

OPENING HYMN

“Ubi caritas et amor/Where True Charity and Love Abide” (ELW 642)

OPENING PRAYER

God of welcome, as you draw us into your word today, open our hearts and minds to be at home in your love, in your promises, and in your calling for us as the body of Christ. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

FOCUS VERSE

“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.’”(Revelation 21:3)

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW)

CLOSING PRAYER

Creator God, you lovingly breathed life into this universe and made it our home, and in Jesus, you came to make your home among your people. Empower us as the body of Christ to serve with compassion and strive for justice for the sake of our neighbors and the earth. Amen.

CLOSING HYMN

“All Are Welcome” (ELW 641)

Holy places

Session one

Home

BY MEGHAN JOHNSTON AELABOUNI

In Jesus, God makes God’s home with us on earth; and God empowers us as the body of Christ to be at home in our bodies and in the world.

INTRODUCTION

This Bible study focuses on the theme of *holy places*. Even in today’s world of digital spaces and virtual reality, human beings still “live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28) in bodies and in physical spaces. As Christians, we believe in a God of incarnation: The Creator of the universe took on flesh in a human body in Jesus of Nazareth. Through Jesus, we know that God is not a disembodied spirit somewhere out there in the cosmos; God is intimately present with us on earth. In the places Jesus lived and carried out his ministry, he experienced the full range of embodied human experience: hunger and thirst, laughter and exhaustion, joy and grief, pain and death. The resurrection of Jesus did not change his connection to humanity but, rather, expanded it—so that now, the risen Jesus is present with us in every time and place.

Accordingly, when the apostle Paul wrote that Christians are not just followers of Christ but members of the “body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:27), this was not just a metaphor. In Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, we receive and carry Christ in our bodies. We ourselves become holy places where Christ dwells! This new reality gives us both an identity and a purpose. As members of Christ’s own body, we are not called to transcend our bodies, but to embody the love and grace of God wherever we

are. The truest value of our bodies is not decoration, nor “perfection” according to one standard of appearance or ability. Our bodies find their purpose in loving and being loved, in giving and receiving, according to the diverse bodies, abilities and gifts we have been given by the Holy Spirit. And we, like Jesus, embody our faith in holy places.

What makes a place holy? As an ELCA missionary living and serving in what is often called the “Holy Land,” I meet Christians, Jews and Muslims who journey here from around the world to be physically present in a place that our three religions all recognize as holy ground. Over time, I have observed that the soil underfoot and the stone ceilings overhead are not, by themselves, sacred. After all, we worship God, not buildings. Yet holiness is found in what people do here: reading and remembering the stories of Scripture in the places where they happened, lifting up prayers and songs in a multitude of languages, and reaching out to touch the stones—thereby picking up molecules of faith left behind by other bodies and leaving their own molecules behind. Over centuries of this embodied activity, holy places are filled with holy presence as the body of Christ comes together to share the places where God’s story and our stories connect.

Over the next three months, we will explore three kinds of holy places: *home*, *sanctuary* and *pilgrimage*. We begin with a focus on home as a holy place, asking: What makes home holy? What does it mean for our faith to have a “hometown” in the Holy Land? How are we as people of faith called into relationship with the earth that is our home?

HOME BODIES

Share aloud or reflect:

1. If you were part of a house, what part would you be and why?

📖 **Read:** Hebrews 3:1–61, Corinthians 12:12–26

What is home? It’s been said that home is “where the heart is” or “where you hang your hat.” Poet Robert Frost famously wrote that “home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” In other words, home is not just a location; it is an experience of welcome, belonging and connection that we feel with our whole selves—hearts and hats included. And yet, even when home is a feeling, that feeling is undeniably connected to *places* where our bodies reside: not only to rooms or houses, but also to communities, landscapes and cultures.

Living in Jerusalem, several continents away from where I grew up, the smell of pine needles or the sight of vineyards can instantly transport me back to Colorado or California, two places I have called home. For my husband Gabi, born and raised in Galilee, living in the U.S. for two decades meant that sometimes our house would be filled with the sound of Arabic music and the aroma of spicy *shakshuka* or sweet *knafeh*, as a way for Gabi to stay connected to his homeland. Our children, who have now lived both in the U.S. and in Israel/Palestine and have roots in both places, are becoming what are sometimes called “third culture kids”: They are learning that home and identity can be complex and that, sometimes, *home* is what you create and carry with you to the places you go. Whatever home is, wherever and however we find it, we experience it with our senses, in our bodies and in places.

