

OPENING HYMN

“Built on a Rock” (ELW 652)

OPENING PRAYER

Holy God, you are with us wherever we go—the whole world is your sanctuary. Hold us in your presence and build us, as living stones, into a sanctuary for one another and our neighbors. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

FOCUS VERSES

“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.” (Ephesians 2:19-22)

MATERIALS NEEDED

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

CLOSING PRAYER

God, our holy refuge, your people long for places of safety and belonging, and you promise us that in you we find sanctuary. Strengthen us, as members of Christ’s body, to extend welcome to others and to build places where the vulnerable may find safe harbor. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

CLOSING HYMN

“Oh, Praise the Gracious Power” (ELW 651)

Holy places

Session two Sanctuary

BY MEGHAN JOHNSTON AELABOUNI

Welcome back to “Holy places! Last month, we explored *home* as a holy place, and how God invites us to be “at home” in our bodies, to ponder Jesus’ incarnation in the sacred places of the Holy Land and to care for the earth that is our shared home. This month, we ponder what it means to seek and to find *sanctuary* as a place of holy presence and sacred refuge.

INTRODUCTION

“Sanctuary” has at least two meanings. It can be a place of worship, set aside (“sanctified”) as a holy space for encountering the divine; and it can be a place of refuge, where people in need of safety may be assured of welcome and protection. Throughout history, places of worship have often served as sanctuary in both ways. In fact, they are connected: the power of a place to serve as a sanctuary (*refuge*) rests in its underlying identity as a sanctuary (*sacred space*) beyond the jurisdiction of human powers. Even today, some churches in the U.S. serve both as sanctuaries for worship and as places of sanctuary for refugees who live in the church building while they seek legal permission to stay in this country. The double meaning of “sanctuary” is important for Christians because it reminds us that for people of the incarnation, the holiness of holy places is not about God’s separateness from humanity. Rather, sanctuaries are places where God intervenes: God steps into the middle of human life and protects humanity from danger—including, and especially, when we are a danger to ourselves and to

each other.

This month, we'll discuss how *sanctuary* is connected to the human longing for closeness to God and for safety and security, how experiences of exile and estrangement have shaped biblical understandings of sanctuary, and how the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus guide Christian communities in our calling to be a living sanctuary for the world.

Share aloud or reflect:

1. What are some of the ways we use the word “sanctuary” today?
2. What do these meanings have in common?

HOW GOOD, LORD, TO BE HERE!

 **Read:** Matthew 17:1–9

They stood atop Mt. Tabor: more a hill than a mountain, but high enough so they could see for miles in all directions. There Peter, James and John witnessed Jesus transfigured in glory, standing with Elijah and Moses. It was a sight (and a site) to inspire holy awe, fervent worship—or in the case of Peter, a strong desire to build something. “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” (Matthew 17:4).

Peter's response may seem surprising, but it is rooted in biblical tradition. Noah's first action upon leaving the ark was to build “an altar to the Lord” on the newly dry land (Genesis 8:20). Each time God appeared to Abraham and Sarah to declare God's promises to them, Abraham built a monument to mark the place (Genesis 12:7; 12:8; 13:18; 22:9). After Jacob awakes from his dream of a heavenly ladder, he anoints the stone that served as his pillow and declares the place “Bethel,” meaning *house of God*

(Genesis 28:16–19)—for God has come to dwell there.

Throughout Scripture, a common response to an encounter with God is to mark the physical place where the encounter occurred and set it aside as a place of worship. It is no longer an ordinary place—it has become infused with the presence of the divine. So, Peter's idea to construct “three dwellings” is not only a way to honor the moment; it is also a way to fix the coordinates of sacred space—for where God has appeared once, surely God might return.

Peter has gotten something right: In his desire to build a sanctuary, he recognizes God's presence in this moment, on this mountaintop. His design plans are an expression of faith. Yet even before Peter can complete his thought, he is interrupted: “While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”” (Matthew 17:5).

