

# Approaching the Bible with Heart and Mind –

An introduction to Scripture for those  
who affirm that “God is Still Speaking”

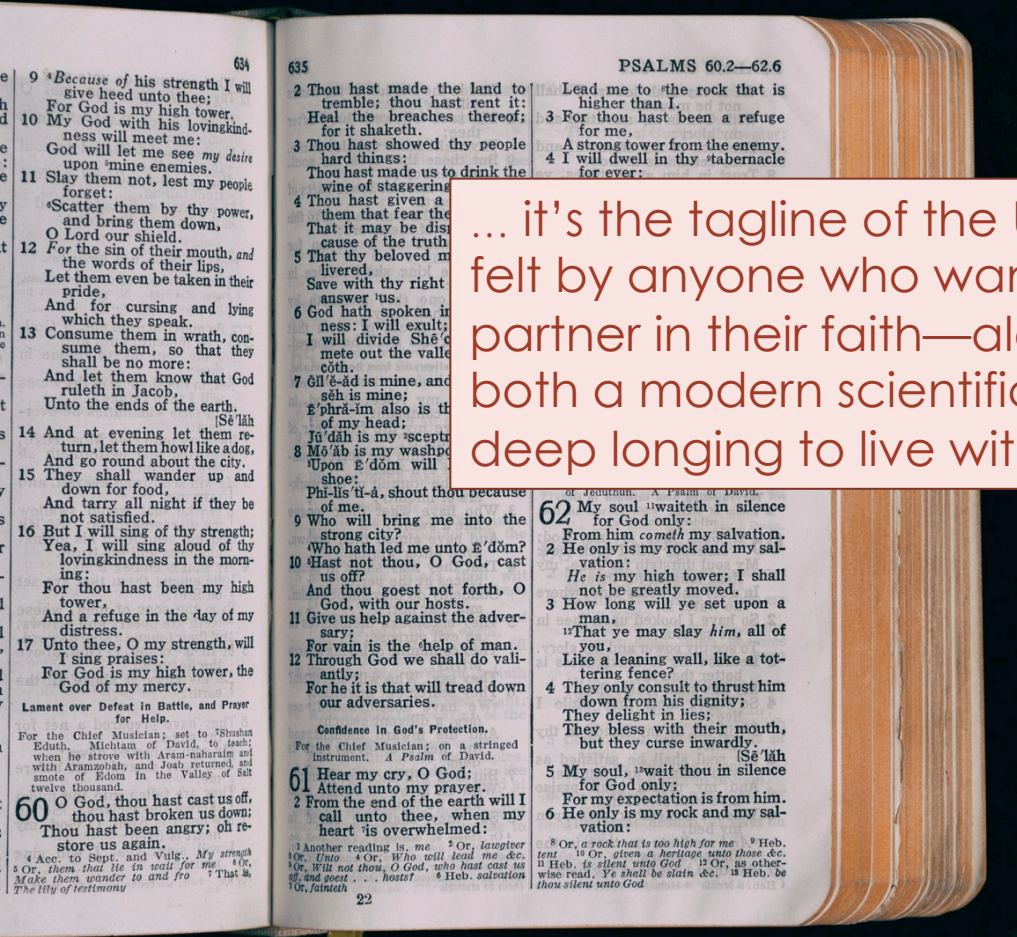
David Weiss

Wednesday - September 30 - 6:30 PM - Journey of Faith - St. Paul's UCC

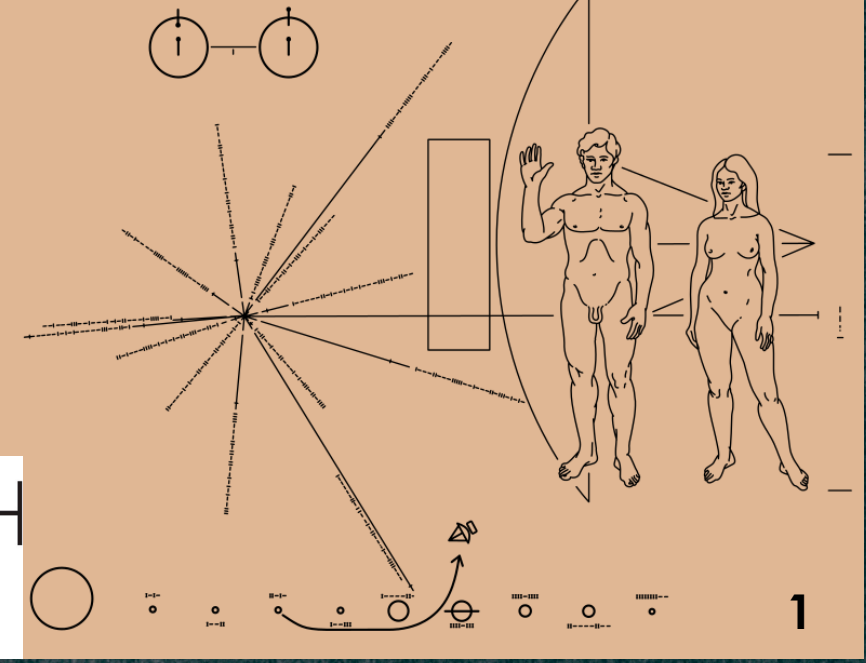


Session #1 - First Things First: Origami & Biblical Interpretation

# Approaching the Bible with Heart and Mind: An introduction to Scripture for those who affirm that "God is Still Speaking"



... it's the tagline of the UCC, but it names the challenge felt by anyone who wants to hold the Bible as conversation partner in their faith—alongside their whole self—including both a modern scientific understanding of the world and a deep longing to live with purpose and meaning.



UNITED CHURCH  
OF CHRIST

# SIX SESSIONS IN THE WHOLE SERIES

**#1 – “First Things First”:** basic tools & perspectives that allow us to invest heart & mind in responding to the biblical text.

**#2 – “On Eagle’s Wings”:** a bird’s eye view of the biblical tale; the Bible isn’t one single story from start to finish, but helpful to see the big pic.

**#3 – “The Gospels: Seeing Jesus Together ... or Not”:** reading the primary texts about Jesus with added understanding and insight.

