

OPENING PRAYER

God of every breath we take, you are with us in every moment. Your presence fills our present. Help us recognize your care and your call in this time and place, that our daily lives might reflect your grace. In Jesus' name. Amen.

SUGGESTED HYMNS

- "Now the Silence" (ELW 460)
- "Gather Us In" (ELW 532)

FOCUS VERSE

"For [God] says, 'At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.' See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!"
(2 Corinthians 6:2)

MATERIALS NEEDED

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

Holy time

Session two

The holy "now"—recognizing and responding to God's *kairos* time

BY MEGHAN JOHNSTON AELABOUNI

INTRODUCTION (1 minute)

Our fall Bible study series focuses on "holy time": God's presence in the past, present and future of our lives, and the ways we live out our faith in relationship to holy memory (September), the holy now (October) and the holy future (November). This month, we explore how the Scriptures speak to us about the holy now: how we recognize and respond to God's grace and calling in the present moment.

RIGHT NOW: GOD'S PRESENCE IN THE PRESENT (4 minutes)

"What are you doing right now?"

Have you ever found this question hard to answer? For some reason, it is often easier to talk about the past or the future than the immediate present. After all, we can choose which past events or future plans we wish to share. We can talk about them from a safe distance, the way we might laugh about old embarrassing moments once they are behind us or confess our dreams or long-term plans with hope and expectation.

In comparison, "What are you doing right now?" catches us off guard, like a camera flashing before we realize we're being photographed. "What are you doing right now?" often yields sheepish or mundane answers: *Right now, I am looking in the mirror trying to figure out how long I have had these wrinkles on my face. ...Right now, I am clipping my toenails. ...Right now, I am sitting in a waiting room wishing I were anywhere else. ...Right now, I am missing*

someone. ...Right now, I am worrying about something. ...Right now, I don't know how I feel.

I'm not sure what to say. "Right now," it turns out, is often a vulnerable place. A familiar quip declares, "The present is a gift; that's why it's called the present." But this present is not always easy to open, and the gift is not always easy to identify. No wonder we would rather talk about last year, or next Tuesday.

And yet, God is present, in both senses of that word. God is here, present in the indescribable, raw, real moments that make up "right now." And God is a present—a gift. God gives God's self freely to us in Jesus Christ, in the presence of the Holy Spirit, now. The awe-filled wonder of this promise is evident in Paul's insistent words to the church at Corinth: "See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!" (2 Corinthians 6:2).

The Greek word Paul uses for "the acceptable time" is *kairos*. In much the same way as the Greek word *agape* describes a certain kind of love, *kairos* describes a certain kind of time. *Kairos* was distinguished from *chronos*, the Greek word at the root of the English word "chronological" that describes the orderly procession of time from past to future. *Chronos* is measured by the seconds, minutes and hours of the clock and the days, weeks, months and years of the calendar. *Kairos* is something different. It is what we mean when we say, "It's time!" It's what we are trying to capture when we describe an experience of time flying or time standing still. *Kairos* is used 87 times in the New Testament and appears in every Gospel and many of the Letters, including Paul's proclamation in 2 Corinthians that "now is the *kairos*."

Of course, the *kairos* of Paul's "now" was in the first century, nearly 2,000 years ago. The times of the Bible are now in the distant past. They were over long before our time, our "now," was ever dreamed of. How could the authors of the Bible even imagine the times we would be living in today?

How could Paul's "now" possibly refer to us?

But Paul's *kairos* moment is also our *kairos* moment, despite the centuries between us. This is how *kairos* works. *Kairos* happens within chronological time, but it is not bound to its limitations. Paul's "now," Paul's *kairos*, speaks directly into our "now." This is not because Paul magically looked into the future and envisioned the internet and airplane travel (or the English language, for that matter). It is because the Bible is a living word, inspired by the Holy Spirit. Every time our Scriptures are opened, they announce the *kairos* time of the risen Jesus Christ, who is God with us, incarnate in this and every "now."

As our siblings in the United Church of Christ say, "God is still speaking!" But how do we listen, and hear? How do we grasp the times we are living in? What does it mean to recognize *kairos* time within our time, and to discern our calling from God to be present? Let's dive into the living word to think together more deeply about some of these questions—right now!

SIGNS OF THE TIMES: RECOGNIZING THE "NOW" (10 minutes)

■ **Read:** Luke 12:54-56; Luke 21:25-33;
Matthew 24:3-8

Share aloud or reflect:

1. What were some of the "signs of the times" when you were growing up? What do you understand more clearly now, looking back on those times?
2. What "signs" most encourage or concern you about the present? What about them brings you hope or anxiety?

