

OPENING HYMN

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

OPENING PRAYER

God of wisdom, open our hearts and minds to seek your presence in all times and places. Fill us with curiosity, that we may follow the way of Jesus in love and justice. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

FOCUS VERSE

“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.”
(Matthew 7:7–8)

MATERIALS NEEDED

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

After certainty

Session one

Curiosity

BY MEGHAN JOHNSTON AELABOUNI

INTRODUCTION

This three-part Bible study series focuses on what it means to live in faith after certainty. In these years of a worldwide pandemic, escalating climate change, political turmoil and a changing religious landscape, it may feel like the days of predictability and stability are behind us. What will the future bring now?

For Christians who have been taught that having faith in Jesus means being certain, times of uncertainty can feel like a spiritual problem to solve, rather than a spiritual opportunity to embrace. However, the Bible shows us that God’s people have often lived in deep uncertainty. Adam and Eve left the garden for an unknown future beyond. Sarah laughed to hear she would have a child in her old age. Moses questioned his call before leading God’s people out of slavery in Egypt—only to face forty years of uncertain wandering in the desert. When Israel’s kingdom and temple crumbled, prophets like Isaiah consoled the exiles in Babylon who did not know whether they would ever return to their homeland. Jesus and his disciples lived under an empire’s rule, knowing that the status quo could change at any time. Early Christians shared the Gospel and built churches without any certainty about what would become of this new faith. The apostle Paul stood firm in the promises of the Gospel, but his descriptions of faith did not always sound like certainty: “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Even Martin Luther, whose certainty about the grace at the heart of the Gospel gave him the confidence to challenge the pope and laid the theological foundations of the Reformation, reportedly came to humbler conclusions at the end of his life. His final words, some say, were not “Here I stand,” or “Salvation by grace through faith,” but rather a simple confession: “We are beggars; that is certain.” In this, Luther displayed the source of his certainty: not his human ability to puzzle out the right theology, but his utter dependence on God for help and hope.

If our ancestors in faith lived and trusted God while remaining in uncertainty, so can we. In that spirit, this series will explore uncertainty not as a failure of faith, but as “the road where faith is found.” (“The road where faith is found” comes from the lyrics of our opening hymn, ELW 326.) Jesus invites us to ask, knock and search for what lies beyond certainty: holy curiosity (June), community (July), and compassion (August) that ground us in the certain love of God in Jesus Christ and accompany us through every unknown.

This June, we begin our series with a look at *curiosity*. Jesus’ ministry often challenged the certainties of the status quo when it came to faith, power and relationships. Curiosity drew people to Jesus and his message. Holy curiosity can still lead us today to the places where God’s love in Jesus transforms “what is” to “what could be.”

Share aloud or reflect:

1. Think of a time in your life when something that seemed certain suddenly wasn’t. How did you navigate uncertainty, and how did God meet you “on the road”?

“WHAT IS THIS?” JESUS’ MINISTRY OF CURIOSITY

■ **Read:** Mark 1:21–28; Mark 4:35–41; John 1:43–50

One day, early in his ministry, Jesus entered the synagogue at Capernaum to teach. This was not an unusual thing for Jesus to do. According to the gospels, Jesus often spoke in synagogues. Yet this occasion was apparently remarkable, because afterwards “at once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee” (Mark 1:28). Why? First, Jesus “taught them as one having authority” (Mark 1:22). Then, when interrupted by the voice of a man with an unclean spirit, Jesus commanded the spirit to be silent and to leave—and it did. The crowd was “amazed” and “astounded” and “kept on asking one another, ‘What is this?’” (Mark 1:27).

This was not the only time that Jesus’ ministry was met with curiosity. Those who encountered Jesus rarely knew for certain what to make of him. They more often responded with questions than with immediate understanding. Even the disciples, who traveled with Jesus and participated in his ministry, remained uncertain about him. After Jesus stilled a storm on the Sea of Galilee, the disciples responded as though it were the first time they had witnessed Jesus in action: “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (Mark 4:41).

