

Luther Seminary

Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary

Doctor of Ministry Theses

Student Theses

5-20-2018

(Re)Discovering a Midrashic Biblical Imagination for the Progressive-Liberal Community

Elisabeth R. Jones

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/dmin_theses



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), and the [Liturgy and Worship Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jones, Elisabeth R., "(Re)Discovering a Midrashic Biblical Imagination for the Progressive-Liberal Community" (2018). *Doctor of Ministry Theses*. 32.

https://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/dmin_theses/32

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Theses at Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Doctor of Ministry Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary. For more information, please contact tracy.iwaskow@gmail.com, mteske@luthersem.edu.

(RE)DISCOVERING A MIDRASHIC BIBLICAL IMAGINATION
FOR THE PROGRESSIVE-LIBERAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

by

ELISABETH R. JONES

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Luther Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

2018

© 2018 by Elisabeth R. Jones

All rights reserved

ABSTRACT

(Re)Discovering a Midrashic Biblical Imagination for the Progressive-Liberal Community

by

Elisabeth R. Jones

This thesis presents the case for the development of a sustainable community practice of midrashic biblical imagination as a catalyst for transformative engagement with the Bible in progressive Christian congregations. Notes that a midrashic imagination applied to the polyvalent testimonies of the biblical canon is an apt partner for post-modern, progressive congregations, whose theology embraces diversity, plurality, and critique of hegemonic structures. Uses a longitudinal qualitative methodology, with Appreciative Inquiry, to trace the various methods used for cultivating curiosity among Scriptural skeptics over nine years, concluding with the Midrashic Imagination Project, which involves the community in study, worship, preaching and discipleship.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

If you are reading, have read, or if you will ever read this, thank you! Richard Rehfeldt, Brian Fraser, Cameron Howard and Karoline Lewis are at the top of the list of the many advisors, mentors, and colleagues in ministry who have tightened the loose ends, strengthened the weak spots, asked the hard questions, and believed enough in this project to encourage me through this writing process.

Thank you too, Luther Seminary, for believing enough in biblical preaching to offer this Doctor of Ministry degree programme, and for staffing it with amazing core and visiting faculty, and administrative support staff who navigated the ins and outs of international student visas, Zotero, heat-waves, and classroom swaps. I especially want to thank Professor Richard Ward, who took away the biblical text so that I could find it already within; your course was pivotal to the development of this thesis in ways I would not have thought possible.

Cohort 2015, we simply cannot stop now! I have learned so much in your company. You have all become treasured colleagues in this odd and wondrous calling, and the most rock-solid soul kin anyone could ask for. To Chris, thanks for your air-conditioned, riverside sanctuary from the scorching heat, and for the pastoral theology filled car rides.

None of this would have happened were it not for the blessed mixture of skepticism and curiosity of the faith community of Cedar Park United Church. To the members of the Congregational Response Groups and all the study groups, as well as to

the worshipping community of all ages, your willingness to turn a text upside down and inside out has taught me “infinitely more than we could have asked or imagined” about the Lively Word hiding in plain sight in our midst. My thanks to you all, especially to Shawm (age two), for sharing your cheerios on the Feast of Epiphany.

To my family, and most especially to Norman, whose weekends, evenings, and even vacations have been sacrificed on the altar of midrashic study, I owe debts of gratitude I will never repay, but will enjoy trying. To you, I promise a summer without turning a text!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|
| ABSTRACT..... | ii |
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | iii |
| LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS..... | viii |
| LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS..... | ix |
| | |
| 1. INTRODUCTION: A LOVE STORY..... | 1 |
| A Love Story: The Prologue..... | 1 |
| The Challenge: Progressives Don't Read the Bible (much)..... | 3 |
| A Progressive-Liberal Community of Faith | 7 |
| ...In a Post-everything world | 11 |
| Recovering a Biblical Imagination | 12 |
| Provoking Curiosity, Fostering Imagination | 15 |
| Outline: How this Thesis will proceed | 18 |
| | |
| 2. BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS..... | 21 |
| Imagination..... | 22 |
| Theological and Biblical Imagination | 25 |
| Excursus: Midrash 101 | 33 |
| Midrashic Literature (Product)..... | 34 |
| Midrashic Process | 36 |
| Midrashic Biblical Imagination in the Progressive Liberal Community..... | 40 |
| Conclusion..... | 44 |
| | |
| 3. LITERATURE REVIEW | 46 |
| Contextual Studies..... | 47 |
| Defining "Progressive-Liberal" | 50 |
| Biblical Imagination | 55 |
| Midrash Studies | 58 |
| Performance Theory | 61 |
| Conclusion..... | 64 |
| | |
| 4. PROJECT DESCRIPTION..... | 65 |
| Methodological Questions..... | 65 |
| Research Context..... | 70 |
| What's Past is Prologue (2008-2015)..... | 71 |
| Biblical Imagination in Worship, 2012-2015..... | 73 |
| The Midrashic Imagination Project (2016-2017) | 76 |

| | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Workshops: “Follow the White Rabbit” | 78 |
| “Texts and Textures” Seasonal Series | 79 |
| Sunday Worship | 83 |
| Midrash in Ordinary Time | 85 |
| Focus Group and Journals | 86 |
| Participation and Evaluation methods | 86 |
| Conclusion | 87 |
| 5. ANALYSIS OF PROJECT | 89 |
| Research Protocols. | 89 |
| Preliminary and Prototype Phases: Analytical Summary | 92 |
| Midrashic Imagination Project | 94 |
| Texts and Textures | 96 |
| 1. Advent Texts and Textures. | 98 |
| 2. Lenten Textures: We Walk this Road Together. | 105 |
| 3. Easter Texts and Textures: This Changes Everything | 110 |
| 4. Ordinary Time | 115 |
| 5. Focus Group | 116 |
| Conclusion | 118 |
| 6. EVALUATION | 120 |
| Did the Thesis Deliver? | 121 |
| a. Research Questions: Outcomes | 121 |
| b. Anticipated Outcomes | 125 |
| Strengths of the Thesis | 126 |
| Weaknesses and Shortcomings | 127 |
| Benefits and Improvements: Things to do differently | 129 |
| Next Steps | 130 |
| 7. PASTORAL REFLECTION | 132 |
| Implications | 133 |
| A Long Journey in the Same Direction | 133 |
| Personal and Pastoral Reflections | 135 |
| APPENDIX A | 138 |
| 1. Midrash Event Codes | 138 |
| 2. Participant Response Codes | 140 |
| 3. Midrashic Imagination Codes | 141 |
| 4. Final Focus Group Transcript | 142 |
| APPENDIX B | 146 |
| 1. Struggling With Scripture Samples | 146 |

| | |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 2. Struggling with Scripture Data Analysis..... | 150 |
| 3. Analytic Summary:2008-2011 | 154 |
| APPENDIX C | 159 |
| Sermon 1: Lent 1B, 2012 | 161 |
| Sermon 2: Easter 6C 2013..... | 164 |
| Sermon 3: Advent 4 B/C 2014 | 168 |
| APPENDIX D..... | 173 |
| Texts and Textures Study Series Samples..... | 174 |
| Lenten Textures 4: Ezekiel 37..... | 178 |
| APPENDIX E | 181 |
| 1. Advent 3A: Sermon..... | 181 |
| 2. Lent 2A: Midrash Monologue..... | 185 |
| 3. Easter 4A Scripture and Sermon | 190 |
| 4. Pentecost + 9A: Worship, Scripture, Sermon | 194 |
| APPENDIX F..... | 203 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 214 |

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|----------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| AI | Appreciative Inquiry |
| <i>Avot</i> | <i>Pirkei Avot. (Sayings of the Fathers)</i> |
| <i>b.</i> | Babylonian Talmud (followed by location numerals) |
| <i>Ber.</i> | <i>Berakhot</i> |
| CEB | Common English Bible |
| CPU | Cedar Park United (Church) |
| <i>Gem.</i> | <i>Gemara</i> |
| KJV | King James Version |
| <i>Mid.Rab</i> | Midrash Rabbah |
| MIP | Midrashic Imagination Project (2016-2017) |
| MT | Masoretic Text |
| NRSV | New Revised Standard Version |
| UCCan | United Church of Canada |

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Tables

| | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Table 1. Biblical Exploration Courses 2008-2011 | 72 |
| Table 2. Texts and Textures Themes and Preaching Texts | 82 |
| Table 3. Advent Texts and Textures | 98 |
| Table 4. Method: Purpose Statements | 107 |

Figures

| | |
|-------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Figure 1. 4-D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry | 68 |
| Figure 2. Texts and Textures Elements..... | 81 |
| Figure 3. Midrashic Imagination Method (revised)..... | 83 |

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: A LOVE STORY

I first fell in love with the Bible when I found out that “it” was a library, not a book. I have been in love ever since with this variegated collection of sometimes contesting testimonies to the ongoing presence and covenantal engagement of God in creation and in human history. This thesis will be my own testimony to the attempts I have made with one particular progressive-liberal congregation, to help its people fall similarly “in love” with this biblical library, and more importantly, with the HOLY ONE¹ revealed within its jostling pages.

A Love Story: The Prologue

Growing up as a Roman Catholic in England, my relationship with Scripture was predictably tangential to a practice of faith that was primarily sacramental, liturgical and magisterial. It was while on a high school retreat at a Benedictine monastery that one of the monks noted in passing that the canonical Gospels were composed in different locations, for different communities, to address different questions concerning the person, nature and mission of Jesus Christ. For me, this was both radically unnerving and exciting, and set me on a life-long trajectory of fascination with the Bible. Subsequently, high school, and then university-guided forays into the polyvalence, internal contradiction, and multivocality of the biblical canon deepened my curiosity into respect,

¹ The use of HOLY ONE here and in the thesis is consistent with my pastoral practice to use this titular signification for the Divine in place of the conventional use of LORD to indicate the tetragrammaton of the Hebrew Scriptures.

and from respect to a full-on love affair with the biblical library that eventually led me out of the Roman Catholic tradition into candidacy for ministry in a liberal historic mainline denomination, the United Church of Canada, and from there into graduate theological studies in the history of biblical interpretation.

While in Seminary, I read Walter Brueggemann's *Old Testament Theology: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*.² His fundamental thesis is that the contested testimonies which jostle one another polyphonically within the canon of the Old Testament reveal a "free, undomesticated and passionate God"³ engaged in a lively, covenantal relationship with Israel, in which both have a right to argue, complain, question and influence the other. This choice of Israel's God, to be revealed in texts and in their interpretation, "presses Israel's speech to its imaginative limit" and has a similar "endlessly interesting, generative and unsettling"⁴ impact upon those who read both testaments of Scripture through this hermeneutic lens. This generative impact can be seen in the post-biblical communities of readers and interpreters. During my graduate studies, I kept coming across oblique and guarded references to the interpretations of "the Rabbis."⁵ With the help of wise guides I ventured into the vast world of rabbinic exegesis,⁶ feeling rather like

² Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997).

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1986), 15.

⁴ Brueggemann, *Theology Old Testament*, 410.

⁵ The references are guarded because of the deeply entrenched anti-Semitism of the periods in question. See a useful treatment of this in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁶ My guides included two teachers, Rabbi Dr. Robert Daum and the Rev. Dr. R. Gerald Hobbs. Textual muses whose writing guided my research include Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Volume 1: The Four Senses of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998); Bernard Roussel and Guy Bedouelle, *Le Temps Des Réformes et La Bible*, Bible de Tous Les Temps, vol 5 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1989); Julio C. Trebolle Barrera, *The Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible: An Introduction to the History of the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

Alice following the White Rabbit into a Wonderland both familiar and utterly strange.⁷ The Rabbis' masterful, often delightful "drashing" or "turning and turning" of the text,⁸ deliberately delves into not one but multiple meanings in a passage of Scripture as it comes into conversation with new social contexts through the centuries. This willing embrace of the polyvalence and innate 'liveliness' of the biblical text as it meets new contexts becomes a cornerstone of the project to help Christians fall in love with the biblical library, as you will see in the thesis which follows.⁹

The Challenge: Progressives Don't Read the Bible (much)

If I have lived happily with this personal epiphany with regard to the biblical library for most of my adult life, and have enjoyed the luxury of sharing this passion with theological students over fourteen years of a seminary teaching ministry, the pastoral epiphany which occurred somewhere around 2008, when I was invited to lead a congregational Bible study, was altogether different. It seems that lay folk of the progressive-liberal persuasion do not, on the whole, share my curiosity about the Bible, much less my fascination or passion for its complicated pages. At the risk of overstating

⁷ Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (London: Wisehouse Classics, 1865), Kindle. I used this image when I began to introduce a midrashic approach to the biblical texts to the congregation I currently serve.

⁸ "Drashing" or "midrash" a text derives from the Hebrew verb (in qal form) שָׁרַשׁ, to search, from which the noun "Midrash" comes, frequently used to denote one form of rabbinic exegesis within a larger scope of exegesis, which includes *peshat* (plain sense), *remez*, (deep meaning), and *sod* (hidden, or secret meaning). The reference to "turning a text" is attributed to Rabbi Ben Bag Bag, *Avot. 5:22*. See Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, *Sage Advice: Pirkei Avot* (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2016) loc3384, Kindle.

⁹ It is not possible within the scope of this thesis to dwell long on the complex history (and revision of that history) of the "parting of ways" between Jewish and Christian exegesis, and I point the reader to wiser scholars who are charting that history. See Emmanouela Grypeou and Helen Spurling, eds., *The Exegetical Encounters between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity*, vol. 18, Jewish and Christian Perspectives (Leiden: Brill, 2009). Also of importance in the revision of the classic treatment of this topic by Marc G. Hirshman, *A Rivalry of Genius: Jewish and Christian Biblical Interpretation in Late Antiquity* (New York: SUNY Press, 1996), see Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Shaye J. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

the problem, those of us who occupy the ‘liberal-progressive’¹⁰ postal code within the Christian neighborhood are particularly adept at declaring what we *don’t* believe about Scripture, but are much less capable of articulating or embodying a lively, informed and coherent biblical imagination robust enough to undergird and inspire transformational, missional Christian discipleship for the sake of Gospel and for the sake of God’s world.

The United Church of Canada, conceived at the turn of the 20th century and born in 1925 of Methodist, Congregationalist and Presbyterian parents, bears the genetic markers of the North American Protestant theological liberalism with its embrace of science, human progress, and historical-critical methods of biblical interpretation, all seen as signs of divine self-revelation. There is a distinctly Canadian trait to this theological liberalism within the denomination, which originates with the shared efforts of key theologians from the three founding denominations (notably Thomas Kilpatrick and Nathanael Burwash, and later, R.B.Y. Scott) to unite Canadian Protestantism so that it could be a powerful moral and social influence upon the shaping of a still-new nation.¹¹ As Robert Fennell has observed, at the time of Union, “the denomination began life with a traditional and uncontroversial view of Scripture,”¹² with the *Basis of Union*

¹⁰ For a helpful analysis of this terminology of “liberal” and “progressive,” see, Gary Dorrien, “American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, Decline, Renewal, Ambiguity,” *Cross Currents* 55, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 456–81. See also the careful phenomenological studies by Diana Butler Bass, *From Nomads to Pilgrims* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2005); *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperOne, 2013). I shall explore this further in chapter 2.

¹¹ This heritage is well documented in a number of monographs, notably by Phyllis D. Airhart, *Serving the Present Age: Revivalism, Progressivism and the Methodist Tradition in Canada*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992); John Webster Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, Revised edition (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1998); Brian J. Fraser, *The Social Uplifters: Presbyterian Progressives and the Social Gospel in Canada 1875-1915* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1988). See also Robert C. Fennell, “How Does the United Church of Canada Interpret the Bible? Part I. 1904-1940s. Tradition and Resistance,” *Touchstone* 26, no. 2 (May 2008): 14–23, for the role of Burwash and Scott.

¹² Fennell, “UCC Part 1,” 16.

articulating a classic understanding of Scripture: “We receive the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, given by inspiration of God, as containing the only infallible rule of faith and life, a faithful record of God’s gracious revelations, and as the sure witness of Christ.”¹³ From then on and for the next three or four decades, this essentially “traditional” hermeneutic held sway, persisting in published documents through to the 1940s, despite the significant challenge of the scripturally more skeptical Canadian Social Gospellers and their “tendency to reduce the sometimes contested and conflicting inconsistencies within Scripture to “essence” and “core ideas”¹⁴ which coalesced around love and work in God’s name for the common good. It is this DNA which runs strong in the blood of the congregation I serve. A significant shift occurred in the 1970s where, along with a concomitant slippage in its Christological claims, an appeal to liberation hermeneutics became dominant in denominational documents,¹⁵ and in the teaching of candidates for ministry at its seminaries, sensitizing at least two generations of leaders to the task of unmasking “those unjust forces that oppress and estrange [people] from God and God’s creation.”¹⁶

The impact of these two thematic approaches to Scripture in the United Church—a liberal-evangelical appeal to historical-biblical expertise, and to liberationist (including feminist) hermeneutics—has been both positive and negative. Positively, as Fennell has argued, the United Church’s approach to Scripture has been fundamentally “this

¹³ The United Church of Canada, 1925 Articles of Faith in the Basis of Union. <http://www.united-church.ca/community-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/twenty-articles-doctrine-1925>. (accessed October 12, 2017)

¹⁴ Fennell, “UCC Part I,” 19.

¹⁵ See for example, David Lochhead (ed), *The Lordship of Jesus* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1978), and the study document, *Authority and Interpretation of Scripture*, (Toronto: UCPH, 1992). Find also a historical summary in Robert C. Fennell, “How Does the United Church Interpret the Bible? Part II. 1950s-1990s. Tradition and Liberation,” *Touchstone* 26, no. 3 (September 2008): 36–41.

¹⁶ *Authority and Interpretation of Scripture* (1992), quoted in Fennell, “UCC Part 2,” 40.

worldly,” not escapist, encouraging its members to “plunge into the world God loves with a faith and a vocation that are confirmed by [a] Spirit-led, Christ-centered encounter with Scripture,” and to be agents of God for liberationist social change. Negatively, there has been a discernible “professionalization” of Scriptural interpretation, overly reliant on those well-trained in the historical-critical exegetical disciplines, and a thematic, and sometimes ideological fragmentation of the Biblical canon, alongside the development of an almost fundamentalist liberal rejection of dogmatism, biblical inerrantism, and any hint of hegemonic theological or biblical interpretation.¹⁷ This, while consistent with its “progressive-liberal” DNA, has left many in the pulpits and pews of the United Church in a state of “epistemological anemia”¹⁸ with regard to the claims of Scripture. The following lyrical statement concerning the role of Scripture in the life of faith, found in the denomination’s most recently approved “subordinate standard,” the *Song of Faith*, is both poetically moving, and alarmingly vapid, in that while it certainly speaks to the wrestling nature of the community’s interpretive work, God has seemingly receded to the disconnected realm of Holy Mystery, rather than being the potentially transformative Lively Word¹⁹ encountered in such wrestling:

Scripture is our song for the journey, the living word
 passed on from generation to generation
 to guide and inspire,
 that we might wrestle a holy revelation for our time and place
 from the human experiences
 and cultural assumptions of another era....
 The Spirit judges us critically when we abuse scripture
 by interpreting it narrow-mindedly,

¹⁷ See Don Schweitzer, ed., *Intersecting Voices: Critical Theologies in a Land of Diversity* (Montreal: Novalis, 2004). Note chapter 9, David Jobling “The Bible and Critical Theology: Best Friend or Unstable ally?” 154–167.

¹⁸ Brueggemann, *Theology Old Testament*, 716–18.

¹⁹ From the preface to Taverner’s Bible (1539), “...sacred Bible, containing the unspotted and lively word of God.” It passed into the vernacular of the English Bible translators of the 16th century.

using it as a tool of oppression, exclusion, or hatred.
 The wholeness of scripture testifies
 to the oneness and faithfulness of God.
 The multiplicity of scripture testifies to its depth....
all a faithful witness to the One and Triune God,
 the Holy Mystery that is Wholly Love.²⁰

A Progressive-Liberal Community of Faith

To bring this home to my particular context, serving since 2011 as the Minister of Word and Sacrament²¹ at Cedar Park United,²² a liberal-progressive, Anglophone, predominantly professional-class congregation in suburban Montréal, Québec, this biblical “epistemological anemia” is exhibited in complex ways.²³ I have chosen a generational analysis as one way to describe the phenomenon, using the categorizations of the Pew Research Centre.²⁴ The so-called “Silent Generation” (born before 1945), while diminishing in overall percentage of our active membership, maintain a dutiful respect for the Bible, if not an active engagement with it. Remembered verses from their childhood KJV or RSV continue to provide frameworks for a small ‘c’ conservative, frugal, and careful discipleship that is focussed on the needs of the other. However, some of this generational cohort keeps company with the many Baby-Boomers of the

²⁰ *Song of Faith: A Statement of Faith of the United Church of Canada*, (Toronto, UCC,2006), Accessed at <http://www.united-church.ca/community-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/song-faith>. The *Song of Faith* was approved as a subordinate standard by action of the General Council in 2013.

²¹ This term, “Minister” is used almost exclusively in the UCCan to refer to those ordained or commissioned and called to pastoral congregational leadership.

²² The congregation will be referred to in this thesis by the abbreviations in common usage by the congregation itself: “Cedar Park United” or “CPU.” The reader should be aware that the word “Church” is a trigger word in Quebec’s strongly secularist society. The decision was made in 2011 to avoid use of the word in external communications. This does not imply that the community itself eschews the notion of being God’s *Ekklesia*.

²³ I have conducted an extensive analysis of the congregation in my Integrative Paper, “They Have Eyes and See Not, Ears and Hear Not”; The Community and the Word of God,” 5-10.

²⁴ I am using the generational cohort designations identified in the Pew Research Centre; see. http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/pf-2015-11-03_rls_ii-13/ (accessed Feb 5, 2017).

congregation, who have cultivated a decades-long “cultured despite”²⁵ (or disdain) for the Bible. Many of our members in this generational cohort are or have been professional engineers, academics, scientists and financial professionals, and their sophisticated hermeneutic of suspicion towards any coercive or hegemonic use of Scripture, leaving them somewhat at a loss for guides to turn to for their discipleship. As one member of a Bible study once opined, “I know we want to keep ‘the message of Jesus relevant and real in our complex world,’ I just wish we didn’t have to read that message from the Bible.”²⁶ These are the congregational fans of Bishop John Shelby Spong, himself a master of cultured disdain for literalist readings of the Biblical text.²⁷

The younger Baby-Boomers, along with some Gen Xers who are bringing their families to worship, are less suspicious of Scripture, but are no less rigorous in their desire to integrate an intellectually stimulating spirituality into their lives, one which does not require an abdication of their scientific approach to life, nor of their socially liberal approach to culture and society. For this cohort, Marcus Borg’s more measured, even wistful, approach to Scripture has provided a way back—or in— to the Bible, primarily as a text that can be mined intellectually through a historical-critical approach, although the jury is still out whether this (for them) very human set of texts can be spiritually inspiring, much less divinely inspired.

Sitting alongside them in the pews are the “*Réfugiés Catholiques*” (Roman Catholic “refugees”), both francophone and anglophone, and crossing some of these

²⁵ A reference to Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

²⁶ Personal quote used with permission. They were quoting part of our congregational “Identity and Values Statement”, see <http://cedarparkunited.org/beliefs/identity-and-values-statement/> (accessed October 15, 2017). See chapter 4 for more on the study groups during which this lament occurred.

²⁷ John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism: A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture* (San Francisco: Harper One, 1992).

generational cohorts. This is a phenomenon peculiar to the Quebec context, where the Quiet Revolution of the mid-twentieth century emptied many Roman Catholic parishes of those burned, hurt, or merely fed up by dogmatic or misogynist approaches to religion and culture that brooked no independence of thought, or polvocal engagement with Scripture. Those who have made their way back into a Protestant congregation are at least open to the possibility that there may be other approaches to dogma and the Bible that encourage critical engagement, question and debate.

This group and the next to be described are newer members of the congregation, arriving as a consequence of our intentional missional turn outward to invite spiritual seekers to “feel at home” in a congregation that has self-identified as “liberal-progressive.”²⁸ Among this group are the millennial generations of Quebec “Nones,” along with their children, who having grown up in families with no religious affiliation, and are now exploring for the first time spiritual and/or religious practice that is both socially liberal and ritually sustaining.²⁹ For this group, the Bible is an ancient, curious text, unencumbered with the hegemonic interpretive baggage which hinders older generations, however, because these people have no familiarity with the Biblical library whatsoever, its texts are completely alien and opaque to them, and hardly likely to be a “Lively Word” until there is someone to “guide” their encounter with these texts (Acts 8:29-30).

²⁸ The reader is invited to review the statements and commitments of the congregation as posted on its website, and in particular in the sections under the heading, “Who Are We?” See <http://cedarparkunited.org/who-are-we/> (accessed June 29, 2017).