**#4 – “Christmas Pageant Pandemonium”:** untangling and *untaming* the gospel yuletide tales. Christmas will *never* seem “just” cute ever again.

**#5 – “Jesus, Before the Gospels”:** peering back decades before the gospels to the “historical Jesus,” the man who is “Ground Zero” for our faith.

**#6 – “Jesus, Death and Beyond”:** asking how the Bible—and we!—make sense of Jesus’ life on the far side of his death.

A full text for each presentation will be on my blog: [www.davidrweiss.com](http://www.davidrweiss.com)

20 slides; then Q & A. Use the chat box to save your questions ...

# OUTCOMES: “WHAT’S IN IT FOR ME?”

- Some of your lifelong questions will be answered, even if that happens in unexpected ways.
- You’ll discover less answerable but even better questions!
- You’ll begin to see more clearly the powerful silver thread the Bible carries even amidst its many quirks.
- You’ll be increasingly able to claim this text with confidence and conviction as a companion on your faith journey.
- 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.
- Most of you’ll be changed in ways you can’t even anticipate ... an outcome I mention as both promise and warning. 😊

# FIRST THINGS FIRST - WHAT'S ON TAP FOR TONIGHT:

- Why this type of learning matters: head, heart, now ...
- Remember how much we don't know.
- Origami (Japanese paper-folding) as a guiding image.
- Seven such "folds."

