

### OPENING HYMN

“What Is This Place”  
(ELW 524)

### OPENING PRAYER

Holy God, you reveal yourself in the divine relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and you form your people into one body of Christ with diverse gifts and callings. Guide us beyond certainty to find your grace embodied in holy community. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

### FOCUS VERSE

“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift.”  
(Ephesians 4:4–7)

### MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- Hymnals (ELW)

# After certainty

## Session two Community

BY MEGHAN JOHNSTON AELABOUNI

### INTRODUCTION: CONVERSATIONS WITH LUTHER

This past January, I traveled from my home in Jerusalem to Wittenberg, Germany, where I had the honor of preaching at the installation of a fellow ELCA missionary. It was my first time visiting this other “Holy Land”—the town where Martin Luther taught, preached and became a symbol for the Reformation. One snowy morning, I made a solo pilgrimage to the Castle Church. Although most historians say that Luther didn’t *really* nail his “Ninety-five Theses” to the church’s door, this is where it would have happened, had he done it.

Luther did most of his preaching from the pulpit of this church. Below the pulpit rests a visible reminder of Luther’s legacy: a stone marking his burial place. Luther’s bones lie here—at the feet of every preacher who has since dared to mount these steps and give a sermon.

I didn’t climb the pulpit steps. But as I stood in front of Luther’s tomb, I found myself in silent conversation with the reformer:

*Here I am, Martin. A daughter of the church you never meant to start. A pastor in the tradition you never imagined would carry your name, centuries later. Nor did you probably imagine women preachers—even if you recognized your wife Katharina as a theologian in her own right! What does it mean to have you as my ancestor in faith? You have given the world so many beautiful and powerful things—and ugly ones too. Your writings against the Jewish people,*

*the Anabaptists, and the Peasants' Revolt fueled unimaginable persecution and suffering. Yet your focus on God's free gift of grace in Jesus is the foundation of my faith. I love the church that bears your name—and we also have much to answer for. What should we do with you? What will God do with us?*

Unsurprisingly, I received no answer from Luther. (I would have been concerned if I had!) I knew that I was really having this conversation with myself and my church. What does it mean to continue to claim Luther's name and legacy, 500 years after the Reformation? Many of Luther's convictions remain the bedrock of our theological identity. Some of Luther's ideas and opinions were so abhorrent that Lutheran churches later formally rejected them and repented for the harm they caused. Yet Luther's complicated story is not unique.

From the beginning of human history, our individual actions and those of our institutions, including the church, have been responsible for both wonderful and terrible things. Just as Luther's anti-Jewish diatribes were later used to fuel atrocities against the Jewish people, some of the most terrible human actions in history have been committed out of the certainty of religious conviction. Whole communities can fall into the temptation to create a sense of belonging and identity through an "us vs. them" mentality that allows people to perpetuate injustice against those who are labeled the "other."

Yet if there is any certainty in the scriptures, it is that God does not desire or condone injustice. Time and time again, Jesus rejects the exclusion or dismissal of people whose identity marks them as outsiders. Jesus often upends the expectations of his followers and their assumed certainties about how God views the world.

Today, the Holy Spirit still brings God's people through times of misguided and dangerous certainty, to find grace and wisdom on the other side. Often the


Spirit works through human relationships and communities, with no single idea or ego standing alone.

In this session, we'll explore how God leads us beyond certainty by calling us into community where we, as members of Christ's body, can learn from and depend on one another. Within the community's love and vulnerability, God's grace saves us from sin. God's wisdom shows us the way forward.

### **Share aloud or reflect:**

1. What lessons or gifts has God brought to your life out of complicated relationships with the past?

### **LUTHER WENT BEYOND CERTAINTY TO FAITH.**

 **Read:** Psalm 118

Did Martin Luther have a favorite Bible verse? For Luther, who held many texts in high regard, no single passage stands definitively above all others. Keeping in mind that, in Luther's theology, scripture is a pillar of the faith (one he referred to as sola Scriptura or "Scripture alone"), it is noteworthy that he distinguishes between the words of the Bible and the living Word it contains.

