

OPENING HYMN

“Bless Now, O God, the Journey”
(ELW 326)

OPENING PRAYER

O God, as your people search for you in holy places, you meet us on the road and bless us on our way. By the power of your Holy Spirit, help us always and everywhere to trust in your constant presence, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

FOCUS VERSE

“When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, ‘What are you looking for?’ They said to him, ‘Rabbi (which translated means Teacher), where are you staying?’ He said to them, ‘Come and see.’” (John 1:38-39)

MATERIALS NEEDED

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

Holy places

Session three

Pilgrimage

BY MEGHAN JOHNSTON AELABOUNI

Pilgrimage is not only about the destination, but also about the “holy place” of the journey itself. Through the risen Jesus, God meets us on the way.

INTRODUCTION

📖 **Read:** John 1:35–42

Beneath the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, near the grotto that marks the traditional site of Jesus’ birth, is a small stone room—plain except for one large stained-glass portrait. The portrait depicts a robed man kneeling before a table, feather pen in hand and a large scroll in his lap. The man looks upward to the risen Jesus, who hovers above with one hand raised in blessing and the other holding an open book. The man is St. Jerome (347-420 CE), a priest who worked within this humble room to translate biblical texts from Greek and Hebrew into Latin, which helped to spread the Gospel throughout the Western world. From Bethlehem, Jerome wrote: “Five gospels record the life of Jesus. Four you will find in books and the one you will find in the land they call Holy. Read the fifth gospel and the world of the four will open to you.”

Jerome’s analogy of the Fifth Gospel can help us to think about the nature of pilgrimage. A pilgrimage is a journey with a sacred purpose, often to visit a recognized holy place. Pilgrimage is certainly not limited to Christianity or to the Holy Land: it is a widespread practice that is both ancient and modern, encompassing many religious and spiritual

traditions. For Muslims, a *hajj* (pilgrimage) to Mecca in Saudi Arabia is a pillar of the faith. Many practicing Jews travel from throughout the world to pray at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Buddhists may visit the birthplace of Siddhartha Gautama in Nepal, and Hindus the four pilgrimage centers of India known as the Char Dham.

Pilgrimage can also extend beyond the traditionally religious. Many Americans visit places like Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. as a pilgrimage to the places of U.S. history. Veterans and historians of World War Two may travel to the sites of famous battles, or to the concentration camps that bear witness to the terrible cost of Hitler's ambitions. Students of the Civil Rights movement might visit the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, where Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, which is now the site of the National Civil Rights Museum.

Whatever the destination or the reason, *pilgrimage* is closely linked with *holy places*. Holy places usually begin as ordinary spaces—until an encounter with the sacred transforms them into holy ground. Over time, as visitors come to recall these encounters in the places where they happened, holy places become pilgrimage sites. They are marked—not only by the originating events that happened there, but also by the act of pilgrimage itself. Years or centuries of embodied human interaction with these physical places leaves a holy residue—the molecules of faith.

For Christians, the Holy Land has long been a central place of pilgrimage. This tradition can be traced in part back to St. Helena, whose son Constantine promoted the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity in the early 4th century. In approximately 326-328 CE, Helena came to Jerusalem under the auspices of her son the emperor and established several Christian holy sites, upon which churches were built. The Church of the Nativity was one; the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, built on a site identified with Jesus' crucifixion

and burial, was another. Today, these sites represent more than 1,600 years of church history and Christian pilgrimage. As these churches were built and rebuilt alongside a succession of empires who conquered the Holy Land, pilgrims journeyed from afar to see and touch these holy places. Some even left a piece of themselves behind: Names, dates and crosses are etched into stone and wood as holy graffiti.

Of course, the Holy Land is not the only place of Christian pilgrimage. Pilgrims may travel to pray in the Vatican, hike the Camino de Santiago in Spain, kneel at the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City, or ascend the stairs to Martin Luther's pulpit in the Wittenberg church. All these cases demonstrate Jerome's idea that pilgrimage to holy places is a kind of whole-body "reading" that enhances our sacred texts and traditions. It also echoes the invitation of Jesus in John's gospel, also extended by Palestinian Christians to the global church: "Come and see."

