



Finding Portals into God's Story—The Bible and Why We Read It (Especially) Today

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CONTOURS OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

SAINT MARK'S CATHEDRAL

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Three
considerations
in reading the
Bible

1) Who is God?

2) Who are we as
People of God?

3) How is this our
story even today?

FINDING PORTALS
INTO GOD'S STORY...

“In Scripture, God has uttered for us, not the last word but the first—a word designed to set us off on pilgrimage, in pursuit of that life that God has willed for us to have.”

-William Countryman

Two affirmations of God:

1) God is an ineffable mystery, and

2) God communicates to us (revelation).

Initial Thoughts...

- ▶ What is your experience of the Bible? How has it been used, for good? For evil?
- ▶ Do you have a favorite story or quote from the Bible? Why is that your selection?



A Few Scriptural Terms to Consider

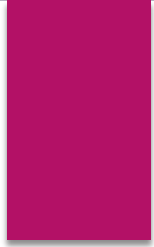
- ▶ **“canon”**—the compendium of approved/official books of the Bible
 - ▶ Old Testament = Hebrew Testament = Jewish Scriptures = Tanakh
 - ▶ New Testament = Christian Testament = gospels, Acts, letters, Revelation—estab. in 4thC.
 - ▶ Apocrypha—secondary books added in 16thC.
- ▶ **Torah**—Jewish teaching of “the Law”—history, mythic origins, societal order, thematic threads for all humans, etc.
- ▶ **Pentateuch**—another names for Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Testament
- ▶ **Gospel**—literally, the “good news”—four accounts of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection (Greek, eu-angel-ion)
- ▶ **Epistle**—letters to early church communities and leaders, written by various persons over several decades for different purposes
- ▶ **Revelation**—the last book of the canon, written at end of 1stC.—not a doomsday tome, but a subversive critique on the empire

Literary forms (not exhaustive)

- ▶ **Myth**—may or may not be true on the outside; always true on the inside...
- ▶ **Law**—delivers instruction on how to live (culturally understood)
- ▶ **Prophecy**—speaking to one people in a particular time and setting but has implications across time and settings for others
- ▶ **Wisdom**—divine attribute enthused into creation, shared in specific books in Bible
- ▶ **Gospel**—"good news" but not intended to be linear modern biographies
- ▶ **Epistles**—letters written to specific groups offering counsel and encouragement
- ▶ **Parable**—stories designed to teach—Greek, parabolein = to cast alongside (of life)
- ▶ **Apocalyptic**—literally, "hidden" but often portends violence or commentary on end times



Mythic Meaning: the Story of Joseph



From the
beginning, God
has been up to
something...

