

### OPENING PRAYER

God of all that has not yet come to pass, we give thanks that you are the Alpha and the Omega. All beginnings and endings are held in your eternal love. Grant us wisdom and courage as we face the unknown future, trusting in your grace. In Jesus' name. Amen.

### SUGGESTED HYMNS

- "Borning Cry" (ELW 732)
- "Canticle of the Turning" (ELW 723)

### FOCUS VERSE

"And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."  
(Matthew 28:20b)

### MATERIALS NEEDED

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

# Holy time

## Session three

Holy future—reimagining the time to come

BY MEGHAN JOHNSTON AELABOUNI

### INTRODUCTION (1 minute)

During this fall Bible study series on the theme of "holy time," we've pondered how God is present with us in all the times of our lives—past, present and future—and how we respond to God's grace by living out our faith in holy memory (September) and the holy now (October). This month we turn toward the times to come and God's promise to be with us, always, leading us into the holy future.

### "WE PLANT; OUR CHILDREN EAT." (4 minutes)

Here in Jerusalem and the West Bank, my spouse, Gabi, and I serve as country coordinators for the ELCA's Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM) program. A small group of young adults from the ELCA comes each year to serve in the schools and other ministries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land. They build relationships in local communities and discern their own vocations for the future.

One young adult, Olivia, shares this story of a conversation with her Palestinian Lutheran host mother: "On one side of the garden there are very small trees that have been planted by the family. I asked her how long it takes for a little tree to start bearing fruit once it's planted. I was surprised to hear that it can take 10 to 20 years. After she told me, she smiled and said that their parents had a saying that had been passed down for a long time: 'We plant; our children eat.' The trees that are grown-up now were planted by generations before them, and

the trees they have planted will serve generations after.”

*We plant; our children eat.* Whether we realize it or not, everything we do is pointed toward the future, despite the knowledge that this future is never guaranteed. This is what faith looks like in ordinary life. We follow a recipe and have faith that a cake will come out of the oven. The “walk” sign blinks, and we cross the street in faith that we will safely reach the other side. We have faith that the trees we plant will grow to bear fruit and that the next generation will be fed. And we do not only wait and wish for these futures. We walk toward them and work toward them. We talk of building, creating and securing futures. We do not know that any of the things we imagine will come to pass, but we place our hope and trust in the possibility that they can.

The Bible is also filled with imaginings of the future and expectations of times to come. The future is at the very heart of God’s promises, because promises, by definition, deal with things that are not yet but will be. And how should we feel about the future? Despite the many passages in the Bible that warn of troubles, trials and tribulations to come, we are still encouraged not to worry about tomorrow (Matthew 6:34), for, as Jesus promised the disciples, “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). Jesus is not telling us to forget about tomorrow or ignore the future. Jesus is giving us a foundation for facing the future. Rooted in the promises of God in Jesus Christ, we do not need to be afraid to face the future—even when the unknown scares us, even when the future looks bleak. We are freed by the gospel not to worry about the future, but to build and work together with God for the future that will come after us, trusting that as we plant, our children will eat.

This month’s study will keep in mind how the Bible’s perspective on the future both comforts us and calls us. What does it mean to reimagine

the future in light of the promises of God’s reign? How do we live *now* in hope and active expectation of God’s future. How does this open us to transformation?

#### IT SHALL NOT RETURN TO ME EMPTY: A FUTURE OF HOPE (20 minutes)

■ **Read:** Isaiah 55; Luke 1:46–55

#### Share aloud or reflect:

1. Which promises of God are mentioned in these texts? Who is included in these promises?

These verses from Isaiah are only one example of many visions for the future that appear throughout the Bible. The prophet imagines a free feast of abundance, an everlasting covenant between God and the people. It is a celebration so universal that it includes not only the people of Israel but also “nations that you do not know” (Isaiah 55:5) and the natural world—the “mountains and the hills” that “burst into song” and the “trees of the field [that] clap their hands” in praise (Isaiah 55:12).

It’s a nice idea. So nice, in fact, that it’s hard to imagine this prophet has spent much time in the real world! When your life is easy, it’s not difficult to be optimistic. Surprisingly, however, this message from God comes within the context of exile, after Jerusalem had fallen to the army of the Babylonian Empire in 587 BCE, and many of God’s people were forced to leave and become refugees in another country. Imagine a current-day refugee from one of the world’s many war-torn places, gazing out on the rubble and announcing, “You shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace” (Isaiah 55:12)!

In fact, the most hopeful visions of the future in the Bible nearly always emerge from times of hardship and hopelessness: slavery in Egypt, exile in

Babylon, the fierce and total occupation of the land of Jesus by the Roman Empire. These future visions are no pipe dreams: They are bold acts of resistance to unjust rulers and powers.