In this moment, God relocates the holiness of the encounter, from a place to a person: Jesus, in whom God dwells. No stone altar is required, for Jesus himself is a living sanctuary. The divine voice instructs the disciples not to build a sanctuary but to act as they would in a sanctuary: to *listen* for God's presence and guidance. As they do, Jesus offers a word of calling and comfort: “Get up and do not be afraid” (Matthew 17:7). The disciples follow Jesus down the mountain to continue their journey, following the path of Jesus' ministry of healing and teaching that will lead to the cross and the empty tomb. The sanctuary is on the move. What does this mean for us today?

Three years ago, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted and complicated many aspects of our lives, including the notion of sanctuary. Almost overnight, people around the world were confined to our living spaces through lockdowns and quarantines. Churches, like other places of worship, were suddenly confronted with an enormous challenge. More than ever, people needed the assurance of God's continued

presence with us in an uncertain time. Yet how could this be provided—in the embodied gathering of community and the physical sharing of the sacraments—when sanctuaries themselves were shut down?

One answer became: in digital spaces. Many congregations, large and small, found ways to stream services or gather online in real time for worship and fellowship. While these adaptations were rarely perfect (much like in-person worship!), many people recognized that these virtual spaces fostered real connection and community. Holy Communion had long been shared in hospitals, on battlefields and in other unconventional places. Now, coffee tables and kitchen counters became altars where a scattered congregation could still join in the meal together. Even now, as most congregations have returned to our physical sanctuaries, some of these digital places have remained a part of our work, fellowship and worship. Virtual spaces can include those who, for reasons of health or limited mobility, are otherwise excluded from congregational life. ELCA Young Adult Ministry has sponsored online small groups that allow young adults to gather across geographic distances and find support and community.


Digital spaces as sanctuaries? Zoom rooms as holy places? This idea is not as strange as it may sound. For one thing, the line between “physical space” and “virtual place” is not as rigid as we may think. As theologian Katherine Turpin points out, even in virtual spaces we are still participating from within our bodies, and in physical places. As well, the message of Jesus’ transfiguration is that we do not need a stone altar, a mountain or a fixed location to find a sanctuary for worship. We only need Jesus: God’s living *sanctuary*, raised to eternal life, who is always on the move in our world and in our lives.

Share aloud or reflect:

3. Where have you felt God’s presence in an unexpected place?

4. Where have you felt God’s presence while “on the move”?

REFUGES IN TIME OF TROUBLE

 **Read:** Leviticus 19:33-34; Matthew 25:31-40

Human migration has always been a part of life on earth. War, famine, persecution or the promise of new life and opportunity have drawn—or forced—individuals and communities to leave behind the familiar and to seek sanctuary in new places. The United States as we know it today was formed in large part through migration: by Indigenous residents of Turtle Island (one Indigenous name for North America) who followed the ebbs and flows of the land, and who were also displaced and forced to move; by Europeans who arrived to build new lives in places perceived to be free for the taking; by Africans who were stolen from their homelands and enslaved to provide labor—and whose descendants moved to new cities and towns to live as free people. Over centuries, the idea of America as a place of freedom and opportunity also inspired millions of immigrants and refugees from around the world to accept the invitation of poet Emma Lazarus, etched at the feet of the Statue of Liberty: that the “Mother of Exiles” offers a “world-wide welcome” to “your tired, your poor, your struggling masses yearning to breathe free.”

Today’s U.S. churches, like the ELCA, were also formed through this migration, and many saw the welcome of new arrivals as part of their mission—a way to honor their history and God’s instruction: “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 19:34). For Lutherans, this legacy is still reflected in the work of church-related organizations that help resettle

immigrants and refugees, such as Lutheran Social Services and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, and in the accompaniment and advocacy work of the church, as in the AMMPARO network.

In recent years, political debates about migration from Latin America, Syria (and other parts of the Middle East and Africa) or Ukraine have again raised the question of what it means to offer sanctuary. Security, economic stability, cultural and religious identity, and legality are all invoked as factors that complicate the welcome of strangers. For those of us who have never experienced the acute need for sanctuary ourselves, it can be challenging to put ourselves in the shoes of immigrants, refugees and asylees. British-Somali poet Warsan Shire captures this conundrum in her poem “Home,” which begins, “No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark.” Warsan continues:

*you have to understand,
that no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land*

(Source: Warsan Shire, “Home,” at *Facing History & Ourselves*, <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/home-warsan-shire>, May 4, 2022.)

