breaking of the bread, he remains among his followers. By his presence, we are fed for the journey and strengthened for mission.

#### REST STOP

7. What do you think the disciples' journey was like as they traveled from Emmaus back to Jerusalem?
8. Where is Emmaus for you? Has there been a time when the Scripture has opened to you, where you have moved to a new or deeper understanding of them?

Write a postcard from Emmaus, noting your questions, insights, and reflections about the text and your own journey of faith. You might wish to write from the stance of Cleopas or his companion as they talk about their trip to Jerusalem.

#### At journey's end

In these three sessions, we have met and traveled with a variety of different biblical characters. While each of their journeys has been different, they have shared common paths. Along the way, each has encountered God, and experienced transformation. Jacob wrestles with God, receives a new name, and emerges with a limp

and a promise. The ancient Israelites are fed with daily manna, even as they walk a rocky path of complaining and learning to trust in God. The prophet Elijah escapes from danger is fed and strengthened and sent back with a new mission. The Samaritan woman and the disciples going to Emmaus encounter Christ. They joyfully share the good news, leading others to faith. As we have walked with them, may we also be encouraged and strengthened for our own journey of faith.

#### Optional: Further Exploration

Complete the faith/life map (or maps) that you have been working on during this study. You may wish to draw in those who have been companions and guides along the way. You may also wish to mark those times and places where you have had significant conversations or come to new and deeper understandings of God's presence and love.

Are there wellsprings of living water? Are there roads where your “heart has burned within you?” Are there places like Emmaus where you have recognized Christ in the breaking of the bread? Identify those times and places on your map. (See “At Every Table,” p. 16.)

#### Closing

Gather your postcards. Re-read them, and share them with your group as you desire. You may also show and describe your faith/life map(s).

#### After a time for silence, pray together:

Gracious and holy God, give us diligence to seek you, wisdom to perceive you, and patience to wait for you. Grant us, O God, a mind to meditate on you; eyes to behold you; ears to listen for your word; a heart to love you; and a life to proclaim you; through the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW, page 76) 🌸

The Rev. Julie A. Kanarr an ELCA pastor from Port Townsend, Wash., enjoys bicycling, sea kayaking, hiking, camping, and writing.



LEADER GUIDE ALONG THE WAY SESSION 3



# ENCOUNTERS WITH CHRIST

by Julie A. Kanarr

## Session Overview

While the three sessions of this study share the common theme of a journey, each session stands on its own as an independent unit. There are two questions at the end of each section. The first is intended to guide participants in reflecting on the meaning of the text, and the second invites participants to reflect on their own life and faith journey in light of the text. While the leader guide provides some suggested responses, there are no right or wrong answers. The responses in the leader guide may serve to jump-start stalled conversations among participants or open up new avenues for reflection.

## Conversation at the Well

1. The woman is surprised because by talking with her, Jesus is crossing two social barriers: one between Jews and Samaritans, and the other between men and women. By initiating a conversation with her, Jesus demonstrates openness, outreach, and hospitality. Jesus listens to the Samaritan woman and responds

to her probing questions. They engage in a serious conversation about genuine matters of faith that are of concern for her. Like the well they are sitting at, the conversation moves ever deeper, until it reaches the living water of understanding and faith, and bubbles up to new life.

2. Participants may have a wide variety of responses. Some participants may wonder who would begin the conversation. Some may have questions that they would like to ask Jesus. Some may be drawn to the idea of Jesus listening to them with compassion and openness.

## Come and See, Go and Tell

3. The Samaritan woman is transformed from an inquirer, who is curious about Jesus and what he has to offer, to an evangelist, who tells others about Jesus and draws them to Christ. Along the way, she engages in theological dialogue with Jesus and confesses her faith. Her initial surprise that Jesus would initiate a conversation with her is transformed to confident faith and joy.

4. Participants may identify a wide variety of places as Samaria for them. Some participants may find that they need to reflect deeply in order to respond to the question. For some, Samaria may be a place of “living water” where all are welcome at the well. For others, Samaria may be a place where they have experienced prejudice. For others, Samaria may be a place to reach out and share God’s love. For some, Samaria may be that place where they find it challenging to welcome those who they have cast in the role of “other.” For others, Samaria may be a place where they are surprised to find Christ. For some, Samaria may be a place where Jesus sits down with them and responds to their questions.

### On the Road to Emmaus

5. The past tense of the verb “hoped” suggests the depth of despair Cleopas and his companion felt about the death of their friend Jesus. They are also grieving the loss of their hope. They may be walking slowly, feeling sad and confused, and worried about their future. They may be wondering what to believe. They may be trying to make sense of the rumors they had heard. They may be having doubts or a crisis of faith. It may have been the longest seven mile walk of their lives. They may be surprised that the person who joins them seems unaware of the recent events that were so important for them.
6. Participants may express a variety of responses. Some may experience doubts and questions. Some may experience their “hearts burning within them.” Some may be struggling with despair or loss of hope. Others may wonder where Christ is present within the world today. Some may be yearning for a closer walk with Jesus. Some may be thankful for a steady faith.

### In the Breaking of the Bread

7. Their journey back to Jerusalem was quick and joyful. Having trudged from Jerusalem to Emmaus, now they’re back, practically bursting through the door to tell the others about their encounter with the risen Christ. As they look back in hindsight, they are able to connect their experience of recognizing the Risen Christ in the breaking of the bread to their recognition

of his presence with them on the road. They see that Christ, walking with them, becomes the guide for their understanding of the Scripture. With joy and amazement, they asked each other “did not our hearts burn within us as he opened the Scripture to us?”

8. Participants may experience Emmaus as any place where they recognize Christ in their midst. Some may name Holy Communion as their Emmaus. Emmaus may be the place that they are “on the road to find.” Participants may reflect on the ways that the gospel speaks to them. Some may choose to share stories from their own lives about people, such as pastors, parents, grandparents, Sunday school teachers, and others, who have helped them to understand the Scripture and grow in faith.

### Optional: Further Exploration

Provide paper and writing/drawing materials for participants to map their journey of life and faith. Some may desire to continue to work on the map they began in session 1. Some may wish to create a new map. Invite participants to think about those who have been companions on their journey, especially those who have served as guides and teachers along the way. Encourage them also to look for places where, like the disciples at Emmaus, may have had their hearts burning within them.

### At Journey’s End

At the end of your study, you may wish to use this blessing and dismissal after the closing prayer found on page 43:

**LEADER:** The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keeps our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus.

**ALL:** Amen.

**LEADER:** Go in peace, Christ be with you.

**ALL:** Thanks be to God. 🌿