The questions that came from people around Jesus were not only about awe or fear, but about curiosity. Awe alone would likely not have been enough for the disciples to leave behind their familiar lives. Fear alone would have driven them in the opposite direction! Curiosity, on the other hand, compelled the disciples and many others to follow Jesus, seeking to know more. Curiosity connected people to Jesus and to each other. Even when they didn’t understand the meaning of what Jesus was saying and doing, the disciples stayed near to Jesus—until the cross. And even then, when the disciples scattered, it was not because of uncertainty, but because they were certain that it was the end. When the risen Jesus appeared, the disciples finally realized what Jesus had been saying all along: Beyond the certainty of death lies resurrection. After

certainty, God makes the impossible possible.

Share aloud or reflect:

2. Imagine yourself living at the time of Jesus. What about his message or ministry might have made you curious to follow him?

CERTAINLY WRONG: (UN)LEARNING FAITH FROM THE DISCIPLES

📖 **Read:** Matthew 16:21–23; Mark 9:2–8; John 3:1–9

Until now, Peter has been having a particularly good day—maybe his best ever. Earlier, Jesus asked the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” and Peter gave the right answer: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). Jesus praised Peter and declared that he was the rock on which Jesus would build the church. Peter’s position is as sure and certain as bedrock. What could possibly go wrong?

In a transition so humbling that it is almost comical, Peter’s very next move is to stumble. As Jesus explains the death and resurrection that awaits him in Jerusalem, Peter pulls him aside and rebukes him: “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you” (Matthew 16:22). So certain is Peter of his rightness that he corrects the Messiah, the Son of the living God! Jesus answers Peter with his own stern rebuke: “Get behind me, Satan!” (Matthew 16:23). Suddenly, Peter’s certainty has made him—the rock of the church—into a stumbling block.

When Peter, James and John later follow Jesus up the mountain to witness his transfiguration, Peter again gets it wrong. He eagerly suggests building dwellings for Jesus, Moses and Elijah, so that they can stay where they are. “It is good for us to be here,” Peter declares with certainty. It’s not hard to

relate to Peter’s desire to stay, perhaps to prove to Jesus that this time he understands what is happening and knows what to do. But staying on the mountaintop is not the plan. The way of Jesus leads not to withdrawing from the world, but to coming to the people—and to the cross. On some level, Peter must know this: He speaks with certainty, not because he is certain, but because “he did not know what to say, for they were terrified” (Mark 9:6).

We can conclude that certainty is not a requirement for discipleship. (Otherwise, Peter would be disqualified.) On the contrary, too much of our own certainty can keep us from understanding what God is doing. Yet even when this happens, all is not lost. The risen Jesus sends the women at the tomb to go and tell the disciples “and Peter” the good news of the resurrection (Mark 16:7). In Galilee, where it all began, Jesus commissions Peter once more: “Feed my sheep” (John 21:17). Jesus still chooses Peter to be the foundation stone of the church—a foundation that is not certainty, but humanity.

Certainty can be a strong temptation. It can simplify a complex world and replace fear and worry with a burning warmth that feels like rightness—or righteousness. But certainty doesn’t mean we’re right; and self-righteousness can lead us astray. Curiosity, on the other hand, can lead us to ask, knock and search for Jesus. Curiosity can open doors we never even knew existed.

Consider the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, the religious leader who comes to see Jesus by night. As befits his authority, Nicodemus begins the conversation with certainty: “We know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God” (John 3:2). There is no question here to indicate what Nicodemus seeks to learn. Still, Jesus seems to know. His response, that “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (John 3:3), may seem to come out of the blue; but this statement astonishes Nicodemus

into voicing the question that he has really come to ask: “How can these things be?” (John 3:9).

Jesus leads Nicodemus beyond his certainty to a place of wonder and curiosity. We can imagine some gentle teasing in Jesus’ tone as he asks Nicodemus, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?” Curiosity emboldens Nicodemus to ask Jesus the deepest question of his heart. In response, Jesus offers him (and us) some of the most beloved words in all of scripture: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...” (John 3:16). This conversation had a powerful effect on Nicodemus, who later used his leadership position to defend Jesus (John 7:50-51), and then came with a generous supply of burial spices to help prepare Jesus’ body after his crucifixion (John 19:39-40). Even today, John 3:16 continues to be held by many Christians as the core verse of the Gospel.

The lesson here is important: Jesus can often do more with our honest curiosity than with our stubborn certainty. Those who asked, knocked and sought after Jesus may not have found what they expected, but they found something real and true. May we do the same.

Share aloud or reflect:

3. When did your certainty about something become a stumbling block?
4. When was being certain, and wrong, the best thing that could have happened?

BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT: A CURIOUS SERMON ON THE MOUNT

 **Read:** Matthew 5:1-12

The Mount of Beatitudes church sits on the top of a hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee, in a lovingly maintained retreat for worship and reflection,

surrounded by flowers and leafy plants. Like many churches in the area, it also has a curious sign affixed to the church door: “NO EXPLANATIONS INSIDE.” Accordingly, most pilgrims enter in a hushed and respectful (if puzzled) silence. Some also happily point out the sign to their nearest preacher. No sermons today!

As a matter of fact, the sign is there to remind tour guides not to lecture inside the sanctuary. However, this has a positive side effect: Pilgrimage groups fan out across the hillside, sitting on rocks or benches to read the Sermon on the Mount in the open air—exactly as the crowds around Jesus first heard it. As the familiar verses flow over them in the sunshine, they may find themselves less focused on Jesus’ words than on the same question the crowds and disciples had during the original sermon: *When is lunch?*

If we pay close attention, however, we find many things to ponder in Jesus’ teaching that challenge what we think we know. In the Beatitudes, Jesus speaks of people who are blessed. The Greek word used is μακάριοι, meaning “blessed” or “happy.” Curiously, many of the people Jesus names are identified by circumstances of hardship rather than happiness. It’s one thing to hear that the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers are blessed. This makes sense; the Nobel Peace Prize, for example, is offered each year for a similar reason. But what about the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who are persecuted and reviled? In a culture still fascinated with social media influencers and curated portrayals of daily life, we’re probably more likely to associate blessing with *#livingmy-bestlife* than with *#poorinspirit*.

In truth, this isn’t much different from the time of Jesus. First century Palestine was occupied by the Roman Empire, which had a reputation for maintaining peace and prosperity (Pax Romana) that was also a carefully curated image. Beneath the

surface, the empire operated through a power structure that rewarded loyalty and punished dissent—often through a quick and violent response to any attempted acts of resistance. (Remember that Jesus was not the only person crucified by the Romans.)

For Jesus to name as blessed the people who were most on the edges of that power structure was more than curious. It was a challenge to a system that called control “peace” (pax) and claimed divine right to rule over other peoples in their own lands. It was a defense of justice (or “righteousness”) in the face of injustice. Compare Jesus’ blessed ones to their opposites: The rich in spirit (or ego). Those who celebrate while others are mourning. The powerful. Those who have no appetite for justice. The spiteful. The impure in heart. The warmakers. Those who benefit from unjust conditions. Those who are falsely praised and protected and fawned over. Likely, we could all put names and faces to these descriptions from our own contexts. If we’re honest enough, perhaps our own names and faces will be among them. By pronouncing blessing on the least likely candidates, Jesus reveals the difference between blessing and privilege.

In Jesus’ time, as now, unearned privilege due to wealth, social status, race and ethnicity, language, religion, physical and mental ability, gender and other factors favored some with power at the expense of others. The curious crowds on the hill found in Jesus what we may also find if we ask, knock and search through Jesus’ message: the declaration of a different reality. God does not have the same accounting system as we do. God’s place is not with the privileged, but with the vulnerable. And God promises a world made right: a world where those who are suffering are comforted, those who are persecuted are vindicated, and power is restored to those who humbly work for peace and seek justice. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God,” Jesus says (Matthew 5:8). Perhaps that promise can be extended to the curious in heart as well.

Share aloud or reflect:

5. Where might the Beatitudes illustrate the difference between blessing and privilege in your own context?

CONCLUSION: JESUS LOVES ME, THIS I KNOW.

According to an oft-told story, during a 1962 lecture in Chicago, Protestant theologian Karl Barth was asked if he could sum up his theology in one sentence. He responded with the well-known words of the children’s hymn: *Jesus loves me, this I know; for the Bible tells me so.*

The truth is that even when we find value in uncertainty, as human beings, we still ask, knock and search for what is certain. Our curiosity has a goal: We seek a truth we can stand in and proclaim, “This I know!” Yet when life is swirling around us and the ground underfoot is crumbling, what does it mean to say, “Jesus loves me, this I know”? This proclamation of certainty might sound inadequate, naïve or even arrogant. With so much suffering and injustice in the world, it might seem callous to shrug and say, “Jesus loves me,” especially if the undertone is one of competition. (“I know Jesus loves *me*. You, on the other hand...”)

