

**Approaching the Bible with Heart and Mind:  
An introduction to Scripture for those who affirm that “God is Still Speaking”  
David R. Weiss – Fall/Spring 2020-2021**

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**Session #1 – First Things First**

**An Overview**

We begin with a quick overview of the first session and the series as a whole. Titles can only hope to hint at what is to come. “Approaching the Bible with Heart and Mind: An introduction to Scripture for those who affirm that ‘God is Still Speaking’.” Well, how *do* progressive Christians approach the Bible as a written text that bears witness to the *God who is still speaking*? The phrase, of course, is the tagline of the United Church of Christ, but it names the challenge felt by anyone who wants to hold the Bible as conversation partner in their faith—alongside their *whole* self. That is, including both a modern scientific understanding of the world and a deep longing to live with purpose and meaning.

I believe this is possible—I *have found it to be true*. And in this brief introduction I will share some of the basic tools that have allowed me to do this and some of the insights that are the fruit of this work.

Here is the briefest sketch of the whole series.

In our first session, “First Things First,” I’ll present some basic tools and perspectives that allow us to invest both heart and mind in responding to the biblical text. Session 2, “On Eagle’s Wings” offers a bird’s eye view of the biblical tale in one giant narrative sweep. As we’ll discover, it’s not quite accurate to think of the Bible as telling one single story from start to finish, but it’s helpful to at least take a glimpse at the whole map before picking any particular terrain to explore.

After the first two sessions we’ll spend our remaining time looking more closely at the gospels and the story (and history) of Jesus. (There are *so many* other fascinating things we *could* explore, but in this 6-part introduction, and we’ll put our initial emphasis on Jesus.) Session 3, then, “The Gospels: Seeing Jesus Together ... or Not” offers some additional tools and perspectives for approaching the primary texts about Jesus with added understanding and insight. And Session 4, “Christmas Pageant Pandemonium” untangles and *untames* the gospel yuletide tales. Christmas wonder will never seem “just” cute ever again.

We conclude with two sessions that invite us to wrestle with the *meaning* of Jesus. In Session 5, “Jesus, Before the Gospels,” we’ll peer back decades before the gospels were written to glimpse the “historical Jesus,” the man who is “Ground Zero” for our faith. Hardly a crystal clear image, this historical glimpse is nevertheless essential for those who want to take the measure of the gospel portrait(s) of Jesus with the whole of our hearts and minds today. And—as if to ensure we don’t tie things up together too neatly—Session 6, “Jesus, Death and Beyond” can only scratch the surface of asking how the Bible—and we!—makes sense of Jesus’ life on the far side of his death.

**Outcomes**

What can you expect from these sessions? I’ll hazard six guesses.

1. Some of your lifelong questions will be answered, even if that happens in unexpected ways.
2. You'll discover less answerable but even better questions!
3. You'll begin to see more clearly the powerful silver thread the Bible carries even amidst its many quirks.
4. You'll be increasingly able to claim this text with confidence and conviction as a companion on your faith journey.
5. In your roles as parent/mentor to children, you'll be able to hold this text *both lightly and firmly*, in a way that can hold the respect and trust of children as they grow.
6. Most of you will be changed in ways you can't even anticipate ... and that's an outcome I mention as both promise and warning. ☺

### **Finally! On to First Things**

Four things remain for us to consider. First, we'll look briefly at *why this type of learning matters*. Then we need to pause before going any further to *remember how much we don't know*. After that I'll introduce *origami* (Japanese paper-folding) as a guiding image for the multitude of tools and perspectives that can help us encounter the Bible as Scripture. And then I'll present in turn seven such "folds": Scripture as interpretative act, genres, sources, history, lenses, contemporary context, and why calling the Bible the Word of God says both too much and too little.

### **Why this type of learning matters ... so much**

Why it matters *for our heads*. Perhaps the biggest challenge for those of us shaped by a scientific worldview is knowing how to stand in respectful relationship to a text that we've been told is authoritative but which is also clearly *not* scientific. And the most common responses are *either* to reserve our intellect for "secular" matters and put Scripture in a category of its own (a sort of intellect-free pure-reverence zone), or to dismiss Scripture as a relic from a pre-scientific era that's no longer worthy of our serious engagement today (as an awkward trapping of our tradition that may even lead us to step back from Christianity altogether). This type of learning matters for our heads because it demonstrates that meeting the Bible with our minds fully engaged is both possible and fruitful. In fact, Christianity is practiced *most faithfully* when we are encouraged to use all the cognitive skills we have.