Notably, Jesus speaks these words in answer to a question. Observing that some of John's disciples have begun to follow him, Jesus first asks: "What are you looking for?" They answer with a question of their own: "Rabbi, where are you staying?" This brief exchange explains much about the heart of Christian pilgrimage. What are pilgrims looking for, as we follow in Jesus' footsteps? We are looking for the places where Jesus is staying—where we can be assured of finding Jesus and feeling his presence with us.

Jesus does not reply with a set of coordinates, but with an invitation: See. The disciples are invited to continue their quest, where they will find what they are looking for—not in a permanent address, but on the journey they take with Jesus. Little wonder that one early name for the Christian church was "the Way."

When pilgrimage centers on holy places, it is easy to suppose that the destination is the point.

However, this text reminds us that God's presence with us is not limited to destinations. The journey itself is a sacred place. God meets us as we go. In the itinerant life of Jesus with his disciples, in a surprising encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus, and in the pilgrimage of the magi to Bethlehem, we find evidence of God's promise to us that "waiting not for places, you meet us all around. Our covenant is written on roads, as faith is found" (*ELW* 326, verse 3).

Share aloud or reflect:

1. Have you ever made a pilgrimage—religious, or otherwise?
2. If you had the opportunity to go on a pilgrimage today, where would you go and why?

"TAKE NOTHING": THE PILGRIM'S PACKING LIST

📖 **Read:** Luke 9:1–6

When participants in the ELCA's Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM) program prepare to spend a year living in accompaniment with communities around the world, one important topic of conversation is the packing list: *What clothing is appropriate? What personal items can I find when I get there, and what should I bring with me? What shouldn't I bring?* These are important questions; and at the same time, the spiritual packing list is as important as the material one: *Make sure to pack an open mind and heart, a willingness to learn. Don't pack so many expectations and preconceptions that you have no room to receive what this place and its people will give you.* Whether we're talking about a suitcase or a state of mind, the underlying question is the same: How do you prepare for a pilgrimage?

Consider Jesus' instructions to the disciples

he sends out in his name: "Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic" (Luke 9:3). In a Middle Eastern culture of hospitality, the disciples could expect to receive invitations and provisions from the communities to which they traveled; but this welcome was not guaranteed. Therefore, Jesus' packing list (or rather, his *un-packing* list) sent the disciples on a journey of vulnerability as well as one of authority. The disciples had something to offer: the ability to heal and cast out evil spirits, as well as the good news of God's kingdom. Yet they also needed something from the communities they visited. This created the conditions for a holy place of mutual relationship, allowing everyone the opportunity to respond to God's gifts.

Many pilgrimages are begun with the hope of receiving healing, peace of mind, spiritual insight, personal transformation, or the renewal of faith. However, Jesus' instructions to the disciples remind us that pilgrimage is grounded in relationship: our relationships to other people and to holy places themselves. Do we come as consumers and customers, seeking an experience we have planned and paid for? Do we come laden with material things or layers of emotional insulation, intending to be self-sufficient? Or are we willing to come in the spirit of a guest—in humility and openness, ready to receive and learn from those we encounter?

It is human to find comfort in our packing lists: to seek control over the unknown by preparing for every conceivable circumstance, so that we do not need to be reliant on anyone else. To need others is to risk that we will be disappointed or rejected. I believe God knows this and understands it, even as Jesus is gently telling us: *You can put some of this down. Trust that in going where I send you, I will be with you; and you will find what you need.*

This is not to say that the road of pilgrimage is easy. After all, even Jesus advises the disciples on what to do when (not if) they face rejection. However,

Jesus does not characterize this as a failure. He instructs the disciples, when they inevitably fail to find welcome, to “shake the dust off” their feet and move on. Since human beings often can’t let go of all our expectations, Jesus offers us the next best thing: a healthy way to respond when those expectations aren’t met, and things don’t turn out the way we imagined. In these moments, Jesus invites us to shake the dust off our feet: to leave behind what we thought would happen or hoped would happen, so that our soles are free to feel the sacred ground where God leads us.

Share aloud or reflect:

3. What lessons have you learned about packing (or unpacking) for a significant journey?
4. What unmet expectations might you be carrying now in your life? How might shaking the dust off your feet free you to move on?