Phrases like “the sanctity of home” point to a way in which, even for nonreligious people, home is considered sacred. But what does it mean for home to be holy? The author of Hebrews points out that “every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God” (Hebrews 3:4). In this way, home may be a human creation, but as we seek to build or create home for ourselves and others, we are “holy partners” with God, who is the source of the love, support and belonging that make a place truly *home*.

Not every household—and not every faith community—is a home. When home (including a “church home”) becomes a place of betrayal, abuse or rejection, it can cause deep trauma that goes to the core of identity. Loss of identity can also be a challenge for people experiencing homelessness—not only the loss of a stable and secure place to sleep, bathe, keep clothing and belongings, and prepare meals, but also a state of vulnerability: *What address can we put on job applications or school paperwork? Whose hospitality do we rely on tonight?* When true home is lacking, this only underscores how the holiness of home is grounded in a kind of safety and belonging that is physical and emotional, material and spiritual. When human-built homes fall apart, God promises us that we have a home in the love of God (the “builder of all things”) that will not fall down, and we will not be evicted. This promise is not just hypothetical; it lives in our bodies, given to us by God as the first place we “live and move and have our being.”

Feeling “at home” in our bodies, on the other hand, is not always easy. Most of us face some kind of anxiety or insecurity about our bodies: size or appearance, physical or mental ability or health, or where and how our bodies take up space in the world and interact with others. Despite the Bible’s assurances that we are made in the image of God, it is easy to be tempted into self-loathing or judgmentalism about what bodies should be, so that we become estranged from one another, or even strangers to ourselves. Here, Paul’s metaphor of the body of Christ offers us a powerful alternative: Our bodily diversity is neither an accident nor a failure, but the divine creativity of God, who knows that our world needs many different things, and so enables our bodies to meet those needs in different ways. As members of one body, we are not called to meet one uniform standard—it makes no sense for a body to be all ears or elbows. We are called to work together and care for one another, as the diverse components of a body do. God invites us to be “at home” in our bodies, and in the body of

Christ, as holy places where God encounters us with love and welcome.

Share aloud or reflect:

2. What embodied experiences (sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or textures) make you feel at home? What memories or emotions do these things stir up in you?
3. When have you felt more at home in your own body—or less? How might the promise that you are a member of the body of Christ guide your relationship with your body?

HOME SWEET HOLY LAND

■ **Read:** Acts 2:1–12

Share aloud or reflect:

4. What do you know about the homeland of Jesus and his disciples, then or now?

As one of the pastors of the English-speaking congregation at the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem, I regularly preach and lead worship in a 12th-century stone chapel that is only steps away from the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the traditional location of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. My sermons sometimes begin: *Grace and peace to you from Jesus of Nazareth, born in Bethlehem, a refugee in Egypt; who ministered in Galilee; was crucified, died and rose in Jerusalem; ascended from the Mount of Olives; and sent apostles from the Holy Land to proclaim the Gospel to all the world.*

In this way, I remind myself and the congregation that these holy places matter. In Jesus of Nazareth, God not only became incarnate in a human body, but also in a time and place:

first-century Palestine. Everything about the place Jesus called home shaped his message and his ministry: things as mundane as the daily work of shepherds with their flocks, fishers with their nets, or farmers with their crops; and things as sacred as the festivals and traditions of his Jewish community. In his teachings and healings, Jesus used the same water and mud, bread and fish, wine and oil that are still a central part of daily life in this land. The story of Jesus is therefore deeply embedded in ordinary places made holy through the presence of the Holy One. Our Savior, and our faith, have a hometown and a homeland. What does this mean for us?

When Christians visit the Holy Land to “follow in the footsteps of Jesus,” it is to remember that the story of God’s relationship with humanity really happened, in a real place that still exists. Even now, two millennia after the time of Jesus, we can find places of physical continuity with the biblical story: There are living olive trees in the garden of Gethsemane that are more than 2,000 years old and were there when Jesus was. Archaeological excavations have uncovered first-century streets where Jesus could have walked, and buildings he may have entered. Some may ask, *If God is everywhere, why do these places matter?* Perhaps because they are a tangible reminder of the promise of incarnation: Since God entered human history in this particular place, God is also present with us in the places we go.