²⁹ “Nones” is a term rapidly coming into common usage to describe those who have no religious affiliation. See this National Geographic article from 2016 tracking this global phenomenon (interestingly, the map and article make no reference to Canada) <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/04/160422-atheism-agnostic-secular-nones-rising-religion/> (accessed November 27, 2016).

What ties this multi-generational community together is a desire to live as an open, life-affirming, welcoming community of Christian faith, “seeking to keep the message of Jesus relevant and real in a complex world”³⁰ Despite commitment to this identity, what is less clear is how to navigate the variety of attitudes (from disdain, through indifference to mild curiosity, and to lifetime notional adherence) and levels of competence to read, engage, interpret and incarnate this message, or Gospel of Jesus Christ, as it is found in the Bible. In this regard, the congregation fits to a T the description offered by Butler Bass of the “progressive liberal, historic mainline” community; somewhat ambivalent towards, and somewhat tone deaf to, the lively melodies and harmonies of Scripture.³¹ If there is a curiosity at all about the place of Scripture as a “song for the journey” or as a “living word, passed on from generation to generation,”³² it is hampered by a lack of confidence in their ability to be readers or interpreters of its pages.

As a lover of this Lively Word, my pastoral dilemma is also a deeply personal one; how can I help this community fall in love with the Bible again—or for the first time—so that it can truly be a “Word that Journeys with us”? And what significance might this have to the world beyond our walls? And, does it matter?

³⁰ Quoting the Cedar Park United Congregational Identity and Values Statement, and the report of the Joint Needs Assessment Committee, April 2010.

³¹ Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004), 69–90.

³² *Song of Faith* (2006).

...In a Post-everything world

Here is where the perspective needs to broaden to take into account the “post-modern condition” within which this conversation is taking place.³³ The well-documented lack of confidence in religious, political and social metanarratives is not, if you believe Charles Taylor, a result merely of a supersession of cool, rational atheism over immature religiosity, but rather, the outward expression of a “troubled and complex pluralism” marked by an *angoisse*, a persistent yearning for transcendence not met by the simple promises of modernity, nor I would add, of fundamentalism.³⁴ James K. Smith helpfully navigates the vast prose of Taylor to propose that honesty in the so-called “Secular₃” era will involve us in a conscious navigation of the “myriad options for pursuing meaning, significance and fullness”³⁵ that are endemic to this postmodern condition.

To make this abstract statement concrete; in North America the fault-lines of these “myriad options” have been exposed following the recent US presidential election, as a simplistic, fundamentalist expression of Christianity with a particular inerrantist/literalist Biblical hermeneutic, is currently enjoying the limelight and power of political support from the White House. The resultant constrictive impact on public and social policy is well-documented, as are the increasing number of incidents of xenophobia and religiously motivated intolerance of “the other” not only within the United States, but

³³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

³⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

³⁵ James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 62. “Secular₃” is Taylor’s designation of the age in which we live, in which a plethora of contingent options for belief vie for our loyalties.

also on the Quebec and Canadian side of the border, as the lamentable hate crimes in Quebec City in 2017 attest.³⁶

This places progressive-liberal Christians in the thick of a crisis, a defining moment of challenge and opportunity, where we may (or must?) learn to articulate in word and action a faith polyvalent and complex enough to speak to the complexities of our current age. Indeed there are hopeful signs of a coalescence of once disparate forces such as Social-Gospel, and liberal, post-liberal and progressive elements within North American, European and South Pacific Christianity aligning to generate action in the name of the Gospel, on behalf of those most disenfranchised by recent and long-standing policies regarding race, poverty, climate, health and human rights.³⁷ This is the moment for the progressive-liberal Christian voice to expand its range, pitch, and vocabulary to become a strong—evangelical—voice for faithful, missional, life-embracing witness to the *Missio Dei* in, and for the sake of the world.

Recovering a Biblical Imagination

One constitutive element of this voice and action for the Gospel in a moderate/ progressive/ liberal key has to be the articulation of a genuine “generative” relationship with those jostling pages of the Biblical library. It seems to me that the polyvalence of the text speaks with particular cogency to the polyvalence of this postmodern secular Age. Or it could, if we only knew better how to let the varied cadences of Scripture inform our

³⁶ This article provides a factual summary of the lone gunman attack on the Quebec City mosque on January 29, 2017. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/quebec-city-mosque-shooting-what-we-know-so-far/article33826078/> (accessed March 15, 2017).

³⁷ See for example, Scott Malone, “‘Religious Left’ Emerging as U.S. Political Force in Trump Era,” March 27, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-religion/religious-left-emerging-as-u-s-political-force-in-trump-era-idUSKBN16Y114>. (accessed July 15, 2017), and Laurie Goodstein, “Religious Liberals Sat out of Politics for 40 Years. Now They Want in the Game,” *The New York Times*, June 10, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/10/us/politics/politics-religion-liberal-william-barber.html>. (accessed July 15, 2017).

understanding and shape our experience of living in this contested world as children of the Living God. Where certain Christian voices have claimed and continue to claim a hegemonic place within the ordering of public life, I am more convinced that God's Lively Word is to be heard most faithfully as a "*subversive protest* and as an *alternative act of vision* that invites criticism and transformation"³⁸ of communities, cultures and societies. God's is a "Word that re-describes the world"³⁹ in utter fidelity to God's Dream,⁴⁰ but because these texts are the products of biblical bards and writers who were "circumstance-situated men and women of faith"⁴¹ —as are we—then the reading, interpretation, proclamation and application of these texts must remain "inescapably... provisional and inevitably disputatious." This demands a capacity on the part of the interpreting community to host contingency, to welcome debate and contestation, to invite faithful imagination,⁴² and to resist the urge to reduce, prove, flatten or absolutize texts that are inherently dynamic and open to ongoing interpretation.⁴³ It is therefore a question of method, as much as it is of any dogmatic or kerygmatic claim we may make or 'sing' about the authority of Scripture or its "unique and normative place" in the life of a progressive-liberal faith community.⁴⁴

³⁸ Brueggemann, *Theology Old Testament*, 713. (Emphasis, his.)

³⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Word That Redescribes the World: The Bible and Discipleship*, Reprint edition (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011).

⁴⁰ The language of "God's Dream" comes from Desmond Tutu, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time* (New York: Image Books, 2004), and has become part of the theological lexicon of this particular congregation, as it infers God's passionate engagement with the world, rather than the more hegemonic inference of the terms "Kingdom" or "Will."

⁴¹ Walter Brueggemann, William C. Placher, and Brian K. Blount, *Struggling With Scripture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 12–13.

⁴² "Imagination" as it is applied to Biblical interpretation will be examined in detail in chapter 2.

⁴³ I use the word 'inherent' following the argument of Brueggemann helpfully summarized in Brueggemann, *Struggling*, 11–13.

⁴⁴ The principles of feminist theory, and of a "people's history" approach are the most appropriate here, both of which privilege the narrative of lived experience of "the laity, the ordinary faithful, the

It does matter. It matters a great deal that the progressive-liberal Christian community can offer the world, in the name of Jesus Christ, a Gospel-Shout⁴⁵ of God's eternal love for all creation in all its diversity, expressed with a lively, prophetic, imaginative embrace of the words and worlds of the Biblical canon. This is where this thesis project comes in. It asks the methodological question: how can we encourage and equip communities of faith to regain a curiosity for the lively Word of God as it is found among the jostling pages of Scripture? This question unleashes yet more critical questions: How can we, after decades of professionalizing and academizing the study of the Bible, put it back on the open shelves, with access for all ages and all readers? How can this Bible become for the progressive-liberal churches, a "Word that journeys with us"?⁴⁶ How can we invite such communities into imaginative conversations that nourish loving reverence for the HOLY ONE who hides in plain sight in the pages of Scripture? How can we encourage communities to be shaped by a "scriptural imagination"⁴⁷ that sees the world as being dreamed of, and ordered, not by geopolitical forces, but by God? I ask how, because it matters *that* we do as a counter-testimony to those who would hold Scripture captive to an ideologically formed socio-political agenda that from my perspective, seems anathema to the teachings of Jesus as variously recorded in the Gospels. To put the demand of Judith Kunst into the present tense, "I want[ed] a Bible

people" who participate in communities of practice over the statements of social, political, or religious elites. See for example, the volumes in the series "A People's History of Christianity" (Fortress Press). Cf. Richard A. Horsley, *Christian Origins* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016), xiii.

⁴⁵ Otis Moss III, *Blue Note Preaching in a Post-Soul World: Finding Hope in an Age of Despair* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 100.

⁴⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, Vol 2: Man in God*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 102. The Scripture, according to Urs von Balthasar is not merely a vehicle, nor external to our own events, but has its own role to play in this "theo-drama" as the Word that journeys with us.

⁴⁷ Luke Timothy Johnson, "Imagining the World Scripture Imagines," in *Theology and Scriptural Imagination*, ed. L. Gregory Jones and James J. Buckley (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 7.

that will not dim or deny but rather sharpen and welcome the particulars of the world” into lively, ongoing argumentative conversation with the texts, in order to wrestle passionately, playfully and reverently with God’s revealed word, and by extension with Godself.⁴⁸

Provoking Curiosity, Fostering Imagination

For the past nine years, I have worked to help one such progressive-liberal community of faith address its own epistemological anemia with regard to Scripture, because the circumstances of faith and life in the present age demand of us a lively, articulate testimony to the redemptive Dream God has for the world. This thesis will plot this ongoing project, from its beginnings in 2008, through a recurring process of *discovery, dream, design and delivery*,⁴⁹ up to the current phase in our ongoing imaginative relationship with Scripture, namely the development, in community, of our own method of “midrashic biblical imagination,” one that is rooted in the wisdom of ancient and contemporary Judaism, but that is also very much a product of a progressive-liberal Christian context. This will be explored more fully in subsequent chapters of the thesis, but for now, a working definition is in order: “midrashic imagination”

- begins with the assumption that God is somehow speaking through the pages of Scripture
- fosters a reverence for God hidden and revealed in the texts, and in ongoing interpretation of the texts (even while wrestling, confronting and contesting with God and the text)

⁴⁸ Judith M. Kunst, *The Burning Word: A Christian Encounter with Jewish Midrash* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006), 3–4.

⁴⁹ These are the four points on the 4-D cycle of appreciative inquiry, a method of organizational change agency, as developed by David Cooperrider and Diana D. Whitney, *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2005).

- acknowledges polyvalence within the texts, and within the character of God
- reads the Bible with question marks, and “minds the gaps”⁵⁰
- encourages multiple, open-ended interpretation of texts, by means of deep scrutiny, playful whimsy, extrapolative imagination, contestation and debate
- assumes that interpretation is an ongoing transformational activity of the community.⁵¹

The necessary first step in this project of helping a progressive-liberal community fall in love with the Bible so that it can be “a Word that journeys with us,” had been to cultivate **curiosity** for the text. Personal passion can go a long way in piquing the interest of others in the object of one’s passion, and preaching gives one an enviable platform from which to share such personal and passionate engagement with Scripture, but it has proven, over centuries, to be rarely a sufficient catalyst for igniting an enduring lay curiosity about the Bible. I would love to have discovered, through rigorous study, or careful contextual analysis, the one “sure-fire” way of cultivating biblical curiosity that is transferrable across all denominational or cultural lines, but I will confess here that we “fell into” the world of Midrash almost by accident. In a seasonal lectionary Bible study five years ago, as an aside to a conversation about who knows what now, I shared a Jewish midrashic legend of God, seated in the midst of a group of rabbis in the *Bet Midrash* (house of study), wrestling with new interpretations from the Torah that God himself (sic) had long ago given to Moses at Sinai. (*b. Ber.6a*).⁵² This image of God, a student of God’s own text, open to new interpretations in the changed circumstance of

⁵⁰ A reference to the admonition in the London Underground transportation network, to “mind the gap” between the platform and the train carriage, which has become a cultural buzz phrase. I used this metaphor in the initial congregational workshops on “Midrashic Biblical Imagination.” See chapters 4 and 5 for details.

⁵¹ This working definition is an amalgam drawn from multiple sources, many of which will be discussed in chapters 2 and 3.

⁵² A captivating image used by Judith Kunst, *Burning Word*, 4, citing her source as Barry Holtz, ed., *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*. (New York: Touchstone, 1984), 167.

diaspora Judaism, provoked a lively conversation in our own congregational house of study about the divine inspiration of Scripture, and the possibilities of new contextually grounded interpretations of these ancient texts in each and every generation. Curiosity was piqued by an image, both whimsical and reverent, from the midrashic imagination of the Talmud! If this worked to side-step generations of “radical criticism”⁵³ and cultured suspicion of Scripture, then, so be it, I would work to bring what I could of a “midrashic imagination” into our community’s engagement with Scripture. Once again, I became a student of the Rabbis, this time for the sake of this congregation.

Chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis will chart the ways in which we worked together to develop this “midrashic imaginative” method, so that clergy and laity of all ages can encounter, explore and engage the Biblical texts together, to “turn it and turn it again, . . . reflect on it and grow old and grey with it,”⁵⁴ trusting that within its pages we will find sufficient holy wisdom to shape our lives and witness as progressive-liberal Christians in the world, grounded in the Lively Word. These chapters will outline how the repetitive elements of community worship –preparation, performance and proclamation, and regularly offered opportunities for study in community, have helped to re-shape our identity and mission, as witnesses to a life-affirming Gospel founded in the Dream of God.

A fourth challenge/opportunity presented by the occasion of this thesis is to share what we have discovered more widely within (and even beyond?) those communities who self-identify as progressive-liberal within the Christian tradition in Quebec, Canada

⁵³ Charles L. Bartow, *God’s Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1997), ix.

⁵⁴ Rabbi Ben Bag Bag, *Pirkei Avot* 5:22.

and the US. Analysis and appreciative reflection upon the project provides us with the opportunity to share “best practices” and some of the wisdom we have learned from our trials and errors in this process of recovering a “scriptural imagination...by a faith community whose practices are ordered according to the world imagined by Scripture,”⁵⁵ or we dare say, ordered by the imagination of God. My hope, shared by many in the congregation, is that others can benefit from hearing this story of a renewed— or new—curiosity for the biblical library, and a reinvigorated, purposeful practice of performance and proclamation based in the Word found in Scripture, and the resultant signs of transformation in our community’s life as we allow a scriptural midrashic imagination to shape our lives in response to the grace of God. We hope this will be one contribution to the larger conversation currently underway to strengthen the biblical hermeneutic foundations of a progressive-liberal theology and missiology, with a coherent methodology for engaging Scripture in community.

Outline: How this Thesis will proceed

Chapter 2: Biblical and Theological Framework. In this chapter, I shall address a number of ‘assumptions’ contained in the thesis title itself. These assumptions will be tested, first by providing working definitions of the terms “Imagination,” “Midrash,” and “Midrashic imagination,” as they occur within the progressive-liberal community. Each of these terms is grounded in its historical, theological and biblical contexts. I will address the question of the use of “midrashic imagination” in a Christian context.

Chapter 3: Literature Review. This chapter expands the conversation by bringing in voices that have informed my understanding of the world of midrashic

⁵⁵ Johnson, “Imagining the World,” 9.

biblical interpretation, and the theological and exegetical contours of the role of “biblical imagination” in the life of the community of faith. This project is grounded contextually in a progressive-liberal congregation in Quebec, a context not necessarily familiar to the readers of this thesis, so I shall draw upon the contextual insights of a number of Canadian authors. A final section in this chapter will examine the growing body of research into performance theory and theology, to undergird the practice under development of community interpretation and performance of Scripture alongside preaching as complementary moments “enfleshed speech.”⁵⁶

Chapter 4: Project Description, will proceed by way of a “longitudinal”⁵⁷ action /reflection mode of research, combined with the principles of Appreciative Inquiry to measure—even if only in “lumbering and shaky” terms, the nature and process of change from indifference to curiosity to imaginative engagement with Scripture evident in the life of the congregation.⁵⁸ The first sections of the chapter uncover the prototype phases of what eventually emerges as my D.Min.. Midrashic Imagination Project, which is the subject of the main section of this chapter. Elements of study/exploration, preparation and performance of Scripture are constitutive elements of this project, alongside midrashic proclamation, and are thus included in this chapter.

⁵⁶ Richard F. Ward, *Speaking of the Holy: The Art of Communication in Preaching* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001), 19.

⁵⁷ Some scholars of longitudinal research would disagree that this study covers a long enough period of time to qualify as longitudinal. Granted that the project portion is short—less than 12 months, but my field of vision and analysis stretches back to 2008, and I believe that 9 years is a “lonnnnnng time,” to quote Johnny Saldaña, *Longitudinal Qualitative Research: Analyzing Change through Time* (Lanham, MD: Rowman Altamira, 2003), 2.

⁵⁸ Ibid.9. Saldaña refers to the work of Mary Catherine Bateson, who suggests that a criterion for longitudinal action/reflection is the identification or measurement of improvisation and adaptation, even if the conclusions must remain “lumbering and shaky.”

Chapter 5: Project Analysis, will present the analysis, first of the earlier developmental projects, and will then focus on analysis of the elements of Midrashic Imagination project itself, using data gathered in deliberately various, designed to triangulate and deepen, and corroborate or challenge findings and assumptions.

Chapter 6: Evaluation. This chapter will conclude the evaluative processes of the previous chapter, by identifying strengths, mistakes and missteps, and to plot avenues for further development and improvement of a midrashic biblical imagination as a catalyst for missional faithfulness for progressive-liberal Christians called to live the Gospel in a complex, contested world.

Chapter 7: Reflection. This short chapter has a teleological flavour, presenting the reader with this writer's wistful 'dream' of what might happen for the world if the progressive-liberal approach to Scripture offered here were to liberate Scripture from the "domestication of transcendence"⁵⁹ on the one (liberal) hand, and from the calcifications of the text through the parvenu bibliolatry of the inerrantist-literalist hermeneutic of North America's "religious right" on the other. It is a note of faith and hope, founded in my conviction that the power of God working in us for the sake of the world "can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine" (Eph 5:20).

⁵⁹ William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Theology Went Wrong*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1996).

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

*Turn it, and turn it, for everything is in it.
Reflect on it and grow old and grey with it.
Don't turn from it, for nothing is better than it.*¹

In the last chapter I introduced the reader to my abiding pastoral passion, namely to draw a progressive-liberal Christian community into a shared love affair with the Bible and with the Word that journeys with us. This passion arises from my own decades-long intrigue with the polyvalence of the biblical canon, and an increasingly reverent awe of the Undomesticated Other who reaches through and beyond its pages to re-member new generations, including this generation, as part of God's body, sent out into the world to do the work of justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly in service to the Dream of God. I provided a thick description of the particular (Anglophone, Quebec) context in which this pastoral passion and work is situated, and delineated the contours of what it means in this particular context to be identified theologically and missiologically as a "progressive-liberal" congregation, noting that a key challenge in the progressive-liberal postal code is its amnesia or ambivalence with respect to the role of Scripture in framing identity and purpose.

This chapter will focus on making the case for a particular methodological approach to address this challenge/opportunity; namely a method for cultivating a *midrashic biblical imagination*, which impacts discipleship through study, worship,

¹*Avot* 5:22.

performance and preaching. This method builds upon a number of key characteristics of midrashic exegesis, combined with performance theory and imaginative creativity, in order to highlight the activity of God within the polyvalent testimonies of Scripture and the communities of subsequent generations which engage those texts as a transformative, Lively Word that journeys with them. Before outlining the method itself, it is necessary, first, to provide the reader with a definition of the term *midrashic biblical imagination*. Each word in this term is worthy of our careful scrutiny in order to provide as solid a theological foundation as possible for the resulting method. I begin by exploring the meaning and implication of “imagination” for this approach to Scripture, and continue with an excursus on “Midrash” (a Midrash 101, if you will) for the benefit of the Christian reader who may be less than familiar with this genre of biblical interpretation.

Imagination

A logical place to begin this section would be Kant’s definition of the human imagination, which has shaped much subsequent Western philosophical and theological discourse. Kant names imagination as “a hidden art in the depths of the soul” conferring upon the human the “faculty of representing in intuition an object that is not itself present.”² Amos Wilder or Rudolf Steiner,³ following Kant, would argue that imagination is fundamental to the way we make sense of the world, an essential epistemological grounding for human knowledge. Imagination is that faculty which enables us to build creative bridges between the self and our environment, between the heart and the mind,

² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Gyer and Allen W. Wood (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 180–81. Cited in Michael Ridgwell Austin, *Explorations in Art, Theology and Imagination* (London: Equinox, 2005), 3.

³ Amos Wilder, *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1976). Rudolf Steiner, Austrian philosopher and educator, founder of the Waldorf Schools movement.

between the real and the possible. To this, Wilder would add, “there is no world for us until we have named and languaged [sic], and storied whatever is.”⁴

This statement of Wilder begs the question of the extent to which imagination is reflective of reality, and to what extent it is constructive. Do we construct reality with our imaginations? We need only to think of a child’s imaginative capacity to believe the monsters under her bed to be real, to know that our human capacity to construct meaningful worlds with the imagination is very strong, probably innate. Imagination is lauded and rewarded in the arts, its fingerprint evident in originality that has broken new ground in music (think Schoenberg’s recasting of symphonic form), and in the visual arts (think of the Impressionist revolution in the portrayal of light). Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye speaks of the range of the human literary imagination to reach “from the height of heaven, to the depth of hell,” and to create in a receptive reader a belief in the possibility of their reality.⁵

Such a generative imagination, however, in each of these disciplines, must be schooled. The formation of creative, imaginative habits most often begins with less than imaginative repetition of the basic fundamentals of a skill, in order to create a foundation for a creative imagination in that medium. The creative precocity of a child prodigy like Mozart was initially schooled at the keyboard and on the violin, learning, practising and perfecting the theory and practice of notation, key signatures, dynamics and so on, that would eventually be marshalled for the creation of transformative, memorable, musical

⁴ Amos Wilder, “Story and Story World,” *Interpretation* 37 (1983): 361.

⁵ Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1997).

compositions.⁶ Similarly the novelist, poet, or journalist begins first by mastering, through practice, the building blocks of reading and writing as a launch pad for their literary creativity.

Alongside these foundational disciplines, imagination is schooled to some degree by the historicity of human experience. It takes place in space and time, and within “the ongoing stream of tradition”⁷, schooled by a measure of constraint, or restraint, which anchors innovation within a disciplinary or cultural horizon. The music, for example, of ethnic Nigerian Yoruba singers and drummers is as recognizably musical as are the digital musical compositions of a Missy Mazzoli.⁸ Similarly, while a painter like Picasso is known for the reach of his innovation, there is a well-defined disciplinary consistency between his earliest and latest paintings.⁹

On the other hand, imagination, for it to make these leaps into new territory, relies upon the “gapped” nature of all knowledge, be it rocket science, childhood education, or biblical hermeneutics. Creative imagination works best in the questions and the gaps. Give a rocket scientist space (literally!), and they will imagine how to project an object into it. Give a child a doll with no facial expression, and they will imagine and create emotional and spatial worlds for that doll not prescribed by anything other than their own

⁶ David J. Hargreaves, Raymond MacDonald, and Dorothy Miell, “Explaining Musical Imaginations: Creativity, Performance, and Perception,” in *Musical Imaginations: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Creativity, Performance and Perception*, ed. David J. Hargreaves and Raymond MacDonald (Oxford University Press, 2011), Oxford Scholarship Online.

⁷ David J. Bryant, *Faith and the Play of Imagination*, Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics 5 (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1989), 126.

⁸ See also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music_of_Nigeria (accessed Jan 21, 2017), and “Missy Mazzoli,” accessed February 19, 2018, <http://www.missymazzoli.com/>.

⁹ Pace Gallery, “Picasso & Jacqueline: The Evolution of Style,” Pace Gallery, accessed February 20, 2018, <https://www.pacegallery.com/exhibitions/12690/picasso-jacqueline-the-evolution-of-style>.

experience and imagination of the world as it is, and might be.¹⁰ Give a Rabbi a question unanswered by the biblical text (e.g. “What *was* the conversation between Cain and Abel?” (Gen 4:8 MT),¹¹ and s/he will fill that gap with midrash.¹² Imagination, set free in this way, is capable of “entertain[ing] images of meaning that are beyond the evident givens of observable experience,”¹³ making leaps from “what is” to “what if,” something Bryant calls “the interplay between horizons”¹⁴ This imaginative leaping is not (merely) escapism, but the potent capacity to shape one’s living to concretize the intuited or possible future. Such imaginative techniques were fostered the non-violent political activists of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, enabling them to frame their actions and words around their imagination of a hoped-for future. It should not surprise us that such a prophetic imagination has biblical origins.¹⁵

Theological and Biblical Imagination

This imagination of “what might be but is not yet,” frames the systematic theological work of Sallie McFague, particularly in her *Metaphorical Theology* and her later *Life Abundant*. Drawing upon the foundations of literary theorists and philosophers, McFague points to the prophetic metaphorical imagination of the biblical prophets, who

¹⁰ A faceless doll is standard equipment in most Waldorf-influenced play centres and schools. Cf. Todd Oppenheimer, “Schooling the Imagination,” *The Atlantic*, September 1999, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1999/09/schooling-imagination/309180/>.