Why it matters *for our hearts*. If liberal/progressive Christians have been led to hold the Bible at arms' length from our heads, that move has been equally fateful for our hearts. The truth is we're *whole* persons—our hearts and minds are interwoven—and when our head is held in check, it's hard to offer more than a half-hearted embrace of the Bible with our heart either. We've become adept at encapsulating Christianity in maxims like "love of neighbor," "care for the least," or "all are welcome," but such maxims only carry meaning when wrapped in the warm flesh of real persons. And if we cannot see how those truths (and others) were profoundly compelling and liberating within the biblical world, our faith will feel oddly disconnected from the book that carries the story of its birth.

This is among the most critical needs for progressive Christians: *to see that our extravagant welcome to others is NOT a disconnect from this ancient text, but an extension of its dynamic power into this present moment*. This type of learning matters for our hearts

because it allows us to find the roots of our progressive faith in Scripture. As much as we yearn to be thoughtful, we also long for faith that is *heartfelt*.

Why it matters *for now*. We live today ... on edge. Tomorrow seems more precarious than ever. Perhaps every generation has found reasons to feel this way. Perhaps every generation has thought itself uniquely justified in thinking so. Still as the political, ecological, economic, and societal stakes of our present moment rise higher and higher it's hard not to feel that *this time it's the truth*. And in the face of tomorrow's uncertainty there's an understandable temptation to look back toward a fondly remembered past that was (at least mythically if not actually) simpler and more certain.

But what if this text has *always*—from Abraham onward through Jesus—intended to gift us with the power to lean into life's uncertainty not with naïve optimism but with the hard-won hope carried by its seeds of wisdom and liberation. Then this type of learning matters for now because if there is a path to tomorrow marked out by hope and wisdom and liberation, that's the path we want to be on. Moreover, the deepest well from which we draw inspiration to orient our lives is from *story*. Our own story. Our family's story. The stories we encounter in great literature. Because humans are fundamentally *creatures of story*, our ability to find in the Bible a well of stories that hint at a surprisingly gracious God going back 4000 years—*that's a deep well*—and we need to drink from its living water today—for the challenges we face now.

Can I point the way to such a path? I believe so. My own journey into a life-giving understanding of Scripture that supports a progressive Christian faith is its own tale for another time. But I should say a brief word about my “credentials”—why should you trust me? I'm not a biblical scholar, per se. But I've done college, seminary, and graduate school study of the Bible, always asking—both in the classroom and out in the world—how this learning matters for my head, my heart, and this particular now. (Where “now” has at times meant apartheid, nuclear weapons, US foreign policy, technology, health care, Native Americans, immigration, LGBTQ persons, ecology, gender, climate change, consumer culture, and race. Which hardly makes me an expert in any of these areas; but they each name a place where I've worked to thoughtfully engage my faith, my Bible, my head, my heart, my life.)

Additionally, I spent twenty years teaching religion—including Introduction to the Bible—to college students. Much of what I'll share comes from those years of teaching, where my own thinking has been refined by the questions brought from my students' heads and hearts and lives.

### **Remembering how much we don't know**

Because *most* of us grew up in a culture where Christianity is the casual backdrop for a lot of things we take for granted—and *many* of us grew up in churches where our knowledge of the Bible was not very sophisticated no matter how extensive we thought it was—it's really important to remember there are things we don't know. And sometimes the only way to reach those things is to let go of things we thought we knew for certain.

Here's an example. Almost all of us learn as little children to find the constellation the Big Dipper in the night sky. Someone helps us trace the pattern from star to star with our fingers until the lines begin to connect even without tracing them. For some of you that may be true of other constellations as well, but likely for everyone, if you look up

into the sky on a clear dark night, by now your eyes will automatically turn those stars into a Big Dipper. In fact, what you'll find—you can do this on your own on the next clear night—is that it's virtually impossible to stop your eyes (your mind) from connecting *those* stars into *that* pattern. But that pattern isn't the only way to see those stars. Chinese astronomers fashioned an intricate sky map wholly independent of the Greco-Roman one we grew up with. And the stars in and around the Big Dipper are arranged in different patterns—linked to different images and stories—in the traditions of each of the many Native American tribes.

