

### OPENING HYMN

“All Are Welcome” (ELW 641)

### OPENING PRAYER

Maker of all, Ruler of all, your love is wider than we can imagine. Lord God, show us our neighbors. Guide us by your Spirit. Bring unity to your beloved world. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

### FOCUS VERSES

Acts 10:1–48

### MATERIALS NEEDED

- Hymnals (ELW)
- Bibles (NRSV)
- scrap paper and pens or pencils

# Faithfulness

## Session three

Faith adventures: Peter and Cornelius

BY DENISE RECTOR

### INTRODUCTION

Acts is one of my favorite books. I keep coming back to it because this book shows us so much of Jesus’ power. One of my favorite ways to read Acts is as “Luke-Acts”—that is, reading the whole Gospel of Luke and then all of Acts, back to back.

Luke wrote both of these books, and he is a fantastic writer. The Acts of the Apostles reads like an adventure novel—and, in a sense, it is. The apostles are on an amazing adventure in a new world. (And how appropriate that *novel* means new!) This is not a “new world” in a colonial, imperialist sense as we in the U.S. usually hear the phrase used, but a world that is new because it has been changed by the presence of God-with-us in Jesus.

In our two-part adventure that is Luke-Acts, God has come to the world in the person of Jesus the Christ to heal and save. The adventure begins even before Jesus is born: Elizabeth’s yet-to-be-born baby leaps as Mary sings that the lowly will be lifted up, the hungry will be filled with good things, and the rich will be sent away empty (Luke 1:46-55). Angels announce Jesus’ birth to lowly shepherds (Luke 2:8-14). The Holy Spirit appears to come out of the sky to anoint Jesus at his baptism (Luke 3:21), and then—*boom!*—Jesus is on the move. He calls the disciples (“followers”) and sends them out too. (The meaning of the word *apostle* is “one who is sent.”) Throughout Luke, he draws crowds and heals those who are sick. Jesus performs miracles and reinterprets the law. And then—he is killed.

But that’s not the last word or the final chapter.

Jesus is raised from the dead and ascends to heaven. Then we come to the end of Part 1, but not the end of the story. Not by a long shot.

### YOU'RE THEOPHILUS? THAT'S MY NAME TOO!

Luke begins Part 2 of this amazing adventure by addressing someone named Theophilus. *Theo* (as in “theology”) plus *phil* (as in “philanthropic”) equals “lover of God.” Some scholars suggest the name may refer not to a specific person but to *anyone* who loves God. So *Theophilus* would be both a title and a state of being for us as lovers of God.

In Acts, the apostles are sent out to distant regions, encountering different languages, cultures and traditions. And there is more than a little friction around laws and cultural practices as the church grows. But note that as Luke calls people into this adventure, he does not single folks out by the particulars of their lives: region, religious practice, wealth, citizenship, legal status. As modern readers of Luke-Acts, we're not Californians or Texans; we are lovers of God. We're not oldies or newbies to the faith; we are lovers of God. We are not high-net-worth individuals or people needing public assistance; we are lovers of God. We are not fifth-generation residents or families waiting for papers; we are lovers of God. We're not law-abiding or in prison; we are lovers of God.

And together, we are on the adventure of adventures. The Spirit blows and Peter preaches to the nations (Acts 2). Stephen, as he is martyred, testifies to the risen Jesus sitting at God's right hand (Acts 7). Saul, persecutor of the Jesus-followers, is changed into an apostle and charged with taking the gospel to the heart of the Roman Empire. Can we draw understanding and courage from how the followers of Jesus do what they were sent out to do?

I'm telling you, Acts has *everything*: miracles, sermons, shipwrecks, jailbreaks, voices and visions of heaven, prominent church-supporting women like Tabitha and Lydia, and the apostles spreading

the gospel even while their lives are in danger. Reading it is just plain fun! And on top of that, it has so many lessons for us.

One of my favorite lessons in Acts is how Peter ends up preaching to Cornelius and his family. Yes, *that* Peter: water-walking and water-sinking Peter, proclaimer-turned-denier-turned-proclaimer Peter (see Luke 9:18-20 or Matthew 16:16, Matthew 26, and Acts). In Acts, we learn so much through Peter's faith experiences with difference, obedience, inviting in those who are not like us, and the wide, wide reach of God's love. Let's go!