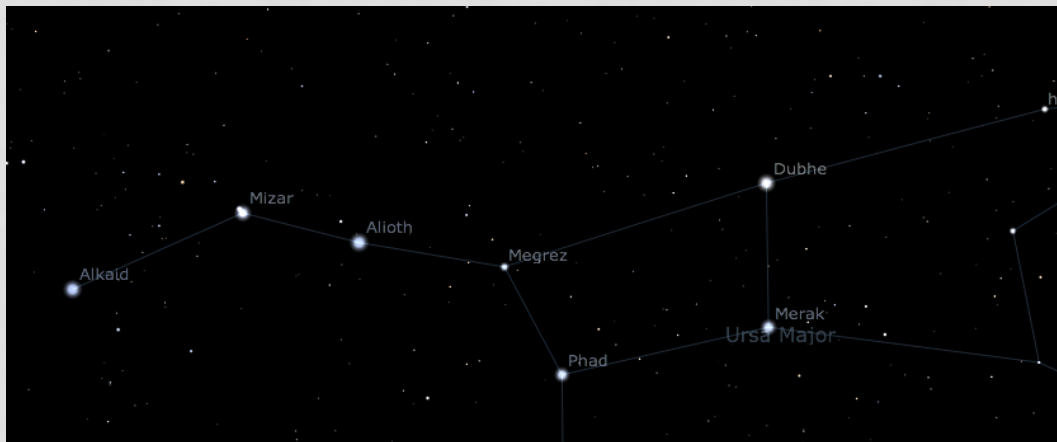
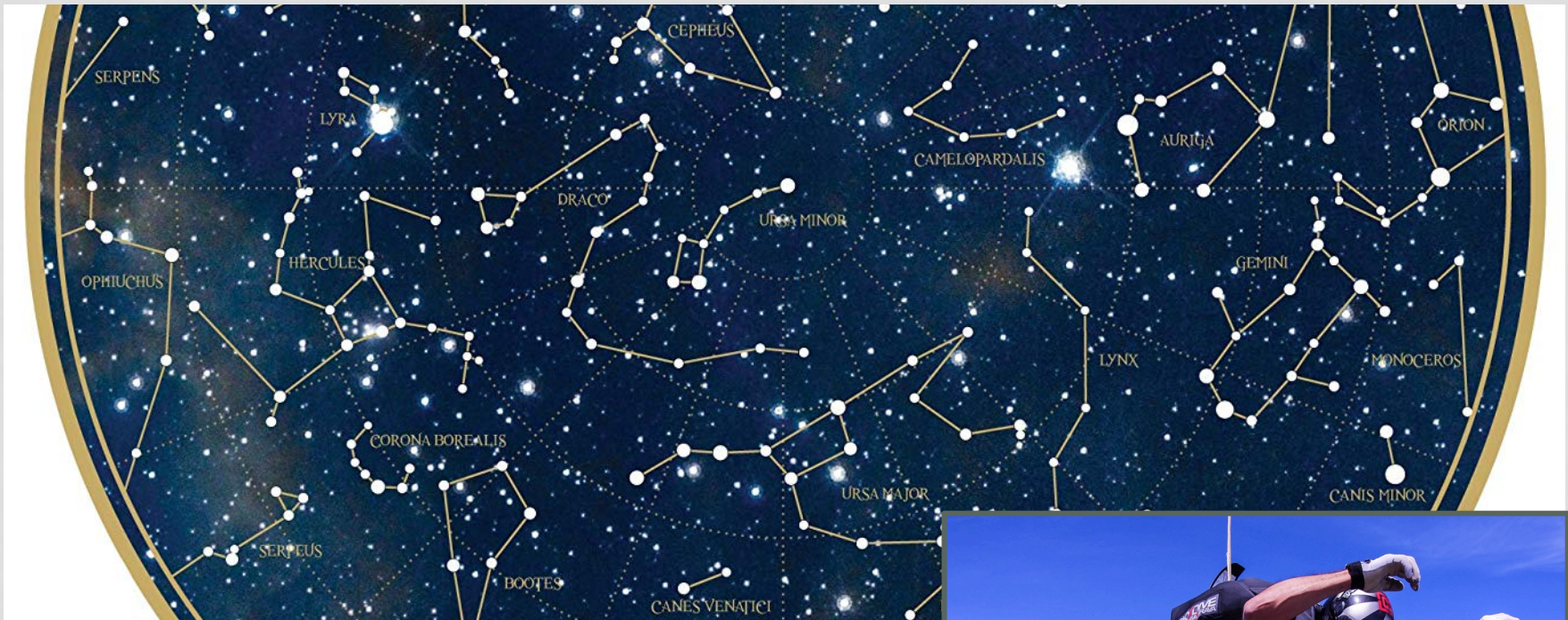