So I invite you to remember that what is true of the Big Dipper is true of the Bible. You grew up connecting dots in one way for so long that by now your eyes, your head, your heart, have been convinced it's the only way these dots could possibly be connected. I'm going to suggest some other ways. And if you're willing to let go—even provisionally—of the things you've always assumed, you *will* see new patterns. Most of them have been there all along; we've simply never been invited (or allowed!) to make these other connections. But because they are life-giving ways to view this ancient text—ways that enable us to meet it with heart and mind at a new depth—I'm betting you'll be grateful to have finally remembered how much you didn't know.

### **Origami—an unlikely image for textual encounter**

You're likely familiar with origami—the Japanese art of paper folding—even if you've never made an origami creation yourself. The only origami creation I ever became adept at was a peace crane. I made several thousand of them as part of a project for the Luther Peace Fellowship in the mid-1980's; so many that almost forty years later the muscle memory still tells me which folds to make where.

There are two important insights that origami art offers to our hope of reading the Bible with head and heart. First, every fold counts. If you skip or accidentally miss one of the folds your creation will be misshapen—if it takes shape at all. Second, there are moments in almost every origami design when you need to move the paper by drawing on multiple folds at the same time: these are the very moments when the paper transforms from a two-dimensional sheet into a three-dimensional creation.

If you were to unfold an origami creation back to a flat piece of paper, you'd see traces of crimps crisscrossing the sheet everywhere, but it'd be impossible to tell what was “hiding” on the far side of all those folds until you actually put it together. Still, every crease is needed to reach the final design. There are plenty of biblical passages from the creation tales to the gospel accounts that are the same way.

I'm going to offer seven “folds” that are essential for approaching the Bible with heart and mind. I'll present them in an order that makes a sort of logical sense to me but there isn't really a priority among these folds. They aren't all decisive in every bit of biblical material, but in *most* cases only by employing *most* of them can you allow the text to reveal the shape—the message—within it.

These are the seven “folds.” After naming them, I'll briefly explain each one in turn.

1. The biblical text itself is an **Interpretative act**
2. The text happens in **History**
3. The Bible has multiple **Sources**
4. The Bible has different **Genres**

5. The Bible is (inescapably!) read through **Lenses**
6. The Bible is best read in **Context**
7. **Calling the Bible the “Word of God” says both too much and too little**

### **The Bible as Interpretative Act**

I think it's useful to see the Bible as *an interpretive act*. I don't want to argue over whether the Bible is the Word of God. I'll offer a few thoughts on that at the end, but I don't think that's the most helpful frame to begin with. I prefer to think of the Bible as *a text that interprets God*, or more accurately *one that interprets the initial encounters between Jews and God and between Christians and God*.

Think of a very moving experience in your life, something that left a deep impact on you. Jot down three words that capture some aspect of this experience. Now imagine how you might use those words in relating this experience to someone else that you want to understand it. What you're imagining is *interpretation*. You don't simply relate facts; when you describe life-changing experiences, mere facts are never enough. You need to interpret the experience to communicate its *meaning*. When we talk about the experiences recorded in the Bible we're talking about life-changing, even history-changing experiences, and so they *necessarily* involve interpretation.

So, what does this tell us about the Bible and our approach to it? It tells us first that the Bible, for its original community of Jews and Christians, was *Scripture*. It was a text regarded as *sacred*. That doesn't mean it was magically delivered from heaven. It means it was a text with which they were *in holy conversation, in ways formative for them*. The text spoke to them—and they spoke to it. It shaped their lives and they shaped its form. Think of it as something like a community journal. The entries are shaped by the experiences you have; the entries then shape your future experiences; and those new experiences come back and shape new entries. And on and on—a kind of *unfolding* conversation.

*To call the Bible “Scripture” is to say that for its first community, the Bible records their ongoing conversations about the meaning of their life with God. One interpretive act after another.*

Of course, it's possible to read the Bible as merely a literary historical text, but you won't fathom its power as Scripture unless you (at least imaginatively) acknowledge its character as interpretive act for the people who wrote it and for those who first read it. And to do that effectively you need to fill in the history, culture, language, and beliefs of these people. Whether or not it's Scripture *for you* doesn't really matter; it *was* Scripture for them, and you simply won't understand it fully unless you meet it on those terms, from the inside.

But what if it *is* Scripture for you still today? Does that make all these scholarly questions about the history, culture, language, and beliefs of the original community irrelevant? *Not at all*. If anything, it makes those questions all the more important. Then grasping its power as interpretive act isn't simply a matter of scholarly imagination, it's a matter of personal and communal faith. Because, then, even if we're no longer adding to the written expression of this community journal, through our lives we are participants in this unfolding holy conversation ourselves.