Yet at the birth of Jesus, the angels proclaimed that God’s incarnation in Jesus is “good news of great joy for all people.” And so, “Jesus loves me, this I know” is a claim everyone should be able to make, because it is true for everyone. It’s also a statement that is noteworthy for what it doesn’t try to say. When people in pain ask, “Why is this happening? What will happen now? What should I do?” proclaiming the love of Jesus does not mean pretending there are easy answers or guessing at a future no one can know. The platitudes of human certainty can ring hollow. Sometimes questions themselves are holy. God’s grace can come through saying less.

It is a powerful witness to speak love into uncertainty. I have seen this witness in the Palestinian

Lutheran church that I accompany as an ELCA missionary, especially during the past year. The trauma of these months has deeply affected both Israelis and Palestinians. But the scale of the suffering, and the balance of power, are not the same. Tens of thousands of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank have been wounded and killed, the great majority of whom are children and women. Millions have been displaced and made homeless in Gaza as homes, hospitals and places of worship have been bombed. Checkpoints in the West Bank have been tightly closed, keeping people from their work, land, families and medical care. Palestinian residents in Israeli areas share that they are afraid to speak Arabic in the streets, which nowadays are filled with Israeli civilians carrying military-grade weapons slung over their shoulders as an unspoken threat. Poverty, hunger and despair are on the rise.

Local churches like the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land are working hard to address the large-scale trauma and suffering of their neighbors. The attacks of Oct. 7 were terrible and unjust, but the vast majority of the Palestinian people had nothing to do with them. And it is also terrible and unjust that mothers in Gaza now write their children's names on their bodies with permanent marker, so that their children can be identified when they are found in the rubble of the next bombing. Our companions are asking us, as fellow Christians: "If the image of God is in all people, how can it be justice that the death of innocent Israelis justifies war, but the death of innocent Palestinians is our own fault?"

How powerful it is, then, when Palestinian Christians still say: *Jesus loves me, this I know*. These words become a declaration of *sumud*, an Arabic word meaning "steadfast faith" (and the name of our new ELCA initiative, *Sumud: for justice in Palestine and Israel*). What is happening in the Holy Land is pure uncertainty. We do not know when or how the current crisis will end, what

will remain, or what the future might be. Yet our Palestinian siblings in Christ are certain of this: It is not happening because Jesus has stopped loving the people. God does not hate them; God has not abandoned them. At Christmas, the Lutheran church in Bethlehem created a manger scene that placed the baby Jesus amid concrete rubble. That image, shared around the world, offered a clear message: Because God is with us in Jesus, God is also in the rubble of Gaza. Because Jesus went to the cross, Jesus is with all who suffer. *Jesus loves us, this we know*. Blessed are they who mourn. Blessed are we all, for the love of Jesus sustains us in uncertainty.

Share aloud or reflect:

6. How might curiosity, rather than certainty, guide us as we ponder what is happening in places of conflict, like the Holy Land?
7. What does it mean for one certainty—Jesus' love—to stand at the heart of our faith?

CLOSING PRAYER

Loving God, bless all your people with the gift of holy curiosity; that as we ask, knock and search for you, we find you revealed in the love of Jesus. Strengthen us in the certainty of your love, that we may continue to follow you in humility and faith. In Jesus' name, Amen.

CLOSING HYMN

"Jesus Loves Me!" (ELW 595) 🌿

After certainty

Session one

Curiosity

BY MEGHAN JOHNSTON AELABOUNI

OVERVIEW

Welcome to the first session of Gather’s summer Bible study series, “After certainty.” Drawing from biblical texts and Lutheran tradition, we’ll ponder what it means to live faithfully in times of uncertainty. As we discuss how our ancestors in faith also lived in deep uncertainty, we will see how God leads us beyond certainty to curiosity (June), community (July) and compassion (August)—practices that help us to navigate uncertainty as people rooted in the certain love of God in Jesus Christ for us and for the world.

We begin by asking: Are we truly living in a time “after certainty”? In 2008, American religion writer Phyllis Tickle published a book, *The Great Emergence*, that claims just that. Every 500 years, Tickle argues, Christianity undergoes a period of significant upheaval and change—a sort of church “rummage sale” through which outdated things are discarded, and new ways of being the church emerge. Beginning with the time of Jesus in the first century, Tickle points to the transition from the Roman Empire to the medieval period around 500, the Great Schism of 1054, and the Protestant Reformation in 1517, as key events that upended old certainties and created deep change in the church. By Tickle’s calculations, 21st century Christianity is due for the next great transition; and it is arriving right on time.