### Share aloud or reflect:

1. Have you ever met someone who speaks a different language or has a different nationality? What was that experience like?
2. Peter was willing to “lose” his tradition of clean and unclean foods. Do you (or your family or friends) have any unique traditions you would hesitate to lose?

### THE ANGEL OF GOD COMES TO CORNELIUS

📖 **Read:** Acts 10:1-8

Cornelius is the first person we meet in Acts 10. He's a commander in the Roman army. He is not Jewish, like the disciples are, but he believes in the same God they do. Maybe Cornelius saw Jesus ministering in Caesarea Philippi. Luke says that Cornelius prayed constantly, and that his whole family believes in God. He is a “God-fearer”—not as in *afraid*, but as in *awestruck, reverent*; we might use the phrase “God-respecter” or “God-follower.” Many non-Jewish people who are following the ministry of Jesus are called “God-fearers” and/or “Jesus-followers” before the word “Christian” is used. You can file all of that under the name Theophilus.

One day, an angel of God comes to Cornelius and calls him by name. This should make our ears perk up. God is communicating with someone who is not one of the “chosen people” (see Isaiah 43:20), the Jewish community, but one from among the people who have been oppressing the Jews. Understandably, because of the political climate and religious practices, the disciples would likely view a centurion as unclean or dangerous—or both. But that doesn’t stop the angel from calling this Roman centurion by name and speaking to him. Often in Scripture, things change when God calls people by name. Furthermore, the angel of God is doing what Jesus routinely did: coming to and calling an outsider.

### Share aloud or reflect:

3. Can you remember some other Bible stories in which God (or Jesus) calls people by name? Were any of those people outsiders?

The angel has a message for Cornelius that will change both him and Peter. Cornelius obeys the angel’s command: to send people to a city called Joppa (about 30 miles from Caesarea Philippi), to ask for a man called Peter. (Acts 9 ends by telling us that Peter is in Joppa.) The detail about Peter staying with a tanner named Simon seems to be included for specificity, to make sure there are no mix-ups; we will hear it several times.

### LUNCHTIME FOR PETER

 **Read:** Acts 10:9-16

The way Luke writes is so relatable! When we meet Peter in Acts 10, it’s lunchtime and he’s hungry. While he is on the roof praying, but before his lunch is served, the voice of God comes to him in a vision that plays on his hunger. The voice says, “Get up,

Peter; kill and eat” (v. 13). In other words, if you’re hungry, here is food.

In the vision, Peter sees a large sheet on which are animals the Mosaic Law recognizes as unclean: certain four-footed creatures, reptiles and birds. Peter understands this to be the voice of God—but he knows that eating these animals is not permitted. So Peter won’t do it. He says he has never eaten anything unclean and he’s not about to start now.

But the voice responds, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (v. 15).

Remember when I said that Acts is a book about the apostles on a new adventure? Acts 10:15-16 illustrates how the world has been changed by God coming in the person of Jesus Christ; by Jesus’ ministry, death and resurrection; and by the Holy Spirit that God gave to us. The Holy Spirit set the apostles’ ministries on fire, *literally*—and that same Spirit is our Advocate in this very moment. Ever since creation, the Triune God has been continually renewing the world.

Peter has seen the power of this Triune God up close. When the Holy Spirit’s power was unleashed at Pentecost, Peter was given a sermon to preach that spurred believers to wondrous acts of ministry. Since then, Peter has testified before religious leaders (Acts 3–4), as his teacher Jesus did. God has healed people who simply crossed Peter’s shadow (Acts 5:14–16). And now God’s voice has a message for Peter: In this new adventure, all animals are clean because nothing God made is unclean.

Turns out the context and meaning are far broader than Peter’s lunch.