PALM SUNDAY TO EMMAUS: MEETING JESUS ON THE WAY

📖 **Read:** Luke 19:28–44; Luke 24:13–35

In many ways, these two stories—Jesus’ procession into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and his appearance on the road to Emmaus on Easter—are mirror images of one another. Both are stories of holy journeys that surprise and subvert expectations. Both help Jesus’ disciples to recognize how his suffering, death and resurrection are part of God’s intentions. While one road leads to the cross and the other from the empty tomb, both stories together can help us to recognize how Jesus meets us on the way.

The Jerusalem that Jesus entered was ruled over by the occupying Roman Empire. Many Jewish

people hoped that God’s promised Messiah would come to liberate the people and their land from foreign rule—the same expectation voiced by the disciples on the road to Emmaus, who say “we had hoped that [Jesus] was the one to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21). This hope fuels the fervor of crowds who lay their cloaks in the road and sing praises to God at the arrival of Jesus as “the king who comes in the name of the Lord” (Luke 19:38).

Luke’s gospel attributes Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion to the efforts of religious leaders who, along with agents of the Roman empire, recognized in Jesus’ message and presence a threat to stability and the power they enjoyed through the status quo. Yet it is also likely that some (perhaps including Judas Iscariot) rejected Jesus for a different reason: because Jesus did not take up the role of a warrior Messiah who would topple the empire by violent force. Still others, like the weeping women who surrounded Jesus while he was led to his crucifixion (Luke 23:27), persisted in believing in him but thought his death meant the failure and end of God’s mission.

The disciples who travel the road to Emmaus can be placed in the last category. Walking the seven miles from Jerusalem, explaining the week’s events to the stranger traveling with them, these disciples confess their sadness, linked to the certainty that all hope of redemption has died with Jesus, the “prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people” who was nevertheless not mighty enough to escape death (Luke 24:19). The disciples even admit that they have heard the news of the empty tomb, and the encounter of “some women of our group” with “angels who said that he was alive”—but apparently, they do not trust this news or know what to make of it (Luke 24:22–23).

Where the Palm Sunday crowds were jubilant, these disciples are devastated. Both are faithful, but both fail to recognize what is right in front of them. The crowds do not understand that Jesus’ journey into Jerusalem is a journey toward death; and the

disciples who walk toward Emmaus do not understand that what they have left behind is not death but resurrection—not an end to their hopes, but a beginning.

Still, recognized or not, Jesus is present with these people where they are. Jesus does not sit back and wait for the Palm Sunday crowds, or the disciples on the road to Emmaus, to find their own way to God's presence through right theology, understanding, or action. Jesus meets them on the road, while they are still on the way to understanding.

When the religious leaders tell Jesus to quiet the crowds, he declares: “if these were silent, the stones would shout out” (Luke 19:40). When the disciples fail to recognize that Jesus is the very stranger to whom they are unburdening their hearts, Jesus reveals himself to them in the breaking of the bread. Like the water, wine, and wheat of our sacraments today, God's presence comes to us through all of creation—including the humble places and materials of the earth. The same Jesus who was God-with-us in the incarnation is still, as the risen Christ, present with us in our embodied lives, on our physical journeys.

And so, pilgrimage is not always or only a journey to holy places marked on maps; pilgrimage is also a way of life. Jesus is made known to us on the road, in the face of the stranger, in times of joyful celebration and deep grief, in times when our hearts “burn within us,” and even when we do not recognize that it is Jesus. Perhaps especially then.

Yet as Jesus meets us where we are, this does not mean that we remain there. Next, we consider what happens after pilgrimage and how we are changed by our encounters with holy places and holy presence.

Share aloud or reflect:

5. When in your life could you relate to the crowds on Palm Sunday, and when could

you relate to the disciples on the road to Emmaus?

6. Where has God, or a sense of holy presence, met you “on the way”?

BY ANOTHER ROAD: AFTER PILGRIMAGE

 **Read:** Matthew 2:1–12

The journey of the magi to the infant Jesus is one of the most unusual pilgrimages in the Bible. The magi were foreigners of a different religion (perhaps Zoroastrians from Persia), drawn to Palestine through their interpretation of the stars. Arriving at the place where Jesus is, the magi kneel to offer gifts of gold and spices as they pay him homage; yet it is not clear whether this is an act of religious worship or of reverence for an earthly ruler. Nothing in the text suggests that the magi become followers of Jesus, nor that they go home to share the Gospel.