## My “credentials” as your guide

- Childhood
- Wartburg College
- Wartburg Seminary
- University of Notre Dame
- College Teaching (20+ years)
- Activist-Writer

# REMEMBERING HOW MUCH WE DON'T KNOW



The "proof": a view like you've never had before ...

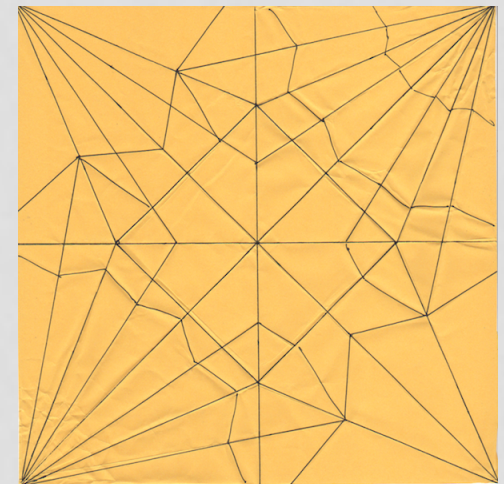
# ORIGAMI – AN UNLIKELY IMAGE FOR TEXTUAL ENCOUNTER



Origami as metaphor for the *host* of things to bear in mind in meeting the Bible.

- Every fold counts; miss one ... misshapen—or worse.
- Moments when you need to *move the paper using multiple folds at the same time*: so the paper can transform from 2D sheet into 3D creation.
- Unfolded, only traces of crisscrossing crimps – no telling what’s “hiding” on the far side of the folds until put together.
- Seven essential “folds.”

In *most* cases only as we employ *most* of them does the text reveal the shape—the message—within.





# THE SEVEN “FOLDS”



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**

# 1. THE BIBLE AS INTERPRETIVE ACT



**Pick three words ...**

Some moments & experiences, can only be shared by finding words that reach beyond the facts. That's

**interpretation. 9**

**As Scripture, the Bible is a text that people were – ARE – in holy conversation with. It recorded the transformative experiences that shaped their lives; then the text itself shaped their lives further even as they re-shaped the text.**



*For its first communities, the Bible records their ongoing conversations about the meaning of their life with God.*

*In one interpretive act after another.*

It's possible to study the Bible as merely a literary historical text. But if it's Scripture for you still today, does that make scholarly questions about the history, language, culture, and beliefs of the original communities 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. Then, **through our lives, we become participants in this unfolding holy conversation ourselves.**

## 2. A TEXT THAT HAPPENS IN HISTORY

... a gloriously messy process!

- Events & experiences (Abraham, Exodus, Exile)
- Retold around campfires, on journeys, among families  
**OVER DECADES / GENERATIONS / RESHAPED IN EACH TELLING**
- Snippets written down on scrolls
- Brought together in larger scrolls: “books” compiled by individuals & “editorial teams”