Luke notes that this exchange between Peter and the voice happens three times (because, well, this is Peter!). Using Peter’s triples (recall his three denials of Jesus, and Jesus’ threefold command, “Feed my sheep”), the voice confirms God’s identity and power, making it clear to Peter and us that all of this is the work of the same God. (Imagine being Peter and having *that* kind of story to tell!)

So far in these first 16 verses, Luke has recounted two mind-blowing events. First, an outsider to the Jewish faith, who nonetheless believes in God, sees a vision in which God tells him to send for Peter. Second, as the men sent by Cornelius are on their way, Peter has a lifetime of teaching upended when God tells him that nothing made by God is unclean. These two events come together in verse 17, and the effects ripple throughout the rest of chapter 10, into chapter 11, and right up to today.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

4. How do you think Peter might have felt to have a lifetime of teaching upended? Can you think of an idea or belief you grew up with that changed as you grew older?

**ROAD TRIP REVELATION**

📖 **Read:** Acts 10:17-29

Verse 19 starts with, “While Peter was still thinking about the vision ...” Peter had lots to think about. Remember that Peter is a devout Jew—as was Jesus. The Jewish followers of Jesus in Acts follow worship and daily-life practices based in the Law that God gave to Israel through Moses. This law had been passed down for generations. One command, recorded in Leviticus 10:10-11, was: “You are to distinguish between the holy and the common and between the unclean and the clean; and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the LORD has spoken to them through Moses.” This was among the commandments that make up the holy covenant (promise) founded on God’s love for the chosen people.

Peter has spent his whole life following the Law. When he was called by Jesus, Peter followed and learned from him. Jesus taught that he had come not to abolish the Law, but to *fulfill* it (Matthew

5:17). But to some, Jesus’ teachings sometimes seemed to bend, break, and defy that same Law. Ultimately, it got Jesus killed.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

5. What are some ways Jesus challenged the Law in his earthly ministry? In what sense did he fulfill the Law?

At this point, Jesus has fulfilled the Law of God’s love for the world; he has been crucified and raised to new life; and he has ascended to the right hand of God. Peter is left faithfully puzzling through a lot of things, not least of which is this vision he’s just experienced. How can the Law that Peter has been taught, that he has faithfully followed, suddenly be set aside?

I can almost see Peter wondering: *But...if...I was taught...* His thoughts are interrupted by some people, men he doesn’t know, who are calling for him. Then, in the next second, it’s as if the Spirit is saying, “Peter, your ride is here! These folks are looking for you. I sent them. Go.”

The men explain that a God-fearer named Cornelius, a centurion—*imagine Peter’s raised eyebrows when he hears this*—was visited by a holy angel—*imagine his eyebrows rising even higher!*—and they’ve been sent to bring Peter to Cornelius’ house.

Peter is probably wide-eyed by this point. And he still hasn’t reconciled the whole “This was unclean, but now it’s not” thing. Still, as is customary, Peter offers hospitality to these travelers, inviting them to stay the night. The next day, Peter and the men, along with some people from Joppa, make it to Caesarea. Because Cornelius is a believer, he has been expecting Peter and has called some friends over. Luke lets us know that a lot of people are gathered; this feels like a hint that something big is going to happen.

When Cornelius sees Peter, he falls before him

in worship. Peter objects that he is just a mortal. Then Peter has a few more things to say. On the way there, he thought about the vision of the animals on the sheet. Peter has come to some conclusions and is ready to share his experiences with Jesus as well.

In the next few verses, God's power works wonders. But Peter's statement in verse 28 is also wondrous—one of the major turning points of the story. It is part of what makes this a new adventure. What Peter says is this:

“You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile [NRSV updated edition uses the word ‘outsider’]; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.”

To make sure we don't miss the power of what God showed Peter, I'm going to add some information in brackets to highlight just how momentous this revelation is. You might consider reading this passage out loud. In effect, Peter is saying:

*“You [you here at Cornelius's house, and you who came with me from Joppa, who have heard of the Jewish laws and customs and the importance of our commandments about what is clean and unclean] yourselves know that it is improper for a Jew [like me] to associate with or to visit a Gentile [like you, or any other outsider, because to do so is unclean according to the Law], but God has shown me [in a strange but very effective vision I saw, three times, about eating unclean animals—well, animals that used to be considered unclean] that I should not call anyone profane or unclean [because nothing God made is profane or unclean].”*

God has given Peter an object lesson about God's creation. Peter was still thinking about this lesson when God sent him to visit an “outsider” and live out the lesson. Because of this experience, Peter realizes and practices a new understanding of what

and whom God has created. This is why, in verse 29, Peter can say that he came “without objection” to visit this “outsider.” Peter understood the assignment.