¹¹ Genesis 4:8 in the Masoretic Text ends at “said to his brother Abel”, without supplying, as do the Syriac OT and Vulgate, the addition, “Let us go into the field.”

¹² About which I shall say more in the next section of this chapter.

¹³ Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993). Summarized very briefly in his short essay in *Struggling*, 17.

¹⁴ Bryant, *Faith and Play*, 149.

¹⁵ This is precisely what the prophet-poet asked of those living with him under the looming threat of Assyria; to use their imaginations to leap from a political reality of despair, to imagine a creation ordered by the Dream of God, wherein “the wolf shall live with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat;.... and a little child will lead them.” (Is 11:6 CEB)

“piled up and threw away metaphors of God, in the hope of both overwhelming the imagination with the divine richness, and undercutting any idolatrous inclination to absolutize images.”¹⁶ She is more careful than some of her critics would suggest in circumscribing biblical imagination, which, while it creates verbal possibilities, does not actually constitute the new or hoped for realities it describes.

McFague, and writers like David Bryant, do speak into a contested theological landscape. For some reason, when the word “imagination” is coupled with the word “biblical,” there has often been a marked reserve, reticence, even outright suspicion from across the Christian spectrum. It doesn’t help the cause that the dominant English translation of the Bible from the 16th to the early 20th centuries uses the word “imagination” with almost exclusively negative connotations, beginning in Genesis when God’s despair at humanity is caused by “every imagination of the thoughts of man’s heart was only evil continually,”¹⁷ (Gen 6:5 KJV) and echoed in the Magnificat, when God “scatters the proud in the imagination of their hearts” (Luke 1:51, KJV). With negative connotations like that in the favoured translation of North American Evangelicals, it is perhaps not surprising that evangelical Christian musician Michael Card has to press his case persistently to justify his Biblical Imagination project among his peers, yearning for others to see as he does, “as created beings, one of our greatest treasures, perhaps the dearest fingerprint of God in us, is our ability to imagine.”¹⁸

In other Christian circles, particularly those well-schooled in the exegetical disciplines of so-called higher criticism, imagination is sometimes dismissed as too loose,

¹⁶ Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1982), 43.

¹⁷ נִפְּצָה n.m.

¹⁸ “Michael Card, Biblical Imagination Series,” accessed December 7, 2017, <http://www.michaelcard.com/biseries>.

too playful, too medieval, too unruly, even dangerous.¹⁹ As Brueggemann opines (before demolishing the concern), “imagination makes us serious Calvinists nervous, because it smacks of subjective freedom to carry the [biblical] text in undeveloped directions and to engage in autonomous fantasy.”²⁰ This is a valid concern worth exploring before moving on. Cautious, or “Calvinist” (sic) criticism of liberationist, feminist, and progressive, post-colonial, or womanist biblical interpretation²¹ coalesces around whether such prevenient perspectives on the part of the interpreters distorts the biblical texts, superimposing upon them an ideology not inherent to the text.²² The problem with this criticism is that it is not biblical! It does not allow for the polyvalence, the counter-testimonial quality of its multiple texts, in which later texts re-interpret earlier ones of new circumstances. To illustrate my point here, when Matthew’s Jesus, after having imagined the blessed community of God’s kingdom (Matt 5:3-16), reaches back into the Torah and Prophetic traditions, saying “Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come... to fulfil.” (Matt 5:17, NRSV). What comes next is his “faith-based extrapolation”²³ of all that has gone before, signalled by the repetitive “You have

¹⁹ Johnson, “Imagining the World,” 12.

²⁰ Brueggemann, et. al., *Struggling*, 16.

²¹ My teachers in this regard include, but are not limited to Barbara K. Lundblad, *Transforming the Stone: Preaching Through Resistance to Change* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983); Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (New York: Orbis Books, 1993); Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken, 2002); Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *The Nakedness of the Fathers: Biblical Visions and Revisions* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994); Elyse Goldstein, ed., *The Women’s Torah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Weekly Torah Portions* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2000); Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017).

²² My own feminist praxis includes attention to the patriarchally silenced voices within the canon, to privilege the voice of Lydia rather than Paul (Acts 16), Mary/Elizabeth over Luke’s narrative interruption (Luke 1), or Esther over Ahasuerus or Mordecai (Esther). All these women’s stories have been ‘retold’ in the course of this Midrashic Imagination Project.

²³ Brueggemann, et. al., *Struggling*, 16.

heard it said... but I say to you..." These are not adversative contradictions, nor are they "antic wayward" ideological tangents, so much as they expand the scope of the foundational, biblical, Dream of God for a new generation. To move the point beyond inner-biblical, to post-biblical interpretation, the same move can be seen when Karl Barth, wishing to bring a biblical imagination to inspire faithful action among Christians in communist Hungary, recasts Romans 13 for this new context.²⁴ Such good-faith extrapolation is risky, prone to ideological manipulation, and humanly flawed, and should therefore remain always tentative and humble, rather than dogmatic, or God-forbid, guilty of certainty,²⁵ but it beats the alternative. Luke Timothy Johnson criticizes the worst habits of his own species, the higher critical biblical exegete, for reducing the craft to "a kind of literary archeology"²⁶ that is more fascinated with the "worlds that produced Scripture" than with the worlds it can produce, and sadly lacking in anything approaching imagination fuelled by the biblical text.²⁷ Johnson and Brueggemann (and I) may be guilty of creating scary straw figures of the straight-laced, unimaginative, magisterial exegete in order to knock them down while pleading the case for biblical imagination; nevertheless, the counter argument must be grounded in a sufficiently rigorous, schooled, method of biblical imagination if it is to serve well the missional purpose of the progressive-liberal Christian community.

In sum, biblical imagination is schooled by the biblical text itself. But what does that mean? Firstly, those who approach the text, alone or in community as readers,

²⁴ Ibid., 16–17.

²⁵ See in particular, Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination; An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

²⁶ Johnson, "Imagining the World," 6.

²⁷ Ibid., 3.

hearers or interpreters, need to encounter the text in all its pluriformity, of content, purpose and form. As we have already established in chapter 1, the biblical library juxtaposes lamentation and doxology, history and prophecy, gospel and horror, oracular theophany and times of divine absence, earthy sagacity and mystical liminality, and so on. Indeed there is little of human earthbound and spiritual experience that is outside the orbit of Scripture. Its argumentative push and pull of testimony and counter-testimony to the varied experiences of divine revelation within the pages and within creation's history, all vie for our faithful imaginative attention. The challenge we must rise to in the Progressive-Liberal church is to use every means possible to encourage an imaginative encounter and engagement with the text in all its liveliness (a point made repeatedly by Barth).²⁸

Almost as a counterweight to this free-wheeling energy of the canon's polyvalence, we need to pay equal attention to what could be described as its narrative arc, and its recurrent themes. Postmodernity has equipped many of us with the suspicion of absolutizing abstractions like meta-narratives, due to the harm that such flattening certainty has inflicted on communities and the world. However, and with all tentative humility, this move is necessary if we are to "school" a biblical imagination that is faithful to the canon, and the HOLY ONE revealed therein. It is perhaps right that no one metanarrative holds sway in the Christian community, be that the Buber-Rosensweig tripartite arc of *creation-covenant-consummation*, or a dangerously supersessionist Christocentric meta-narrative, of which even Barth is suspicious,²⁹ nor yet N. T. Wright's

²⁸ Karl Barth, *Homiletics*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 76–81.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 79. See also Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Vol 1: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1963), 1:251.

“worldview” meta-narrative framework, which proposes that all scripture coalesces around existential questions (a meta-narrative that in my view fails in its attempt to include the full sweep of the canon by flattening the historicity and narrativity inherent to the Biblical text).³⁰

The point to be made here is that as preachers and interpreters, we need both a starting point and a limiting framework from and through which to “lead the church in situating its daily life – with all the ambiguities present and not to be denied – in this sweep”³¹ of the biblical narrative, if only to rescue us from pulling Scripture this way and that like a waxen nose.³² If there is a narrative arc to which the people of Cedar Park refer, it centres around God’s persistent redemptive passion for the lost, the last, the least, God’s Dream” for abundant life, and loving justice for all, and for the fulfilment of which God calls, equips and commissions God’s people.³³

This attention to both the content specificity and the narrative arc of Scripture schools not merely an imagination *about* the Bible, but a biblical imagination, one framed by the content, form and purpose of the canon within the life of the church and world. Moreover, this biblical imagination is one which does not retreat from or avoid reality, but rather serves to constitute an alternative reality³⁴ in which the “what if” of God’s

³⁰ N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (San Francisco: Harper, 2006), 121-146. His framing questions are: “Who are we? Where are we? What is wrong? What is the solution?”

³¹ Brueggemann, *The Word Redescribes*, 8.

³² A collective reference to the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century (to wit: Luther, Geiler, Bucer, Calvin), who all used this metaphor to criticize other interpreters.

³³ A summary confirmed by the congregational survey on common themes heard through Scripture and my preaching. May 2017.

³⁴ Johnson, “Imagining the World,” 15.

Dream begins to shape the “what is” of missional activity.³⁵ Again, as Johnson ventures, to engage in the practice of biblical imagination “is not to flee reality, but to constitute an alternative reality.”

Secondly, with regard to the interpreters themselves, cultivating a biblical imagination in the community is not a “drop in activity,”³⁶ rather it is “a long obedience in the same direction.”³⁷ It takes the sort of disciplined practice outlined earlier and the establishing of foundational practices in order for biblical imagination to have both roots and wings, and to become a generative imagination in the life of the interpreting community. As such, it requires a more engaged practice among a congregation than has hitherto been expected of the listener to a monological, 10-15 minute, Sunday morning sermon. Worship itself (through confession, doxology, the performance of Scripture, hymnody, prayer and sacramental liturgy) can be shaped to enhance this *habitus* of public biblical imagination. It can be enhanced yet more through community discipleship and missional practices³⁸ that are grounded in the imaginative engagement with the biblical narrative.³⁹

While I am personally moved by the passion of Walter Brueggemann who calls this *habitus* of biblical imagination a “life-risking venture,”⁴⁰ my suspicion is (as already

³⁵ This type of prophetic-biblical imagination is at play in Ezekiel 37, and was explored in the Midrashic Imagination Project, Lent 5B. See chapters 4 and 5 and appendices C and D.

³⁶ Brueggemann, *Introduction to OT*, 438.

³⁷ Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*, 20th Anniversary edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

³⁸ Luke Timothy Johnson speaks of four steps to a recovery of scriptural imagination in the church beyond the academy, “Imagining the World,” 10–14.

³⁹ At CPU our community discipleship centres around the five marks: *litourgia*, *kerygma*, *koinonia*, *didache*, *diakonia*. See Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 16ff. See also Edwin J. Searcy, “God’s Own Gift: Glimpsing Tomorrow’s Church Today,” *Touchstone* 31, no. 1 (February 2013): 6–13.

⁴⁰ Brueggemann, *Introduction to OT*, 402.

named in chapter 1 that for many in the progressive-liberal communities of faith, “life-risking venture” is not a selling point! It has been my experience throughout the nine years of this project that to aim so high too soon does not work. First there must be an initial encounter, a conversation, an exploration of possibilities within the text, and within the community in response to the text. We need to create moments for those new to this “Scriptural living”⁴¹ to encounter the Lively Word as one of hope, forgiveness, comfort, joy, before we can expect those same people to follow that Word into a “life-risking venture.”

I have tried, in the forgoing, to anchor my working definition of Biblical Imagination in the philosophy, theory and practice of human imagination, noting that creative imagination is founded upon or grounded in disciplined practice, is situated and launched from the “gaps”, the edges of experience, between “what is” and “what might be.” When human imagination meets the biblical canon, it recognizes a kindred spirit, for the canon is also deeply human in its exploration of the gapped nature of human and spiritual experience, that its texts collectively are polyvalent in purpose, content and form, gapped and dialogical, provoking plurality of interpretive possibility. Far from being a threat to the integrity of the biblical canon, it is my proposal that a disciplined imagination applied to the interpretation of biblical texts is most faithful to those texts, and ultimately to the HOLY ONE hidden and revealed therein.

It remains now to make the case for the addition of the adjective “midrashic” to the term “biblical imagination” in order to provide this additional biblical-theological foundation for the project which follows, but more importantly, to articulate an approach

⁴¹ Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, Revised Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 4.

to the Bible which can serve to inspire progressive-liberal Christians to become engaged interpreters of the Lively Word which shapes discipleship and mission. Michael Fishbane, speaking from within the Jewish exegetical and mystical tradition, calls this (Jewish) biblical imagination *zitathaftes leben*; “textualized existence,” or Scriptural living, by which he infers that the imaginative engagement with Scripture is not merely a philological or verbal exegetical event, but a habit of mind, body and heart which impacts a community, or is concretized within the community at the level of its daily living, through the practice of a peculiarly midrashic imagination to which we now turn.⁴²

Before we do, however, I offer a brief excursus for the Christian reader for whom the word “Midrash” is not familiar. This is not meant to be an academic précis of the expansive and multi-disciplinary fields of Midrash studies, nor an elementary introduction to the vast library of extra-biblical literature that goes by the name Midrash, but merely a few breadcrumbs placed strategically along the path to save any of us getting lost in the woods.

Excursus: Midrash 101

Midrash as a word, derives from the Hebrew verb **דרש** (*derash*) meaning to seek, search, inquire, probe, pursue.⁴³ Midrashing, then is an interpretive activity that takes place within the Bible itself, as later texts revisit earlier ones and add layers of new

⁴² Michael Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 1; Michael Fishbane, ed., *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought, and History* (New York: SUNY Press, 1993), 61.

⁴³ Strong 1875. See also this from <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/derash> (accessed June 25, 2016): “In the Midrash the distinction between *derash* and the alternative method called **peshat* is not clearly defined and in parallel passages the terms are sometimes interchangeable (cf. Gen. R. 10:7 with Tanh., Hukkat 1). Only in the Middle Ages, probably under the influence of Rashi’s Bible commentary, did *derash* come to be used for homiletical exposition in contrast to *peshat*, the literal interpretation.” Thus for our purposes in this thesis we use the looser understanding of the definition cited here.

meaning in light of new experiences.⁴⁴ Midrash emerges as a distinctive exegetical practice, process, and product in emerging diaspora Judaism within the first two centuries of the Common Era,⁴⁵ and continues over the next nine centuries, contributing to a vast library of extra-biblical literature of Tannaitic, Amoraic and Rabbinic Judaism, leaving “sedimentations of a linguistic community’s interpreted experience”⁴⁶ of God and the biblical canon amid the changing circumstances of Jewish life. Midrash then is both an interpretive activity (process), and the collective noun given to the written texts produced by such activity (product). The main focus of my attention in this thesis is upon midrashic interpretive activity, rather than on the texts this activity has produced. However, in order to hone my own skill as a *darshan* (one who “midrashes” a biblical text) in order to help my community become imaginative interpreters of Scripture in their own right, I have had to become at least somewhat familiar with the broad strokes and major elements of this midrashic library. The paragraph which follows provides the reader with a synopsis of that material.

Midrashic Literature (Product)

Midrashic literature falls into two categories; the first, Midrash Halakhah, addresses questions relating to Jewish law and religious practice, questions which became particularly pressing after the destruction of the Temple and the dispersion of Jews from Roman Palestine. Biblical texts, which assumed location of the people of Israel in the land of Israel, and centred around temple worship in Jerusalem, needed to be re-examined

⁴⁴ Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*; M. D. Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004).

⁴⁵ Two monographs cited earlier trace this development; see Boyarin, *Border Lines*, and Cohen, *Beginnings of Jewishness*.

⁴⁶ Sallie McFague, *Models of God* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), 76.

in light of this new circumstance, and the result is halakhic midrash, legal and ritual commentary on Torah. This material, known as oral Torah, was compiled in the *Mishnah* in the second century C.E. Commentaries or “studies”—*Talmuds*—on both written and oral Torah were compiled in two major diaspora communities,⁴⁷ and the halakhic material contained in them was eventually compiled into three books, the *Mekhilta on Exodus*, the *Sifra on Leviticus* and the *Sifrei on Numbers and Deuteronomy*.⁴⁸

The second category, Midrash Haggadah, is much more various in form, content and purpose, but focusses primarily on biblical and ethical issues in light of new generational experiences. This body of literature includes tight exegetical or philological examinations of conundra within the biblical texts, alongside sometimes wildly imaginative explorations and extrapolations derived from biblical characters and narratives, and creative compositions including parables (*mashal/meshalim*) fables, stories, narratives, and later homiletic collections. As with halakhic midrashim, these can be found throughout the two Talmuds. Over a period of eight or nine centuries, some of this material was transcribed into ten major midrashic compilations, the *Midrash Rabbah* (Great Midrash) being a compilation centred around the Torah, and Esther, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, and Ecclesiastes). Other smaller collections, such as the *Midrash Tehillim* (Midrash on Psalms) were added to the canon of rabbinic literature over the centuries. A final work needs to be mentioned because of its enduring popularity both within and beyond contemporary Judaism: the *Perkei Avot* (Sayings of the

⁴⁷ Talmud (meaning Study) is commentary on the Mishnah (the first work of rabbinic law, published c. 200 CE). The Palestinian or Jerusalem Talmud achieved its final form c. 400 CE, and the Babylonian Talmud was compiled between the third and eighth centuries. Cf. Karin Hedner Zetterholm, *Jewish Interpretation of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 48–61. They are abbreviated in most standard scholarly literature as *y.* (Yerushalmi) and *b.* (Bavli, or Babylonian).

⁴⁸ For sources of these texts used in this thesis, see the Bibliography. I have used only critical editions in bilingual or English translation.

Fathers),⁴⁹ originally part of the *Mishnah*, it contains short sayings attributed to the rabbis of the first two centuries of the Common Era, many of which are still quoted today, one of which heads this chapter.⁵⁰

Midrashic Process

Now that we know where to find the literary remains of this midrashic activity, it is time to draw from them the defining characteristics of midrash as an imaginative biblical interpretive activity. First of all, midrashic activity is not only an exegetical one, but also a spiritual or religious activity which involves a disciplined imagination. The rabbis pored over the text of the Bible in search of the HOLY ONE, and God's direction for the living of their days, believing that somehow God was and still is speaking through the biblical text. We need not mistake the anthropomorphisms, the parabolic humour, the at times ragged, brutal debates with the character of God, as signs of disrespect, but rather as evidence of a deep, abiding reverence for the Holy One hidden/revealed not only in the biblical text, but in their wrestling with it. "Turn and turn it again, for everything is in it,"⁵¹ including God.

From this reverence for the presence of the HOLY ONE within the text, flows a deep respect, even reverence for the biblical text in its entirety. The ancient rabbis were able to reconcile their knowledge that human authors wrote the texts over centuries, with the conviction that God is at work in its composition and core convictions. This combination of human scribal activity and divine revelation/hiddenness is fundamental to

⁴⁹ The edition I have used is an online resource: https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_Avot.1?lang=bi

⁵⁰ This paragraph stands on the shoulders of giants, relying upon the scholarship of experts in Midrashic Studies, Jewish History. The chief among them are named in chapter 3 section 2.

⁵¹ *Avot* 5:22. Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 14.

a core understanding of the biblical texts among the *darshanim*, namely its “gapped and dialogical nature.”⁵² Therefore a distinctive feature of midrashic activity is that it “always takes as [its] point of departure something in the [biblical] verse that appeared problematic.”⁵³ With some exceptions, much of the biblical canon is terse, and sparse in character or plot detail. This gapped nature begs the reader to “mind the gaps,” pose questions, follow its inner interpretations and offer new ones in light of the text’s encounter with the reader’s context. The gaps are various; it could be a philological detail or an unusual word (e.g. just what is גבינה (*g’binah*)? (Job 10:10)); an apparent contradiction, omission, or duplication within the narrative arc (e.g. how many times did Abraham pass off Sarah as his sister?); or a larger theological conundrum caused, for instance, by the behaviour of a character in the narrative (e.g. why was Jacob such a perennial heel? (Gen 25-35)), or by the behaviour of God (e.g. would God really demand the death of Isaac, or of entire Canaanite nations (Gen22; Num 31))? The rabbis do not answer such questions with a definitive, singular finality, so much as “turn and turn them” this way and that, offering up multiple interpretive possibilities. This is paradigmatic of midrashic imaginative activity, and pithily summed up in a midrash in the Babylonian Talmud, on Jeremiah 23:29 (“Is not my word like... a hammer that breaks the rock into pieces?”): “As the hammer splits the rock into many splinters, so will a scriptural verse yield many meanings” (*b. Sanh.* 34a).⁵⁴ The written midrashic compilations record these polyvocal, often argumentative responses, piling up the interpretations of a number of rabbis, placing contradicting or divergent

⁵² Ibid., 14.

⁵³ Zetterholm, *Jewish Interpretation of the Bible*, 69.

⁵⁴ Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *God’s Echo: Exploring Scripture with Midrash* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2007), 28.

interpretation—often from different centuries and regions—side by side. These rabbis, in their efforts to expose the polysemy of a biblical text, draw upon texts from other parts of the bible to shed new light, new possibilities for understanding, or engaging initial text in view, thereby “texturing” the text with layers of interpretation and meaning.

One of the more winsome, though often alarmingly fanciful, traits of midrashic biblical interpretation at its most imaginative is the creation of parables (*meshalim*), fables, and alternative narratives composed to shed light on a particular aspect of a given biblical text. One example, borrowed from Joel Allen’s work on the legendary nature of Jewish midrash will suffice to illustrate the extent of “faithful extrapolation” sometimes reached by the rabbis. In *Genesis Rabbah*, the editors have compiled a number of rabbinic responses to a theological problem presented in Genesis 1:2, where God appears to create the universe from “inferior material” תְּהוֹ וְבֹהוּ (*tohu v’bohu*). This caused no end of theological trouble for the Gnostics of the early Common Era, and their Jewish neighbours who sought to contradict their conclusions with midrashic imagination. A Tannaitic parable is offered by R. Eleazar:

This is like a king who built a palace on top of piles of dung, sewers, and garbage dumps. Everyone who came along would say, “This palace was built on s**t piles, and garbage. They wouldn’t necessarily devalue the property would they? So it is when someone comes along and says the Holy One constructed on *tohu v’bohu!*” They aren’t likely to devalue creation, are they?” (*Gen. Rab.* 1:5)⁵⁵

Two things are striking about this parable. Firstly let us note its imaginative twist on the passage. The trope of YHWH as king is common, both within and beyond the biblical canon, but the placement of this story as a midrashic interpretation of a phrase, displays

⁵⁵ Joel S. Allen, *Jewish Biblical Legends: Rabbinic Wisdom for Christian Readers* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 18.

the extent of the whimsical “wayward, antic”⁵⁶ playfulness in which the rabbis indulged in their imaginative engagement with the text. The second feature to note is the lack of closure. This is not meant to be a definitive case-closing “final answer.” As Hans Frei states, “a good interpretation of a text is one that has “breathing space,” that is to say one in which no hermeneutic finally allows you to resolve the text – there is something left to bother, something that is wrong, something that is not yet interpreted.”⁵⁷

The purposes of all this extravagant imaginative activity, particularly the production of stories, fables and parables, are many, and not limited to the didactic objective of achieving greater “understanding” of the biblical text or its ethical implications. They were also intended simply to delight and entertain, and provoke belly laughs, outrage, intense debate, unbridled joy. Midrashic imaginative activity is wholehearted and its ultimate objective is to cultivate a biblical imagination, one in which the totality of Scripture meets the totality of contemporary everyday existence, each informing, shaping the other, “an interplay of horizons,”⁵⁸ in which life is written into the text, and the text becomes a Word that journeys with the community.

Finally with respect to midrashic process, it should be well noted that midrashic imaginative activity is communal. In a contemporary society steeped in individualism, it is sometimes hard to appreciate the deep communitarianism of the biblical text itself, and this form of interpretive imagining. A typical midrashic unit witnesses to the multiple voices contributing to the search for meaning, as the various rabbis who are named stand

⁵⁶ David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 3.

⁵⁷ Cited in Garrett Green, *Theology, Hermeneutics, and Imagination: The Crisis of Interpretation at the End of Modernity* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 167.