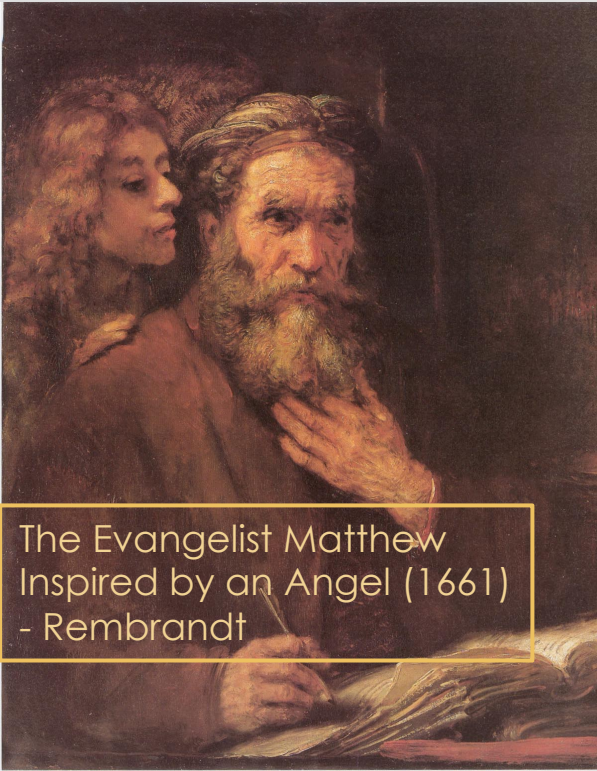
**ALSO OVER DECADES / GENERATIONS / RESHAPED IN THE WRITING**

- MUCH later “books” are gathered ... into the Bible ...  
a wholly other messy process.



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 the description is ***often shaped more by the historical context in which it is told than when the events actually took place***. So in reading any passage in the Bible it helps to know ***both*** the history and culture that frames the events themselves ***and also*** the historical context in which those events are being later recorded.

### 3. THE BIBLE HAS MULTIPLE SOURCES



The Evangelist Matthew  
Inspired by an Angel (1661)  
- Rembrandt

It's too simple—**and simply irresponsible**—to name God as the Bible's author and stop there.

(The story within the Bible makes clear that God is far more comfortable working through fallible human characters than we might prefer.)

#### Just two examples:

- Torah (~~Moses~~): Jahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomist, and Priestly writer(S) ... spread out over 500 years.
- Gospels (~~Matthew, Mark, Luke, John~~): Each is named by tradition; and they were editors of earlier material from other sources.

**Each source brings their own agenda, perspective, bias, wisdom, and creativity into play.**

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.**

## 4. THE BIBLE HAS DIFFERENT GENRES

**Myth:** universal stories for which facts are insufficient or irrelevant. (Gen. 1-11)

**Legend:** folk-lore based in history, but with lots of room for exaggeration: meaning is more important than facts. (Genesis, Exodus, Joshua, Judges)

**History:** not “newswire” history; always told with a spin. (Samuel, Kings, Acts)

**Wisdom:** philosophical reflection. Proverbs, Ecclesiastes

**Debate:** written in dialogue / argument. (Job)

**Poetry:** hymns. (Psalms, parts of Proverbs)

**Poetry:** prophetic oracle. (many of the prophets)

**Fiction:** story as the carrier of daring insight. (Jonah, Ruth)

**Apocalyptic:** “crisis” lit revealing meaning in tumult. (Daniel, Revelation)

**Gospel:** not biography; “good news” is telling Jesus’ life in such a way that the news of it becomes GOOD for those with whom it is shared.

**Parable & Allegory:** distinct types of teaching stories. (gospels, elsewhere)

**Letter:** a literary form – and only one side of a conversation. (Epistles)

***Recognizing genre helps you asks intelligent vs. foolish questions.***



**But OMG! – With so many genres how will I ever know which one I’m reading?!**

**Relax ... we do this ... ALL THE TIME.**

*“Hmmm ... what am I interested in watching tonight? I’ll channel surf ...”*

- News or Fox “news” ... morning news show or late night talk show ...
- Comedy or dramedy ... game show or reality TV ...
- Documentary or bio-pic ... bio-pic that takes “liberties” ...
- medical drama or medical spoof ...