"Here (in the Bible) you will find the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies," Luther wrote. "...It is for Christ's sake that we believe in the Scriptures, but it is not for the Scriptures' sake that we believe in Christ." In other words, Luther took the Bible seriously, but he did not worship it. Jesus, not the written word, is our salvation.

So which biblical texts do we most associate with Luther? We might cite Ephesians 2:8: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." But Luther also loved the Psalms—especially one that he called "my own beloved Psalm." It's not hard to see why. Psalm 118 echoes key aspects of Luther's personal story of

faith: God answered his cry for help, freed him from spiritual anguish and enabled him to withstand the attacks of adversaries. In Luther's famous declaration, "Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God," we can imagine Luther taking courage and inspiration from his beloved Psalm 118: "I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord" (v. 17).

Psalm 118 begins and ends with expressions of thankfulness to God, but by no means is this only a psalm of celebration. "Out of my distress I called on the Lord," the Psalmist says (v. 5). This emphasizes that God's help is needed. The Psalmist mentions "those who hate me" (v. 7) and describes the threat of surrounding nations who are "like bees" and "a fire of thorns" (v. 12). Moreover, the Psalmist struggles with not only external enemies, but with God. "The Lord has punished me severely, but he did not give me over to death (v. 18)."

Luther knew something about this struggle. As a young adult, while traveling, Luther bargained with St. Anne to protect him from a lightning storm. In exchange, he committed his life to the church, becoming a monk. It was the start of a journey that transformed not only his life, but the life of the church.

Though Luther survived that storm, he was not unmarked. Early on, he questioned his choice. The more time and effort he spent trying and failing to live up to the expectations of a righteous, exacting God, the more despair he felt. Luther called this time his *Anfechtungen* (or "tribulations"), recalling: "I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God."

Yet this was not the end of Luther's story. God's help came to Luther through scripture. His affliction became a catalyst for experiencing God's redemptive action, as in Psalm 118: "I was pushed hard, so that I was falling, but the Lord helped me. The Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation" (Psalm 118:13-14).

This verse and other texts identified God—not

human action or achievement—as the ground and source of salvation. Hearing the Gospel in this new way—through the same scripture—was transformative for Luther. The old certainty that God demands a righteousness from human beings that we can never achieve was replaced by a new vision: God is the one who acts through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to save us and make us part of Christ's body, the church.

In this community, every member receives God's free gift of grace in the Word preached and the Sacrament shared. The Bible is written in the language of the people for all to understand. Parents teach faith to children at home, because all the baptized are "priests." And a priest, like Luther himself, can also be a spouse, parent and neighbor.

After his theological breakthrough, many of Luther's teachings located faith not in individual piety, but in the mutuality of community. A similar shift, moving from "I" to "we" can be found in Psalm 118: "This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!" (vv. 22-25)

Both Psalm 118 and Luther's life reflect the journey beyond despair to grace, beyond the self to others, beyond certainty to community.

#### **Share aloud or reflect:**

2. Which parts of Psalm 118 speak to you? Why?
3. Where in your life have you experienced a transformative moment of God's grace?

#### **LUTHER'S VIEW OF ROMANS AND JAMES**

📖 **Read:** Romans 3:21-28, 4:13-25; James 2:14-26

Along with the Psalms, Luther loved Paul's epistle to the Romans. In Luther's German translation of the Bible, he describes Romans as "truly the most important piece in the New Testament," "purest Gospel" and "the daily bread of the soul."

No doubt, Luther revered Romans largely due to its focus on the theology of justification by grace through faith. As Romans 3 describes, we receive "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe... [and] since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (vv. 22-24).

Paul offers the example of Abraham, one whose "faith was reckoned to him as righteousness" because of his trust in God's promises. Paul points out that God's promises to Abraham and Sarah came first—before any action on their part! Everything the couple did was in response to God's initial gift: the promise of descendants. Their trust that God would fulfill this promise was counted as righteousness. As it was with Abraham and Sarah, so it is with us. Our faith in God, who raised Jesus from the dead for our sake, will be "reckoned to us" (Romans 4:23-25). Faith in God's grace *counts*.