*SO WHAT IF WE TOLD
THE STORY
DIFFERENTLY
(COMPREHENSIVELY)?*

Working for Right Relationships

▶ Rel. with God-----

Theology

▶ Rel. with Self-----

Psychology

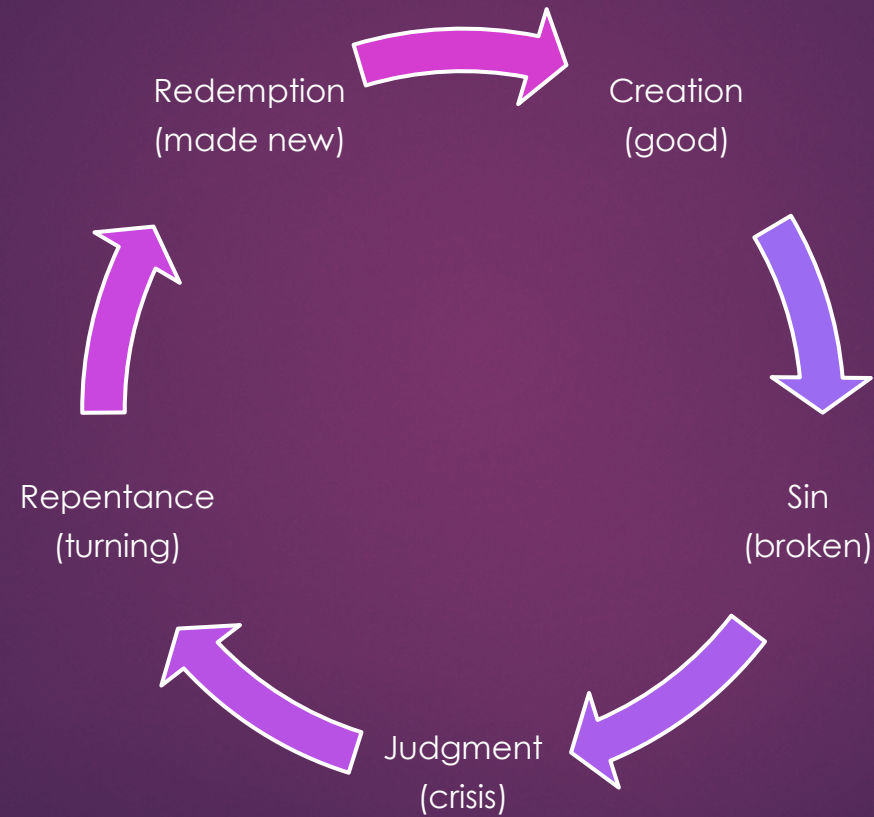
▶ Rel. with Others-----

Sociology

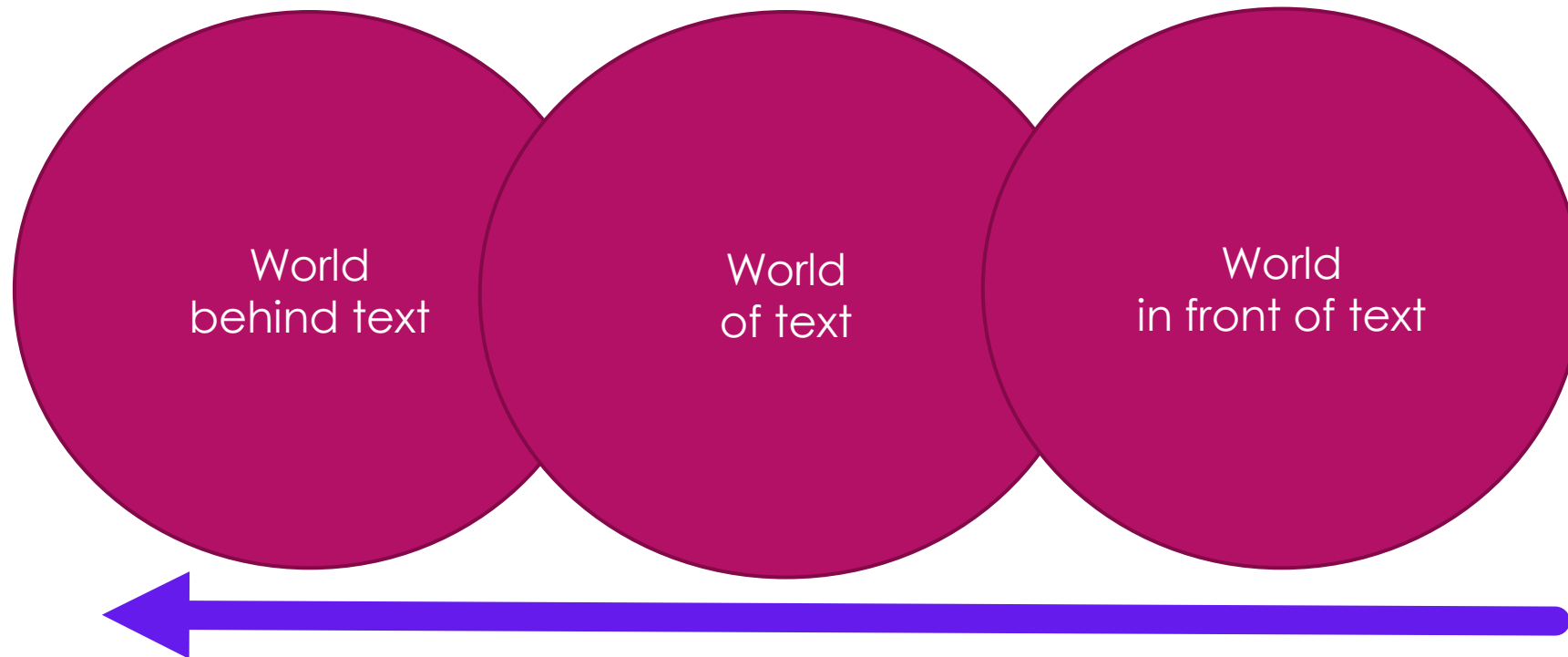
▶ Rel. with Creation-----

Ecology

Biblical themes



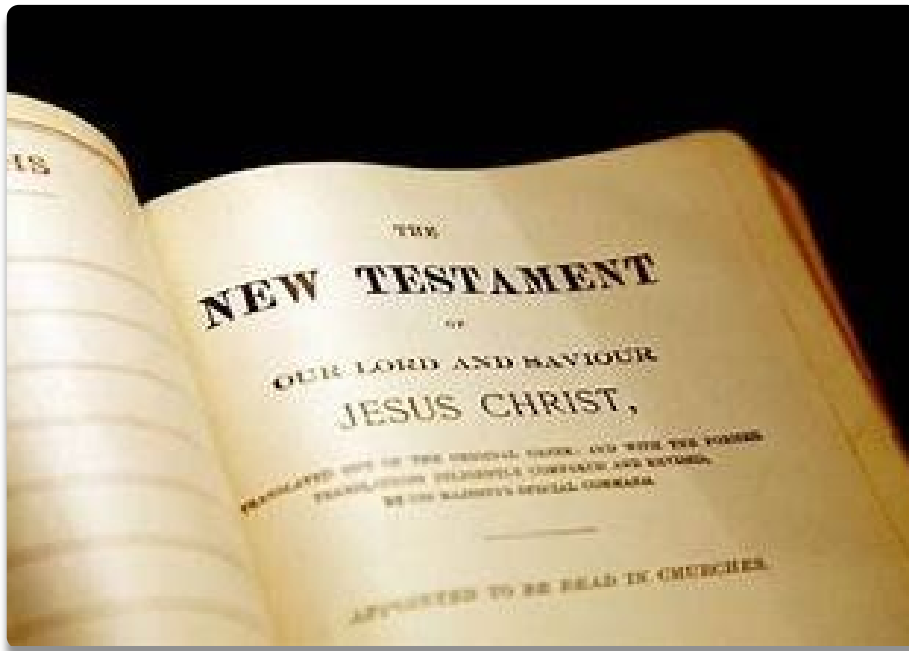
Hermeneutical Circle



Old Testament (Hebrew Testament)

- ▶ Torah—five books (Genesis-Deuteronomy)—stories of origin, relationship, human condition
- ▶ Chronicles of Judges and Kings—faithfulness = blessing; unfaithfulness = disaster
- ▶ Prophets (Major and Minor)—give voice to God's justice and to judgment
- ▶ Psalms—songs of lament, praise, thanksgiving—always in relationship with God
- ▶ A few others (Esther, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, etc.)
- ▶ Written: ~1000BCE-~180 BCE (Apocrypha added in 16th C.)