⁵⁸ Bryant, *Faith and the Play of Imagination*, 149.

not only for themselves but for the *bet midrash* (house of study) in which they lived and worked. Contemporary Jewish communities continue this fundamentally communitarian approach to the study of Torah, assigning every individual a *havruta* (study partner) so that no one has to midrash alone. This story from the Talmud illustrates the power of this aspect of midrashic activity.

.... And Resh Lakish died. Rebbe Yochanan suffered his loss greatly. The Rabbis said, “Who do we have that can help settle his mind? Let us bring him Eliezer ben Padat, for he is sharp in his learning.” Eliezer den Padat went and sat in front of Yochanan and for everything Yochanan said, Eliezer brought forth a text to support Yochanan’s argument. But Rebbe Yochanan despaired, saying “You’re not like Resh Lakish. When I said one thing in front of him, he would challenge me with twenty-four questions which I would have to answer, and from that the Torah was richer – but you, you just support me! So, now I have no way of knowing if what I am saying has any truth! And Rebbe Yochanan ripped his cloak in mourning for Resh Lakish. (*b.Ketuv.103b*)⁵⁹

Midrashic Biblical Imagination in the Progressive Liberal Community

In chapter one, I offered a six-point working definition of “midrashic biblical imagination” as it is used throughout this thesis. Midrashic biblical imagination

- begins with the assumption that God is somehow speaking through the pages of Scripture
- fosters a reverence for God hidden and revealed in the texts, and in ongoing interpretation of the texts (even while wrestling, confronting and contesting with God and the text)
- acknowledges polyvalence within the texts, and within the character of God
- reads the Bible with question marks, and “minds” the gaps
- encourages multiple, open-ended interpretation of texts, by means of deep scrutiny, playful whimsy, extrapolative imagination, contestation and debate
- assumes that interpretation is an ongoing transformational activity of the community.

⁵⁹ Cited in Kunst, *The Burning Word*, 44–45.

The forgoing discussion of imagination, biblical imagination and the excursus on Midrash together demonstrate the extent to which this *zitathaftes leben*—the textualized existence—of a midrashic biblical interpretive community is anchored in the principles, theory and practice of human and biblical imagination. Midrashic imagination is uniquely equipped to attend to the “gapped and dialogical” nature, not only of the biblical text, but also of progressive-liberal faith communities for whom questions, textual and interpretive polyvalence and spiritual as well as exegetical imagination are benchmarks for faith and discipleship.

Midrashic imaginative activity is ongoing, just as the life of God is ongoing in the life of the world. Within the religious descendant communities of the Rabbis who first developed midrashic exegesis and imaginative interpretation, Conservative and Reform Judaism continue to understand that God’s revelation is both historical and ongoing. As Abraham Joshua Heschel asserted, “As a report about revelation, the Bible itself is a midrash.”⁶⁰ Moreover, Heschel maintained that there were and continue to be two active partners in the ongoing relationship to the Bible: God, the giver of Torah, and the human communities charged with interpreting it in successive generations.⁶¹ In the slow and careful post- Holocaust rapprochement between the Jewish and Christian traditions, there is evidence of a renewed curiosity among some Christians for the midrashic imaginative approach to Scripture, as a possible process for engaging both Testaments of the Christian Bible. Work by Jewish and Christian scholars in New Testament studies⁶² have

⁶⁰ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), 185.

⁶¹ As he famously opined, Judaism is “a minimum of revelation and a maximum of interpretation. Ibid., 274.

⁶² See for example, Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, Reprint edition (New York: HarperOne, 2015); Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in*

exposed the deep sedimentary layers of Jewish interpretation within the texts. Similarly, both Christian and Jewish authors are engaging in deliberate dialogue and narrative exchange to explore the gapped possibilities of both canons.⁶³

Marc Gellman's delightful book of "stories about stories in the Bible" entitled tantalizingly as *Does God have a Big Toe?*⁶⁴ in typical midrashic fashion, does not answer the question! Instead the reader is delighted, and inspired to one's own deep pondering of the story of Babel by the whimsical tale he tells of a curious girl called Arinna. Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso similarly teases, ponders and questions the biblical texts in her midrashic explorations for both adults and children.⁶⁵ With incisive poetic prose, Alicia Ostriker picks up the assertion in Deuteronomy 5:3 "Not with our ancestors did God make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive this day." She minds the feminine gap that tradition has wedged into this text, which has excluded women from the study of the biblical text, saying "the truths of women are present in this text... but we will not see these truths until women do their own reading, perform their own acts of discovery."⁶⁶ Her work is a transgressive re-visioning, a midrashic re-imagining of the biblical texts from the perspective of the child of exile, child of the Enlightenment, diasporic, dispersed. She holds the contemporary *darshan* (me) to a

Matthew; Brad H. Young, *Meet the Rabbis : Rabbinic Thought and the Teachings of Jesus*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007); Brad H. Young, *The Parables : Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998).

⁶³ See for example, Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*; Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *Midrash: Reading the Bible with Question Marks* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2013).

⁶⁴ Marc Gellman, *Does God Have a Big Toe? Stories About Stories in the Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

⁶⁵ Sasso, *God's Echo*; Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *In God's Name* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1994).

⁶⁶ Ostriker, *Nakedness of the Fathers*, 1, 8.

standard of ethical questioning of the patriarchal and hierarchical assumptions within the biblical canon and those who live imaginatively in its orbit.

These contemporary examples shared all too briefly here suggest that the midrashic approach to biblical interpretive imagination is ideally suited to the progressive-liberal Christian community seeking to revitalize its engagement with Scripture as a “song for the journey.” There are three points I want to make here, all of which I shall return to in Chapter Seven, but I name them here for the reader to bear in mind as the thesis unfolds in the following chapters.

First, any exegetical approach which values multivocality within both text, and interpreter, and within the character of God, and which encourages multi-dimensional responses and engagement with the text, fostering an interplay between the horizons of the text and contemporary experience meshes remarkably well with the progressive value of embracing the heterogonous nature of creation, humanity and the Divine.⁶⁷

Second, it is in the remit of Progressive Christianity to take issue with the patriarchy, colonialism, racism and systemic injustice inherent both in Scripture and in contemporary society. A biblical interpretive method which actually fosters a critique of text and context may be the greatest gift a midrashic imaginative approach may offer to strengthen a progressive biblical hermeneutic.

Thirdly, one of the challenges I have experienced in creating this midrashic imagination project has been how to translate midrashic reverence for the sacredness of the text into the context of a hermeneutically suspicious community that inherits all the modern scientific traits of skepticism towards any such claims. What I have discovered is

⁶⁷ Roger Wolsey, *Kissing Fish: Christianity for People Who Don't Like Christianity* (Lexington, KY: Xlibris, 2011) Kindle; David Felten and Jeff Procter-Murphy, *Living the Questions: The Wisdom of Progressive Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2012).

that by being unapologetic about this key feature in my preaching, while also attending to the layered textuality and contextuality of the Bible, and by using aesthetic responses to the texts in question in our midrashic study sessions, there has begun to emerge in the community a new vocabulary of “progressive Christian reverence”—or at least respect for—the persistent and polyvalent liminal imagination at work in so many biblical texts. The reverence or respect derives from the resonance between the biblical experiences of faith and doubt, hope and despair, sin and forgiveness and those same experiences in the progressive interpretive community. This dialogue between past and present is creating holy space to imagine a God-shaped tomorrow, which, in Christian terms at least, is the deepest human longing there is.

Conclusion

I have taken time here to explore the theory and practice of human imagination as it meets the biblical text, noting along the way the Enlightenment inspired suspicion of imagination as a valid approach to ancient texts. I have done this in order to propose a solid inner biblical foundation for the deliberate, disciplined, communitarian activity of midrashic imaginative interpretation of the Bible, not only by Jewish descendants of this rich tradition, but also by the Progressive-Liberal Christian community, who may find in this “stranger practice” a less baggage-laden approach to biblical interpretation. For many, this is a discovery, rather than a recovery of an interpretive method that has its roots within the Bible itself, which encourages all interpretive communities to press their speech about God’s redemptive and creative action in the text and in the world “to its imaginative limit.”⁶⁸ Such a midrashic biblical imagination has the potential to

⁶⁸ Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination*, 15.

encourage community interpretation and engagement with Scripture that is argumentative, challenging, playful, artistic, aesthetic, exegetic, homiletic, and sufficiently persistent to create a “textualized existence” for those who engage in this practice/method.

In the chapters which follow, I hope to demonstrate that the development in community of this midrashic method has unleashed an “undomesticated biblical imagination” in the life of the congregation of Cedar Park United. Through a series of biblical exploration projects over a number of years, we have learned to stop being bored with the Bible and instead, have learned to explore, study, play, reverence, perform and preach these lively texts in a midrashic key. The following chapter provides an extensive literature review of the major texts and resources that have guided this adventure.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

The previous chapter presented the philosophical and biblical-theological foundations for a “midrashic biblical imagination”, through which a progressive-liberal congregation might fall in love with the polyvalent texts of the Bible. I have sought to traverse the tricky terrain of biblical imagination with outside help from other practitioners of transformational imaginative practice in other disciplines as a prolegomena to the main focus, namely Midrash as both an imaginative process, and a product of that process, identifying those key characteristics which seem to be the most applicable to the development of a midrashic interpretive praxis for the progressive wing of the Christian church. This chapter anchors the forgoing discussion by identifying those scholars and practitioners who have shaped this project with their knowledge, insights, wisdom, and warnings. I shall proceed thematically, beginning with a section introducing the reader to literature which describes the “distinct society” context of Quebec,¹ before touching again on the area of biblical imagination and midrash, this time from the perspective of a literature review. This is followed by a lengthier section on biblical performance theory.

¹ A phrase that did not quite make it into Canada’s constitutional law, but is nevertheless definitive of the province within Canada. See Trevor W. Harrison and John W. Friesen, *Canadian Society in the Twenty-First Century. An Historical Sociological Approach* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2015).

One thing that was clear to me, from the moment I shared my tentative proposals for this thesis with Luther Seminary faculty, is that few people have done a project quite like this before. I am bringing together a number of disciplinary areas of study and practical theology, and have been fortunate enough to find many experts and wise companions for various aspects of this project. However, other than one D.Min. thesis which touches briefly on Midrash and preaching in a Christian context, I am on my own.² Other doctoral theses (one PhD, and five D.Min.), ephemeral pieces and online resources, where they have been significant contributors to my work, are named within the following sections.

Contextual Studies

I was schooled in Clifford Geertz' "thick descriptive"³ methods of social anthropology and cultural analysis as a seminary student, and continue to use the tools developed for congregational cultural analysis as outlined in the classic handbook, *Studying Congregations*.⁴ Such an approach calls for a careful, critical approach, not only to the specifics of the community's context, but also to the larger context within which it is situated. It is a perennial issue for those of us who serve the Gospel north of the 49th parallel that we must constantly filter "North American" literature, research and references, to see if in fact they are relevant or truly reflective of our Canadian

² Teresa Angle-Young, "'So What?' Preaching to a Postmodern World: Using Midrash and Deconstruction to Approach the Sunday Sermon" (D.Min thesis, Aquinas Institute of Theology, 2014). Angle Young's thesis explores three approaches to preaching in a postmodern context: midrash, *lectio divina*, and deconstruction. Her primary focus is the postmodern mind and population of an emerging church. Her section on midrash (part of chapter 2) is brief, and uses only two resources, Sasso's *God's Echo*, and an article by Marc Bregman, but she does note polyvalence and ambiguity as two traits conducive to interesting the postmodern worshipper.

³ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation Of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

⁴ Nancy T. Ammerman et al., eds., *Studying Congregations* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998).

experience. My approach, then, has been to balance reading of the macro context (postmodernity, secularism, western military-industrial-democratic-capitalist, and so on) with study of the micro context (Canadian, Anglophone, Protestant-minority within a post-Quiet Revolution, vestigially Roman Catholic, Quebec). These complex layers of contextual reality, I believe, impact how we approach biblical interpretation, imagination, and discipleship more than we often assume. Being myself non-native to Canada and Quebec, and knowing that most readers of this thesis will also be unfamiliar with this context has meant that this preliminary contextual work has been essential in order to understand and interpret what has been happening throughout the years covered by this study.

Michael Gauvreau's *The Catholic Origins of Quebec's Quiet Revolution: 1931-1970*,⁵ proved especially helpful in presenting a cogent analysis of the complex origins and implications of Quebec's "Quiet Revolution," when staggering numbers of Roman Catholics left their churches for good between the 1960s and 1980s. Gauvreau sees this as a radical "modernist" laicization (or de-clericalization) within Catholicism that had hitherto been a central social, religious and political force in that era. His thesis, while not totally compelling, certainly helps to explain the current rigorous, even belligerent anti-religious secularism of this province, and connects with the conclusions of that other Quebecer, Charles Taylor, who charts in immense and dense prose, the contours of a profound secularity that is present not only here in Quebec, but also in Canada, the United States, and Europe.⁶ Fortunately James K. Smith's précis of Taylor's monumental

⁵ Michael Gauvreau, ed., *The Catholic Origins of Quebec's Quiet Revolution, 1931-1970* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 2005).

⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

work has provided a handy pocket map with which to navigate Taylor's description and thesis that ours is a haunted era, in which there is a residual spiritual longing no longer satisfied by traditional religious expression.⁷

With this micro and macro map in place, it was time to fill in the details and the contours with a careful study of what it means to be the United Church of Canada, both at its inception as a union of three mainline Protestant denominations at the turn of the 20th Century, and now. Phyllis Airhart's two monographs and Brian Fraser's *Social Uplifters* proved particularly helpful in identifying the unique Canadian nuancing to the oft-repeated trope that the United Church of Canada got its Social Gospel DNA from Schleiermacher, and via the Methodists alone.⁸ Neither part of that trope is entirely true; as I have already suggested in the first chapter of the thesis, Schleiermacher's influence in Canada comes later with the flourishing of the Social Gospel movement post World War I, and therefore less foundationally significant than the forging of ecumenical partnerships under the theological leadership of Presbyterian T.B. Kilpatrick and Methodist Nathanael Burwash, among others, in a common cause to create a Protestant Christianized Canada. Robert C. Fennell's careful historical examination of the United Church of Canada's evolving biblical hermeneutic, as expressed in its creedal statements, public and official documents and educational curricula, proved to be especially valuable in identifying the various strata of biblical hermeneutics at play in the one congregation I serve, whose history extends beyond the entire life-span of the denomination.

⁷ Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 5.

⁸ Airhart, *Serving the Present Age*; and *A Church with the Soul of a Nation: Making and Remaking the United Church of Canada*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014); Fraser, *The Social Uplifters*.

Defining “Progressive-Liberal”

I have chosen throughout this thesis to use the hyphenated term “Progressive-Liberal” in part because I believe the two descriptors together best describe my congregational context, where Canadian evangelical liberalism (as helpfully charted by Airhart in *Soul of A Nation*),⁹ had both a founding and a lasting influence. “Liberal” has also been the adjective used by members of the congregation (and the denomination as a whole) to describe their sense of identity across the Christian spectrum, and by it they have also inferred a liberal social ethic operative in its longstanding commitment to social justice, the equal place of women in church and society, and the full participation of LGBTQ2A+ folk in the life, work and leadership of the church.

It is really only in very recent years that the term “Progressive” has become a factor in this congregation’s self-identity. There is abundant material which charts the phenomenon of so-called resurgent, convergent, or emergent Christianity, particularly, but not exclusively in North America. Notable among this material are the works of American religious social historian Diana Butler Bass,¹⁰ and Brian McLaren, whose dialogical works are of particular merit in a landscape where progressive-liberalism must stop its patronizing dismissal of anything that smacks of conservative or traditional faith or worldview.¹¹ Literature that defines Progressive *theology* is still relatively thin on the ground, although there are many writers, theologians, pastors and preachers who are increasingly using the term to identify their location within the Christian landscape.

⁹ Airhart, *Soul of a Nation*.

¹⁰ Three key works by Diana Bass include *Christianity After Religion*; *The Practicing Congregation*; *From Nomads to Pilgrims*.

¹¹ Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That are Transforming the Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2010); *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

Perhaps it is in the nature of the beast—a new, evolving coalescence—that other than a few monographs, much of this defining confessional work is ephemeral, episodic, and online. Nevertheless, for those in our congregations, trying to figure out what it is that brings them and holds them into relationship with the biblical library and the worshipping, discipling and missional practices of a progressive community of faith, such work is necessary, even if the shelf-life of such work will be short. Four (global) websites currently act as a sort of clearing house or hub to help the curious and committed navigate their progressive theological way, and they are listed in the next footnote.¹² Notably, the Australian site is the strongest for theological resources. Also online, and increasingly, since the US Presidential election of 2016, the Sojourners’ website is becoming a place of convergence for Christians from all over the geographical and theological map, who seek to live their faith and hope for God’s justice at the intersection of faith, politics and culture.¹³

Monographs which try to define the parameters of what is still a fluid phenomenon include three which I have used to ground my work, not only for this thesis, but also to help the congregation to articulate its own progressive vision. Delwin Brown’s irenic little volume,¹⁴ helps to map out the terrain for lay readers, and curious others, under classic theological headings. A larger monograph, written as a textual resource for the *Living the Questions* online and digital resources, edited by Felten and Procter-

¹² See the following websites, all accessed most recently, December 9, 2017: *Living the Questions*, www.livingthequestions.com; *Progressive Christianity*, <https://progressivechristianity.org/>; *Progressive Christianity Network UK*, <https://www.pcnbritain.org.uk/about>; *Progressive Christians Australia*, <http://www.progressivechristians.org.au/>.

¹³ The website of *Sojourners*, accessed December 7, 2017, <https://sojo.net/>. See also *Patheos*, <http://www.patheos.com/> and a number of Facebook pages which are creating cross-denominational communities and the progressive/conservative chasm, e.g. <https://revgalblogpals.org/>.

¹⁴ Delwin Brown, *What Does a Progressive Christian Believe?: A Guide for the Searching, the Open, and the Curious* (New York: Seabury Books, 2008).

Murphy performs a similar function.¹⁵ Another fun read, but unnecessarily prolix, and to my mind too flippant to have staying power within the field, is Roger Wolsey's jaunty *Kissing Fish*.¹⁶ This particular work highlights one reason why Canadians often need to look elsewhere than the United States for wisdom, conversation and best practices in the emerging progressive Christian way, as the straw person at whom he lobbs most of his shots is US Progressive Christianity's nemesis, the US Right Wing, Puritan- heritage Conservative Evangelical, making the book reflective of a religious landscape indigenous to the USA's history, but not Canada's. Nevertheless, our proximity to the American Empire means that we, like the proverbial mouse, do keep an ever-watchful eye on the activity of the elephant with whom we share continental space.

When not watching the elephant in the room, home-grown United Church authors have become my mentors and conversation partners as each addresses various aspects of what it means to be progressive Christians in Canada. Brad Morrison's *Already Missional* provides the necessary outward, world-facing, missional perspective that can so easily get ignored when we become overly absorbed in imaginative biblical interpretation.¹⁷ His eye on the lived-ness of the Gospel trains my homiletic eye to push through the exegesis to the missional application. John Pentland's *Fishing Tips*¹⁸ is beautifully and simply grounded in a biblical image; asking "what if" we choose to cast our nets on the other side? (John 21:1-6),¹⁹ and continues to offer a practical progressive theology in action in

¹⁵ Felten and Procter-Murphy, *Living the Questions*. See also their website, which includes additional resources, www.livingthequestions.com.

¹⁶ Wolsey, *Kissing Fish*.

¹⁷ Bradley T. Morrison, *Already Missional: Congregations and Community Partners* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016).

¹⁸ John Pentland, *Fishing Tips: How Curiosity Transformed a Community of Faith* (Toronto: Edge: Network for Ministry Development, 2016).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, xii, 216.

the life of a congregation. I value the humility and precision of a local expression of God's global vision, his insistence on contextual grounding, and the open-ended, midrashic "or maybe there's another way" tone to the offered "fishing tips." It is less a criticism than an observation, that the biblical hermeneutic of Pentland's work is implied, not explicit. My hope for my own work here is that it speaks conversationally, adding a biblical hermeneutic dimension that complements, or better yet, undergirds Morrison's and Pentland's practical theologies.

I cannot leave the topic of progressive-liberal Christianity in the Canadian context without mentioning briefly Gretta Vosper and Bruce Sanguin, both of whom represent the far left, outer reaches of the progressive Christian universe. Both would perhaps best be described as post-progressive, even post-Christian. Sanguin's earlier work helped to define "emerging" Christianity, and to give liturgical voice to a theology broad enough to embrace evolution,²⁰ but he has since moved beyond his 2015 self-definition as an "evolutionary Christian."²¹ Gretta Vosper self-identifies as an atheist minister (and certainly post-biblical),²² still trying to keep her credentials within the United Church of Canada, which is causing supreme consternation in a denomination that perceives itself as a "broad church;" the question is how broad? A recent doctoral thesis by Rebekka King provides a solid ethnographic analysis of Vosper and her community, although some of her theological conclusions and extrapolations from this idiosyncratic context are

²⁰ Bruce Sanguin, *The Emerging Church: A Model for Change and a Map for Renewal* (Kelowna: Copperhouse, 2008); *If Darwin Prayed: Prayers for Evolutionary Mystics* (Vancouver: Evans and Sanguin, 2010).

²¹ See Sanguin's personal website, <http://brucesanguin.com/>, accessed October 17, 2017.

²² Gretta Vosper, *With or Without God* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2008). See in particular 38–9, 105 for her (dismissive) views on the Bible.

too sweeping.²³ Nevertheless, I include Sanguin and Vosper here because they are part of “my people” they push the left edges, and demonstrate to me what can happen when a Christian community becomes untethered from its biblical heritage. It is not enough to dismiss the Bible because “the texts are irredeemably patriarchal, ancient, misogynist, ethnophobic... “or whatever derogatory adjective you need. To me, that is a fault of our limited, de-theologized biblical imagination, rendering us blind to those fleeting glimpses of God who is always much bigger than the parochialisms of either the biblical text or its readers. What is required is imaginative recovery work, work I am attempting to do here.

In closing this section, I said earlier that there are numerous theologians whose work is considered to be expressive of progressive theology. It is in the nature of pastoral work in this context that I’ve studied too many of them to do more than highlight a few significant authors by name: Borg, Caputo, Crossan, Elizabeth Johnson, McFague, Rohr, Rollins, Tutu, Wallis, Volf, among many others.²⁴ I would be remiss as a closeted sort-of post-liberal Brueggemannian working in a progressive-liberal context, if I did not also acknowledge my debt to a few post-liberal, and even conservative (!) theologians whose scholarship has helped to add a biblical rigour, a narrative framework and a healthy skepticism of that liberal optimism that assumes societal transformation is within a

²³ Rebekka King, “The New Heretics: Popular Theology, Progressive Christianity and Protestant Language Ideologies” (Ph.D. diss., Toronto, 2012), https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/34082/1/King_Rebekka_201211_PhD_thesis.pdf, accessed July 17, 2017.

²⁴ Marcus J. Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously but Not Literally*, reprint edition (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2002); John Dominic Crossan, *How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian: Is God Violent? An Exploration from Genesis to Revelation*, reprint edition (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2016); John D. Caputo, *Hoping Against Hope: Confessions of a Postmodern Pilgrim* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015); Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 2002); Richard Rohr, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (Whitaker House, 2016); Peter Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2011); Desmond Tutu, *God Has a Dream*; Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011); Jim Wallis, *On God’s Side: What Religion Forgets and Politics Hasn’t Learned about Serving the Common Good*. (Grand Rapids MI: Brazos Press, 2013).

human grasp without the grace and potency of a covenantally demanding, Holy, Undomesticated God. Stanley Hauerwas' trenchant, no-nonsense critique of human optimism, repeated in most of his published work can act as an Eeyore-like lead-weighting to any tendency to flippant optimism in my preaching and teaching.²⁵ William Placher's helpful long-view of the evolution of theologies of God reminds me constantly to seek out the polyvalence of God within the biblical canon,²⁶ and his *Narrative of A Vulnerable God* underpins the way I navigate the complex diversity of Christological conviction within my community through my preaching, and the Advent sermons included in the appendices show the influence of his careful, and expansive vision.²⁷ That's enough! Although of the making (and reading) of books there is no end!

Biblical Imagination

Until beginning this project research, I was blissfully unaware of how sensitive the topic of "Biblical Imagination" is among conservative Christians. I swim in progressive-liberal waters where the place of imagination as an approach to Scripture in study, worship and preaching is, if not normative, certainly acceptable. I suspect that the same could be said for Edward Kay's recent thesis calling for the cultivation of biblical imagination through preaching, as his definition of "biblical imagination" is benign and

²⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom?: How the Church Is to Behave If Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991); "The Christian Difference, or Surviving Postmodernism," in *Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 144–61; *Resident Aliens*, Anniversary ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016). The reference to Eeyore, comes, of course from A.A. Milne.