Focused on the centrality of grace through faith, Luther re-examined old certainties of the Christian tradition (including parts of the Bible itself) that distracted from the core truth of the Gospel. For example, Luther dismissively called the book of James "an epistle of straw." Where Paul lifts up justification through faith "apart from works," James bluntly insists that "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (James 2:17, 26). James argues that Abraham's righteousness is not trusting in God's promises alone, but also his faithful action in offering to sacrifice his son Isaac, the embodiment of God's promise of descendants (James 2:21).

James calls people to action partly out of an ethic of care for neighbors in community. To James, "faith without works" looks like a Christian whose

"brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food," then responding to them with platitudes ("Go in peace; keep warm; and eat your fill") but doing nothing to actually "supply their bodily needs" (James 2:15-16). In this, James and Luther do not disagree. Luther railed against works-righteousness because he'd experienced the spiritual trauma of believing that he must make himself good enough for God. Luther could not accept any suggestion that salvation would depend on one's faith being "brought to completion" by one's works (James 2:22). Yet Luther strongly supported Christian action for the good of others in community: "God doesn't need your good works, but your neighbor does," he wrote. For Luther, works of love for the neighbor are the natural consequence of grace through faith.

Sin, Luther explained, is like being curved in on oneself (*curvatus in se*). When we are self-absorbed, whether from arrogance or self-loathing, any good works we might do are motivated by self-interest. Grace frees us from sin and expands our horizons outward to our neighbors. We no longer act to prove ourselves worthy. We act because the divine, abundant love we have received overflows from us in gratitude and love for God and others.

As Luther joyfully embraced a God of grace, he too became more actively involved in what was happening to his neighbors. The church at that time was involved in selling indulgences—promises of reduced time in purgatory in exchange for financial payments. Many church authorities promoted this practice as a way to achieve salvation for the self or loved ones. However, Luther viewed indulgences as economic and spiritual exploitation of ordinary people, done to enrich the church hierarchy and fund projects such as the refurbishment of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, which most of Luther's community would never see.

For Luther, a transactional God, whose mercy could be bought, was no better than a God of merciless judgment. This was not God made flesh in

Jesus, who fed the hungry and preached good news to the poor without charge. Compelled to correct these abuses of power, Luther spoke out against indulgences. He also supported establishing a “community chest” (a common fund) to aid financially vulnerable people in Wittenberg. In this way, even as Luther rejected the theology of James, he honored the epistle’s concern: that a Christian community is called to help our neighbors—not with empty words, but with actions.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

4. Have you ever done the right thing for the wrong reasons, or the wrong thing for the right reasons? How did that feel?
5. How can accepting God’s grace as a free gift affect the way we live in community?

**CHRIST’S BODY AS COMMUNITY**

📖 **Read:** Ephesians 4:1-16; Romans 12:4-21

Nowhere is the role of the faith community more eloquently expressed than in the image of the church as the body of Christ. This image conveys both unity and diversity. As Ephesians 4:4-5 states, we are members of “one body and one Spirit... one Lord, one faith, one baptism.” Our different gifts and roles are like the various parts of the human body, according to Romans 12:4-8. This is more than a metaphor. The community of Christ doesn’t just function *like* Christ’s body. The community of Christ *is* Christ’s body. Through baptism, communion and the proclamation of the Gospel, God’s Holy Spirit forms individual people into a community—a community in and through whom Jesus is truly present. As St. Teresa of Ávila, a contemporary of Luther, wrote: “Christ has no body but yours / No hands, no feet on earth but yours / Yours are the

eyes with which he looks compassion on this world.”

The early church needed this unifying image. After Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, the community had to figure out how to live together, worship together and relate to neighbors. Bringing together people of Jewish and non-Jewish backgrounds, different social and economic status, varied cultures, and different ages, genders and perspectives brought so-called certainties of the world into question. One such “certainty” was the idea that human beings are naturally divided into various categories of “us” and “them.” The early church became a place where these lines blurred and crossed. People who weren’t considered equals in society found themselves part of the same body and “members one of another,” albeit with “gifts that differ according to the grace given to us” (Romans 12:5-6).