New Testament (Christian Testament)



- ▶ Four gospels—story of Jesus and disciples
- ▶ Acts of the Apostles
- ▶ Letters to early church communities and leaders
- ▶ Revelation
- ▶ Written: ~55 CE-100CE



Great Stories

Levitical Law—a way of ordering society

Three parts to the Law:

1. Civil

- ▶ Be just with the poor, (Lev. 19:15)
- ▶ Do not hate in your heart (Lev. 19:17)
- ▶ Retain just scales in commerce (Lev. 19:35f)

2. Ceremonial

- ▶ Priestly duties (Lev. 7:1-37)
- ▶ Food laws (Lev. 11:1-47)
- ▶ Law of Atonement (Lev. 16:1-28;17:1-16)
- ▶ Festivals (Lev. 23:1-25)

3. Moral: *"You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy," (Lev. 19:2)*

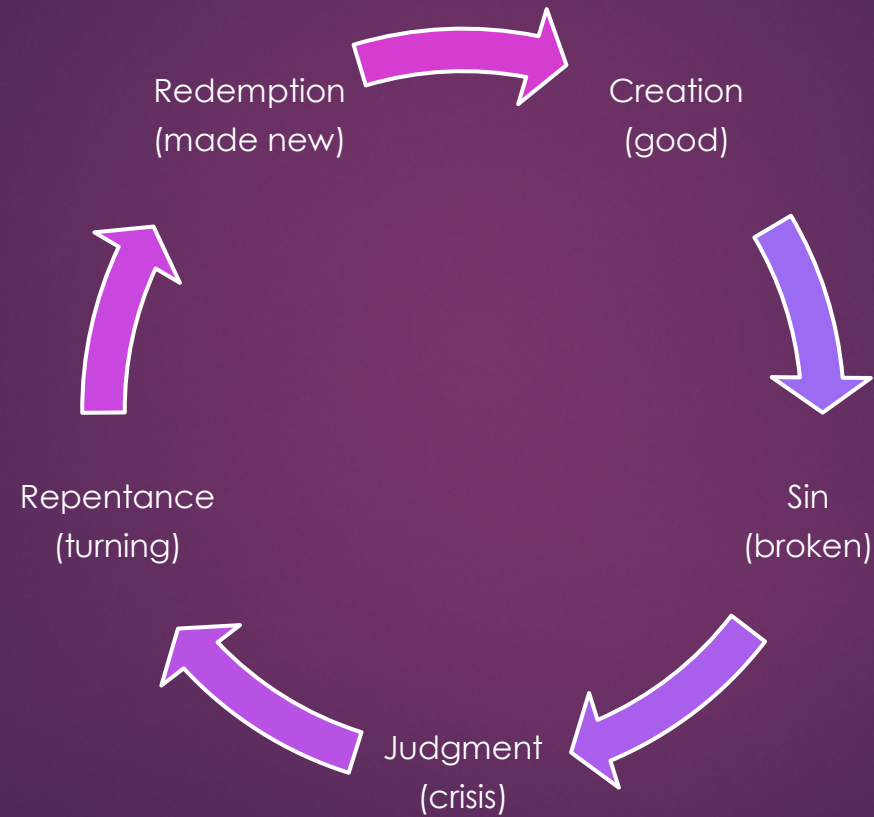
- ▶ Do not steal or lie (Lev. 19:11)
- ▶ Do not oppress your neighbor (Lev. 19:13)
- ▶ No idolatry (Lev. 26:1-13)
- ▶ You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:18)



The prophets have something to say to us!

- ▶ Poetry and song (and all art) is offered by the artist, but the work of interpretation is given over to the one engaging the art
 - ▶ “Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder”
 - ▶ The ink dries but the viewer always brings her worldview
- ▶ Prophetic voice is offered in the same way

Biblical themes



Finally Comes the Poet...

- ▶ The power of poetry scandalizes the mundane..."it is shattering, evocative speech that breaks fixed conclusions and presses us toward new, dangerous, imaginative possibilities." (Brueggemann)
- ▶ Always orients to **Covenant** with God

Prophets of the Old Testament



Language of the Prophets

- ▶ Always “widow, orphan and immigrant (alien)” who represent the least, the lost, the lonely. They are the “canaries” in any social system failing under its own weight.
- ▶ As the ideology convinces us of our autonomy from God, there is a simultaneous freedom that finds expression in disregard for neighbor
- ▶ The Great Commandment is breached, the relationships with God and neighbor go hand in hand and are both broken.
- ▶ Care for the vulnerable is the means by which we come to know God.