²⁶ Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Theology Went Wrong* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

²⁷ William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).

unchallenging.²⁸ The terrain, I have discovered, is far more contested, so much so that from one paragraph in my proposal, I have expanded my response to the better part of a whole chapter, believing that the progressive church needs to address this as fully as possible with a coherent and rigorous response that calls upon the wisdom of scholars within and far beyond the disciplines of theology and biblical hermeneutics, as I hope to have demonstrated already in chapter two.²⁹

Before moving on from this topic, I need to state the obvious: the extensive corpus of Walter Brueggemann, on biblical imagination, the theology of the Old Testament, and the intersection of Bible, theology and discipleship, the Bible as a contested text that speaks truth to power in our own age, as it has done in every age, have had a profound impact on my own biblical imagination, discipleship and profession as a teaching pastor, and upon this thesis, as a quick look at the footnotes and bibliography will attest. Brueggemann more or less happily situates himself as a postmodern interpreter of Scripture, admitting easily that there is no such thing as an “interest free interpretation.” If that is the case, then it behooves the Progressive-liberal Christian community to name and claim its place within the ongoing “dynamic practice of the Torah,” in which we get to move beyond “conventional polemical caricatures.... in order to ponder an interpretive practice that is intransigently normative, and yet enormously

²⁸ Edward N. Kay, “Cultivating Biblical Imagination Through Preaching” (D.Min. thesis, Luther Seminary, 2016), 6, 13. “[Biblical imagination] allows the hearer not only to know or recite the Word of God, but also to be able to see the intersection of the Word and everyday life.” His methodological approach is basic, and Trinitarian in its formulation. See his “close the eyes and see God’s work”, “feel the presence of Christ” and trust that the Holy Spirit is “alive in the hearer even today,” *ibid.*, 6.

²⁹ I have chosen not to include here the complex terrain of medieval exegesis, and the subsequent battles for the hermeneutical high ground during the Reformations of the 16th-17th centuries, the vestiges of which still scar the Protestant/Catholic and Conservative-Literalist/Progressive-Liberal polarized landscape of biblical interpretation, let alone biblical imagination.

open to adaptation... never reaching closure, but always being responsive in ways that preclude final settlement.”³⁰

Where Brueggemann still has me struggling is his repeated portrayal of God in terms of monarchical power, for example, connected to the above quotation, he names God as “an uncompromising sovereign”³¹. Within the biblical polyvalence, perhaps this is the divine characteristic that most strongly resonates with Brueggemann’s personal discipleship, but it is not one I share, and neither, I suspect, does it have much traction within the United Church in Quebec, where monarchy is a “bad idea.” It must be possible to speak biblically of the Divine in terms that resonate more closely with a post-Christendom progressive theological imagination. I turn then to ancient authors like Hildegard or Julian, or to contemporary theologians and Biblical scholars like Sallie McFague and Elizabeth Johnson, Catherine Keller, and homiletics like Anna Carter Florence and Barbara Lundblad, and to contemporary Jewish *darshanim* whose work is steeped in a feminist biblical imagination.³² Together, these writers school my own homiletic vocabulary to rely not on patriarchal, hierarchical, or colonial metaphors, but to push for the full exposure of other biblical metaphors for God-Beyond-our-Naming, and to proclaim God’s Dream within creation as an emanation of Divine Love which is redemptive and transfigurative, not coercive or dictatorial.

³⁰ Brueggemann, *Theology Old Testament*, 595.

³¹ Ibid.

³² McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*; Johnson, *She Who Is*; Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2002); Lundblad, *Transforming the Stone*; Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007); Ostriker, *Nakedness of the Fathers*; Sasso, *God’s Echo*.

Midrash Studies

I shall keep this short and synoptic, although this is where the bulk of my research time has been spent. The previous chapter has, I hope, provided the reader with a sense of the vast scope of this topic; so what follows here is a brief hand-drawn map of the literary journey I took through this midrashic wonderland, rather than an in-depth analysis of some of its key players. When I returned to midrashic studies a few years ago, I picked up where I left off, with the work of Michael Fishbane in various monographs and edited collections.³³ Now, as one reviewer rightly states, his work is not for the faint of heart, being dense, and assuming an immersion into Jewish religion that I do not have. Nevertheless the hard slog is well worth the effort in revealing an imaginative approach to scriptural interpretation almost lost to the average Christian reader. Jacob Neusner's work was initially useful as a more pedestrian entry point,³⁴ but as I moved further into this research I found myself following Boyarin, Fraade, and Stern³⁵ in moving beyond Neusner's persistence with a dated approach to Jewish literature that does not take into account the major revisions and interdisciplinary critical advances of the past two decades. One arena of revision that has played a significant role in the background research—although it is less evident in the finished thesis—concerns the now hotly debated question of the history, origins, or “border lines” of Judaeo-Christianity in the first two to

³³ Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination; Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel; The Midrashic Imagination*.

³⁴ Jacob Neusner, *The Midrash: An Introduction* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994); Jacob Neusner, *Judaism and the Interpretation of Scripture: Introduction to the Rabbinic Midrash* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004).

³⁵ Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*; Steven D. Fraade, “Rewritten Bible and Rabbinic Midrash as Commentary,” in *Current Trends in the Study of Midrash*, ed. Carol Bakhos (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 59–78; Stern, *Midrash and Theory*.

three centuries of the Common Era. Shaye Cohen³⁶ and Daniel Boyarin are at the forefront of this work, Boyarin basically proposing that Jesus-following Jews and other Jews shared a religious landscape for longer than more classic interpretations (in works by Hirshman, or Trebolle Berra)³⁷ would have us suppose, and that it is the “invention of heresy”—a defining urge among leaders “anxious to construct a discrete identity for Christianity”—who more or less imposed a “border line” from above.³⁸ Given what we know about “people’s histories” of the experience of religious belief and practice as being resiliently far more heterogonous than the religious, academic or political elites would propose or prefer, Boyarin’s thesis is both historically compelling and interpretively intriguing, and gives a solid historical basis for the work of historians of biblical interpretation who are “discovering” far more midrashic qualities in the New Testament than the old borderlines would have allowed.³⁹ Accompanying this revision of rabbinic origins, and the complex overlay of biblical interpretations, is a flurry of new work examining the intertextuality of midrash in relation to culture which is available through the more recent and mercifully short books by Stern, Boyarin, Jacobs, and the enormously helpful collection of essays in Carol Bakhos’ edition.⁴⁰

As with Biblical studies, where it is possible to learn an awful lot about the bible without ever cracking its spine, the same can be said for Midrash (as product). My guides included three Christian authors, Brad Young and Joel Allen, and Judith Kunst, who

³⁶ Cohen, *Beginnings of Jewishness*.

³⁷ Hirshman, *A Rivalry of Genius*; Trebolle Barrera, *The Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible*.

³⁸ Boyarin, *Border Lines*, 36ff. See also his brilliant chapter on John 1 as a midrash, *ibid.*, 89ff.

³⁹ See, for example the following exemplary monographs, Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*; Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew*; Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation*.

⁴⁰ Irving Jacobs, *The Midrashic Process: Tradition and Interpretation in Rabbinic Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). The other works named are already cited above.

having bravely ventured into this vast library, have emerged to offer a guided tour.⁴¹ Of the three, Kunst and Allen provide a fascinating bus tour of midrashic fables, whereas Young's work is more like a walking tour with an expert who shows not only the sites, but gives some useful historical and contextual background. He does so with an apologetic enthusiasm to help his (suspicious) evangelical brothers and sisters to see the Jewishness of the Gospel. The three together combined to help me produce a third-hand tour for participants in the Midrashic Imagination project, which with various tweaks and adjustments along the way, proved to be successful, and useful. To these Christian guides I also owe a debt of wisdom and gratitude to three contemporary Jewish *darshanim*/midrashists; Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, Marc Gellman and Alicia Ostriker.⁴² If midrash is not an antiquarian study, but a living expression of the ongoing "dynamic practice of the Torah,"⁴³ these three, along with Rabbis with whom I have had the privilege to study and explore Torah in the context of synagogue worship, have been generous guides. Sasso's *God's Echo* is a winsome invitation to the practice of midrash, bringing the questions of the Bible forward into our own lives; "God's question to Adam and Eve after they have eaten the forbidden fruit— Where are you?— would become a question for us, for now. What are we doing...? Are we shamed...? Are we hiding?"⁴⁴ Marc Gellman's delightful collection has inspired me to write "stories about stories in the Bible," minding the gaps in whimsical, yet profoundly inquisitive ways, to open up creative, imaginative possibilities.

⁴¹ Young, *Meet the Rabbis*; Allen, *Jewish Biblical Legends*; Kunst, *Burning Word*.

⁴² Gellman, *Does God Have a Big Toe*; Sasso, *God's Echo*; Ostriker, *Nakedness of the Fathers*.

⁴³ Brueggemann, *Theology Old Testament*, 595.

⁴⁴ Sasso, *God's Echo*, 3.

Performance Theory

When I began this process, I had every intention of dedicating more space within the thesis to lay out in fine detail the ways in which recent advances in the discipline of biblical performance theory have informed my homiletic practice, and have opened up remarkable imaginative interpretive possibilities for the community, in study, meetings, and the performance and interpretation of Scripture in worship. The practical work has indeed been extensive, building upon the foundational work we did together in 2016 in part for the Luther Seminary D.Min. Colloquy required Integrative Paper assignment, and indeed this work is a crucial component of the creation of an effective “midrashic method” for congregational engagement with the Bible. However, the innovative focus of the “midrashic” component has pushed the reflective analysis of biblical performance studies beyond the current scope of the thesis, partly because others are doing good work in this field, and the resource base is building.⁴⁵ What follows is my best attempt in a few words to point to the ways in which this research and practical fieldwork have contributed to the development of the Midrashic Imagination Project.

Richard Ward’s immensely provocative and helpful intensive course, supplemented by his own *Speaking of the Holy*⁴⁶, and his collaborative work with David Trobisch⁴⁷ are foundational to this relatively recent development in my practical theology of worship. Ward is a classic biblical storyteller,⁴⁸ using the printed English version of

⁴⁵ I note here the recent contribution to this body of work by Kathryn L. Skoglund, “Telling the Old, Old Stories: Reconnecting with Jesus’ Parables through Biblical Storytelling” (D.Min. thesis, Luther Seminary, 2016).

⁴⁶ Ward, *Speaking of the Holy*.

⁴⁷ Richard F. Ward and David Trobisch, *Bringing the Word to Life : Engaging the New Testament through Performing It* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013).

⁴⁸ See Thomas E. Boomershine, *Story Journey: An Invitation to the Gospel as Storytelling* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1988).

the text as the only script for an oral performative event. He builds upon an eclectic foundation of classical and contemporary oratorical theory, but what undergirds the practice is a profound reverence for the biblical text, and the Holy One to whom it witnesses, a demeanour consistent with one of the key characteristics we have been introducing through the midrashic approach. This, for Ward, and now me, spills over into the preaching moment, where the sermon too becomes “enfleshed speech” if it is prepared and delivered with “reverence, love and humility,” qualities he exemplifies in his teaching.⁴⁹ The work of Jana Childers and David Rhoads and Bausch⁵⁰ have added both theoretical and practical depth to the homiletic moment, and in the process has pushed me to consider imaginative possibilities that result from increasing the engagement of worshippers with Scripture, not just as hearers, but as interpreters. The challenge is to bridge the gap between pulpit and pew, as Mark Allen Powell has graphically illustrated throughout his book.⁵¹ The conversational approach to preaching explored by Ronald and Wesley Allen⁵² goes some way to address this gap, but once again the assumption seems to be that it is the preachers who will be doing most of the conversing with their homiletical neighbourhoods, rather than a polyvocal conversation of text, community, context and preacher. Richard Swanson’s aptly titled *Provoking the Gospel* series has been influential in pursuing this trajectory, but ultimately, much of his content is just what he promises, unrelentingly provocative discourse that in my

⁴⁹ Ward, *Speaking of the Holy*, 19.

⁵⁰ William J. Bausch, *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith* (Mystic, CT: Twenty Third Publications, 1984); Jana Childers, *Performing The Word: Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016); David Rhoads, *Characterization in the Gospels* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2004).

⁵¹ Mark Allan Powell, *What Do They Hear? Bridging the Gap between Pulpit and Pew* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007).

⁵² Ronald J. Allen and O. Wesley Allen, *The Sermon without End* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2015).

experience bombards and constrains the hearers own imaginative engagement with the text. Christopher Colby Smith's thesis on preaching as performance goes some way to promote a collaborative approach to the preparation of a sermon arising from study outside of worship, and Edwin Searcy's analysis of sermons preached over six years provides a glimpse of the process of inscripturated community transformation which, I find, resonates with what is beginning to emerge at Cedar Park United.⁵³

Based on this research, my exegetical and preaching practice has begun to extend the practice of performative delivery of the text beyond the monological approach, to include the physical, auditory and performative engagement of those listening to , or participating in, the narrative of Scripture. The result is a closer connection to the biblical text through the use of various translations, or close paraphrase, and the incorporation of multivocality into the performative delivery of these texts.⁵⁴

It may seem out of place to end a chapter which privileges the voices of scholars and their published work, with the voiceless Gospel proclamation of a toddler, but if the Gospel is about overturning the world so that the voiceless sing and the lame dance, why not? In the season of Epiphany, we worked with Matthew's text together, to enflesh the Magi's visit to the child's home. One participant, a father, brought with him his toddler son. As the gathered "Magi" imagined the gifts they would bring to Jesus, the young boy sat on the ground, and proceeded to offer the magi his snack tub of cheerios and grapes. The hush and wonder that settled gently around a full sanctuary as people began to recognize that the Scripture was re-writing us, was profound, moving, liminal, and

⁵³ Colby Smith, Christopher, "Preaching as Performance: The Appropriation of Skills and Elements of Acting Performance for Preaching." (D.Min.thesis, Luther Seminary, 2007); Edwin J. Searcy, "Figural Preaching in a Missional Congregation: A Descriptive Case Study of the Relationship Between Figural Preaching and Ecclesial Formation" (D.Min.thesis, Columbia Theological Seminary, 2002).

⁵⁴ A number of these multi-vocal performative scripture texts are included in the appendices

memorable. A modern epiphany occurred in the presence of a tiny child. “Today Scripture has been fulfilled in our hearing.” (Luke 4:21 NRSV)

Conclusion

In this chapter I have reviewed the pertinent literature in a number of areas that contribute to the thesis, beginning with resources which help to define the contours of progressive-liberal Christian practice in the postmodern, post-religious context that is Anglophone Quebec. In the sections on Midrash studies and biblical imagination, I hope to have demonstrated a passing acquaintance with the work of major scholars in these areas and to be cognizant of the contested discourse in each. Together, these sections of the review add further theoretical footings to the work of the first two chapters. The final section on biblical performance theory likewise seeks to ground in theory the practical midrashic imaginative work of the project.

In the next chapter, I shall begin by laying out the methodological framework for conducting a longitudinal qualitative research project which spans a number of years, and which concludes with an in-depth description of the Midrashic Imagination Project, which took place over four liturgical seasons between Advent 2016 and Ordinary Time (September) 2017.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

In November 2016 the Midrashic Imagination Project (MIP) began at Cedar Park United, and continued through the seasons of Advent, Lent, and Easter, and formally concluded in Ordinary Time, September 2017. The project is the love child of a much longer process of trying to cultivate a curiosity for the Bible as a generative, lively Word that journeys with us as a progressive-liberal community of faith with missional purpose to live the Dream of God in the world. This chapter will use a longitudinal research methodology to trace a nine year journey of discovery, dreaming, designing and delivery of a number of prototypical educational, liturgical and homiletic projects from which this culminating project emerged. Space constraints dictate that the earliest projects, which took place between 2008-2016, be described only briefly within the body of this chapter, to draw out the learnings and questions which guided each subsequent project, leading eventually to the Midrashic Imagination Project itself. Appendix B contains more narrative description, as well as the research data result analysis for an illustrative number of these preliminary projects.

Methodological Questions

As stated earlier in this thesis,¹ members of this congregation and I came upon the imaginative and generative potential of a midrashic interpretive process almost by

¹ See chapter 1

accident, in 2013 or so, in the midst of a long, and organic, piecemeal series of attempts to cultivate more enthusiasm for Scripture. This presents a methodological challenge; how can one, responsibly and with sufficient academic rigor, give due credit to these early forays into biblical imagination as being the soil in which the seed of the Midrashic Imagination Project germinated?

The solution I have adopted is to engage in a “longitudinal” qualitative research methodology² in order to analyse as best I can not only the MIP, but also a number of these preliminary episodes going back to 2008, in order to identify those pivotal moments of change and development of capacity, curiosity and biblical imagination in the life of this congregation, and me as the one called to share this Lively Word with them.³ This amounts to a serious pile of data and analytical material, not all of which can be included in the body of this and the following chapter, given that the focus of this thesis is the resulting Midrash Imagination Project. Therefore I shall include a brief synopsis here, and refer the reader to Appendix A for more description and analysis of the various biblical imagination episodes from 2008-2014.

What is a longitudinal qualitative research methodology? At its most basic, a study “becomes longitudinal when its fieldwork progresses over a lonnnnnnnng time.”⁴

More specifically, this longitudinal method requires three other elements:

- a) “Continuous research in the same society over a number of years”
- b) Attention to “time” as both a cultural construct and as data.
- c) “Change” as a data variable, often a key focus of longitudinal research.⁵

² Saldaña, *Longitudinal Qualitative Research*.

³ This is possible in large part because I am an academic pack-rat. I have kept every course outline and handout, all my session teaching /discussion notes, participant evaluations, and a teaching journal for most of the courses I have taught. These are archived for retrieval in accordance with Luther Seminary IRB guidelines.

⁴ Saldaña, *Longitudinal Qualitative Research*, 3.

All three criteria are met in this project, by virtue of my professional relationship with the congregation, dating back to 2004,⁶ and having begun to teach various tailor-made Bible study courses for adults and youth about the Bible 2008 within specifically identified parameters for desired change.

In his book on qualitative research methods for Doctor of Ministry theses, author Tim Sensing bluntly states, “longitudinal studies are not practical for D.Min. projects” because most interventions take less than a year, not long enough for “prolonged engagement.”⁷ However, he does concede that for those who have served in their context for “months if not years in the field of study in question, D.Min. researchers do meet the criteria and rationale for prolonged engagement by the nature of their relationship with the context.”⁸ Indeed, Saldaña refines this criterion by pointing out that because longitudinal methodologies give deliberate attention to the description and analysis of change over time, they can take into account the “careful planning, unexpected opportunities, uncontrollable forces, detours and revised plans”⁹ that are inevitable elements of a long-term project or experiment. Saldaña’s description here fits to a tee the circumstances of the development of this thesis project as a result of, and emergent from the previous attempts to inspire and provoke curiosity and imaginative engagement with the Bible.

⁵ Ibid., 3–13.

⁶ While I was Director of Studies at the United Theological College, a called ministry position, I participated in the life of this congregation as a voluntary associate.

⁷ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 222–23.

⁸ Sensing, 223.ensing, 222–23.

⁹ Saldaña, *Longitudinal Qualitative Research*, 15.

A second, related methodological question centres on semiotics. It has long been the language practice of academic discourse to frame research and hypotheses around “problems to be solved.” However, when the language of problem/solution is applied to the practice of ministry, it is, well, problematic! If one understands that language is not merely descriptive, but can also be constructive of social realities, then language matters. The language of Appreciative Inquiry has framed my teaching and pastoral ministries, as a vehicle for an “appreciative (re)construction of communicative action.”¹⁰ I have chosen therefore to frame this chapter using the methods and language of Appreciative Inquiry that shape my pastoral practice.



Figure 1. 4-D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry

Briefly, Appreciative Inquiry, pioneered by David Cooperrider, is a “strengths-based” approach to organizational change, which engages stakeholders in dreaming, designing, and implementing sustainable, transformative change, based on a community’s core strengths, rather than as a corrective to its perceived deficits.¹¹ Appreciative Inquiry

¹⁰ Antonio Sandu, *Social Construction of Reality as Communicative Action* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 13–21.

¹¹ Cooperrider and Whitney, *Appreciative Inquiry*. See also the website at <http://www.davidcooperrider.com/ai-process/>, accessed October 28, 2017.

uses a cyclic, iterative action-reflection process (see Figure 1, above)¹² that can readily be inserted into the longitudinal qualitative framework described by Saldaña, above.

By using this combined methodology, it is possible to see that the earlier attempts to cultivate a biblical imagination capable of undergirding faithful missional discipleship in the progressive-liberal congregation helped to create the environment conducive for the implementation of the Midrashic Imagination Project conducted between Advent 2016 and Pentecost 2017. Moreover, using the strengths-based language of AI, we shall see this project not as the solution to a problem, but rather as one more (big) step in living into the long-term dream of drawing this community into a love affair with the Bible and with God who journeys with us in this textualized existence.

The final methodological question discussed briefly here relates to the dual role that a lead minister inevitably plays when she is both researcher and change-agent/facilitator. This question is particularly germane to a practical terminal degree like the D.Min., where the rubrics of the Association of Theological Schools actually stipulate that the research conducted by a student in such a programme leads not merely to a personal enhancement of that students' "theologically reflective practice of ministry" (E.1.2), but also to "a contribution to the practice of ministry... in other contexts of ministry" (E.2.4).¹³ While a variety of research methodologies are deemed acceptable to a number of ATS accredited schools,¹⁴ there is a pronounced preference for the use of

¹²Source: Svensson and Wikmalm, http://www.svensson-wikmalm.se/eng/td_3.html, accessed July 28, 2012. This is a graphic representation of the 4-D cycle described in Cooperrider and Whitney, *Apprentice Inquiry*, 16.

¹³ ATS "Degree Program Standards." <https://www.ats.edu/uploads/accrediting/documents/degree-program-standards.pdf> accessed October 21, 2017.

¹⁴ I reviewed the D.Min. handbooks for four ATS accredited schools, in addition to Luther Seminary. (Chicago Theological Seminary, Toronto School of Theology, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Boston University).

some form of “participatory action research methodology,” either alone or in a “mixed method” combination. Unlike more nomothetic and quantitative methodologies used in scientific and social-scientific disciplines, action-research methodologies, defined by Bramer and Chapman as “an iterative project cycle with action, research and reflection guided by a leader with the participation of others... to effect positive individual and social change and to develop transferable and theoretical knowledge,”¹⁵ can most appropriately attend to the embedded role of the researcher in both the project under scrutiny, and the longer-term life of the community. In addition, Bramer and Chapman give sufficient methodological rigor to enable the research to contribute to the development of best practices that are transferable to the wider church.

Research Context

As I have already outlined in the first chapter, Cedar Park United is a predominantly Anglophone multi-generational mainline Protestant congregation situated in a professional suburb of the greater Montreal region of Quebec, whose DNA or character¹⁶ is theologically and socially liberal-progressive and social justice-oriented, willing to be innovative in faith and discipleship, and intellectually curious. Members expect worship and preaching to be both spiritually and intellectually nourishing, and contextually relevant. Their relationship to the Bible has been heavily influenced by the rationalist theological liberalism of its formational heritage, where “interpretation of the

¹⁵ Paul Bramer and Mark Chapman, “Action Research for Doctor of Ministry Project: A Practical Definition,” *Journal of Christian Ministry* 6 (2017): 29, accessed June 4, 2017, <http://journalofchristianministry.org/article/view/17494/11339>.

¹⁶ See Janet Cawley Janet R. Cawley, *Who Is Our Church?: Imagining Congregational Identity* (Herndon, VA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006). Using this as a model for analysis, I have consulted the JNAC (Pastoral Search) report of 2010, worship and governance archives of the congregation, a collection of sermons from previous incumbent ministers, and the two unpublished congregational histories of the congregation, compiled by Jeannie Blevins.

Christian message was to be consistent with reason and experience.”¹⁷ This has resulted in a muted intellectual embarrassment about the ancient oddities of some parts of the biblical canon, and a Marcionite tendency to eschew the offensive texts of the Old Testament, in favour of “the message of Jesus,” itself measured according to its perceived “relevance to a complex world.”¹⁸ It is in this context that the first attempts to provoke a deeper curiosity about the biblical library were made, out of which, by process of critically appreciative evaluation and experimentation, the Midrashic Imagination Project emerged.

What’s Past is Prologue (2008-2015)

Between 2008 and 2011, I was invited by the then Minister of Cedar Park United to offer a series of Bible studies, designed specifically by me for what she described as a “community of Scriptural skeptics.” The first study, aptly named *Struggling with Scripture: Bible Study for people who aren’t sure why we read it*, allowed participants to engage head-on with their skepticism, confusion, or curiosity for the Bible in a safe environment. What I discovered in leading this study was that while there was an identifiably “liberal” skepticism for the notion of Scripture as sacred, it was combined with a persistent curiosity about the Bible, which was hampered by minimal knowledge about or engagement with the Bible, typical of liberal UCCan congregations.