Luther’s theology of the priesthood of all believers (though he never used this exact term) echoed this balance of unity, diversity and purpose. Calling all baptized Christians “priests” means that all Christians are equal in status before God, however fixed the hierarchies of the world (and the church) might seem. It also means that all Christians, not just clergy, have a holy calling to serve God in their work and daily lives. Luther imagined God “smiling” at the father washing his children’s dirty diapers. Even if others would ridicule the father for this departure from the certainty of gender roles, Luther held that anything done “in Christian faith” for the sake of the community is holy work.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

6. Where has God met you in or through community?
7. What is the importance of diversity and unity in community? How do they relate?

**CONCLUSION: WE ARE BEGGARS; THAT IS CERTAIN.**

“By all means flee solitude, for the devil watches and lies in wait for you most of all when you are alone,” Martin Luther wrote to Jerome Weller in July 1530.

Luther treasured the gift of community not only in theory, but in practice. His household included not only his wife Katharina and their children, but also extended family members and students. This boisterous, communal atmosphere produced Luther’s famous “Table Talks.”

Later in Luther’s life, it seems that he withdrew from this extroverted life—not into peaceful solitude, but into the troubled isolation he’d struggled with during his *Anfechtungen* years before. Perhaps Luther’s ill health and general irascibility contributed to this lonely turn. Some of his most objectionable writings came from this period. This does not mean that Luther did not hold these problematic views earlier (he did) or that he was without compassion in his later days (he wasn’t). It also does not excuse Luther from culpability, in weaponizing his powerful public platform against communities of people who suffered greatly as a result. However, the timing suggests something important about the role that community plays in faith and in understanding. Community—like the body of Christ—provides a sense of belonging that is rooted in unity and diversity. Mutual accountability, care and the integration of diverse perspectives can offer much-needed balance. Community can challenge attitudes conceived in the echo chambers of closed-minded opinion.

Luther’s last words, as he died, were: “We are beggars; that is certain.” Even Luther’s life was not a straight line from fear to faith, from law to grace. Any of us, however deeply grounded in grace through faith, can fall back into old assumptions, fears or prejudices that cause separation between us and others, pulling us away from the wisdom of the Gospel. In those moments, we realize anew that grace comes not by our own power or effort, but by

the power of God acting in us.

No wonder Luther described baptism as not a one-time transformation, but a daily dying to sin and rising in Christ. We gather in worship, not just once, but again and again. In the community of Christ’s body, we find the reminder and the renewal of God’s grace, whenever and wherever we need it.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

8. Considering Luther’s gifts and faults, what do you take away from his legacy?
9. Where is God calling you to reach beyond certainty to community?

**CLOSING PRAYER**

Gracious God, you form us into the body of your Son, to be the hands and feet of Christ for our neighbors. Help us to honor diversity and work toward unity. May we reflect and embody your love as we serve you in the callings of our daily lives. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

**CLOSING HYMN**

“All Are Welcome!” (*ELW* 641) 🌿

# After certainty

## Session two Community

BY MEGHAN JOHNSTON AELABOUNI

### SESSION GOAL

To see how God frees us from the burden of finding our own certainty and draws us into community, where we grow in grace as members of the body of Christ.

### OVERVIEW

Welcome to the second session of *Gather's* summer Bible study series, *After Certainty*. Together, we are considering what it means to live faithfully in times of uncertainty. Session 2 focuses on Martin Luther's journey beyond certainty to community.

As you prepare to lead this series with your group, consider that (even within Lutheran settings) participants may have differing degrees of familiarity with Luther's story. They may or may not know Luther's theological contributions to today's Protestant traditions. They may or may not be familiar with the problematic writings for which he has been rightly criticized and his words condemned. You can use the suggested resources (see p. 25) to help group members learn more about Martin Luther.