Whether channel-surfing on TV or reading the newspaper (op-ed, news, letter to editor, ads, advice, comics, political cartoon, etc.) **we discern genres and adjust our expectations – and questions! – accordingly.** Almost seamlessly—but only because we’ve **learned** to do it. The original biblical communities recognized the genres in the Bible; it’s time for us to learn to do the same!

## 5. THE BIBLE IS READ\* THROUGH LENSES

*\*inescapably!*

Less about the biblical text 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 is not to be rid of our lenses but to be aware and self-critical of them. (We might use more than one.)



**Fundamentalist/Literalist** – (mistakenly) imagines it is no lens at all.

**Liberal/Humanist** – head heavy; eager to explain away the supernatural.

**Devotional** – heart-focused on inward comfort or spiritual insight.

**Liberationist** – shaped by the academic insight & lived experience of oppressed persons (Black, poor, women, queer, and more).

**And ... for me:** *white, straight, well-educated, middle-class, Christian, U.S. male.*

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A threefold bottom line. (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) 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.



## 6. 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.

**Weather** / **Season** / **Climate**

Tornado, flood, wildfire, other natural disaster

COVID-19 Pandemic

George Floyd / BLM / Racism & White Supremacy

Death of a loved one

Climate Crisis

Marriage

Pastoral transition

***Context can be immediate or long-term; individual, communal, or societal.***

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. If we mean to encounter this text *on its terms*, we should allow those terms to speak to the context of our moment.

## 7. CALLING THE BIBLE THE “WORD OF GOD” SAYS BOTH TOO MUCH—

It overstates things because it doesn't take seriously the humanity of the story-tellers. **Always** *what the Bible records is the human interpretation of very profound encounters with God.*

The incarnation (however you understand the details) says that God's character is revealed in the decision to meet us **HERE** in the person of Jesus: to dwell among us, sharing humanity with us.

To call the Bible the Word of God—as if that settles everything—**doesn't pay nearly enough attention to the God whose word it is.** This is a God who is determined to speak *with* humans not simply to them.

When we regard the Bible as Scripture **we need to pay as much attention to the storytellers 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 ...

... And 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:** 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. ☹

**Do we dare then to venture in Scripture at all?**

**Yes,** because God waits for us to summon the audacity to challenge these words because the God we've known shows us better (slavery, women, LGBTQ, etc.).

**This is OUR interpretive act.**

# AND CALLING THE BIBLE THE “WORD OF GOD” —SAYS TOO LITTLE

**It stops short.** To 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**. 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**, we need to remain open to God's word, both within these pages—**and beyond**. Who knows where God's voice will be today? **Except**—that the biblical story suggests it will likely be at the edges, among the outcasts, the oppressed, and those overlooked.

**The biblical pattern** is **not** one where God speaks and we listen. It's a pattern of **shared** conversation, at times even debate & argument.

**When** we encounter the text with heart & mind, using the tools & insights offered here, we discover that the Bible holds wisdom, truth, and power—and remains **extraordinarily good news** for us gathered together today.

# CONCLUDING WORDS / Q & A

**How do progressive Christians approach the Bible as a written text that bears witness to the God who is still speaking?**

Why this type of learning matters ... for our heads, our hearts, and for now. And the value of remembering how much we don't know.

Origami—an unlikely image for textual encounter—via these **seven “folds.”**

- The biblical text itself is an **Interpretative act**
- The text happens in **History**
- The Bible has multiple **Sources**
- The Bible has different **Genres**
- The Bible is (inescapably!) read through **Lenses**
- The Bible is best read in **Context**
- **Calling the Bible the “Word of God” says both too much and too little**

*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 today with all the grace we can bring to it. I believe the Bible can help.*

**YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ... I CAN'T PROMISE ANSWERS.  
BUT I CAN PROMISE CONVERSATION. LET'S GET STARTED!**