The following table summarizes in synoptic fashion the subsequent studies I designed and offered at CPU between 2008-2011, each designed using the Appreciative

¹⁷ Delwin Brown, *Progressive Christian*, 4ff. Brown’s terse description of the failures of liberal theology tend to be harsh, but his point is valid.

¹⁸ See the “Identity and Values Statement” of the congregation, created in 2009, where this phrase stands at the top, front and centre. <http://cedarparkunited.org/beliefs/identity-and-values-statement/>, accessed February 15, 2016.

Inquiry approach described above, to address and build upon the discoveries, strengths, and challenges identified in each event.¹⁹ The reader will note this cycle by reading the “Outcomes” in column three as the design objectives used for the next course, outlined in column two.

Table 1. Biblical Exploration Courses 2008-2011

| Course Topic | Teach/Learn Objectives | Outcomes/New Goals |
|--------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Struggling with Scripture | Addressing “Scriptural skepticism,” creating a safe environment for biblical exploration | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not lack of curiosity • Indifference to seemingly irrelevant texts • Participant identified incompetence as readers of the text |
| Ways and Means | Address sense of incompetence with interpretive/exegetical methods for lay adults | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Isolation when reading alone • recognizing that texts have communicative intent |
| Reading Bible in Community | A Readers’ workshop to explore how to communicate the ancient text in community and in family settings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OT lacunae - content, theology and relevance |
| Politics of Prophetic Imagination | OT Prophets paired with contemporary ‘prophets’ as a window into biblical political/cultural relevance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shapes new perspectives and possibilities for OT as a relevant “Word that journeys with us” • Content is overwhelming |
| Psalms: Songs of the Soul | Spiritual, multisensory and creative approach to engage familiar biblical psalms in conversation with modern songs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • relevance/correlation of OT with contemp. culture • Multisensory opens up new imaginative possibilities for interpretation |
| Threatened with Resurrection ²⁰ | The first lectionary based biblical exploration of themes of resurrection in the Easter season preaching texts. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • connection with preaching text/worship a bonus • multiple interpretations of a text encouraged |

About forty-five adults participated in one or more of these courses, and their comments and evaluations helped to shape each subsequent offering. The “changes” I note from my analysis of this material, include a deliberate increase on my part of the use

¹⁹ The design of these courses was framed philosophically in conversation with Paul Ricoeur, in order to critique liberal certainty and to push beyond a hermeneutic of suspicion to a more post-liberal engagement with the historicity of all texts and language. See Rita Felski, “Critique and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion,” *Journal of Media and Culture*, 15, no 12. 2012 (November, 2012), n.p., accessed February 12, 2015, <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/viewArticle/431>.

²⁰ The course title comes from Julia Esquivál’s poem of the same title, cited in various sources.

of deliberately imaginative and multisensory approaches to the biblical texts. This approach seemed to have immediate effect in bridging the gap between skepticism and a more open curiosity, even respect for the polyvalence and communicative potential of the texts we studied. Two areas for further development can also be identified: firstly not enough people in the congregation were being exposed to this imaginative approach to Scripture, or to see its potential as a biblical hermeneutic appropriate to a theologically progressive congregation. Secondly, these studies occurred independently of the worship life of the community.²¹ The final course in this group *Threatened with Resurrection* was designed to be team-led by me and Rev. Moon, where we modelled a dialogical approach to the upcoming preaching text. Seeing our very different approaches in action served far more effectively to illustrate the polyvalence of text and interpretation than anything I had done in the earlier studies.

Biblical Imagination in Worship, 2012-2015

Following the retirement of Rev. Moon in 2010, and a year-long intentional interim ministry, I was called as Minister to the congregation in August 2011. Between 2012 and 2015, I and the congregation developed a fourfold strategy to bring the Lively Word of God into closer conversation with all aspects of the congregation's life and witness, with public worship and preaching at the heart of that conversation. This fourfold strategy became the topic of the Integrative Paper, completed at the end of my

²¹ Leander E. Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit: The Renewal of Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), 13.

first year of D.Min. studies at Luther Seminary.²² This strategy, which is still in use, involves:

1. Homiletic preparation for the preacher which moves beyond scholarly approaches alone to include visceral, emotional, spiritual, and imaginative engagements with the text.
2. Preparation of the biblical text for “performance” within worship as an oral, communitarian event.²³
3. Helping the congregation to hear well (Acts 8:20-30)²⁴ with clearly thought out introductions, and articulated strategies for listening to or participating in the performance of the text. This involved reducing the number of lections used in worship from the RCL prescribed four, to one.
4. Preaching that attends to and attempts to bridge the gaps between pulpit and pew, text and context, scholarship and discipleship, learning *about* God and experiencing the lively presence of God.

Between 2012 and 2015, I began with increasing frequency to include deliberately “midrashic” approaches to the performative presentation of Scripture in worship, and into my proclamation/preaching. Fifteen sermons deliberately engaged one or more element of midrashic biblical imagination, three of which are included in appendix C, and a summary descriptive analysis of this block of material is included in appendix B.

What should be noted here though, as I summarize the pivotal and developmental moments, is firstly, a noticeable shift from sermons which tended to present “a midrash

²² Elisabeth R. Jones, “‘They Have Eyes but See Not, Ears but Hear Not.’ The Community and the Word of God.” (Integrative Paper, Luther Seminary, March 2016). Submitted following the first summer residency in Luther’s Seminary’s D.Min. in Biblical Preaching programme.

²³ I do not in any way assume that this is a replicative process of some biblical, now lost, art, as some proponents do see for example, Boomershine, *Story Journey: An Invitation to the Gospel as Storytelling*. This is a strategy for contemporary, multigenerational engagement with the biblical text as a “Lively Word.” I also critique the soliloquy approach to delivering many texts, as this practice can render the congregation members into a passive audience, rather than being participatory interpreters of the text.

²⁴ A reference to Philip’s Spirit-led encounter with the Ethiopian court official, who seeks guidance in reading the Isaiah scroll.

on” (noun) a gap in a biblical text, as for example in the midrashic sermon (Easter 6C, 2013), telling the story of Paul’s visit to Ephesus from the perspective of Lydia. Secondly there is a discernible shift towards and increasing use of midrashic process in presentation of scripture in worship and in my preaching; a “serious playfulness” with the text that is evident in classic and contemporary rabbinic exegesis and proclamation. As Robert Alter observed, while our Christian tradition since the Enlightenment has “encouraged us to take the Bible seriously... the paradoxical truth of the matter may well be that by learning to enjoy the biblical stories... we shall come to see more clearly what they mean to tell us about God, man [sic] and the perilously momentous realm of history.”²⁵ Thirdly, Midrash and midrashic process, we discovered together, can become a powerful tool for a feminist hermeneutic of Scripture in study and in worship, a crucial element for a progressive-liberal hermeneutic of Scripture.²⁶

In order to prepare for my final thesis project, I reviewed all this material using the cycle of Appreciative Inquiry/reflection within the parameters of a longitudinal research modality. From this emerged the idea to engage in a deliberate, repeatable, multi-dimensional project involving as many of the congregation as possible in an identifiable method for midrashic imaginative engagement with Scripture. The following research questions in turn guided the development and implementation of the Midrashic Imagination Project:

Research Questions

²⁵ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1981), 189.

²⁶ As seen for example in the feminist work of Alicia Ostriker, *Nakedness of the Fathers*, and the womanist Christian approach of Wilda Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*.

1. Does this proposed midrashic method, applied to study, presentation and preaching work theologically? Is it coherent with a theologically “progressive” hermeneutic of Scripture?
2. Can a midrashic method be developed that can be applied to all parts of the biblical canon? Does it do justice to the “gapped and dialogical nature” of the Bible, and make room for the multiplicity of interpretive possibilities?
3. Can a midrashic method be developed that is rigorous enough to do the work of proclamation by a preacher, but also accessible enough that children, or those new to faith, or those long-schooled in other interpretive methods, can use it effectively?
4. Can a midrashic method bridge the gaps identified in this study? (Skepticism, indifference, lack of competence/confidence/curiosity?) Or, put positively, does the midrashic method foster curiosity about the Bible?
5. Does a midrashic method encourage a generative biblical imagination? Is there evidence that this biblical imagination is impacting community or personal discipleship?
6. Does a midrashic method foster reverence for the “Lively Word” contained in Scripture? Does it also encourage wrestling or contending with biblical texts?
7. What next steps might be taken to improve on what we as a community of faith have so far discovered, dreamed, designed and delivered?

The Midrashic Imagination Project (2016-2017)

The Midrashic Imagination Project is both the next step in our ongoing relationship, as a progressive-liberal community of faith and witness, with the Word that journeys with us through the lively pages of the biblical canon, and the culminating project of my D.Min.. studies. Building upon the extensive research I have done in recent years into historic and current midrashic practices, and using the four-fold worship strategy outlined in the previous section, I have designed a “midrashic imagination method” to be used for homiletic preparation by the preacher, to guide the preparation of the biblical text for presentation in the context of public worship, to help lay readers of

texts from all books of the biblical canon read with curiosity, competence and imagination, and to fuel the missional imagination of the congregation. This method, described below (figure 3, p.83), lies at the heart of this project, and is used in all elements of it.

The project comprises four sequential and overlapping elements, or congregational opportunities, which together enable a longitudinal or iterative, evaluative research methodology, and maximize the evaluative participation of the congregation. Because the second element—the seasonal studies—is repeated three times in three/four different liturgical seasons, it is possible to incorporate both “time” and “change” into the project—both necessary elements of a longitudinal qualitative methodology.²⁷ The elements are outlined below, followed by a descriptive summary.

1. A “Prototype” workshop, enigmatically entitled “*Follow the White Rabbit*,” to be delivered on two occasions prior to the start of the Advent season. These workshops were designed to test a nascent “midrashic imagination method” for community interpretation of Scripture.
2. Three seasonal multi-dimensional series of midrashic opportunities to run during the liturgical seasons of Advent 2016 (*Texts and Textures*), Lent 2017 (*Lenten Textures*), and (by popular demand, not originally part of my project plan) an Easter Season series called *This Changes Everything*. These series include four elements; weekly bible study, worship, preaching, and reflective journaling.
3. Two ‘incidental’ worship events in Ordinary Time, both of which applied the midrashic imaginative method to the Luther Seminary post-residency sermon

²⁷ Saldaña, *Longitudinal Qualitative Research*.

assignments, and used the format of *Texts and Textures* to frame the Congregational Response Group participation.

4. An Evaluative Focus Group. This event brought together a cross-section of participants from all elements of the project to evaluate in community together their insights from the experiences.

Workshops: “Follow the White Rabbit”

Two workshops, of two hours’ duration each were designed and offered as prototype sessions to test a midrashic imaginative method for lay people to explore scripture together in community. The workshops were offered three times to different groups within the congregation, in November 2016. The title was deliberately imaginative, and oblique, using a literary reference likely to mean something to the predominant target age group, in order to stimulate curiosity. We advertised the workshops through the respective groups’ mail smart-lists, and through regular congregational communication channels:

Follow the White Rabbit

For as long as there's been a Bible, there's been an imaginative, playful, yet reverently serious way of interpreting it, called Midrash. Midrashic interpretation “minds the gaps” in a biblical text, fleshing out the bare bones of those texts with faithful imagination. This interactive, participatory workshop will introduce you to this way of reading the Bible, as we explore some of the more intriguing biblical narratives. Like Alice in Wonderland, following the White Rabbit, expects to enter a whole new world, and be surprised!

The workshops began with a PowerPoint-enhanced introduction to what Midrash is as both noun and verb, product and process. Participants were shown how to *midrash* a text by marking it, minding its gaps, layering its contexts, and then identifying the intriguing question one might follow, like Carroll’s White Rabbit, into a new experience

of the world,²⁸ and then given the opportunity to *midrash* a text, in study pairs.²⁹ After sharing those experiences in a large group, and answering questions provoked by the method or experience, participants worked in larger groups with another biblical text to examine and create multiple interpretations for that text. The final part of the workshop presented a number of examples of contemporary midrashing of biblical texts (for example, Martin Luther King Jr's "I have been to the Mountaintop" speech as a midrash on Moses' mountaintop sermon (Deuteronomy), or the Byrd's secularizing takes on Qoheleth). The workshops ended with group conversational evaluation (recorded) of the experience, using four directed AI questions about the experience: What surprised you about this way of reading the Bible? What questions do you have about this method of reading the Bible? What worked really well? What would you suggest I do differently next time? Notes from this evaluative process, along with two teaching journal reflections became the basis for modification of the midrashic method and introductory material for the main part of the project, below.

"Texts and Textures" Seasonal Series

For Advent, Lent, and for four weeks of the Easter liturgical seasons, I created a multi-dimensional series. Each seasonal series was comprised of four elements:

a) A weekly adult Bible study, to be offered two times during the week (an evening and a morning), as well as online via my blog,³⁰ hyperlinked through the Church

²⁸ Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*.

²⁹ As the project progressed I began deliberately to use the word "midrash" as a verb, or as an adjective. The Jewish tradition of studying in pairs (*havrutot*) emphasizes the dialogical and communitarian nature of biblical interpretation in that tradition.

³⁰ Elisabeth R. Jones "Texts and Textures" *BeyondWoodandStone* (blog), various dates, <http://cpuc.edublogs.org/texts-and-textures>.

website, over four weeks of each liturgical season. The Easter series was not part of my original project plan, but thanks to the enthusiasm of participants in the previous seasons it was offered, this time only on Thursday mornings, due to time constraints.

b) Sunday morning worship was themed around the preaching text with creative input and leadership from the study group participants. Performative presentation of the preaching text was a deliberate part of the project, and various methods were used over the twelve weeks to expand the range of midrashic-imaginative approaches to the text. The weekly Children's worship experience (KidZone)³¹ was also integrated into the overall project, but was not included for analysis, as the decision was made to protect this vulnerable population from the scrutiny required to retrieve sufficient quality of evaluative data adequate to the parameters of this type of research. Also not analyzed here, but included in the overall worship ministry, was the visual midrashing which I do each week to prepare PowerPoint slides to enhance worship experience.

c) Sermons. For all but two weeks of the fourteen included in the project, I preached a sermon emerging from the interpretive imagination and insights of the study group and blog participants. These sermons included as full a range of homiletic options as is conducive to the overall worship ministry. One of the two remaining weeks (Pentecost 13A, 2017) involved multi-generational interactive proclamation of the Word.

d) Teaching/Midrash Journal. This primarily private journal has been a reflective element of my teaching and pastoral ministry for many years. It serves both as a teaching

³¹ In Lent 2016 we shifted from an educational model for our children's Sunday programme to a multisensory worship model, which is closely integrated with the overall worship ministry. Children participate fully in worship until after the presentation of the biblical text, after which they normally go to their worship space to explore the text in age-appropriate ways. (This is a topic worthy of reflection, but alas, must remain outside the purview of this thesis.)

log and as a reflective journal of my experiences as a visitor/student in Talmud-Torah study and synagogue worship in 2016 and again during my fall Sabbatical.

A graphic representation of interconnections of these elements of the “Texts and Textures” is found in figure 2, below.

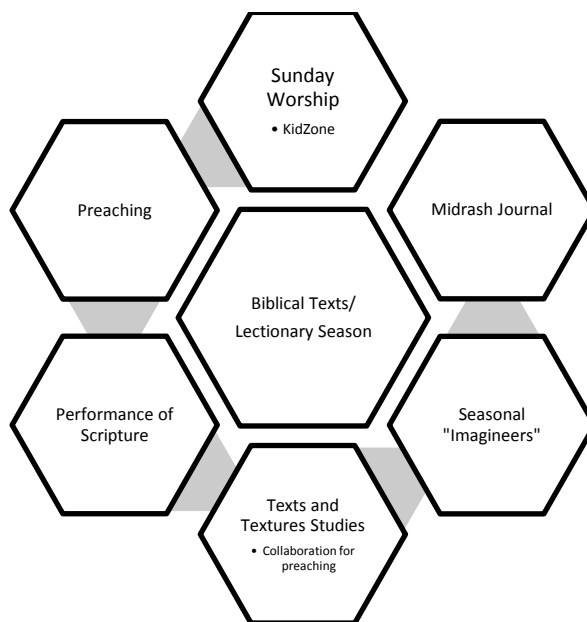


Figure 2. Texts and Textures Elements

For each seasonal project, weekly preaching texts had been selected earlier in the Fall, in consultation with the worship ministry (lay) team and the children’s ministry coordinator. One criterion I had used in selection of the texts was to range as widely as possible over the literary spectrum, and the two canons of the Bible, to address the second research question named above: whether this method could be applied to various texts. These preaching texts became the focus texts for the weekday adult study series. Exploration of these texts with the study groups would in turn shape the decisions regarding mode of Scripture presentation in worship, and inform the direction of the sermon I would preach on the Sunday following. The texts, themes, and sermon titles for

each of the three seasons are tabulated below, and examples of various elements from each of the three series are included in appendix D.

Table 2. Texts and Textures Themes and Preaching Texts

| | Week/Theme | Text | Sermon |
|---------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| ADVENT | Advent 1: Intro to Midrash: Hearing the Gospeller | Matthew 24:36-44 | Wait... what?! |
| | Advent 2: Hearing Advent Oracles | Isaiah 11:1-10, Is 7:10-16 | Anticipation of a Peaceable Kingdom |
| | Advent 3: Layering the Texts/YHWH's Justice | Isaiah 35, Luke 1:47:55 | Magnificat |
| | Advent 4: Reinventing the Texts | Matthew 1:18-25/Is 7: Isa 9:2-7, Luke 2:1-14 | <i>Joseph's Dream (Interactive Drama)</i> |
| LENT | Lent 1: Jesus walking with Satan | Matthew 4:1-11 | Jesus with Satan |
| | Lent 2: Jesus with Nicodemus | John 3:1-17 | Night |
| | Lent 3: Jesus with the Foreigner | Matthew 15:21-28 | Stranger Wisdom |
| | Lent 5: Walking with the Dead | Ezekiel 37:1-14 | Can These Bones Live? |
| EASTER | Easter 4: Abundant Life | John 9:13- 10:10 | Abundant Life |
| | Easter 5: Stoned for the Gospel | Acts 7:55-60 | Proclaiming Life Anyway |
| | Easter 6: God by Other Names | Acts 17:22-31 | Proclaiming the God (we think) we know |
| | Pentecost: Wind and Flame | Acts 2:1-21, Joel, Ezekiel, Genesis | <i>Feel the Burn (Cross Gen)</i> |
| ORDINARY TIME | Pentecost 9A (Aug) Biblical narrative /current context | Genesis 28 and 32 | Jacob the(Heel, J**k) |
| | Pentecost 13A (September) Parabolic stories, meshalim, midrashim? | Matthew 13:24-30 | What shall we do with the Weeds? |

Each series proceeded along similar lines, beginning in session one of each series with an introduction to Midrash and to the midrashic imagination method to be used in each subsequent week. Each subsequent week used the method to address the given biblical text, but different elements of the method were emphasized on different weeks to encourage a fuller grasp of the midrashic method in all its elements. In the Advent series,

we elected in the study groups to reorder steps two and three to improve the logical and imaginative flow. This is reflected in figure 3 below.

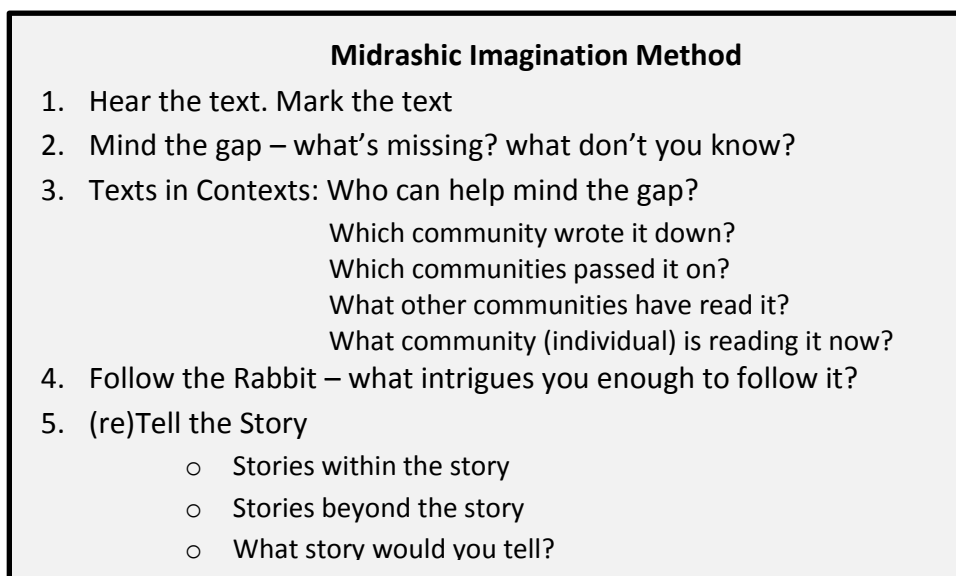


Figure 3. Midrashic Imagination Method (revised)

Given that polyvalence of the text is well addressed by the multivocality of a midrashic method, I also worked to vary the media used to explore these texts. To give an example, session 2 of the Advent Texts and Textures series used art history, referencing the multiple versions of Edward Hicks’ *The Peaceable Kingdom*³² as a midrashic turning and turning of the Godly vision, as changing circumstances impacted each of his paintings.

Sunday Worship

Performance of Scripture. As public weekly worship is the place where most people encounter the Bible, this was the place where the outworking of the midrashic imaginative method could be experienced by most people. For each week of the project,

³² Edward Hicks, “Peaceable Kingdom” (artwork, various dates), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peaceable_Kingdom#Art, accessed May14,2017. See also Victoria Emily Jones, “The Peaceable Kingdoms of Edward Hicks.” *Art and Theology: Revitalizing the Christian Imagination through painting* (blog), accessed May 11,2017, <https://artandtheology.org/2016/12/06/the-peaceable-kingdoms-of-edward-hicks/>.

study groups were partners with the worship leadership team in deciding how to present the Scripture text. This is where the earlier fourfold strategy for helping the community to hear the Lively Word of God was integrated into this project. The text and introduction were usually prepared prior to the study group, but was frequently adjusted slightly or significantly based on the interpretive directions we had taken. Again, to emphasize polyvalence both of text and interpretive possibilities, we aimed to provide a variety of presentations, consonant with the texts in question, as well as balance in the overall seasonal experience of worship. For eleven of the twelve weeks, children were present for the presentation of Scripture, meaning that care was taken to engage them meaningfully in those texts. To give one illustrative example, for Advent 3, the children created a simple song “Children’s Magnificat” as their midrashic response to Mary’s Magnificat (Luke 1:46-56). Children were able to be participants in interactive presentation of the texts for Advent 4, Lent 2, Lent 3, Easter 6 and Pentecost. Three texts (Advent 1, 2, Lent 3) were “told” by me, using a form of biblical storytelling (paraphrastic or text-based) rather than reading. Four texts were presented by a small group with a prepared, rehearsed script (Advent 4, Lent 4, Easter 4, Easter 5); two texts were sung (Advent 3, Lent 5), and a number were enhanced with visual accompaniment via PowerPoint projection.

Sermons. Classic monological sermons were delivered by me for all but two of the weeks included in this study, the exceptions being a participatory pageant written by me specifically as a midrashic interpretation of Matthew’s Gospel account of the Nativity (Advent 4). For Lent 3, the proclamation, based on Jesus’ encounter with the Syrophenician woman (Matt 15:21-28), was shared dialogically with a Muslim feminist-

pacifist scholar, who brought a surah of the Qur'an into midrashic conversation with the gospel text. In the Lenten and Easter series particularly, my sermons drew directly from the midrashic directions taken by participants in the weekday study groups. The sermons were published (as usual) on the church website weekly following worship, and print copies were made available for those with no digital access. For the duration of the three lectionary worship and study series, time was taken each week in the study sessions following worship to debrief the worship experience of the texts studied the week prior.

Midrash in Ordinary Time

The last phase of the project moved into "Ordinary Time" to deliver two more sermons using midrashic imagination, in the long season between Pentecost and Advent, and to conclude the project with a Focus Group session. The sermons (listed in Figure 3 above) were created and delivered under the rubrics for post-residency assignments, which involved the Congregational Response Group process³³, wherein a group meets ten days before the delivery of the sermon to explore the text, identify homiletic goals, provide input for shaping the Scripture and other elements of worship, experience the sermon in the context of Sunday worship, complete a written evaluation, and then meets to debrief the experience. This format allowed for a continuation of the community interpretive modality used in the seasonal project, but had the added dimension of continuity with CRG members who had been involved for three years.

³³ The process was used for all Luther Seminary post-residency sermon assignments. Over the three years, in addition to a core group of four people, a further 18 adults and one youth were involved.