If only it were as simple as Jesus makes it out to be: that interpreting the signs of the times is no different from how farmers, sailors and scientists read the signs of the natural world, from the “appearance of earth and sky” (Luke 12:56) to the sprouting of leaves at the same time each year. In practice, however, human beings spend a great deal of time puzzling, arguing and agonizing over how to interpret our own times. Perhaps the point Jesus is trying to make is that “What is happening now?” is a question that does not exist in a vacuum. It is inseparable from questions of the past and future, such as “How did we get here?” and “Where are we going?”

The challenge of reading the signs of the times is related to something that media scholar Marshall McLuhan once said about culture: that asking human beings to describe our own culture (or in this case, our own times) is like asking a fish to describe water. How can we understand the times in which we live when we are swimming in them, surrounded by them?

This is where Jesus’ advice comes in. How do human beings know that certain clouds will bring rain and that leaves on the fig tree herald the coming of summer? We know from experience: from thousands of years of living through the same causes and effects, the same cycles and seasons of nature. We can’t predict the precise moment or location rain will fall or leaves will sprout, and it probably never happens exactly the same way twice. Repetition doesn’t mean replication: There are no two identical snowflakes, human lives or world events. Yet echoes, cycles and trends serve as lessons of the past, signs pointing toward the future. They are as natural as the turning of the seasons. But what do they mean?

It can be alarming to hear Jesus describe the signs of coming times: War, destruction, division, pain and loss pervade Jesus’ teachings about the future. Yet in the thousands of years since the time of Jesus, haven’t human beings experienced these

things again and again? Likely Jesus is not trying to terrify people about what is coming—his most frequent command, after all, is “Do not be afraid.” What if, instead, Jesus is speaking through the centuries to every person who has experienced tragedy, injustice and suffering to assure them that their pain is not a sign of God’s absence from them or God’s desertion of the world? What if these warnings are meant not only to afflict the comfortable but also to comfort the afflicted?

Pay close attention to how Jesus himself interprets these times. Though they bring hardship and fear, they are “but the beginning of the birth pangs” (Matthew 24:8), signs that “the kingdom of God is near” (Luke 21:31) and along with it, redemption (Luke 21:28). This is surely good news for those enduring pain and oppression: It is a promise that what we see is not all there is, nor will it be the end of the world’s story. Luke’s Gospel, in particular, is filled with parables and events that show Jesus embodying this redemption as he heals, feeds, forgives and includes people on the margins. True, the kingdom of God interrupts the status quo and radically changes the world as we know it. Nevertheless, God’s reign is good news. Jesus came not to turn the world upside down but to turn it right side up: to turn *right now* into the *right now*, to replace the *wrong now* with a *kairos* time of justice, mercy and love.

“TODAY THIS SCRIPTURE HAS BEEN FULFILLED...”
(15 minutes)

■ **Read:** Luke 4:14-30

Share aloud or reflect:

3. Where do you see the good news of Jesus being fulfilled in the world today? Where is the kingdom of God coming near?

4. Where might God be calling you or your congregation to proclaim the good news right now?

Imagine Jesus sitting in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, about to speak. The crowd is buzzing: This young man, a son of the congregation, is gaining a reputation as a great teacher filled with the Holy Spirit. The crowd waits in expectation that they are about to witness history in the making. When Jesus stands up, someone hands him the scroll of Isaiah to read. Now is the time of the Roman Empire's occupation, days with an uncertain future for the Jews of Palestine. Now more than ever the people need a prophet to declare God's *kairos*, a holy now that will change everything.

At first it seems this is exactly what is happening. Jesus reads the words from Isaiah 61 that describe the prophet's own calling, the message God has given him to proclaim to the people: good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed! Jesus' audience would have heard this as referring to the beginning of the year of the Lord's favor, or Jubilee (as described in Leviticus 25)—a time when debts were to be forgiven, the enslaved freed and life made new. Instead of holding out this vision as a far-off future hope, Jesus then rolls up the scroll and begins his sermon with one sentence: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

It is astounding, electric, hopeful. The crowd is filled with excitement and a kind of proprietary pride: This new prophet of Israel is one of their own. But then Jesus flips the script. He warns them that they're not going to like what he has to say, and then he reminds them that God sent Elijah and Elisha not to help the people of Israel but to help foreigners—*those* people of a different land, accent, culture and religion. The mood of the crowd turns on a dime. The same people who were ready to take credit for Jesus' success drag him roughly to the top

of a hill to throw him off a cliff. Thankfully, Jesus eludes their grasp. The message is clear: Whether they love Jesus' message or hate it, he does not belong to them alone, and neither does the good news. No one congregation, nation or people owns Jesus or his gospel. The times, they are a-changin'—and so is the nature of God's *kairos*.