God shows Peter how his thinking and knowledge will change as he continues to proclaim the Good News. Through the Holy Spirit, God is creating a new level of inclusion. This inclusion started back before Peter's first sermon, on the day of Pentecost, when all the speakers of different languages understood each other.

### Share aloud or reflect:

6. When have you learned something new and then had the opportunity to live it out in a meaningful way?

### PETER'S GOSPEL MESSAGE OF INCLUSION

📖 **Read:** Acts 10:34-43

Peter processes the teaching “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (v. 15), and then preaches it to the people who have gathered. His sermon begins with the testimony that he now sees that “God shows no partiality, but in every people [or nation, or group] anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (vv. 35-36). Imagine how good this Good News is to those who have historically not been included as part of the chosen people. It means they are no longer outsiders!

Peter is speaking to two groups of believers: one from Caesarea, and one from Joppa. But we can imagine each person among them as Theophilus (“lover of God”), just like Luke imagines that everyone reading his books is Theophilus. Peter reminds the believers of Jesus' ministry, sacrifice and ascension. Peter tells them that he and the other witnesses who saw Jesus after his resurrection have been charged with sharing the gospel with all people.

One of the great things about Acts is that things

*happen* when Peter preaches! He has not even finished his sermon before the Holy Spirit moves through (“falls on”) everyone gathered and listening. Holy, holy, holy!

Note the reaction of the people from Joppa. Luke calls them “circumcised believers”—a detail that means they are devout Jews who follow Jesus. They have come to Caesarea with Peter, and with their own eyes they see the Holy Spirit “falling on” non-Jewish people. The Spirit that God unleashed on the disciples at Pentecost (Acts 2) is working again here in the house of Cornelius, a Gentile.

Just one day earlier, Peter had thought Cornelius’s house was unclean. Now, the Holy Spirit is present for all who believe, “poured out even on the Gentiles” (v. 45). The folks from Joppa are amazed by this generous gift to all. Now they, too, are witnesses in this astonishing adventure and the wide, wide reach of God’s love.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

7. Have you ever felt prompted to expand the circle of people you include in your life in some way? What was challenging about that shift? What was easy? Have you ever been the person newly included by another? How did that feel?
8. Now that we’ve studied this story closely, how might this exploration affect your “adventure” of faith?

Peter’s vision and changed understanding in Acts 10 reflects the way Jesus himself moved toward those who were outcasts with love and compassion. Rather than wall ourselves in or others out, we can be Theophilus and look for the image of God (*imago dei*), in everyone we meet. As we do so, others will also see the *imago dei* in us.

**CLOSING PRAYER**

Sustaining God, thank you for coming to us with the gift of salvation. Thank you for the gift of your Holy Spirit, our Advocate and Comforter. Thank you for the people you bring into our lives. Lord, continue to guide us on this adventure—with faith in our hearts and an openness to love those you love. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

**CLOSING HYMN**

“Come, All You People” (*ELW* 819) 🌿

# Faithfulness

## Session three

Faith adventures: Peter and Cornelius

BY DENISE RECTOR

### SESSION GOALS

- Learn more about Peter’s faith journey and what God reveals to him in Acts 10.
- Rather than wall ourselves in or others out, consider what it means to be a Theophilis (lover of God) and look for the image of God (*imago dei*) in everyone we meet.

### OVERVIEW

We open this session by singing the hymn “All Are Welcome” (*ELW* 641), which reinforces the message of God’s love for all. This session explores Acts 10, which teaches believers—in Peter’s day and today—about judging and prejudice; who is included in God’s church; and God’s love for all.