Living in Jerusalem has given me a new appreciation for the role of holy places in our Christian faith—and not just because of what this place was 2,000 years ago. My faith has been profoundly changed and renewed because of what Israel/Palestine is today: a place where Jews, Christians and Muslims live in a land they call not just holy, but *home*.

THE HOME OF THE CHURCH

The ELCA’s work in the Holy Land is to accompany our partner church, the Evangelical Lutheran

Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL). This church of Palestinian, Arabic-speaking Lutherans began in the 19th century, when Protestant missions came to the Holy Land. But the roots of the church are much deeper: Palestinian Christians trace their origins to the time of Pentecost, when Arabic was one of the languages spoken by the Spirit-filled apostles (Acts 2:11). Over thousands of years, as the Holy Land was conquered and reconquered by various empires and kingdoms, as borders were redrawn and lands renamed, a local Christian community has maintained a continuous presence that connects the whole global church to our beginnings. The Holy Land is the homeland of our church, and with Ethiopia and Armenia, it is the only place on earth where Christianity is an indigenous faith. Yet because Christians are a small minority, now less than 2% of the entire population of Palestine and Israel, most of the world thinks of the Holy Land as a place inhabited by Jewish Israelis and Muslim Palestinians (and visited by Christian tour groups). Palestinian Christians, like my spouse, Gabi, are frequently asked when they converted to Christianity. (Gabi’s favorite reply is “About 2,000 years ago.”)

Palestinian Christians still live today in places like Jerusalem, Nazareth and Bethlehem. Some have Israeli citizenship, but many live in the West Bank and Gaza, as part of a larger Palestinian population living under the military occupation of the state of Israel. The occupation creates a daily life of struggle for ordinary people who are treated as suspicious persons simply because of who they are and where they were born. Palestinians living behind Israel’s separation wall must apply for permits from the Israeli government to cross checkpoints for work, school, worship, medical care or to visit family—permits that can be denied for any reason. Water, electricity and internet access in Palestinian areas are also controlled by Israel and are frequently restricted or even turned off. Areas within the West

Bank that belong to Palestine under international law have been seized by Israel and developed into settlements (Jewish-only towns and cities), with modern highways that allow Israeli settlers to bypass the checkpoints. Many Palestinian civilians, including journalists and children, have been arrested, beaten and killed, sometimes without cause and often without legal recourse. These realities are not well understood by the global community. But for those of us who live here and see the facts on the ground, the inequality and injustice are undeniable.

What does it mean to be at *home* when you are treated like a stranger in your own homeland? If *home* is not unlike a prison, how can it still be built as a place of welcome, belonging and hope? This is the challenge and the calling of the Palestinian church today. The ELCJHL is a small church of 2,000 members in six worshipping congregations, but like the small group of apostles on the day of Pentecost, the church has an impact far greater than its size. Supported by international partners like the ELCA, the ELCJHL carries out a range of vital ministries that serve local communities: four K-12 schools, an environmental education center, a gender justice program, centers for seniors and for social work, a deaf ministry and much more.

In the ELCJHL schools, Muslim and Christian students learn side by side as they are prepared to be leaders in their communities. Along with STEM and humanities subjects, students learn peacemaking, conflict resolution, interfaith studies, environmental care and the arts. Programs like Model United Nations and *dabke* (a Palestinian folk dance) allow students the opportunity to travel regionally and abroad. In a place that often seems far from holy, where young Palestinians long for freedom and opportunity, these ministries not only proclaim the gospel in words, but also embody the good news to people of all religious traditions: that even in near-impossible circumstances, it is possible to survive and to thrive, to build a future and to

experience joy. Most Palestinians and Israelis know little about Lutheran theology or history, but they know that Lutherans provide education, health care and support for the vulnerable. This witness, in this place, has taught me anew what the ministry of Jesus truly meant in his time and place.

Share aloud or reflect:

5. How does it affect our Christian identity to remember that our faith has a “homeland”? What might this mean for our connection as Christians with Israel/Palestine today?
6. How can our partner church in Palestine inspire us to accompany our local communities—and especially vulnerable people—in the places we call home?