What does this text say to us, now? Perhaps it reminds us that we, too, have a tendency to want a God who meets our expectations. We long for God to show up in the midst of our lives and say to us, "I see you. I am here for you. This good news I bring is for you, today." There is actually nothing wrong with this. In fact, the good news is for you and me today, and it does come to you and me in the word and in the sacraments, by the power of the Holy Spirit. The mistake made by the people of Jesus' hometown was in thinking that the good news should only be for them, not others. It's the notion that if God's promises are wide enough and powerful enough to reach those people, our own special relationship with God is somehow diminished. I suspect that this fear lurks behind the cruelty of church groups who show up to picket funerals and declare God's hatred or indifference for other people on the basis of sexuality, gender, religion, nationality, race or ethnicity. This cannot be supported by Scripture. The Gospels show the good news of Jesus moving ever outward, expanding to include more and more people, and challenging every kind of inequality and social division. On the cross, Jesus gathers the whole world into the *kairos* time of Jubilee. The empty tomb declares that Jesus cannot be buried in the past; he is risen! He lives forever—including now.

We might call this "resurrection time," and it is the very reason the good news proclaimed by Jesus 2,000 years ago is also the good news for us in the 21st century. The risen Jesus is not limited to any one place, time or human group. When Jesus says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," the "today" is that Sabbath day in Nazareth

so long ago—but it is also every today into which this text is spoken, including this today, as you read these words. And it is for other todays to come.

In other words, there is enough of God's love and enough of the gospel for every time, every place and every people. Jesus is the living embodiment of God's kairos—of holy time, the appointed and acceptable time, the day of salvation. And because Jesus is risen, God's kairos also lives, everywhere and for all time. What does this mean for us? Let's read on.

LOVE POURED OUT: RESPONDING TO GOD'S KAIROS
(25–30 minutes)

 **Read:** Mark 1:9-15; Matthew 26:1-13

Share aloud or reflect:

5. If you had been present in the moment when the woman anointed Jesus, would you have been more likely to applaud her or scold her? Why?
6. The disciples and Jesus interpret the woman's act very differently. How do each of them view what is happening in that moment? What might the woman herself have said?

We have been discussing God's kairos time and its incarnation in the world in the person of Jesus, who entered human history in a particular body and in a particular place and time. Jesus proclaimed, "The time [kairos] is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near" (Mark 1:15). Not only that, but he enacted God's kairos through healing, feeding and welcoming those who were poor and hungry, ill or disabled, tax collectors and sinners. His disciples believed they were witnessing history in the making, and they were. But the history being made was not

what they were expecting.

Matthew's story of the anointing of Jesus by an unnamed woman in Bethany not long before Jesus' betrayal, arrest and death comes after Jesus has been speaking in the temple in Jerusalem (Matthew 21–23) and teaching his disciples in parables about staying alert and awake during the approaching times (Matthew 24–25). Finally, after saying all of these things, Jesus clarifies: "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified" (Matthew 26:1-2). It is after this statement that the woman comes to him in the house of Simon and anoints him lavishly.

It is reasonable to suppose that this is not a coincidence: Rather, this woman has heard Jesus' warnings about what is in store. This would explain why Jesus, in the face of the disciples' condescending disapproval, reframes her anointing of his head with expensive ointment as an action that anticipates his death: "Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial" (Matthew 26:10-12).

Jesus is not trying to be callous about the needs of the poor. He is making a different point. Unlike the disciples, who do not seem to take in the significance of Jesus' upcoming death, this woman has correctly read the signs of the times. She has listened to Jesus and heard him, and she is awake to what is happening in the present moment. The disciples grumble about the waste of money that could be used to support their ongoing ministry, to keep things going as usual. But the woman has recognized that business-as-usual is over. Chronos time has been interrupted by kairos. The appointed time of Jesus' death is near—Jesus, who is the Messiah, God's chosen one. So the woman anoints Jesus' head, as the Messiah is meant to be anointed

(“Messiah” means “anointed one”), and as the bodies of the dead are anointed for burial.