Threefold pattern for us to consider, then and now

- ▶ Prophets invite listeners into a Reality check (exceptionalism, self-centered)
- ▶ Prophets invite listeners into Grief (denial)
- ▶ Prophets invite listeners to turn into Hope (despair)

Public Grief in the face of Denial

- ▶ Recovering the ability to lament becomes the urgent pastoral task.
 - ▶ Psalms of lament (express grief, fear, disillusion honestly in the context of relationship with God)
 - ▶ Modern laments? (music, poetry, essays)
 - ▶ Laments by those who are suffering in real time—pain yearns to speak
- ▶ Insidious web of economic injustice wrapped in racism, trafficking, homelessness, hunger...
 - ▶ Trappings of evil (well-worn paths of unrighteousness)
 - ▶ How long, O Lord, how long?!
- ▶ Anger, fear, vengeance, power trumping power—none accomplish the same as lament
- ▶ For more, read
http://individual.utoronto.ca/mfkolarcik/CostlyLossofLament_WBrueggemann.pdf

Then and Now

▶ 587 BCE—Destruction of Temple and Jerusalem, Exile

- ▶ Exceptionalism run amok
- ▶ Denial of the problem
- ▶ Despair

▶ Prophets declare:

- ▶ Power and corruption
- ▶ Grief at loss
- ▶ Hope for a new path forward

▶ 2026 CE—American ethos, fear-mongering among leaders

- ▶ Exceptionalism run amok
- ▶ Denial of the problem
- ▶ Despair

▶ Prophetic Voice of the Church

- ▶ Power and corruption
- ▶ Grief at loss
- ▶ Hope for a new path forward

Lament accomplishes at least three things

1. A lament insists that things are not as they should be, and can be changed.
 - ▶ It emboldens us to the possibility that God's kingdom is a clear and present reality as alternative to the status quo and its unjust power dynamic.
2. A lament declares that the current situation is intolerable as it is
3. A lament appeals to God as an agent of action and change.
 - ▶ Lament orients to God in hope for something different, even as we are inspired to work for that different, more just world (prayer and agency go together)
 - ▶ Antidote to cynicism, despair, hopelessness
 - ▶ Then lament can turn to praise (e.g., Song of Zechariah)--Hope

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Prophetic Voice becomes poetic

- ▶ Hope is a tenacious act of imagination given in dream, oracle and song (We shall overcome)
- ▶ Need not be crystal clear in its details, but trajectory is sure
- ▶ Speaks boldly in God's name
- ▶ Rooted in the authority of God (e.g., MLK speeches) that conveys moral energy and courage while envisioning the new possibility.
- ▶ It is inherently ecumenical, expansive, merciful (neighbor)

Table Conversation (we skipped this for time)

- What does despair-provoking anxiety look like in our time?
- What would lament look like for you?
- What does hope look like for you?
- How do our Scriptures help inform this effort to claim our prophetic voice in our time?