For too many people in the world, sanctuary is not an abstract concept or point of political debate. It is a dire life-and-death need. The 2022 film “The Swimmers,” based on the true story of Syrian sisters Yusra and Sarah Mardini, powerfully illustrates this reality. The Mardini sisters fled Syria in 2015, at one point jumping into the sea to help tow a stalled, overcrowded boat to shore, saving 18 other refugees. Yusra went on to compete in swimming in the 2016 and 2020 Olympics, and both sisters now advocate for refugee rights. As the film shows, Yusra and Sarah were resourceful, but also vulnerable. At every step in their journey, they had to place their hopes for survival in the hands of strangers. Sometimes this led to exploitation, and other times to sanctuary. In this case, sanctuary was not just a

destination, but a state of being. Yusra and Sarah found sanctuary on the move: sanctuary in the ways they and other refugees helped each other; sanctuary in every moment when the sisters’ humanity and dignity were recognized and safeguarded by those with power over their lives and futures.

In Matthew 25:31-40, Jesus describes a time in which “all the nations” will be judged according to how they have served the vulnerable among them and, in so doing, have served Jesus himself: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, *I was a stranger and you welcomed me*, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” It is not simply that Jesus cares about those he calls “the least of these,” whose circumstances mean they must rely on the goodwill of others. Jesus also makes clear that he is fully present with them, and *is* them: They, too, are sanctuaries of the living God. In a world where a lack of papers, savings, or status can be used as an excuse for treating human beings as problems rather than people, Jesus says: *You have a worth that cannot be taken from you. You are my sanctuary, the holy place where I live. I am with you.*

For Christians in a position to offer sanctuary, the biblical call is clear: We are to welcome the stranger as we would welcome Jesus, and we are to love the foreigner in our midst as we love ourselves. After all, we too—or our ancestors—were also once strangers in need of a home.

Share aloud or reflect:

5. When in your own history (or your family history) have you needed sanctuary?
6. When have you, or your ancestors, provided sanctuary?

LIVING STONES

📖 **Read:** Ephesians 2:17–22; 1 Peter 2:4–5; Isaiah 56:1–8

As the indigenous church in the place where Christianity was born, Palestinian Christians take pride in their identity and their calling as caretakers of sanctuary: the sacred sites where the events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are remembered and visited by people of faith from all over the world. Tourism is both a holy vocation and a significant source of livelihood for many who serve as tour guides, bus drivers, restaurant cooks and servers, hotel staff, shopkeepers, groundskeepers and in many other roles.

My Palestinian friends and colleagues often lament that many Christians who come to the Holy Land seeking Jesus do not look for Jesus in the living church. Many say, in essence, to visitors: "Please do not only visit the ancient stones. Please also come to visit the living stones!" Facing the challenges of the occupation, these Palestinian Christians take seriously the call to be "living stones" (1 Peter 2:4), "built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God" (Ephesians 2:22). Churches like the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL) believe they are not simply called to be the body of Christ in general; they are called to be the body of Christ *here* (in Palestine and Israel), on behalf of the global church, for the sake of their neighbors. The true sanctuaries of the Holy Land, they say, are not church buildings; they are the living sanctuaries of God's active presence in and through the people.

Many people outside of Israel/Palestine know little about the Palestinian church. The global Christian community does not always recognize the importance of these living stones. Mindful of our sinful history of anti-Semitism and of verses in the Hebrew Bible identifying the land of Israel as a "promised land" for the Jewish people, many

Christians (sometimes unknowingly) support policies that oppress their fellow Christians in this land, alongside their Muslim neighbors. Palestinian theologian Daniel Bannoura has pointed out that for Christians, all biblical interpretation is through the lens of the gospel—that word meaning "good news." If the Bible is interpreted to say that Palestinians do not have the right to exist in their own homeland, Bannoura says, "This is when the Bible stops being good news for [us], God's word for [us], and begins to be God's word against [us]. If the Gospel is not good news to me as a Palestinian, and good news to the Israeli and to the Jew and to the Arab and to the Muslim, and to all people from all backgrounds, it's not the gospel. It's not good news." In other words, if the Holy Land is not sanctuary for all of God's people, it is not sanctuary.