Consider Mary's words (the Magnificat) in Luke's Gospel. They may be so familiar as the text of hymns that we don't always realize how radical they are. (Also, in 2020, as the ELCA celebrates the 50th anniversary of women's ordination and the 40th anniversary of the ordination of women of color, let's recognize the words of this first-century woman of color for what they were: a sermon!)

Mary's proclamation is no less than a promise of revolution: the powerful brought down from their thrones and the lowly lifted up; the hungry filled with good things and the rich sent away empty; the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham and all the ancestors. It is also amazing to realize that Mary is talking about her child who is not yet born; yet she speaks as though these things have already happened: God has already done it! Before Jesus' resurrection, before his ministry, even before his birth, Mary announces that the world has already changed, and has changed for good: "Surely from now on, all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation" (Luke 1:48-50). Mary speaks here, through the centuries, to us: to this generation who calls her blessed and who receives the same promises.

And yet, we too may feel as though we are still waiting for the fulfillment of visions like Isaiah's and Mary's. From generation to generation, the world is still troubled by poverty and violence. Empires and nations do crumble into dust, but others take their place. Rather than bursting into song and clapping their hands, the fragile ecosystems of our planet call for help.

Martin Luther also noticed this strange reality of time: Christians proclaim God's redeeming work

in Christ as *already* accomplished, and at the same time acknowledge that this world does *not yet* fully reflect redemption: "This life therefore is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness, not health, but healing, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it, the process is not yet finished, but it is going on, this is not the end, but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified" (*Luther's Works*, vol. 32).

For Luther, this paradox finds some resolution in the reminder that God's time is not our time—that, as the Lord says through Isaiah, "my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways" (Isaiah 55:8). All time finds unity in the eternity of God, who promises that "as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth..., so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:10-11).

The Gospel of John declares that this word sent out to the earth becomes a living Word in Jesus: "The Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14). The promise given by God to Mary, to Isaiah and to all generations struggling for a word of hope is this: In Jesus Christ, the hope of the future is now and will be for all generations. How, then, do we respond? How do we live now in the light of this promised future?

#### OIL LAMPS AND HIGH BEAMS: (15 minutes)

■ **Read: Psalm 119:105; 1 Corinthians 13:8-13**

#### Share aloud or reflect:

2. How has God's word helped to light the path of your life?

3. How might love guide us, even when the path is hard to see?

Christian recording artist Amy Grant's 1984 song "Thy Word," part of many outdoor ministry songbooks, has introduced generations of Christians to Psalm 119: "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path" (verse 105, KJV). Grant and the original psalmist both sing with a confidence we may not always share. The path to the future, even with Holy Scripture as a guide, can seem murky—a fact Paul himself recognized when he wrote that "now we see in a mirror, dimly" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Some years ago, a seminary professor brought to class an example of the oil lamps the psalmist might have had in mind: tiny clay vessels that fit in the palm of one hand. Thousands of years before electricity, these lamps might well light the path forward—but not like a high-powered flashlight illuminating the entire road. Perhaps, the professor reasoned, this is exactly the way the psalmist meant it. God's word gives us just enough light to see the next step in front of us, but no more—yet the lamp that is faithful can still guide us home, one step at a time.

Trusting in God's future and seeing it all at once are not the same thing. If we knew everything that would happen ahead of time, we would have no need for trust, we would have no opportunity for joy, and we would have no freedom to choose and to grow. It's true, as Paul says, that "now 'we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part.'" This is not a flaw. (As computer folks might say, it's not a bug but a *feature* of our humanity). We grow in knowledge, just as we grow from childhood to adulthood. This natural process also has an end: a time "when the complete comes," when "we will see face to face," and when we "will know fully." This future rests in God, whose love already knows us fully, and will never end (1 Corinthians 13:8-12). Like the oil lamp, these

promises do not reveal everything, but they give us a way to walk forward into the future.

#### THE FUTURE IS NOW: REMAKING THE WORLD (25 minutes)

■ **Read:** Revelation 21:1-6; 22:1-7

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

4. Do you think of these passages from Revelation as describing heaven or earth? Why?
5. When you look to the future, what causes you the most worry? What brings you hope?

Over the last several years, a popular new movement addressing care for creation and climate change has taken the world by storm. Many of the leading voices of this movement have been youth, such as Greta Thunberg, a Swedish teenager whose school strikes for the climate inspired millions to march in the streets. Care and concern for the climate is also a core value of the Lutheran World Federation—a worldwide expression of Lutheran churches, including the ELCA, representing 75.5 million Lutherans around the globe. LWF's focus on the climate has also been a youth-led effort: "As people of faith, we have been given the responsibility to care for creation and secure it for future generations," says LWF Youth Secretary Pranita Biswasi.