It is interesting that the disciples talk about the woman’s actions in terms of spending. The perfumed ointment she pours over Jesus at the table has a high monetary value, and she “spends” the whole jar, an act the disciples see as wasteful and frivolous. Of course, the woman is spending more than money. She is spending effort, spending devotion, spending her time as a way of showing love.

What do we mean when we talk about “spending time”? We recognize that our time on earth is not unlimited, and that how we choose to live in the time we are given reveals a lot about what matters most to us. Who, and what, receives our time and attention? As the song, “Seasons of Love,” from the Broadway musical “Rent” recognizes, there are “five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes” in 12 months of life—that’s *chronos*. But the song also asks, “How do you measure a year in the life?” and suggests an answer: “How about love...seasons of love?” That’s *kairos*. And asking how you will spend your time—asking, as poet Mary Oliver does, “What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”—that’s *kairos* too. It’s not a question of whether we will spend time: We do, regardless. It’s a question of where and how God invites us to spend that time. It is an invitation to live like the woman in Luke’s Gospel, measuring our time in seasons of love poured out.

The church as a whole recognizes and responds to *kairos* moments, on levels from local to global. Because God has poured out grace, life and love for us in Jesus, now and always, and because “now is the acceptable time [and] now is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2b), we ask: What moments of God’s *kairos* are breaking into this day and age, and how are we called to respond?

Last year, at the ELCA’s Churchwide Assembly, the gathered church recognized a number of *kairos* moments. The church committed to work to

dismantle racism and white supremacy, sexism and patriarchy, and gender-based violence in the church and beyond. We chose to stand with refugees and migrants as a sanctuary church body and to work together in interreligious partnerships. We joyfully decided to celebrate in 2020 the 50th anniversary of women’s ordination, the 40th anniversary of the ordination of women of color, the 10th anniversary of the decision to remove barriers to ordination for people in same-gender relationships, and the beginning of ordination for deacons called to the ministry of Word and Service.

How are these actions *kairos* moments? First, because they recognize God’s presence in the present—the holy now, the signs of God’s time within our own times. Second, because they represent the church’s response: to *spend* our time (and the other resources God has given us) as the body of Christ in working “to bring good news to the poor ... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19). It’s not that our salvation depends on this work. God has already declared this day the day of salvation. Rather, in words often attributed to Martin Luther, “God doesn’t need your good works—but your neighbor does.”

Like the actions of the woman anointing Jesus, these decisions may not make sense to everyone. The woman’s ointment might indeed have helped to feed people who needed food. The ELCA could have taken up other pressing concerns of the present moment. For some, these actions of the church seem too hasty or too much; for others, too conservative or too little. We respond to the times and discern God’s *kairos* as human beings of limited wisdom, subject to sin. But we respond. We can’t help but respond, because God’s love is poured out for us beyond all fathomable limits and reasonable boundaries, including the boundaries of time. Every now contains a *holy now*, because every present moment

is filled with the presence of the living God. May we recognize that kairos time, and may it grant us courage and hope to pour out love like the woman who was so present to the holy now that “wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her” (Matthew 26:13).

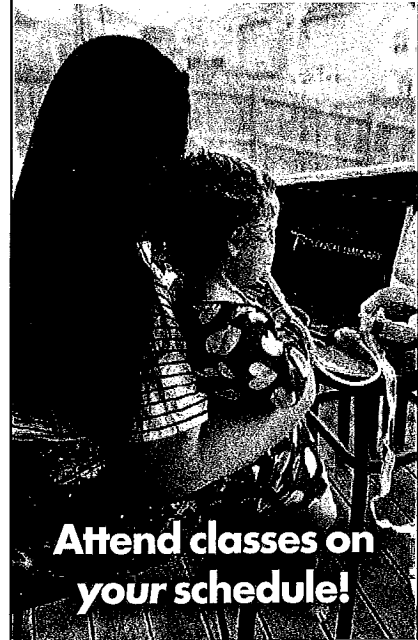
Share aloud or reflect:

7. If you knew for certain that “it’s never too late,” how might you spend your time (and life) differently?
8. What kairos moments do you see in your community and the world right now? How might your congregation—or the church as a whole—be called to respond?

WRAP-UP

From now until your next meeting, keep a daily journal that lists “God moments” (moments of kairos) amid ordinary life. These entries can be very short (1-2 sentences) or as much as a few paragraphs. Next month, in the gathering time before you begin session three, consider sharing some of the kairos moments you experienced and journaled about. 🌿

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