THE HOLINESS OF THE EARTH

📖 **Read:** Genesis 2:4–9; Revelation 21:1–4; 22:1–5

“There is no planet B.” This phrase, used by many environmental justice advocates, emphasizes a need to preserve and protect the earth from human actions that cause pollution, depletion of natural resources and disruption of ecosystems. Our survival depends on taking care of the planet we have.

Political and scientific discussions (and yes, heated debates) abound on the causes of climate change, as well as possible solutions. As people of Christian faith, we can also look to our theology to ask: What is our calling from God in relation to the planet? How can the Bible guide us in determining what it means to care for the earth as our home?

Revelation, the final book in the New Testament, is considered an apocalyptic text—a word that is commonly understood to mean “the end of the

world,” but which, in the original Greek, refers to “unveiling” or “revealing”—hence the book’s name, Revelation. This name almost seems ironic, since it’s hard to say for certain what is being revealed in this text. Revelation is an extended spiritual vision full of vivid and strange symbolic imagery. Ever since it was written, biblical scholars and theologians have offered widely differing interpretations of how these visions might relate to the world we know. Is Revelation a description of our heavenly home, or a critique of the Roman Empire? Is the “New Jerusalem” a historical event, or is it the destination for Christian believers who are taken home in rapture while others are left behind?

In her book *The Rapture Exposed*, Lutheran theologian Barbara Rossing offers an interpretation of Revelation grounded in a deep and thorough study of the text and its original context. Rossing notes that in Revelation 21, humanity is not gathered up from the earth into a better home. Rather, the New Jerusalem is seen “coming down out of heaven from God... [with] a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes’” (Revelation 21:2-4). God’s home with us on earth includes restoration and abundance: At the center is the “river of the water of life,” and growing along its banks is “the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22:1-2).

It is no accident that the tree of life, first found in Genesis, reappears here in Revelation. This tree bookends the story of God and God’s people, from the moment God first breathes life into the dust to create humanity until the moment God comes to “dwell with them as their God” for eternity. Importantly, the tree of life here also connects the original creation of the world by God to its eventual re-creation. According to this vision, the same place

that was and is now our earthly home is also where we will one day live fully at home with God, one another and the whole creation, in a holy homecoming that heals all estrangement and is the gift of our creating, redeeming and sustaining God.

Far from offering us free license to treat the earth carelessly, like a temporary home we will one day leave behind for a better one, Genesis and Revelation declare that our earthly home is holy. It is where God breathed the Holy Spirit to create life from the dust. It is where God came to dwell with us in Jesus, the fully divine and fully human one whose body we become. It is where God will come to be at home with us and to wipe every tear from our eyes. This world is not destined by God for abandonment, but for transformation and healing. As members of Christ’s body, we are called to be part of God’s work right here on earth.

CONCLUSION

Whether it’s the places we each call home, the Holy Land that is home to our faith, or the earth that is home to us all, it’s clear: Home is not only where we hang our hearts and hats. It is where God comes down to earth to make God’s home in our midst. And it is all the places and ways in which our bodies “live and move and have our being” in the Holy One who welcomes us home. As we find ourselves at home in God’s love, may we as the body of Christ also love and serve our neighbors—so that together we may share the earth that is home to us all.

Share aloud or reflect:

7. What theological perspectives on the earth can the church share in our communities? How might this help?
8. What is one way you, or your congregation, might join in God’s work of healing the earth? 🌿

Holy places

Session one

Home

BY MEGHAN JOHNSTON AELABOUNI

OVERVIEW

Welcome to the first session of *Gather's* fall Bible study series, “Holy places.”

Physical places often shape our identities, relationships and faith. When Paul writes, “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Corinthians 12:27), we remember that faith doesn’t just live in our thoughts or emotions. Faith resides in our whole bodies, and our bodies “live and move and have our being” in sacred places where God encounters us: places like *home* (September), *sanctuary* (October) and *pilgrimage* (November).

This month, we focus on *home*. Home is a near-universal concept for humans and other living things, connected to survival needs such as safety, sustenance and stability. We may first think of home as a physical building, but home can also be the people we call family, our community or our homeland. Home can be found wherever we truly and fully belong. With that in mind, it’s no coincidence that we sometimes also speak of faith communities as another kind of home (for instance, a “church home” or our “home congregation”).

In our lived reality as human beings, home is rarely simple. Though our identity is often strongly shaped by the places we call home, human sin means that at times, the places we expect to be home to us can become the opposite: We can experience rejection rather than welcome, abuse rather than safety, or alienation rather than belonging. The resulting trauma should not be taken lightly and is not easy to resolve.