Just as Luther's legacy is complicated, so too is the legacy of the Christian church. For many, the church is a place of deep belonging, joy and love—a place where God's love is made real in the community of faith and the body of Christ gathers for worship and is sent out to serve neighbors in the world. Yet history is also filled with examples of large-scale sins of the church, including clergy abuse of children, the role of missionaries in Western

colonialism, and the church's past support for slavery, sexism and anti-Semitism. On an individual level, many people have experienced spiritual and psychological trauma in Christian communities.

Out of care for group members, it's important to treat discussions like these with sensitivity. Unbeknownst to your group, members may be carrying deep pain from their or their loved ones' experiences. As a leader, make space for courageous and compassionate conversations by setting clear expectations and healthy boundaries. For example, you can:

- Invite, but not require the sharing of personal stories.
- Ask all group members to receive others' stories without offering corrections or judgments.
- Remind the group (and yourself) that it is not a breach of faith to criticize the Christian church. After all, the church is a human community, as well as the body of Christ. All humans fall short and need God's grace and forgiveness of sins, the church included.

Jesus reminds us that “the truth will make you free” (John 8:32). In that spirit, may this session be a place where your group discusses the journey beyond certainty to community. May your group experience this gift through the community you create during your study.

Luther held many certainties in his life, but he also trusted the community of Christ to carry on after him. He called for the church to be *semper reformanda*, “always reforming.” What reformations are happening or need to happen today? How might God be calling your community to be involved?

### OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES

If time allows, before or after the group gathers, you might do one of the following:

- (5 to 10 minutes) Invite group members to share their knowledge in a group brainstorm: *What do we think we know about Luther? What are some of his best—and worst—contributions? How connected do we feel to Luther’s legacy?*
- (5 to 15 minutes) Ask members, in groups of 2 or 3, to share a time when their mind or heart changed about something important. What was that change? How did it come about? What role did relationships and community play in those life-changing moments? How does community challenge, change or create certainty?
- (A longer, future time commitment) Pair this study with a follow-up service project. Invite a congregational or community leader to spend 5-10 minutes sharing distributing information about a ministry or project that could use a helping hand on one or more occasions. Tell your group members: Let’s think about ways we can live out the grace we have received by taking part in acts of service for our community! Once the group has settled on an activity, find a day and time when all or most group members can participate, according to their gifts and abilities.

#### SHORT STUDY (30-45 MINUTES)

1. Ask each group member to name one section and one question they would like to discuss. Spend the remaining time discussing the sections and questions raised by the group.
2. Have group members read, reflect and journal at home about parts of the study you did not have time to discuss during your meeting.

#### A LITTLE LONGER (60-90 MINUTES)

1. Do the opening prayer. Sing at least 1 verse of the hymn.
2. Read “Introduction.” Do Q1.
3. Read “Luther went beyond certainty to faith.”

Do Q3.

4. Do “Luther’s view of Romans and James” and Q5 / or do “Christ’s body as community” and Q7.
5. Read “Conclusion,” and end with “Closing prayer.”

Note: If you have a larger group, you might want to try a “book report” format. After the opening prayer and hymn, break into smaller groups of 2-3 participants. Assign each group a different section to read and discuss for 30 minutes. Conclude with short presentations (perhaps 3 to 5 minutes) from each group on important takeaways from each section.

#### LONGER (90-120 MINUTES)

1. Read all sections. Skip Qs 2, 4 and 6.
2. Add Q8 or Q9 if time allows.
3. Again, larger groups may find it helpful to discuss the questions in groups of two or three. 🌿

#### RESOURCES

Joan Acocella, “How Martin Luther Changed the World” (*The New Yorker*, October 2017), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/10/30/how-martin-luther-changed-the-world>.

*Living Lutheran’s* Martin Luther archives, <https://www.livinglutheran.org/tag/martin-luther/>.

*The Forgotten Luther* (vol. 1-3), <https://www.fortresspress.com/store/search?ss=%22forgotten+luther>.

Rick Steves, “Luther and the Reformation,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CXK9NNp1yk4/>.