This does not mean that the magi are unaffected by their encounter with Jesus. Matthew's gospel (the only place where the story of the magi appears) intertwines their pilgrimage with sinister events: King Herod's plan to destroy “the child who has been born king of the Jews” (Matthew 2:2). Matthew's gospel no doubt intends the tragic irony we find here: while the magi come from afar in recognition of the significance of Jesus' birth, Herod—a leader of Jesus' own people—is unaware; and he treats Jesus' birth as a threat to his own power rather than as the fulfillment of God's promises.

For twenty-first century Christians reading these texts, it is critically important to recognize that Herod's suspicious, deceitful and murderous actions are not about Judaism. As with many references to “the Jews” in the gospels, the issue is not Jewish vs. Christian, but a conflict that arises within a diverse Jewish community that also included Jesus and his disciples. Christians today would do

well not to ascribe Herod's actions to his Jewishness, but to his status as a religious leader compromised by his close relationship with empire. Where in our own contexts might fear or greed keep us from knowing the truth of who Jesus is, even in the church? Where might outsiders like the magi recognize Jesus in ways we have missed, or forgotten?

Whatever their personal relationship to Jesus, one thing is clear to the magi: Faced with a choice to follow the orders of a powerful king or a dream about a holy child, they choose the child. Heeding a divine warning, the magi do not return to Herod, but instead return to their own country "by another road." In doing so, the magi do the will of God and choose the way of justice. If the magi set out on this journey for their own edification, they return in service to the child in Bethlehem, changing their plans and their route for his sake.

We might ask: How does pilgrimage also change us, and send us home "by another road"? What do we learn as God encounters us in holy places, including the holy place of our journeys? What, in the end, is the purpose of pilgrimage?

Share aloud or reflect:

7. Share a story of a time when a pilgrimage journey, or an experience of "holy ground," changed your mind or your plans.

CONCLUSION : GO AND TELL

Holy Land pilgrimages today bring Christians not only to encounter sacred stones, but also sacred people. Despite the hardships of the occupation, the indigenous church of the Holy Land remains steadfast. Occupied and pressured, the church nevertheless continues to share the Gospel in word and deed, loving and serving its neighbors. For pilgrims who take the time to meet with and hear from Palestinian Christians, the presence of Jesus is often

felt most powerfully not in the ancient stones of the buildings, but in the living stones of the people. As pilgrims "come and see" the power of the Gospel in this place, and the realities of the injustices faced by so many people, they are sent to "go and tell" what they have witnessed. Many pilgrims return home from the Holy Land by another road—a road that leads to deeper accompaniment, awareness-raising and advocacy for justice in Jesus' name.

As a pastor and missionary representing the ELCA in the Holy Land, Jesus has encountered me on the road here, in many holy places: where bread is broken, and cups of coffee and tea are shared; where my Palestinian siblings in Christ shake the dust of unjust stereotypes off their feet as they build communities of unflinching generosity, hospitality and love; and where hope is not a far-off possibility, but rather a reality that God can create now, in the midst of hopelessness—where, as the Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb says, "Hope is what we do today."

May that hope sustain you in your own pilgrimages: chosen and unchosen, smooth and rocky, joyful and heartbreaking. May Jesus meet you on your way and send you home by another road. May we and our world be transformed in and through the holy places where God is present with us, until every road and every holy place is filled with God's justice and love.

CLOSING PRAYER

God of the journey, all of life is a pilgrimage; and you are present with us in every path we take. Grant us the courage to "come and see" where you lead, and to "go and tell" the good news of your love to all we meet; in the name of the one whose life, death and resurrection made the whole world a holy place: Jesus, our Savior. Amen.

CLOSING HYMN

"I'm Going on a Journey" (*ELW* 446) 

Holy places

Session three

Pilgrimage

BY MEGHAN JOHNSTON AELABOUNI

OVERVIEW

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

Over the past two months, we have explored what it means for people of faith to “live and move and have our being” in embodied relationships to physical places. In September, we pondered the holiness of home. In October, we examined sanctuary as a place of holy presence and sacred refuge. In November, we conclude our study by considering pilgrimage: the journeys we take to a holy place or for a holy purpose, and the promise that God meets us along the way.