As we examine what makes home holy, even amid these challenges, one example we’ll discuss is the Holy Land of Israel/Palestine, the hometown of Jesus and the homeland of the church. For Christians throughout the world, this place is holy because of its connection to the ancient events of the Bible. Yet for the indigenous Christian church, here since the time of Jesus, home is also a place of struggle. Palestinian Christians live under occupation as Palestinians and exist as a minority community within Palestine. As the church in the Holy Land responds to these challenges by loving and serving its neighbors, we may also ask, How is God calling us to be the church in the places we call home?

In the texts we study this month, God makes a promise that speaks into all the complicated realities of *home*: God’s home is with us, on earth, in our embodied lives. Through the incarnation, God dwells with us. Our bodies and the world are at home in God’s love. As we come to know true home through the love of God, we are also called as the body of Christ to love and serve our neighbors, and to join in the redeeming work of God to heal our shared home, the earth.

As you lead this study, it’s good to keep in mind that discussing *home* may bring up a variety of strong emotions in your group, both positive and negative. As a leader, aim to create a space—physical, emotional and spiritual—for vulnerability and the honest sharing of experiences. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

WELCOME PARTICIPANTS

- Consider ways that your space can help participants feel “at home.” Is there enough seating? Will participants have enough privacy and quiet for personal discussions in small groups? If you decide to add candles, music or food to help create a welcoming atmosphere, be aware of sensitivities to perfume, hearing difficulties and food allergies

or aversions.

- Some groups use icebreaker activities before the meeting begins. As an alternative to icebreaker prompts like “Tell us about your home,” you might invite each participant to bring a physical object (or a photo of a physical object) that represents *home* to them. If you do not have time during the session, you might make space at another time during the month for participants to share a story about these objects and their meaning.
- This study series, written by an ELCA missionary in Jerusalem, often refers to Israel/Palestine and some of the challenges faced by the Palestinian church there. This is a complicated topic, but also a great opportunity to learn more about our ELCA commitment to the region in accompaniment, awareness-raising and advocacy. Consider finding photos and videos about the ELCJHL that can be shared during or after this first session. Try the church’s website (www.elcjh.org) or YouTube channel (www.youtube.com/@ELCJHL) for these resources.

OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES

- Draw the outline of a house on a large piece of paper or a whiteboard. Pass out sticky notes and pens or markers, and invite people to write down prayer requests for people experiencing homelessness, isolation, loneliness, illness, forced migration or other situations that prevent people from being “at home” in this world. During the hymn, invite people to come forward and fill the house with these prayer requests.
- Consider organizing a service activity as a follow-up to the study. Putting faith into action can help people in your congregation or community to feel more “at home.”
- To help participants learn more about the ELCA’s connection to the Lutheran church in the Holy Land and our commitment to accompaniment, awareness-raising and advocacy in Israel/

Palestine, point them toward the *Churchwide Strategy for Engagement in Israel and Palestine*, adopted by the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in 2005 and available at https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/PNW_Strategy.pdf.

SHORT STUDY (45 MINUTES)

1. Do the **opening prayer**. (Skip the opening hymn.)
2. Skip the **introduction**. Dive right into “God’s agenda is life.”
3. Do Q1. (Skip Q2.) Discuss all questions in small groups of 2-3, keeping discussion to four minutes or less.
4. Do Q3. (Skip Q4.)
5. Do Q5 and Q6. (Skip Q7.)
6. Do Q8.
7. Do the **closing prayer**. (Skip the **closing hymn**.)
8. Note: Invite participants to consider or journal at home about the questions your group does not have time to discuss. They may appreciate being able to write their responses in a personal notebook for prayer and reflection.

A LITTLE LONGER (60–90 MINUTES)

As above but allow discussion for some questions to run a little longer. If you still have time available, add back in:

1. the last two paragraphs of the Introduction.
2. Q2.

LONGER (60–90 MINUTES)

1. Do the full session.
2. Allow more time for discussion of some questions.
3. Add a related service activity, such as a Habitat for Humanity build; a project with a local branch of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service or Lutheran Social Service; an organized visit to members who live alone or in assisted living facilities; or an advocacy action in your community related to affordable housing. 🌱