Consider, Tickle writes, how the 20th and 21st centuries have also brought unprecedented change to the world. Scientific and technological advances,

changing social and family structures, and a diversifying global Christianity are all contributing to a changing church. Today—nearly a quarter of the way into the 21st century—we could likely add a few things to Phyllis Tickle’s list: the age of “terrorism” and “anti-terrorism”; increased political polarization; artificial intelligence and a loss of trust in institutions; the rise of the “nones” and “dones” who claim no religious affiliation. Within five years, the COVID-19 pandemic changed communities, workplaces and human relationships in ways that we cannot yet fully comprehend.

It seems clear that these times will shape what the church and the world will become—but how? We do not know for certain. Of course, neither did the apostle Paul, who wrote that “now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Perhaps certainty is only possible in retrospect. In any case, we’re in good company.

There is more good news. If Tickle was right, this period of deep and widespread change—as challenging and painful as it may be—is not an end, but rather a beginning. In a time when so many lament that the church is dying, it is encouraging to imagine that the church is instead emerging into something new. That theory cannot yet be proven, but it rests on a sure and certain promise: The love of God in Jesus Christ gives us our foundation and our roots. Where might we go, and grow, from here? These are questions of curiosity, this month’s theme.

Secure in God’s grace, we can let go of the need to be certain. God can guide us through our questions and searching into new realizations and new realities. This study won’t offer all the answers, but it will encourage you and your group as you ask holy questions. We’ll seek biblical guidance for facing life after certainty—and before what comes next.

PREPARE

As you prepare to lead this series with your group,

consider using one of these ideas as a promotional activity prior to the study day or as an icebreaker on the day of your study.

- Set up a large blank sheet of paper or a dry-erase board. (Use the “chat” feature if you are meeting via online video conferencing.) Invite group members to write down examples of things in their lives and the world that are uncertain. When everyone has contributed, read their responses aloud. What common themes emerge? What else do you notice?
- Alternatively, invite every participant to bring a mystery object hidden in a bag. Each person can take a turn to offer brief hints about their mystery object while the others guess. The person who correctly guesses an object with the fewest hints, and the person whose object needs the most hints to be identified, both win. (Small prizes are optional but could motivate the group!)

WRAP-UP

- Ask each member to share aloud (or journal about at home) a certainty that keeps them grounded. What do they know for sure?
- Connect each month’s study theme to a follow up action. For “Curiosity,” partner with a local school or educational program to help support teachers and students through a school supply drive, school lunch fund or other effort.

SHORTENING SUGGESTIONS

The entire study can be completed in a 90- or 120-minute session (or a series of weekly half-hour studies). Larger groups can break up into pairs or groups of three for discussion, to keep the whole group engaged. Here are suggestions for shortening the study:

SHORT STUDY (30 MINUTES)

1. Ask group members to read the entire study before they come.
2. Sing “Opening hymn” and pray “Opening prayer.”
3. Ask each participant to name one thing they appreciated in the study and the one question they would like to discuss.
4. Spend the remaining time discussing the questions raised by your group.
5. End with “Closing prayer”

A LITTLE LONGER (45 TO 60 MINUTES)

1. Sing “Opening hymn” and pray “Opening prayer.”
2. Do “Introduction.”
3. Add one section from the core of the study (“What is this,” “Certainly wrong,” or “Blessed are the poor in spirit”).
4. Read the “Conclusion.” Do one of the questions if time allows.
5. End with “Closing prayer.” Add “Closing hymn” if time allows.

A LITTLE LONGER (45 TO 60 MINUTES)

This “book report” format works well with medium-to-larger-sized groups.

1. Sing “Opening hymn” and pray “Opening prayer.”
2. Break into smaller groups. Assign each group one of the five sections of the study (“Introduction,” “What is this,” “Certainly wrong,” “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” and “Conclusion”) to read and discuss for 20 minutes. (Note: If you only have four small groups, ask if one group could do both the Introduction and Conclusion.)
3. Conclude with 3- to 5-minute presentations from each group on what they see as the takeaways from their study section.
4. End with “Closing prayer” and “Closing hymn.” 🌿