TIPS FOR LEADERS

As this session begins, think about what “pilgrimage” means to you and to your group. Some group members may have taken pilgrimage journeys to religious locations like the Holy Land, “heritage trips” to their ancestral communities, or visits to places that have cultural or historical significance. Consider asking group members to share some of these memories before the session begins or at another time. To help your group to discern together, you might ask: What do these experiences have in common? What distinguishes a pilgrimage from other kinds of journeys, or other kinds of places?

It's also worthwhile to reflect on the identity or role of a pilgrim. People in the U.S. who grew up with stories of the Pilgrims at the first Thanksgiving may think of a pilgrim as someone who follows the

convictions of their religious faith and ventures into unknown territory to build a new community—or, as someone who intrudes on already-occupied lands, claiming an ownership that ignores the rights of Indigenous people. In other words, “pilgrim” is a concept with a complicated set of associations in the U.S. context. Listing or speaking some of those associations aloud might help a group to take a fresh approach to considering pilgrimage.

In fact, Christian pilgrimage is something altogether different from the buckled hats and starched collars of U.S. history. The biblical texts we explore in this session suggest that to be a pilgrim is to take a journey in humility, vulnerability and openness that leads to a holy place of encounter; and then to come home again, changed by the experience.

You will want to recognize at the outset that not every person has the access or the inclination to take a long and arduous journey to one of the world's iconic places of pilgrimage. There is a certain level of economic privilege, as well as privilege connected to physical ability, that makes travel possible for some and impossible for others. As a Bible study leader, it's important to keep these sensitivities in mind, and to help group members to do the same. This Bible study is not about shaming or alienating those who find traditional religious pilgrimages out of reach. Truthfully, pilgrimages that venture beyond the familiar and the ordinary can be found everywhere! Depending on the sensibilities of your group, you can try lifting up everyday pilgrimages: those moments when God surprises us, as we are going about our lives and daily routines. These moments, too, are biblical. It's not only geography that makes a holy place of pilgrimage, but the presence of God, which can find us wherever we are.

OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES

- Consider offering a “taste of pilgrimage” by choosing a specific location as a virtual destination. For example, for a pilgrimage to Bethlehem, you

could: show photos or a video tour of the city and its churches; offer a sampling of local foods and beverages like hummus, pita and mint tea; or invite a guest who has been to Bethlehem to share their own story of pilgrimage.

- Invite participants to share with your group (during your Bible study or at a later time) a photo or object that represents a pilgrimage (or other meaningful trip) they have taken.
- If your Bible study is held over an online video conferencing platform, consider inviting group members to choose virtual backgrounds (or hold up a representative object) that places them “on pilgrimage” in a favorite destination they have visited or wish to visit.
- Tell participants they can view ELCA member and travel expert Rick Steves’ video introductions to the Holy Land, available free by searching YouTube.
- Close with prayers for holy places around the world. You might place a world map on a table or the floor at the center of a prayer space, and allow worshippers to light and place votive candles on specific map locations for which they would like to pray.

SHORT STUDY (45 MINUTES)

1. Do the **opening prayer**. (Skip the **opening hymn**)
2. Take only 1 minute to do Q1.
3. Do Q2, and then either Q3 or Q4 (but not both) in small groups of 2-3, keeping discussion to four minutes or less.
4. Skip either “Palm Sunday to Emmaus” and Q5-Q6, or “By another road” and Q7.
5. Do the **closing prayer**. (Skip the closing hymn.)
6. Note: Invite participants to consider or journal at home about any section or question your group does not have time to discuss.

A LITTLE LONGER (60–90 MINUTES)

As above, but if time allows add back in any skipped sections, such as “Palm Sunday to Emmaus” and “By another road.” If you still have time available, also add back in 1-2 of the related questions.

LONGER (HALF-DAY OR FULL DAY WORKSHOP OR MINI-RETREAT)

1. Do the full session.
2. Allow more time for discussion of some questions.
3. Add a related activity, such as: a labyrinth walk, a viewing of the film *The Way* (2010) about the Camino de Santiago, or a time of learning about ELCA-related ministries in regional or global places of pilgrimage.)
4. Alternatively, you might hold a follow-up event during Advent, building on the themes of justice, peace and holy places. For example, your group might plan its own or join in an existing event, such as a clothing and food drive for people in your community experiencing homelessness; a caroling and service trip to a local assisted living facility; or a virtual pilgrimage to the “little town of Bethlehem” to share what your group has learned with the rest of the congregation. 🌸