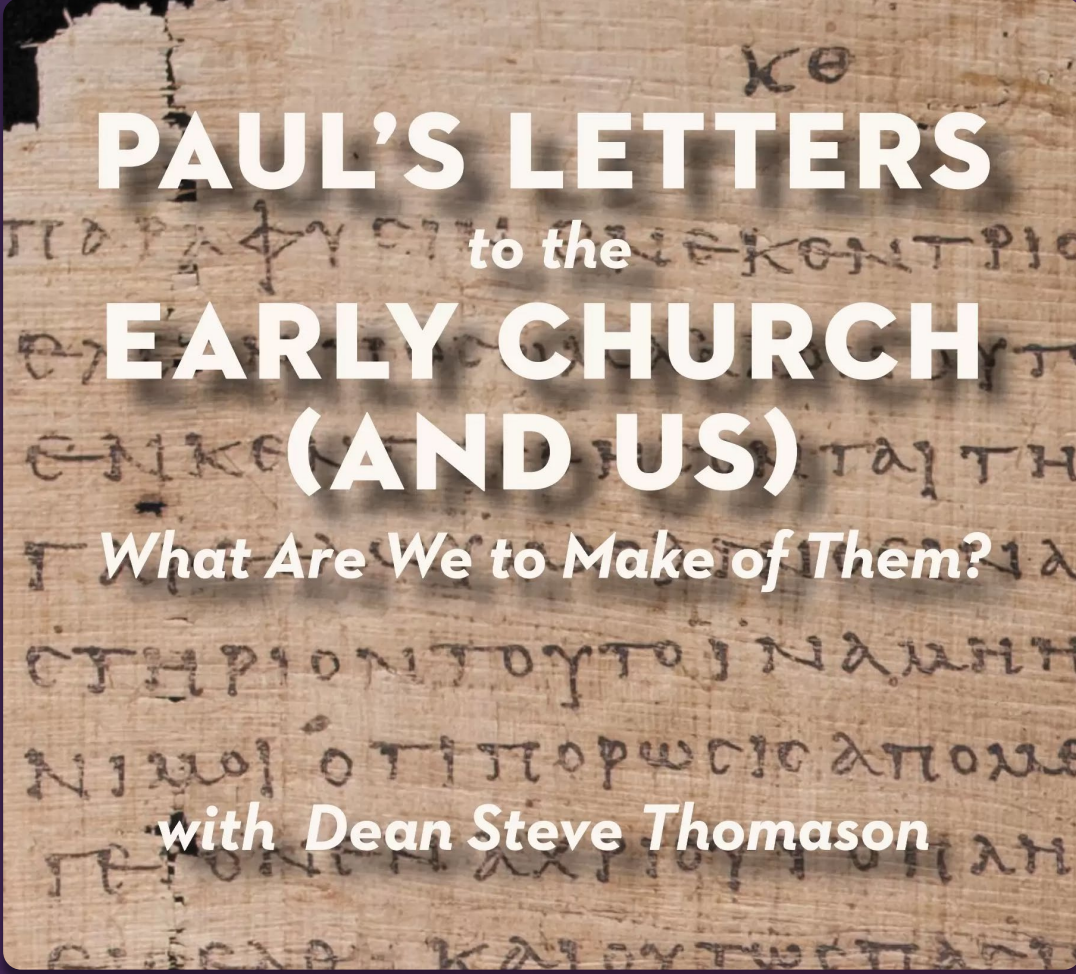


An incarnate God, here with us...

IT'S A LOT TO TAKE IN...

Magnificat (Mary's Song)

- ▶ It's a lot to take in—this concept of immanent God (even more, the reality of it)
- ▶ Incarnation is at once mystery and a consummate source of meaning
- ▶ But can we make the Magnificat our own story?
 - ▶ -can we consider ourselves to be pregnant with God? That we are God-bearers?
 - ▶ -can we be that faithful, nonanxious?
- ▶ We get anxious in the face of such an invitation, easy to divert
- ▶ When the false self gets anxious, it will find a work around (in unhealthy ways)—worldly ways of power, prestige, or numbing (checking out, cynicism or diversion/projection/suppression/transference)



PAUL'S LETTERS

to the

EARLY CHURCH (AND US)

What Are We to Make of Them?

with Dean Steve Thomason

January
2024
series--

take a look at videos
on website if interested

RECLAIMING THE BOOK OF REVELATION IN THE FACE OF CURRENT EVENTS:

A CRITIQUE OF EMPIRE AND CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM RUN AMOK

Steven L. Thomason

Saint Mark's Cathedral

September 2025

Take a look at videos on website if interested





**GOD'S WILL:
TO HEAL,
NOT
DESTROY**



Questions,
Comments,
Conversation...