## **A text that happens in History**

Because we've only ever seen the Bible in its final form, it's easy for us to forget—and yet important for us to remember—that the Bible didn't miraculously arrive all at once. It was compiled experience-by-experience over literally hundreds of years. And those experiences had been told and retold orally—for decades, generations, sometimes centuries—before being written down. And when they were written, they were often written down episode-by-episode, only slowly becoming books, and the books only slowly became the Bible. Thus, the Bible is the result of a long process, not a one-time event.

Each book or portion within a book is born out of a particular historical context; it records one chapter of Israel's (or the early church's) life. A text might be written at same time as the events it describes (the way a newspaper account or a current event book is), but that's rare in the Bible. Almost always the text describes events decades or even centuries *after* they occur, and in these cases the description is often shaped more by the historical context in which it is told than that in which the events actually took place.

This is hardly a radical idea; we just haven't been taught to watch for it in the Bible. We know, for instance, that any account of slavery in the U.S. or our dealings with Native Americans that's written today will frame its discussion very differently than it would have a hundred or two hundred years ago. Sometimes even just decades can make a huge shift in perspective. Such lag times between events and the written texts that record them *is the rule, not the exception in the Bible*. So in reading any passage in the Bible it helps to understand *both* the history and the culture that frames the events themselves *and also* the historical context in which those events are being later recorded. This double-layering of history was often quite evident to the original community. We forget it at the peril of our own understanding.

## **The Bible has multiple Sources**

It's too simple—and simply irresponsible—to name God as the Bible's author and stop there. Not least because the story within the Bible makes clear that God is far more comfortable working through fallible human characters than we might prefer. So the Bible comes from a variety of sources or authors. Understanding the context or agenda of these sources is essential to understanding their messages. Some books (like the prophetic writings) bear the name of the person to whom they are attributed —though these books were likely often collected by students or disciples of these prophets rather than the prophets themselves. Other books either don't identify their author or are linked to persons by traditions that may or may not be accurate (David and Psalms; Solomon and Proverbs; the gospel writers).

The Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) is traditionally ascribed to Moses, but while it recounts events in which Moses often plays a central role, scholars today discern (at least) four distinct editorial sources at work in the Torah—and dating hundreds of year after Moses lived. These sources are almost certainly not four individual authors but four “editorial teams,” four sets of writers active at different points in Israel's history each recording earlier events from their own distinct vantage point. It requires great facility in the original Hebrew to unravel these sources—and scholars indeed argue at times over which passages belong to which source—but the arguments presume multiple sources, as evidenced by distinctive viewpoints, ways of naming God, and echoes of cultural background.

In reading any particular book of the Bible understanding the source(s) is critical not because it reduces the “holiness” of the text, but because it helps situate the holiness more clearly, making it easier for us to follow—and perhaps join—the conversation with the respect it deserves.

### **The Bible has different Genres**

We might say, “Sure: history and hymns,” but it’s *a lot* more complicated than that. And it matters *a lot*. It makes a huge difference in what we attend to in the text—and an even greater difference in the questions we bring to it.

For instance, scholars universally agree that the first eleven chapters of Genesis are *myth*. That’s not a value judgment against them; it’s a literary assessment that allows us to fully appreciate them. You *can’t* ask “fact questions” of myths. They were never intended to provide those answers—and neither the first tellers nor the first hearers thought so. Myths carry truths—the best-regarded wisdom of their eras—often about cosmology (the perceived principles that undergird the world and where we and other beings fit within the world’s order).

Besides myth, the Bible also holds *legend*—folk-lore regarding historical figures, but with ample room for exaggeration because meaning is more important than the fact in these tales (Genesis, Exodus, Joshua, Judges). And *history*—although even here this isn’t modern “objective news” history but facts recounted usually with a heavy spin—like plenty of biased “news” sources today (Samuel, Kings). Additionally, in the Hebrew Bible we find *wisdom* literature—philosophy about life (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes); *debate*—where the philosophical reflections are presented via debate and argument (Job); *poetry as hymn* (Psalms); *poetry as prophecy* (prophets); *fiction*—where short story is used to carry daring insights (Jonah, Ruth); and *apocalyptic literature*—writings steeped in symbolism as they seek to reveal meaning in the midst of dire tumult (Daniel).