In this session, the overflowing of the Holy Spirit to all infuses our Acts 10 text with an Easter tone. God gave us the Holy Spirit soon after Jesus’ resurrection. Parts of Acts 10 are often read on Resurrection Sunday.

### READING “LUKE-ACTS”

We discuss how the writer Luke structured his two books, Luke and Acts, like a two-part adventure.

Leaders can note that:

- In the beginning of Acts, Luke refers to his “first book,” the Gospel of Luke.
- It’s possible that this Luke, the evangelist, is the same Luke who traveled along during Paul’s ministry.
- Luke may be addressing both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts to an unknown

person named Theophilus—or perhaps he is calling his readers (including us) this Greek word, which means “lover of God.”

- The first half of Acts focuses on several of the disciples-turned-apostles, including Peter.
- The second half of Acts focuses on Paul’s travels for the sake of the gospel.
- Our English word “disciple” comes from the Latin *discipulus*. Stronger than the word “student,” the word disciple means “enthusiast” or “follower.”
- When Jesus sends the disciples out to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth, they become known as apostles. The word “apostle” is from the Greek *apóstolos*, which means “sent.”

### ABOUT THE LAW

The law given to Moses (Mosaic Law) for the Israelites in the Hebrew Bible (what many Christians call the Old Testament) is an important element in the Book of Acts. The Jewish people who followed Jesus during his earthly ministry and witnessed his ascension would have grown up learning these laws—including which foods were understood as ritually clean or unclean.

Considered crucial to Jewish life, these laws were initially passed down orally, and only later shared in writing. For example, Leviticus 10:10-11 reads: “You are to distinguish between the holy and the common and between the unclean and the clean; and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the LORD has spoken to them through Moses.”

These laws were part of the covenant God made with the Israelites, God’s chosen people. Obeying the law kept one in right standing ceremonially. It is important for us as Christians to understand that cleanliness impacted whether and how Jews in Jesus’ time took part in worship. This may have been part of the Pharisees’ concern about Jesus’

eating with “sinners” (see, for example, Matthew 9:10-13).

After Jesus’ ascension, laws about what was ritually clean or unclean continued to cause tension in the early church. In Acts 10, Peter says he will not eat unclean animals—but then God includes something unclean in Peter’s vision. In fact, God is giving Peter, and us, a new way to think.

Leaders can tell participants that after the texts covered in this session, believers in Jerusalem think that Peter ate with someone unclean when he visited Cornelius, a Gentile. So, Peter will testify to those believers, too, about the reach of the Holy Spirit. The tension with this new teaching continues during Paul’s ministry in Acts 15 and is at the root of Paul’s instruction in 1 Corinthians 8.

The session closes with a well-known hymn, “Come, All You People (*Uyaimose*)” (*ELW* 819), which includes verses in Zimbabwe’s Shona language, as well as English.

#### SHORT STUDY (30 MINUTES)

1. Ask participants to read the study and complete the questions before they arrive.
2. Sing the “Opening hymn” or pray the “Opening prayer.”
3. Ask each person to share one memorable point and/or one question they have from the lesson.
4. Discuss the questions group members have raised, as time allows.
5. End with the “Closing prayer” or the “Closing hymn.”

#### A LITTLE LONGER (45–60 MINUTES)

1. Sing the “Opening hymn” and pray the “Opening prayer.”
2. Read through the session silently as a group. Ask a group member to read aloud the scripture passages in the session.
3. Invite one or two responses to the questions

in each section.

4. End with the “Closing prayer.” Sing the “Closing hymn” if time allows.

#### TWO-HOUR STUDY (WORKS WELL WITH LARGER GROUPS ALSO)

1. Sing the “Opening hymn” and pray the “Opening prayer.”
2. Read through the study as a group. Ask a group member to read the scripture passages aloud where indicated.
3. Break into small groups of two or three to discuss the questions in each section. (People can remain in their group for all the questions, or switch groups as they prefer.) Take 5 minutes to report out on the conversation before moving to the next section.
4. Invite participants to share a favorite hymn or contemporary song that reflects the theme of the lesson.
5. End with the “Closing prayer” and the “Closing hymn.” 🌿