Focus Group and Journals

To conclude the project, I convened a focus group to meet following worship on a Sunday in September. The group of thirteen people comprised of members of the Congregational Response Group, participants in the Text and Textures studies, congregational long-time worshippers, and two newer worshippers, the Family/Youth Ministry coordinator, and members of the governing body (some, obviously wore more than one hat!) The purpose was to review the Midrashic Imagination Project of the previous eight months, but to do so in reference to the earlier steps we had taken as a community since 2011 (or 2008) to cultivate a biblical imagination consistent with our progressive theology. Transcripts of the audio recording of this focus group were made, and coded.

My Teaching/Midrash Journal provides a running commentary through the length of this project, and records key insights from each study group, notes of participant comments which shaped and improved my practice, and other notes and reflections relevant to the midrashic imagination project, including my participation in various midrashic practices with Jewish communities, including a Talmud-Torah study group, experience of a *Beth Midrash* and synagogue worship, and recording of conversations with rabbinic colleagues, as well as and my notes from conversations with Christian colleagues in ministry who have acted as ‘interested outsiders’ for much of the project period.

Participation and Evaluation methods

It has been a consistent practice in my ministry to solicit verifiable evaluative material from participants in studies, workshops, and periodically, in worship in order for

me to reflect, revise and improve my teaching, worship presidency and preaching. Because of this practice, those biblical interpretive events which pre-date any formal study or preparation for this thesis project have sufficient quantities of content and participant evaluative data to make them useable data points for a longitudinal study such as this. This also creates the problem of abundance! There is simply too much data for a project of this scope; therefore I have made judicious choices of which elements to select for analysis. In the next chapter, three Bible Studies from 2008-2014, and five sermons preached between 2010 and 2015, are analysed in comparison with five sermons preached in the Midrash Imagination Project (2016-2017).

Conclusion

This chapter has laid out the methodological issues pertinent to a longitudinal qualitative research modality used to plot the sometimes winding, emerging way towards the cultivation of a midrashic-biblical imagination in a progressive-liberal community of faith. The chapter has shown how an Appreciative Inquiry approach contributed to this journey of discovery, and has outlined the events leading up to and including the most recent step in our journey, the “Midrashic Imagination Project” conducted over four liturgical seasons in 2016-2017.

Chapter 5 will present and summarize the analysis of the various data media assembled to assess this “lonnnnnng project” in relation to the seven research questions which guided the final project portion of this journey. Chapter 6 will then continue the conversation, asking evaluative questions of the project, data, and analysis in light of these questions; have we found a way to cultivate a curiosity for the Bible in a progressive Christian context? How does a midrashic biblical imagination contribute to

the missional identity of a progressive community of faith? What might we do to continue to improve on what we have begun, and share it beyond our own wood and stone?

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS OF PROJECT

In the previous chapter, I described the combined longitudinal qualitative research and appreciative inquiry methodology I used to plot the iterative cycle of Bible studies, workshops, performative presentations of Scripture, and preaching moments occurring over a number of years, through which a progressive-liberal Christian community discovered and developed the beginnings of a midrashic biblical imagination. The first, prototypical phases of this iterative process were summarized briefly, with supplemental material located in Appendix B, so that the bulk of descriptive attention could be focussed on the Midrashic Imagination Project, which took place between Advent 2016 and September 2017. In similar fashion, this chapter will first lay out the research protocols used, to be followed by a summary of analytical conclusions concerning the prototype projects which took place between 2008 and 2015 (supporting data for which can be found in Appendix B), before focussing the bulk of this analytical attention on the Midrash Imagination Project of 2016-2017.

Research Protocols.

Seven research questions guided the development and implementation, and now the analysis and evaluation of the final “Midrashic Imagination Project.” These questions

arose from reflective evaluation of the previous years' work, using an Appreciative Inquiry process,¹ and are included here in summary:

1. Is this midrashic imaginative method coherent with a theologically progressive hermeneutic of scripture?
2. Can this method be applied to all parts of the biblical canon?
3. Can this method be used by everyone? (Preacher/Lay person/child/adult)
4. Can this method help to bridge gaps (e.g. between indifference and curiosity, lack of knowledge and competence, diffidence and confidence)?
5. Can this method foster a generative biblical imagination?
6. Can this method contribute to or encourage a "reverence for the Lively Word"?
7. What can be done to improve the method? What are the next steps?

These research questions were used to generate an interlocking set of data analysis categories and codes. First, a set of "Midrash Event Analysis" (MEC) codes was established to identify and quantify the materials and events conducted between 2008 and 2017 as part of this longitudinal research study. In total, there are nineteen discrete event codes, and each of these is further sub-divided to capture data from component weeks within that one event, yielding sixty-seven longitudinal event data points. An example is furnished below:

| | | |
|------------------------|---|---------|
| <i>Lenten Textures</i> | = | LTT |
| Week 1 course material | = | LTT/C1 |
| Week 1 sermon | = | LTT/S1 |
| Week 4 journal entry | = | LTT/Jnl |

Second, all seventy-six identifiable participants, plus eighteen anonymous ones were anonymized using Participant Identification numbers (identified with a hashtag: e.g. LTT/Ev/#27).

¹ See chapter 4, p.68.

In order to analyse participant responses and evaluations with respect to each of these events, I created a set of thirteen adjectival Participant Evaluation codes (PEC). Each of these was further subcategorized in order to nuance or refine the analysis of these responses. These data analysis codes are all listed in appendix A.

It became apparent at this juncture that the amount of event data that could be coded, correlated and analyzed was vast, yielding close to 1,200 possible data entries! I have reduced this to a manageable amount first by limiting my analysis of the earlier material (2008-2016) to four key events, and using only written evaluative data from participants, and secondly by selecting key elements within the Midrashic Imagination Project, to yield a total of 179 pieces of written or transcribed evaluative data in relation to the 19 longitudinal data sets and 67 subsets.

To corral, track, collate and evaluate this overwhelming amount of data, I used Excel spreadsheets, using the sort and filter functions, following the guidance of Bree and Gallagher,² and the data (word) visualization functions of *Wordsift* educational software. As Susan Eliot points out, “no system...can analyze the data for you, no matter how expensive or sophisticated it is. It takes a human brain.”³ So, to help this aging brain, in addition to the technical tools of Excel, I also used tried-and-true, coloured pencils and post-it notes. The basic task of all this analytical work was first to let the data, rather than my assumptions or expectations, answer the seven research questions, and second to plot the longitudinal process to see if there had indeed been change in congregational attitudes to Scripture; had the Lively Word of God been unleashed from the page, and become a

² Ronan T. Bree and Gerry Gallagher, “Using Microsoft Excel to Code and Thematically Analyse Qualitative Data: A Simple, Cost-Effective Approach,” *AISHE-J* 8, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 2811–2811, accessed October 29, 2017, <http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/281>.

³ Susan Eliot, “Using Excel for Qualitative Data Analysis” *The Listening Resource* (July 2011): 1, accessed July 11, 2017, Url no longer available.

Word that journeys with us? And if not, what more might we as a community of faith need to do to reach that goal?

Preliminary and Prototype Phases: Analytical Summary

As stated at the outset of chapter 4, a longitudinal qualitative methodology was necessary to locate the final Midrash Imagination Project within a longer arc of (re)discovery of a midrashic biblical imagination for the progressive-liberal community of faith as a means through which that community can perceive the Lively Word contained in Scripture, a word that can journey with us. The summary of analysis of the earlier projects is to be found in appendix B. What follows here is a compendium of my significant learning markers throughout this six year period, which contributed to the final Midrash Imagination Project.

I was particularly interested in the following categories among participants: skepticism; suspicion; curiosity *about* Scripture; relationship *with* Scripture (from none to generative); competence as readers of multiple forms of biblical literature; awareness of polyvalence within texts and interpretation; imaginative creativity as interpreters of texts. By using the analytical of longitudinal methodology, it was possible to track changes in attitude over time, noting a persistent seam of intellectual curiosity *about* the Bible, even at the beginning, that was joined in later studies by an increased willingness, and competence to be spiritually, or ethically impacted by a relational engagement *with* the biblical texts (e.g. PSOS/Ev#57). This increase in engagement with the texts can be matched to exposure, through the studies, and particularly through the experiences of performative presentations and preaching using prototypical midrashic processes, to

various *Ways and Means* of reading texts, resulting in an increase in the articulation of a sense of competence as readers of elements of the biblical canon. (PSOS/Ev 20).

This reluctance was often based on previous bad experiences with Scripture, or its interpretation. The following comments are illustrative: “the Bible should be read in church, and left in church.” (SWS/PLA/#6) or more bluntly, “I fail to see how misogynist or violent passages have any benefit to contemporary society” (SWS/PLA#64). By the time we explored the Psalms, two years later, using a much more imaginative engagement with the texts, there were comments like this one; “I did not have words before to express my rage and grief in prayer, but here they are, all ready for use!” (PSOS/Ev#57).

This process began as an attempt to address scriptural skepticism, which we discovered was coupled with negative prior experiences of scriptural interpretation, and a relatively unschooled liberal suspicion of “misogynist, or violent texts” and the God they revealed. By addressing these texts of terror⁴ head on, throughout the entire eight years (I do love to wrestle a text!), the result was a shift from “despising” these texts to a more schooled hermeneutic of suspicion (e.g. PPI/Ev #28), coupled with an increased capacity to imagine alternative or multiple interpretations, and to wrestle with the implications of situating a text in its textual, canonical, cultural, and interpretive contexts. This feature becomes hugely significant in shaping a repeatable, usable midrashic method for lay people to be able to “turn and turn” the text.

⁴ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 13.

Analysis of my own development throughout this process was tracked through analysis of course content, participant evaluations, my teaching journal, and the sermons preached between 2011 and 2015. As I became more immersed in and adept at using an imaginative “turning” of a text with a mixture of question, debate, scrutiny and humour (serious playfulness), the more I was able to conceive of the possibility that this midrashic imaginative process might contribute formatively to a solid progressive biblical hermeneutic which insists that while “God-breathed” (2 Tim3:15), the biblical canon is also a product of human, social, political and religious contexts in which God and humanity interact in complex ways.

This ongoing process of developing strategies for imaginative engagement with the biblical texts in study and worship settings helped to frame the research questions, and the midrashic imaginative method which I developed to be used in the Midrashic Imagination Project, to which we turn.

Midrashic Imagination Project

The “Midrashic Imagination Project” started with a two-hour workshop, repeated with three different groups in mid-Fall 2016. The workshop, enigmatically entitled *Follow the White Rabbit*, presented a prototype midrashic-imaginative process or method with which a group of lay people could study, or “turn, and turn again” a biblical passage together. Two of the groups participated in an AI conversational evaluation process to assess strengths to be built on and weaknesses to be addressed in both content and method. Four questions were asked of participants:

- 1) What surprised you about this way of reading the Bible?
- 2) What questions do you have about this method of reading the Bible?
- 3) What worked really well, and is worth repeating?

4) What would you do differently in this workshop to present a midrashic method to other people in the congregation?

The participants' responses were recorded in note form, then transcribed, collated, anonymized and randomized. A portion of this transcript is included in appendix D. I used this data set to modify the design for the planned four-week seasonal adult Bible studies to take place in Advent and Lent. "Surprise" identified in response to the first question coalesced around polyvalence within the text and in its interpretive possibilities, and at the complexity that is introduced by that part of the midrashic method which involves contextual layering. The queries raised by participants in response to the second question suggest a degree of discomfort or diffidence of the sort that normally competent people experience when faced with a lot of new materials and methods. This insight provoked me to work on strategies to introduce new materials quickly, but in manageable portions, and to practise new skills quickly and thoroughly so that lack of competence or confidence did not impede engagement with the material, and more importantly, with the biblical texts themselves. The issue of hermeneutic practice and "Progressive identity" emerges, framed both positively and negatively, was raised in response to Q2 and Q3:

"Why is this [polyvalence] frowned on in other churches?"

"It seems 'anything goes' - how can you know if it's right?"

Q3 provides an appreciative framework to invite critical response in Q4, and both combined provided data useful to generate design change both for the upcoming project study series, and in general. Learning in community was seen predominantly as a plus, with only one who was leery of group work which can tend "to be a pooling of ignorance." Intellectual stimulation with a lot of facts can be seductive in this congregation, and responses in both Q3 and Q4 prove that, with many admiring the

Midrash content lesson, but few seeing the connection between it and the actual practice of turning the texts. My own journal assessment was that I had not synthesized the initial presentation on origins and contours of Midrash sufficiently to connect it succinctly or effectively with the actual method we were using.

The strengths which emerged from this analysis, and which were amplified in the subsequent study series included the handling of polyvalence and contextual layering in ways that generate curiosity *for* the biblical text, along with the use of multi-sensory points of access to the material, learning in community, and the inclusion of creative and imaginative work for participants to explore new dimensions of the biblical texts, and their interpretations of them.

Texts and Textures

Following the prototype workshops, the core of my thesis project was conducted during three liturgical seasons, Advent, Lent, and the second half of the season of Easter (RCL Year A), from November 2016 to June 2017, with two additional single events in the season after Pentecost (Ordinary Time). The project consisted of a number of connected yet distinct elements. Firstly, Scripture texts were selected from the Revised Common Lectionary specifically for the project, and worship (including music, prayers, and litanies) was planned around those texts. Secondly, I created “Texts and Textures” Bible study series which approached the upcoming preaching texts with a midrashic imaginative method. For two of the seasons, these courses were offered at two separate times in the week, so more people could participate. Thirdly, during Sunday morning worship, the presentation of Scripture (for which children were present for most weeks of the project) incorporated various midrashic-imaginative elements, either to introduce, or

to ‘embody’ or present the text itself. Finally, and building on all the forgoing, sermons arising from the presentation of Scripture were preached for ten of the weeks. The remaining two weeks (Advent 4 and Pentecost Sunday) involved an extended participatory midrashic exploration of the text, with no monological sermon (see chapter 4). The combination of these elements provided me with an extended evaluative relationship with the participants richer than could be attained from a series sermon evaluation forms.

The worship, preaching and study materials, my teaching journal, participant written evaluations, and follow-up transcribed audio interviews comprise the data field for each of the four lectionary seasons during which the project was conducted. My process of analysis of this data followed a sequential set of steps, in this order:

1. Transcribing and anonymizing evaluation data into Excel workbooks, and doing an initial analytical code sequence
2. Using the sort/filter functions of Excel, and the visualization functions of WordSift, to refine and eliminate codes, and recoding the evaluation data sets.
3. Applying the Research Questions, Participant Evaluation Codes and the Midrashic Analysis code sequences to the content data fields.
4. Conducting a sequential analysis of each element of each week to create a total of twelve analytical summaries, one for each week of the three seasonal series. This enabled me to track changes in participant responses, and to discern patterns or anomalies either in participant response, or my own work.
5. Compiling a synthesizing or synoptic analysis, using the original research questions.

This final step provides data useful for identifying emerging strengths and persistent or emerging weaknesses as indicators for further refinement and future work. The following

section provides snapshots of this analytical process, applied to each of the three Lectionary seasons, and paying particular attention to the research questions.

1. Advent Texts and Textures.

The following table gives the reader a graphic overview of the Advent series, noting the preaching textual focus, the element of midrashic imagination to be highlighted in that week, the teaching focus used in the *Texts and Textures* study groups, and finally the resulting worship and preaching focus for each of the four weeks.

Table 3. Advent Texts and Textures

| | Week 1 | Week 2 | Week 3 | Week 4 |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Text focus | Matthew 24 (Apocalypse) | Isaiah 11:1-10 | Luke 1:39-56 Visitation/Magnificat | Is 7+ Matt1 (Adv 4) Is 9 + Luke 2 (Xmas Eve) |
| Midrashic Method focus step # | Intro to Midrash as method. #1,2. engaging text | #3. Textures/ layers #4 Identifying “rabbits” | #5. Retelling, Extrapolative interpretation | #1-5. Recap method |
| Teaching focus | Forming learning, interpretive community | Multisensory approaches | Feminist interpretation | Sm Group independence. Review, Evaluation |
| Sermon/ Worship | Connecting with apocalyptic longing | Poetic missional motivation | Magnificat. God has ... | Participatory interpretation/ proclamation |

Worship: Advent worship was, typically, centered on the thematic unity of the season, namely the “waiting with expectation” for the coming Incarnate One. The Season is rich in imagery and familiar to most worshippers; however, ministry staff were also attentive to the families recently joining us in worship who are not familiar with the “religious” season of preparative waiting, and its comparative distinctiveness from the “waiting for Santa” of the secular culture. The texts selected for preaching were chosen with this in mind, beginning with the Matthean apocalypse as a jarring irruption of a “biblical” as opposed to a “secular” imagination for the first Sunday of Advent. More familiar texts were given a deliberate midrashic “twist” or “turn”, for example the delving

into Matthew's possible motivations for focussing on Joseph in the multi-generational Advent 4 participatory pageant, and the close textual "turning" of the implication of the verb tense in Mary's Magnificat.

Texts and Textures Study Series: A total of 21 people were involved in the "Texts and Textures" Advent Bible Study (ATT), which was offered twice in the week (Wednesday evenings and Thursday mornings) and online via an asynchronous blog post. Eighteen participants completed written evaluations and two others were interviewed using the same questions, their responses transcribed, coded, and analyzed along with the written evaluations. While two or three participants flipped between the Wednesday evening and Thursday morning sessions, the evolving group dynamics were distinctive for each group. The evening group was generally younger, with working professionals making up the majority. This group was also the more theologically diverse. In contrast, the morning group was made up of a long-standing pre-existing faith discussion group many of whom are retired, although the advertised "Text and Texture" content brought in three GenX participants. The interests of the two groups remained identifiably different throughout, the evening group remaining more captivated by the texts than by the interpretive possibilities, with the morning group relishing the interpretive work.

In what ways did the worship, preaching and study sessions address my research questions, and to what extent were these strategies effective? The development a method or process for exploring scripture that is coherent with the theological character of Progressive forms of Christian praxis, it was important to me to introduce reality of polyvalence, both within and between the biblical texts, and beyond the text to its multiple layers of redaction and interpretation as being fundamental to this approach.

The study groups took to this approach like proverbial ducks to water, with the evening group showing a marked affinity to this approach. A comment written in the final evaluation for the study series is indicative of a participant's answer to this question:

“I have a long personal history “doing Church” but I had never thought questioning the fundamentals of the Bible was an option. Being released from that completely changes my perspective. We experienced instead an invitation to see what the Bible means for me, and for my world, now.” (TTA/Ev/#53).

The danger with a fascination for textual layering however is that it can privilege an Enlightenment intellectual approach to texts, and consequently demand at least some familiarity with the historical critical corpus of Biblical scholarship. Therefore it was important also to introduce for aesthetic, playful, spiritual, and multisensory approaches to the texts, not just in the study groups, but also in Sunday worship, not only to expand the notion of polyvalence as inherent to the character of the Biblical library, but also to address my third research question, namely, whether it is possible to create midrashic method that is accessible to all ages and levels of familiarity with our sacred texts.

If success in this regard can be achieved, a number of incidents may suffice to suggest that some progress was made, both by me as presenter and preacher, but also by participants in study groups and in worship, some of whom were newcomers experiencing Advent for the first time. In the study groups for Advent 2, I had used Handel's musical midrash of Isaiah texts in his oratorio *The Messiah* to demonstrate an immediately recognizable aesthetic interpretive piece, a midrash that added a Christological layer to the prophetic texts. Similarly in the studies and in worship that Sunday, use of multiple editions of *Peaceable Kingdom* painted by Edward Hicks provided people with a “visual text” to which to apply the midrashic method of contextual layering, noting how context and circumstance changed the shapes, colours,

and even species contained within the extensive corpus of works.⁵ The children midrashed the text in KidZone by creating their own collage version of Hicks' painting, including creatures and elements of creation that Hicks could not have imagined.

Addressing the second research question regarding the method's suitability for use across the biblical canon, it must first be noted that choosing to use lectionary appointed texts within a liturgical season as structured as Advent places limits on the possibilities. In this seasonal series, we used Matthew's Gospel and Isaiah twice, and Luke's Gospel once. The elements of Advent 3 centred midrashic intention around Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:47-55, noting in the study Luke's own midrasing of 1 Sam 2). The contemporary and earthy *Mary* by Patty Griffin,⁶ accompanied by a slide presentation of artistic portraits of Mary, from many centuries and global regions, reached beyond intellectual approaches to the text to connect with all ages at a more elemental, or spiritual level, which in turn encouraged the children to create their own children's Magnificat.

This same data serves to illustrate how I was attempting in this midrashic-imaginative approach to address my fifth research question concerning the fostering of a generative biblical imagination. This relates not merely to creativity for its own sake, to make it "fun" or "interesting," as certainly happened with the Magnificat of Advent 3, not only in worship, but also in the study groups, where one participant was inspired to write her own midrash on the Visitation as a result of our exploration of the canonical context of the text. More significantly, my hope for this midrashic -imaginative approach to the Bible is that it may help people to situate themselves within the biblical worldview

⁵ Edward Hicks, *Peaceable Kingdom*. See chapter 4.

⁶ Patty Griffin, "Mary," recorded 1998, on *Flaming Red*, A & M Records.

sufficiently for it to generate an altered attitude or response to current contexts. This was the intent with the homiletic approach to Matthew's apocalypse; to create a sense of identification with apocalyptic yearning for God's in-breaking into times of severe torment or trouble. Similarly, the poetic midrashing of Isaiah's vision (Isaiah 11, Advent 2B) addressed head-on the note of cynicism that often hard-coats despair at current situations (then and now), before moving to encourage an anticipation of a God-dreamt future that involves us in its creation, an encouragement which spilled over into extended conversations about our own community's "prophetic acts of hope" for refugees.

My fourth research question relates to the capacity of this midrashic approach to bridge a number of gaps, most notably the competence and confidence deficits experienced by many in progressive congregations from whom traditional enlightenment, or fundamentalist approaches to scripture have proven unhelpful, or worse. I used the analytical codes that identify "cultured disdain/despite," degrees of suspicion, or lack of confidence or competence, on all the participant evaluations for Advent season, and compared them from week one to week four. While such a process produces results that should be considered tentative at most, there is a statistically significant shift from wariness, frustration and outright rejection of a difficult text like Matthew 24, to guarded curiosity, and a stated willingness to delve into a similarly difficult text (Matthew 1) in week 4. Moreover, when compared with the evaluations from the 2008 study, *Struggling with Scripture*, words expressive of curiosity are more prevalent in the final evaluations for this seasonal experience. On the 'failure' side of this particular question, my attempts to bridge the distance between people and the biblical texts by provoking curiosity and encouraging multiple interpretive possibilities was less than successful because the

sequencing in the the method's steps was wrong. I had placed the step dubbed "Follow the Rabbit" (referring to an element in the text that provokes a curiosity one wants to pursue further) immediately after "minding the gap" which identifies textual queries, like "What is missing here? What do I not know? What does that mean?" This led, in the first weeks, to a number of what must uncharitably be called "uninformed rabbits," or worse, not rabbits at all! One example will suffice; "Were there really bears in Israel?" (Isaiah 11:7). This, while a curiosity, is surely not the pivotal element of Isaiah's poetic imagining of a peaceable kingdom. My own teaching notes over three weeks try to identify the misstep, however, credit for identifying the error and for correcting it by re-sequencing belongs to the participants themselves during the evaluative conversation in week 4. This modification was incorporated into the revised method used in subsequent Texts and Textures series (see below, table 4, p.107).

The sixth research question asked if this method fosters a sense of sacredness, or reverence for the "Lively Word." My initial analysis of the material assumed that much of that work was done through worship and in my sermons where I unapologetically and repeatedly refer to the Lively Word, however, I was surprised by the impact that participation in the previous study of the biblical texts had upon those who then contributed significantly to the whimsical, playful approach to the Matthean and Lukan nativities in the pageant created for Advent 4. The invitation to embody the narrative was extended to worshippers of all ages, who could choose to become whichever character most resonated with them on that morning, resulting in Marys, Josephs, and more Herods than one might imagine. Participants in the study groups the week following identified

the experience as “surprisingly moving to find oneself located within the story, not merely an observer of it.” (TTA/Ev/#53.)