In the New Testament we have *gospel*—a genre we’ll discuss in Session 3, which is neither history nor biography, though we’ve often wanted to read it that way; literally “good news,” gospel tells Jesus’ life in such a way that the news of it becomes GOOD for those who receive it. Within the gospels we encounter *parable* and *allegory*—distinct types of teaching stories. After the gospels, Acts sort of extends *gospel* (it’s a sequel to the Gospel of Luke) merged it with *history*—but history with a decided spin, of course. Then *letters*—noteworthy because knowing the first century literary form helps us read them more clearly, even as we wrestle with hearing only one-half of the conversation (the Epistles). And another instance of *apocalyptic literature* (Revelation).

Each type of literature has characteristics that help identify it and, more importantly, that help us encounter it on its terms of respect and insight. *In fact, we do this all the time in our daily lives.* Whether watching television or reading the newspaper, we move seamlessly from one genre to the next (news, documentary, comedy, entertainment news, op-ed columns, comic strips, political cartoons, advice columns, etc.) No one tells us what type of genre we’re engaged in; we’re expected to recognize it and interact with the material accordingly. *The author counts on this!*

It’s almost certainly the case that the original communities interacted with the Bible like this: recognizing and moving seamlessly across its genres. But our historical distance, our lack of biblical literacy, and as often our theological prejudices have led us

to treat the Bible as just “history and hymns.” To insist on honoring its diversity of literary genres (and how those genres impact the questions we can legitimately pose) isn’t to take it less seriously than a biblical literalist; it is to meet it with the seriousness the text deserves. To acknowledge that “even” myth, legend, and fiction can be Scripture is to affirm that *holy meetings can happen on this type of literary ground*. In the rest of our lives we regularly honor art that reaches for the sacred; sometimes that same reach happens in the art of myth, legend, and fiction within the pages of the Bible.

### **The Bible is (inescapably!) read through Lenses**

This “fold” is less about the biblical text itself than about being aware of *where we position ourselves* as we meet the text. We read from different places—but we all read from *somewhere*—*no one reads from nowhere*. There is no perfect vantage point. The goal of recognizing our lenses is not to be rid of them but to be aware and self-critical of them. That is, to take responsibility for them—and to make sure they are as free of “debris” as possible.

There is no shortage of lenses used for reading the Bible. And some of us might use different lenses at different times. I’ll mention just a few as examples.

Some Christians claim that the Fundamentalist/Literalist lens is no lens at all—it simply reads the words on the page and takes them as truth. But as we’ve just seen in discussing history, sources, and genre, the very presumption of this lens brackets a bunch of helpful insights *outside* of where the text meets head and heart and thus ultimately (in my view) fails to give either the Bible (or God!) their due.

The Liberal/Humanist lens is steeped in commitments to the head; so eager to remove any hint of the supernatural that it often ends up erasing mystery as well. Still, this lens has brought much insight to the text by its enthusiastic support for making the fullest use possible of scholarship of all sorts.

A Devotional lens (which might be tilted either toward the individual or the community) makes the heart its priority; but it can be so focused on seeking inward comfort or spiritual insight that it can miss the many ways that the Bible directs us outward, into the messiness of the world.

I tend to use a Liberationist lens, shaped by the academic insight *and* lived experience of many oppressed persons (Black, poor, women, queer, and more)—because I find that the Bible foremost tells the story of a God who champions the cause of the outcast and the marginal. But I employ that lens as *a white, straight, well-educated, middle-class, liberal Protestant, U.S. male*. And all of those details about me further specify my location as I read the Bible and further focus what I notice (*and what I miss*) in the text. So even as I might claim that a Liberationist reading offers the “truest” lens for the Bible’s message, these many finite features that further define my vantage point means that *my* liberationist reading will never be absolute. I need to count on others to fill out the text’s meaning from locations other than my own.

All of these are broadly drawn examples of lenses; each might be specified further into almost endless sub-groups. And there are lenses that are outright abusive: those that support overt racism or sexism or xenophobia. The bottom line here is threefold. (1) The lens we use matters; it guides the attention of both our head and our heart. (2) We each *have* a lens, whether we acknowledge it or not, so it’s important to “own” our lens and



use it responsibly. (3) And we need to read the Bible *in community with other persons unlike us* if we hope to meet the fullest measure of the meaning it holds.

### **The Bible is best read in Context**

Lenses carry intent behind them (even if we're personally unaware of that intent); *context*, meanwhile, describes the "weather-season-climate" the conditions that prevail around us during our encounter with the Bible. Currently, the pandemic is context. So is the cry for racial justice—and to finally face the way that white supremacy misshapes our society and our communal lives. The looming threat of climate crisis. And rising global inequity. The unnerving and unholy alliance between evangelical Christianity, far right politics, and white nationalism.