The call to be the living stones of God's presence in this and every place is rooted in the fact that we once were "strangers and aliens" ourselves. We embody sanctuary for others because we, too, need and receive sanctuary from God. Leviticus 19:33–34 invokes the exodus story of God's deliverance of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt, and their journey with Moses to the promised land that would become a new homeland for God's people. Yet this was not the end of the story. Centuries later, the two kingdoms of Israel fell to the invading Assyrian and Babylonian empires, which led to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and a mass expulsion period (approximately 587–539 BCE) that is often called the Babylonian exile. Many of the prophetic and wisdom writings of the Hebrew Bible deal with the experience of exile: God's people lament the separation from their holy places and comfort one another with the promise that God will restore them; they will find—and build—sanctuary again. Among the most memorable of these writings are the proclamations of Isaiah 40–66, which describe in poetic detail how God will liberate the people of Israel from exile and grant them sanctuary.

BUILT TOGETHER AS GOD’S SANCTUARY

Isaiah’s depiction of the safe return of God’s people is not an exclusive but an expansive vision: As the people of Israel return, they are called to be a “light to the nations” (Isaiah 42:6), to build a community of justice that cares for the vulnerable, and to recognize that they are not the only people God has invited home. For example, Isaiah 56:1-8 declares that God’s “salvation” and “deliverance” also include “the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord”: God declares: “These I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered” (Isaiah 56:7-8).

The exilic writings of the Hebrew Bible carry both a promise and a purpose: God’s people will find a promised sanctuary in a place where God will be present with them; and God’s people are called to open their sanctuaries—and to *be* sanctuary—to others. It is an echo of the theology of Leviticus: God’s expectation is that a people who were once strangers and aliens, enslaved and exiled, will use their freedom to liberate others and will recognize that theirs is only one part of God’s plan to gather “all peoples.”

These themes continue in the New Testament. Shortly after his birth, Jesus becomes a refugee, as he and his parents escape Herod’s murderous plans and find refuge in Egypt—only returning when an angel of the Lord assures them it is safe (Matthew 2:13-23). During his ministry, Jesus is rejected in his hometown of Nazareth (Matthew 13:54-58), and he describes himself as one who “has nowhere to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20). As Jesus is arrested, deserted and crucified, the living sanctuary of God finds no sanctuary—until the resurrection. There, God transforms the cross and tomb, the very emblems of cruel injustice and death, into holy

places of new life. God consecrates a holy sanctuary from places that were the opposite of sacred. The risen Jesus becomes a sanctuary now open not only to his disciples in first-century Palestine, but to all people, in all places, at all times—to the whole communion of saints.

The letter to the Ephesians reflects on similar themes in the early church community, where members grappled with the question of whether Jewish and Gentile (non-Jewish) believers, once religious strangers to each other, were equally welcome in the church. Ephesians makes clear that it is God’s grace, not human credentials, that determines who belongs: “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord” (Ephesians 2:19-21).

Share aloud or reflect:

7. How is being a “living stone” like being a member of the body of Christ?

CONCLUSION

These texts suggest something as simple as it is revolutionary: In its truest sense, sanctuary is not something we build but something into which we ourselves are built. The privilege of being a part of this sanctuary—one of God’s living stones—is a free gift, given to us by the grace of God and intended for all people. Sanctuary is not always a reality in the present moment, but it is a promise of safety, security and peace for all who are exiled. Because our place in this promise is secure, we no longer need to keep our sanctuaries to ourselves. Sanctuary is something we are called to share, and to be, for the sake of the world.