In an interview, Greta Thunberg was once asked why younger people seemed to be at the forefront of addressing climate change. Thunberg's answer was straightforward: While many older adults have the relative luxury of knowing that the worst effects of climate change will come after their lives are over, young people can expect to live through them. Because they are more directly affected, they feel

more urgently the need to act now for the sake of the world's future.

As Christians discuss concerns about climate change, the above texts from Revelation are invoked by some as evidence that the church should not get involved. After all, if God is preparing a new heaven and a new earth, does it really matter what happens to this one? If those who believe in Jesus will go to heaven after we die, then shouldn't the church be focused on helping people get to heaven, rather than on what is happening here?

New Testament scholar Barbara Rossing has pointed out that as often as these passages from Revelation are taken as descriptions of a heaven up in the clouds, with pearly gates and streets paved with gold, the Bible itself is pretty clear that these visions do not refer to a place "up there" to which faithful Christians are whisked away in an escape from this world. It's actually the opposite: The "holy city, the new Jerusalem," is seen "coming down out of heaven from God," and a voice declares, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them" (Revelation 21:2-3). The future is not a world abandoned by God, but a world made new by God. God's future takes place not in heaven, but on earth—albeit an earth so transformed that "death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more" (Revelation 21:4), and there will be "healing of the nations" (Revelation 22:2).

Still, some might argue, don't these texts imply that the work will come from God, not us? Perhaps. Yet I am reminded of the parable about a man caught in a flood who turns down help from his neighbors in a truck, a boat and a helicopter, determined to rely on help from God alone. Finally, stranded on his roof, the man cries out, "God, why won't you help me?" and God answers, "I did help you: I sent you a truck, a boat and a helicopter."

It is God who heals, God who saves, God who

accomplishes the future by "making all things new" (Revelation 21:5). Yet in baptism, God also makes us, ordinary human beings, into children of God and members of the body of Christ. Christ's body on earth has always existed to bring about the kingdom of God, to participate in God's work of "making all things new." Put another way, this is, as the ELCA tagline says, "God's work. Our hands."

In part, this is what we do in worship. We declare the forgiveness of sins and proclaim the good news of Jesus as a free gift to all people. We welcome new members of the body of Christ through baptism, and at the table of Holy Communion, we share the meal and ensure that there is enough for everyone. We sing our thankfulness and joy. We lift in prayer and love the names and concerns of our neighbors. For all of these reasons, worship is sometimes described as a rehearsal for the reign of God in the world, a way of living that extends abundant love, water, food and a place at the table to all people.

Presbyterian pastor Eugene Peterson once recalled a comment made to him on the way out of a Sunday service: A member remarked that he loved worship so much it was a pity he had to return to the "real world." Peterson saw it differently: that what happens in worship actually represents "the most real world" there is (Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*, p. 27).

When we worship, we are not merely reenacting ancient history or rehearsing for some far-off future. The holy mystery of Christian worship is that we are enacting the reign of God in what we do. It becomes real, more real than the broken world we know. The world we know is not yet the world that will be; yet the future breaks into the present, and the reign of God is here. As in our worship, so in our ministry to the world—like the sign above the sanctuary exit in my home congregation reads: "The worship has ended; let the service begin!"

**PLANTING GOD'S FUTURE: TO THE END OF THE AGE**  
(15 minutes)

■ **Read: Matthew 28:16-20**

**Share aloud or reflect:**

6. How does this text speak to the past, the present and the future?
7. What does it mean to you to know that God is “with you always”?

In the final verses of Matthew's Gospel, just before what is often called the Great Commission, there is a small detail that often slips by unnoticed. As the disciples gathered on the mountain in Galilee and the risen Jesus appeared, “they worshiped him; *but some doubted*” (Matthew 28:17).

This admission acknowledges such a human response. To be face to face with Jesus resurrected from the dead, the living embodiment of all God's promises, and still to doubt is authentic and relatable. It is a blessing that the Gospel writer takes care to include this admission—because Jesus' response to both the worship and the doubt is the same promise: “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

Jesus' promise speaks to us through the ages of the past, speaks to us now in the present moment, and speaks to us of the future as a place where Jesus is already present. This promise is ours, no matter how we believe or doubt it. It is nothing less than the presence of the living God in the past, present and future—the eternal God in whom all our time finds a home. We do not have to remember God or recognize God or make our way toward God in order for God to be present with us. God was, God is and God will be. This is grace.

May this grace bring you God's presence in holy

memory, in the holy now and in the holy future of God's reign: as we plant so that our children may eat, as we join together as the body of Christ to enact God's reign in the world, and as we face all the time to come in hope and trust.

*O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord.*  
(ELW Evening Prayer, p. 317) 🌿