But context can also be the positive if still challenging aspects of our contemporary moment, such as the interconnectedness of the global community and the religious-cultural diversity in our own communities. And context can be immediate and local—as the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd. Communal, as in the transition between pastors. Or personal, as in the birth of child or a cancer diagnosis.

The story within the Bible is of a God who engages people not in the abstract but in the particular, the messy, the joyful, the crisis moments of life. Therefore, to the extent we mean to encounter this text *on its terms*, we should allow those terms to speak to the context of our moment.

### **Finally, calling the Bible the "Word of God" says both too much and too little**

It's common for Christians to refer to the Bible as the Word of God. I don't dispute that. But it seems to me that this both *overstates* and *understates* the case.

It overstates it by ignoring or at least overlooking the very human reality of the people who *are* the story-tellers. Scripture is not a monologue delivered by God; the writers are not trance-held microphones used to convey divine words. (Although many of us likely grew up with this as the unspoken presumption in our minds.) The Bible is rather the written record of a dramatic encounter *between* God and people. Sometimes it records that encounter in the words of a conversation; more often it records it in the historical events that transpired. *Always what the Bible records is the human interpretation of very profound encounters with God.*

For Christians, to call the Bible the Word of God overstates it in the same way that calling Jesus "God" *misses the whole point*—if we don't *also* call him "human." Thus, if, as Christians claim, we see God most clearly in Jesus, then what we see first and foremost is a God who is willing—indeed determined—to meet us under very human conditions, including hunger and weariness, sorrow and misunderstanding, suffering and even death. This suggests that to call the Bible the Word of God—and to think that settles everything—doesn't pay nearly enough attention to the God whose word it is. This is a God determined to speak *with* humans not simply to them.

So when we regard the Bible as Scripture we need to pay as much attention to the storytellers, to those who form the other half of the conversation. We need to know everything we can about their language and manner of writing, their history, cultural assumptions, and beliefs. *This is not because we fail to believe enough in God, but precisely because we believe strongly in a God who does not shy away from the risks and the*

*messiness involved in encountering us under the less than ideal conditions that we humans offer: that is, all manner of human bias, prejudice, and limited understanding.*

One caveat here: this last observation means that there *are* places where the biblical authors record the injustices of history or the prejudices of their own culture ... and unfairly project them onto the heart of God. And then God waits for us to summon the audacity to challenge these words because the God we have known shows us better (e.g., slavery, women, LGBTQ, etc.). *This is OUR interpretive act.*

But also, to call the Bible the Word of God ... says too little. It stops short. To truly claim the Bible as Scripture today is to claim that the God spoken of in the Bible is still alive—and that *therefore this is a text worth being in conversation with even today.* It means the Bible remains a *living* text: sacred not because its words are unchanging but *because they remain dynamic, capable of speaking to us here and now.*

If God is still speaking, then we need to remain open, both within these pages and beyond them, because who knows where God's presence will be today? Except—that the biblical story suggests it will likely be at the edges, among the outcasts, the oppressed, and those overlooked.

Finally, we should be clear: the biblical pattern is not one where God speaks and we listen. It is a pattern of *shared* conversation, at times even debate and argument. It might be more comfortable for us, if God promised encounters in which we could simply sit back, listen, and maybe take a few notes. But God is always asking for volunteers to come up on stage. In fact, God seems intent on making volunteers out of all of us in this divine-human drama by leaving the stage and wandering around in the audience, where, one after another, we're invited to join in the conversation.

My goal in these sessions is to share some of the tools and perspectives that can help you encounter the Bible with head and heart—your whole person. As we meet this text, drawing insight from the seven “folds” outlined here, I believe we'll discover that the Bible, far from being written for another time, holds wisdom, truth, and power that is still extraordinarily good news for us gathered together today. We can't afford to be tentative as we encounter this text. The world can't afford for us to be tentative either. *So much is at stake.* We need to meet this moment with all the grace we can bring to it. I believe the Bible can help.

Drawn into this holy conversation, you may perhaps even feel a little *excited* when God leaves the stage and wanders over *your way*. I *can't* promise to remove the fear that comes with that moment (fear—soul deep awe—at the immediacy of God's presence is a pretty strong theme in the biblical material), but at least you'll recognize that a bit of reverent fear belongs to the moment, too. 😊

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