Holy places

Session two Sanctuary

BY MEGHAN JOHNSTON AELABOUNI

OVERVIEW

Welcome to the second session of *Gather's* fall Bible study series “Holy places,” as we continue to ponder how we “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’s study focuses on sanctuary. Whether a place for worship and prayer or for safety and refuge, sanctuary is made holy by the presence of God. And because God is with us in the world, sanctuary can show up in surprising places. Through the story of the transfiguration, we’ll explore what leads people to build sanctuaries in places where we have encountered the holy, and what Jesus teaches us about being a sanctuary “on the move”—including in virtual spaces. Reflecting on the circumstances that drive people to seek refuge in new lands, we’ll remember the example and teachings of Jesus that urge us to welcome the stranger as we would Jesus himself. Finally, as we learn more about the “living stones” of the Palestinian church, we’ll recall our biblical history of exile and estrangement, and how it shapes the ways God’s people are called to become a living sanctuary for the sake of the world.

TIPS FOR LEADERS

Even as a biblical term with rich connotations for our life together as Christians, “sanctuary” has also become a sensitive concept in current U.S. political discourse. You will likely have participants who

disagree with one another about these matters, or who have strong reactions (positive or negative) to this term based in part on how politicians have used it in recent years.

As a discussion leader, it may help to acknowledge this reality up front and to set expectations for this session. Consider starting with a discussion that recalls all the ways “sanctuary” is used today: for worship spaces, land and wildlife reserves, and communities that promise to offer a safe haven for refugees. Remind your group that for Christians, our understanding of sanctuary and its relation to our calling and identity goes beyond political affiliation or national identity. Rather than examining biblical texts and theology through the lens of partisan politics or government policy, our calling is to do the reverse: to approach our vocation as citizens and community members through the lens of our theological identity.

This session may raise challenging questions. If there is a gap between what our theology calls us to do and what our politics tells us to do, how do we as Christians discern our way forward? If we disagree about how communities should offer sanctuary, can we at least agree that we are called to do so? How can we, following the example of Jesus, try to put ourselves in the shoes of those who need sanctuary, or remember the times we ourselves needed sanctuary?

Hard questions sometimes also lead to hard conversations, but this is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, it can be a sign that the discussion is relevant and important to our lives today—that we are talking about real things. Invite your group to be courageous, loving and vulnerable as they share with each other how these texts meet them where they are—and how God may be moving them to somewhere new.

OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES

- Consider, given our focus on sanctuary, ending

with prayer and song, or even Holy Communion. Give thanks for the places that have been sanctuary for your group. Pray for those who are separated by distance or other limitations from being physically present in worship. This might include people who are hospitalized or in rehab or assisted living, members at home with mobility or health issues, deployed military personnel or young adults away at school, people who are incarcerated or those who are feeling spiritually isolated. (You can invite people to lift specific names aloud or silently, or you might bring a list of names from your congregation to the session.)

- This session will reference the experience of refugees today, and the ways the church responds. Consider viewing the film “The Swimmers” (on Netflix or check your local library) as a group or separately before the session.
- Peruse the websites for Lutheran Social Services in your state or Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (www.lirs.org). Learn how you, individually or as a group, might get involved in efforts to welcome refugees in your community.
- Search online for references to “sanctuary” in the Bible. Invite each member of your group to look up one reference and bring the verse to the session. As you begin, take turns reading your verses, and reflect together on what they suggest about sanctuary.
- If your congregation trains lay leaders for home communion ministry, invite the members of your study to join one of these lay ministers—or the pastor—on one of these visits in the coming month to help be a “sanctuary on the move” for members of your community.
- Consider places (community events, festivals, farmers markets, advocacy efforts) where you or your congregation could bring the sanctuary into your community. Since October 4, 2023, is the feast of St. Francis, one option might be a public pet blessing.

SHORT STUDY (45 MINUTES)

1. Do the **opening prayer**. (Skip the **opening hymn**.)
2. Do Q1. (Skip Q2 and Q3.) Discuss all questions in small groups of 2-3, keeping discussion to four minutes or less.
3. Do Q4 and Q5.
4. (Skip Q6 and Q7.)
5. Do either Q8 or Q9, but not both.
6. Do the **closing prayer**. (Skip the **closing hymn**.)
7. 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, do both Q8 and Q9.

LONGER (60–90 MINUTES)

1. Do the full session.
2. Allow more time for discussion of some questions.
3. Add a related service activity. Possibilities could include: 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. 🌿