The final research question looks forward to discern what needs to be done to build on the current work to enhance its effectiveness both in the current context, but also, potentially, in other settings. The advantage of the format chosen to conduct the full length of the project means that I have been able to ask and respond to this question a number of times throughout the project. At the end of this phase of the project, as a result of evaluative conversations and analysis of the written participant evaluations, six improvements were identified to be incorporated into the Lenten season. First, although I had expected that my participation in study with the study groups would contribute to the final shape of worship and the sermon, it was not built in as an intention for the study series. Second, and connected, an intentional time to close the feedback loop with study groups on the week following worship had not been part of the first seasonal study, as I had not wanted to disadvantage those who may not have attended worship, but as the saying goes, this was cutting off my own nose, leaving out a valuable evaluative step, and at their suggestion, it was incorporated into the design of the Lenten series, to everyone’s benefit, as I shall show later in the following section. Third, at their suggestion as already noted, the Midrashic Method was re-sequenced and enumerated, making it logically more coherent, and mnemonically easier to use. Fourth, the sense of ownership of the text studied was such that the groups responded readily to the invitation to be part of the presentation/ performance/ delivery of Scripture in worship, and this was incorporated more intentionally into the Lenten Season, as was the fifth modification, the continued, increased use of multisensory elements throughout the worship. The final change was

directly related to my approach to midrashic preaching. As noted in section/group B above, when I began to preach midrashically, I had tended to preach “a Midrash” (noun) on a text. In this series I intentionally began to use a more adjectival approach, preaching midrashically within different sermonic forms. I committed to attend to this in the subsequent series, and to note the changes or effectiveness, using the Midrash analysis codes to plot the changes. This cumulative analysis of these sermons will be discussed in the next chapter.

2. Lenten Textures: We Walk this Road Together.

The Lenten worship, preaching and discipleship ministry theme for 2017 was *We Walk this Road Together*. The lectionary texts selected were those which gave the congregation opportunity to “walk this road together with our ancestors in faith. What would happen if we were to meet these characters? What would they teach us about this journey of faith?”⁷ Using the lectionary texts for Lent 1, 2 and 5, with an alternate Matthean text for week 3 of Lent, we “walked with” Jesus in his encounter with Satan in the wilderness; we met Nicodemus in the night; we saw Jesus’ missionary vision expanded by the Syrophoenician Woman; and then we walked with Ezekiel and YHWH among the dead of the valley of dry bones. An additional element of the Lenten worship was the invitation, following each sermon, and during KidZone time, to “set an intention” for discipleship or missional practice for the upcoming week, based on these encounters. These intentions were recorded on cut out feet, which were then posted to a wall in the church building, the cumulative effect of which was also to encourage a missional, midrashic- biblical imagination. The Lenten Textures Bible study was a four-week adult

⁷ From the seasonal advertising, in various places, including the introduction (LTT/1).

study programme offered again on Wednesday evenings and Thursday mornings, with an online option, designed to coordinate with and contribute to the worship and preaching theme for the Season of Lent. It followed the same format as the Advent series, but incorporated the six modifications identified in the evaluative process that concluded that series.

- a) introducing a regular intentional opportunity to draw participants into the homiletic process; first by using Step 5: “re-telling the story” as the locus for this discussion
- b) completing the sermon/worship feedback loop in the week following.
- c) re-sequencing, standardizing and enumeration of the Midrashic-imaginative method
- d) involving study group participants and others in participative presentation of the Scripture
- e) using multisensory approaches to the biblical text where appropriate, in both study and worship
- f) monitoring the midrashic approach I use in preaching

I shall begin with the third modification, that of reordering, enumerating and standardizing the steps of the midrashic method, because from that one modification a number of significant indicators emerge. By placing the step named “Follow the Rabbit”⁸ step to later in the process, we immediately avoided the recurrent trap experienced in the first season of following a lot of distracting bunnies and never quite reaching Wonderland. With this modification, the ‘rabbits’ we followed were more likely to lead us to new insight into the interpretive and imaginative implications of the text for our own living.

⁸ A brief attempt to drop the name for something with more biblical gravitas resulted in threatened rebellion, so here it stays, adding a whimsical touch to what is rigorous, reverential work.

This realignment also resulted in a much clearer purpose for each of the steps. The following tabulation helps to make clear in a graphic way how not only the method, but also the integration of the study into the conduct of worship and preaching, was enhanced by this re-sequencing.

Table 4. Method: Purpose Statements

| Method Step | Purpose/Intent |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Step 1: Hear/Mark the Text | to identify reactions, questions, and to mark the 'gaps' (of knowledge or inner textual gaps (e.g. a lectionary text that begins with "Then...")) |
| Step 2: Mind the Gap | to clarify the markings (step 1). To answer simple questions where needed, and to identify 'gaps' requiring more exploration, but ones which will lead to interpretive insights. |
| Step 3: Layering: Texts in contexts | to deepen understanding, to delve into what's behind, in, and in front of the text, to make sense of its origins, its interpretive history, and potential. |
| Step 4: Following the Rabbit | Choosing 1 or 2 rabbits to follow to "wonderland." Expecting a new way of seeing the text, and/or God, and/or our own world |
| Step 5: Re-telling the Story | Making contemporary sense of an ancient text by deliberate use of wisdom, imagination, accumulated through steps 1-4. |

The fifth step (re-telling) the story was now re-framed as the intentional collaborative conversation for fuelling the worship and homiletic direction for the upcoming Sunday, giving this creative step a community-oriented purpose that engaged not only the naturally creative types, but those less so inclined. However, it did not curtail some striking creativity among participants in both groups. One participant made a connection between the sinews and bones of Ezekiel 37 and a musical midrash on the text by Linnea Good, which uses only a plucked instrument and a drum as accompaniment to the spoken voice.⁹ Another participant created a short slide show of valleys of dry bones with images taken from recent news stories (bombed out Aleppo, Fukushima, oil spills,

⁹ Linnea Good, "Dry Bones Hear the Word!" recorded 1998, Borealis Music.

and desertification of African river valleys). Others contributed to a collaborative set of images used in worship for Lent 3.

One illustration, taken from the study groups for Lent 2, highlights the knock-on effect this re-sequencing had for other elements of the method, not only upon the study groups, but also on me as preacher, and our worshipping community. One participant, having identified a ‘gap’ in their understanding of the significance of “night” in the narrative of Nicodemus’ encounter with Jesus (John 3:1-17), did enough independent study (a provoked curiosity) to discover that John’s Gospel is “full of light and dark,” and brought a painting by Dutch artist Crijn Hendricksz to illustrate the point.¹⁰ This was not a ‘teacher-generated’ theological topic, but a participant-generated inquiry which drew people not just into the text, but into the imaginative theological worldview of the Gospeller, and into the realm of their own spiritual experiences. This particular conversation impacted the homiletic direction and content quite significantly, as the reader can see from the sermon appended.¹¹ Furthermore, although I had been prepared for there being interest/agitation around John 3:3b (ἄνωθεν “born again/ from above”), it paled in comparison to the intense curiosity that participants brought to other parts of the text. One Thursday morning participant, grumbling that they “hated John 3:16 for the way it’s used as a hammer to guilt people into a pathetic gratitude for a dead Jesus” (LTT/C/2/#45) had nevertheless chosen “despite [them]self” to persist with the method and read the preceding unit (John 2:13-22, the disruption of the Temple economy), and suggested, convincingly, a narrative link between the two episodes. This, coupled with

¹⁰ Crijn Hendricksz, “Jesus and Nicodemus,” oil on canvas, c.1615-1645, *Wikimedia Arts. Work in the public domain*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Crijn_Hendricksz.jpeg (accessed March 3, 2017).

¹¹ See appendix E.

the fascinating discovery—for most participants—that Nicodemus appeared again at the end of the Gospel to bury Jesus¹² ultimately provided the preaching hook for the resulting sermon and framing of worship, as they suggested that the gap they wanted me to mind in worship (now the rabbit they wanted me to follow) was Nicodemus. This squares with Mark Allan Powell’s observation, based on extensive congregational research, that most lay people sitting in the pews do not readily identify with Jesus, nor with theological abstractions (such as the meaning of *ἀνθεν*), but with other, often flawed characters in the biblical narrative.¹³ Their instincts were correct. Having a structured opportunity to review the Sunday with the two groups the following week created a rare, extensive opportunity for this preacher to receive quality analysis and reaction to worship and the sermon. Two participants spoke of having been emotionally touched by the characterization of Nicodemus, others spoke of the spiritual impact of Nicodemus’ old-age retrospective understanding of what the life and death of Jesus had come to mean for him. In a follow-up interview three months after the sermon, with one of the participants, they elaborated on that feeling with this analysis:

You didn’t so much fill in gaps in his life story, as you filled my gap, which was why would a Pharisee go and find Jesus in the first place, and what difference did it make to him. The way you brought the beginning and the end of the Gospel into the sermon, especially the crucifixion scene, made me ask...well, you know.... does Jesus mean that much to me? Would I come out into the harsh light of Good Friday to help bury him? (LTT/Ev/Int#3).

This comment points to the fifth research question governing this project, namely can this method encourage a generative biblical imagination that shapes personal or communal discipleship. Reviewing the sixteen written evaluations submitted by participants in the

¹² Graphically introduced into the study groups by Titian, “Entombment,” 1559, Museo del Prado, Madrid, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Entombment_\(Titian,_1559\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Entombment_(Titian,_1559))/ (accessed March 2, 2017).

¹³ Powell, *What Do They Hear?*, 29–64.

study groups, almost all respondents named “learning how to midrash” and “reading biblical texts in new ways” as their most significant learning. I get the sense however from the answers to the open-ended questions that this was not merely the acquisition of a new technical skill, but an avenue or opening to a changed appreciation for the texts they were exploring with this midrashic method. Perhaps the comment above, and the following one, are helpful indicators of the impact this approach has had upon people who (in the case of the comment below) had been one of those most articulate in their suspicion of the Bible in 2008:

I found this creative way of looking at Scriptures to be inspirational, transforming, insightful and very thought-provoking.... You provided us with the opportunity to share personal experiences in the context of the Bible stories and how “alive” and relevant these texts are to us still. (LTT/Ev/#39)

3. Easter Texts and Textures: This Changes Everything

The season of Easter was more disjointed as a worship season, for various reasons, and I was not planning to run a third iteration of “Texts and Textures” for my thesis project. Indeed, I concluded, after the Lenten Series that I had sufficient experiential data to draw upon to begin to reflect and draw value, identify strengths and shortcomings to complete the project itself, before beginning the Appreciative cycle again in the coming year, following my pastoral sabbatical. I had not reckoned on the persistent persuasions of participants, and others who had not yet participated, who wanted this experiment in midrashic-biblical imagination to continue after Easter. When you’ve made it your life’s work to help people fall in love with the Bible, you don’t say no! Also, perhaps that persistence speaks in the affirmative to one of my research questions; can this method provoke curiosity for the Bible, and engender a willingness to engage with its complexities? It seems so.

This third iteration became an opportunity to address a new question emerging from the project thus far, namely, is this method of collaborative midrashic imagination, applied across children's programming, worship planning, preaching and weekday discipleship programming sustainable over the long-haul? It also gave me the opportunity to focus more intentionally the intersections of some of my research questions. First, question 2 asks about the applicability of the method to all parts of the biblical canon, and question 6 asks if it can encourage "wrestling" or "contending" with Biblical texts. I wanted to test these three questions by working with a particularly troubling text. Also, used this third phase to pursue the question of how the midrashic method can be used by children, youth and adults at various stages in their faith journeys, and finally, whether people can deepen this approach and resultant learning sufficiently that it becomes integrated into a person's discipleship and the community's identity. The analysis of this seasonal iteration of the Midrashic Imagination Project will focus on these questions.

The Worship theme for Easter and the lectionary preaching texts were chosen around a theme which explored the implications of the Resurrection for contemporary discipleship, "This Changes Everything" and children's programming and worship, and a Text and Textures series of the same title were created for the weeks of Easter 4, 5, 6, and for the feast of Pentecost. Time constraints meant that the study series ran only on Thursday mornings and online, resulting in a total attendance of nine participants, seven of whom completed written evaluations. These, the content materials, the scripture presentations, worship materials, sermon transcripts and audio files, and my teaching log provide the data fields for analysis of this third phase of the project.

With regard to the question of long-term sustainability of this method in a worshipping community, the length of time available in this season to prepare the study materials was limited, but having this element tied to the worship and KidZone planning – which is ongoing and normally happens three to six months in advance in consultation with a lay worship planning team and other staff – meant that this is simply adding an educational layer to a well-established congregational practice. The exegetical preparation required of the minister to prepare in advance of the weekly study is also already happening, normally in isolation, so the addition of a learning community, with participants gaining in skill as midrashic interpreters of biblical texts is a collaborative advantage that far outweighs the imposition of a preparatory deadline.

I approached the second question through the choice of the lectionary text from Acts 7 (the stoning of Stephen), and by the homiletic direction I chose to take with the familiar Pentecost text from Acts 2. As soon as the session on Acts 7 began it was clear to me that those who had been present in earlier series were already hearing and marking the text with more emotional control and discernment, not letting their dislike of the violence and malevolence of the text disconnect them from the struggle to find something worthwhile in it. Gaps identified for possible further scrutiny were perceptive, for example, “Is this story a deliberate echo of the crucifixion by Luke?” and “What is the significance in the text, and in our own lives/cultural context of the refusal to listen to good news?” The thorny question of divinely condoned or permitted violence was thoroughly explored, again an example of a valid hermeneutic of suspicion, rather than a rejection of the interpretive possibilities of the text. In step 5 (retelling the story) again a creative twisting and turning of the story, via a discussion of *ars moriendi*, the current

cultural fixation with zombies as dystopian discourse for troubled times kept the group connected to its homiletic possibilities. With the Pentecost text, the group encouraged a re-telling of the story that explored the necessity of the Spirit's in-breaking into the world then, and now, as fire, not as a dove, and to connect the seemingly exceptional narrative with their/our lived experiences of "Pentecost moments" of which with a little encouragement, the group shared a number, including "the first time I marched for something that mattered" (the Vietnam War protests), and the moment when "you're in that seemingly impossible position and you're overwhelmed with a courage you didn't know you had." What becomes evident in looking at the data for these two weeks, is firstly, an increased confidence and competence in approaching a difficult text, knowing that it is possible to mark it, peel back its layers, not to soften it, or smooth out its wrinkles, but to explore them more profoundly. Secondly there appears to be a greater facility in making connections between these ancient texts and personal or communal experience. In an interview with one participant, when asked about their experience of the session for Easter 5 (Acts 7, the stoning of Stephen), the interviewee said,

I usually don't like reading passages like this; I don't want such horror to be in the Bible. But then I realized I have the same reaction when I read of the latest terror attack, and I don't want such horror to be in the world. They're the same, and somehow God has to show up in both. And maybe so do we. (TCE/Int/#4)

My third research focus for analysis of this Easter series examines whether it is possible to see if this midrashic method, once learned, is internalized or integrated in any way into people's practice of faith and missional discipleship. The parameters of the study limit the researcher's perspective to what can be seen or heard in the study room and the sanctuary, but the following description of the first session shows what happened when those who had been participants in earlier Text and Textures events became

teachers for those who were new to the process. Instead of me presenting the opening segment on “Midrash as product and process” I invited the second- and third-timers to share what mattered to them in their experience of midrash in the previous studies. I took notes. By far the greatest emphasis was placed on midrash as a creative, imaginative process of “actually reading the Bible.” One called the process “slowing down the reading enough to see the details, notice the gaps and ask the questions.” Another contributed this comment, “You mark it, mind it, and chase it, until you begin to feel it. Then you do something with it, or it does something to you.” (TCE/Jnl/1). The teachers chose to share little about the vast repositories of Jewish Midrash, except to say both that “Jesus was probably midrashing the Torah in the Sermon on the Mount” (something I do not recall having said in previous presentations of this material). What I learned from this was what they considered crucial to their own appropriation of midrashic interpretation as a legitimate and effective (for them) way of exploring the Bible.

Another incident in this seasonal course also illustrates the internalization of elements explored over two months earlier. When a new participant began to object to the uppity wordiness of John’s Jesus in John 10, a third-time participant interrupted to suggest we look earlier in the Gospel to see what happened just before, and the conversation quickly retrieved insights into the Johannine community and John’s rhetorical structuring of sign-act/ discourse, all with very little input from me. They also modelled for the new group their enthusiasm for making homiletic suggestions, and an interactive sermonic presentation of Scripture in Sunday worship was the result, which included a participant who does not normally attend worship. The sermon, with direction notes and annotations is included in Appendix D.

Bringing these three questions together I return to the first, about sustainability and conclude with a comment from my own Midrash Journal, an entry written in June, immediately following the conclusion of the final worship of the Easter-to-Pentecost series:

I work harder[than before I began this midrashic journey] to be ready for these study groups, and sometimes they throw something at me from left field that needs more work before Sunday, but the rewards? A learning community, a collaborative energy around the formulation of a sermon idea or a scripture performance, mean that I come to church on Sunday knowing there are some 'eager to hear a lively word.' That makes it more than worth it. (TCEJnl2/7)

4. Ordinary Time

Two more Sundays, in Ordinary Time (Sundays after Pentecost 9 and 13) are included for analysis because they both deliberately used this midrashic-imaginative method for worship and preaching, and because both benefitted from the involvement of a Congregational Response Group (CRG), as described in chapter 4. Again, the texts were studied in a midrashic community of learning, with clear indications from the groups about possible presentations of the preaching texts, and homiletic directions. In the case of the Jacob text(s), the group's strong suggestion that we use both Genesis 28 and 32, given that this would be the only time in the season we would encounter Jacob, created a worship conundrum which was resolved by using the first unit with the children, who then midrashed the ascending and descending angels in their KidZone time, leaving the adults to wrestle with Jacob and the stranger in ways resonant with our contemporary culture.

Two participants were new to both the Texts and Textures midrashic-process and to the Luther Seminary format for the CRG, so their insights into the process were helpful to gauge the effectiveness of the method with people new to the context. One stated, "As

a parent, I try to teach my children the spiritual value of asking questions and being open to others; it seems to me that this method does those two things with Scripture, and that is, in my experience of other churches, very unusual.” (FG/#55) By the time we reached September 2017, I noticed from the transcripts of the CRG conversations how many times members used the word “midrashing” as a verb to describe their own processes of reading or preparing the texts being used. Comparing this usage of the term by participants to the evaluations of the Advent study group, the increase is noteworthy, and possibly indicative of an integration of the method into congregational practice.

5. Focus Group

At the final focus group, which met in September, participants were asked to reflect specifically upon their experiences of the development and use of the midrashic method in Congregational Response Groups, worship, children’s programming, and the Texts and Textures study series. I highlighted for the participants in this final focus group three of my seven research questions as being particularly germane to this discussion;

Qn 1: whether this midrashic approach was coherent with a congregation that self-identifies as progressive-liberal;

Qn 3: whether the method is accessible for a variety of participants and contexts (worship, study, discipleship)

Qn 6: whether the method fosters a reverence (even if wrestled and contested) for the Holy.

As with any group, different questions resonated with different respondents, but each question was addressed. The following are either typical or exemplary examples of responses:

Qn1: The barrier we are up against as this sort of church [progressive-liberal] is that there’s a big negative assumption about what we are, which necessitates innovation to break that down, and this method is innovative and has potential for

an experiential approach, an avenue for others exploring their spirituality.
(FG/#32)

This respondent also spoke of the post-modern, post-Christian context in which experiential learning is more highly valued. Another respondent declared that this midrashic approach “is vital if you want to understand the Bible... which is an anthology of interpretations of God interacting with people” (FG/#52). For this respondent, who has grown up in this congregation, the method is congruent with their experience of faith. Another spoke of the method as a homecoming, finding a community of “kindred spirits” willing to turn and turn and ask questions together, which is “really awesome. ... This relationship with God and humans, it’s messy, and acknowledging that it’s messy in the Bible too is reassuring.” (FG/#34)

Three respondents in conversation with one another exemplify the impact of this method upon participants and the community as a whole;

Qn 3: (three respondents) As long as you can get past the old hang ups about wanting “truth” or “answers” and lean into the questions, anyone can do this. But it’s way better to do it together. (FG/#39) “Yes, you can test your hunches together with one another, discerning, not judging.” (FG/#6) “Yes. Absolutely, and I find I’m midrashing everything these days, looking behind and in front for layers and contexts, it’s crazy!” (FG/#70).

The emphasis on the community midrashing together recurred throughout the group conversation, a sentiment that echoed that of every study group since 2008. What seems to have shifted in this focus group is the capacity to state why this is important. Three reasons are named; first the community’s role as a testing or discerning place, where the limits of interpretation are pushed to the limits in order to find the limit; second, the formation of community identity around a common narrative. Discussion of the emergence of common themes, such as the “Dream of God” was liberally seasoned with references to texts we had explored together in Advent, ten months before. And

thirdly, the role of learning in community that provokes a “creative synergy where even our resident scholar is schooled by the process with new insights and wisdom.” (FG/#25).

Finally, with regard to research question 6 concerning reverence for the Lively Word, this statement from a participant provides an answer:

Qn 6: What is the Sacred, what is holy? Why do I care? Friends who are evangelicals want simple answers; they want it to be rule book. Atheist friends also want simple answers. It seems to me that the sacred lies somewhere in accepting the complexity of a universe we can't understand, and this Bible, with stories that are so mystifying leads me into the sacred... I'm better able to see the holiness of the text precisely because it is so complex. (FG/#2)

This response is not typical of the varying degrees of indifference and skepticism I have identified within this community over the years, but is symptomatic of a discernible shift in the language used by some in the congregation as they have become more involved in this midrashic-imaginative process we have been developing together, with increasing clarity over the past nine-years, and in particular through the past ten months of the thesis project.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to sift, sort and analyse in order to lift out points salient to the development, through three major phases over a span of nine years, of a number of ways of fostering a biblical imagination in a progressive community hitherto indifferent to, or suspicious of, Scripture. While much of the summary analysis for the first two phases (2008-2011, 2012-2015) is, for reasons of space, located in the Appendices, I have shown here how the Appreciative Inquiry process actually contributed to the development of the Midrash Imagination Project, by generating strategies that resulted in a repeatable method for midrashic imaginative engagement with the text, and by helping to generate a set of research questions to guide the design, development and

implementation of the final 10 month project. Analysis of the Midrashic Imagination Project itself also shows how this has become not my project, but one shared with the most curious among the congregation, who are contributing to its further development beyond the parameters of a D.Min. project.

What follows in chapter 6 is a stepping back from the details to survey the larger landscape once more, to draw out the value, strengths, shortcomings, pitfalls, and possibilities for refinement or change, all of which can contribute to future work to foster a generative biblical imagination in the life of a progressive liberal community so that the Lively Word can journey with us into “the perilously momentous realm of history.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 198.

CHAPTER 6

EVALUATION

*You mark it, mind it, and chase it, until you begin to feel it.
Then you do something with it, or it does something to you, probably both.¹*

This thesis has explored, through a longitudinal qualitative research methodology, what happens when a midrashic-imaginative approach to the biblical text (defined in chapter 2) is developed within and implemented by a progressive-liberal Christian community of faith. The previous two chapters have identified, described and analyzed various pivotal, or defining, moments in that nine year journey. Key moments, identified in the forgoing chapters included the initial Bible study course offered in 2008 to those who “Struggle with Scripture;” the four-fold strategy developed between 2012 and 2015 to help the congregation hear the Lively Word of God in worship, through midrashic presentation and preaching; and the final major action-reflection research project designed for this thesis, and implemented between Advent 2016 and the early Fall of 2017, the “Midrashic Imagination Project.”

The questions that remain are these: Has it worked? Have I helped a congregation to fall in love with Scripture through study, worship and preaching? Did the thesis project itself deliver on what it set out to do? What were my expectations and how did these adventures in midrashic biblical imagination meet or miss those expectations? What new insights, good ideas, new practices have emerged? What can be learned from the many

¹ “Texts and Textures” participant, 2017 (TCE/Jnl/1).

missteps, shortcomings, and fumbles along the way? Are there elements that, with more work or a shift of emphasis, might become a strength upon which to build? What, in retrospect, could have been done differently, or to greater effect? And, what's next? This chapter will respond to these questions, but with a caveat; I've learned that midrash provokes more questions than it answers, leading deeper and further into the life-long sacred journey with the Lively Word.

Did the Thesis Deliver?

The research questions which I used to guide the design and implementation for the Midrashic Imagination Project, tabulated below, will guide the discussion in this chapter. The responses follow, enumerated to match this table.

1. Is this midrashic imaginative method coherent with a progressive hermeneutic of Scripture?
2. Can this midrashic imaginative method be applied to all parts of the biblical canon?
3. Can thismethod be used by everyone: preacher/lay person?
4. Can this method bridge gaps? (Curiosity, competence, confidence)
5. Can this method foster a generative biblical imagination?
6. Can this method encourage a 'reverence' for the Lively Word (is it sacred)?
7. What can be done to improve the method? What are the next steps?

a. Research Questions: Outcomes

1. Is the midrashic imaginative method coherent with a progressive hermeneutic of Scripture? As stated at the outset the thesis, I hoped to show that a midrashic-imaginative method would make a valuable contribution to the ongoing conversation, critical at this juncture among progressive Christians, concerning the articulation and practice of a biblical hermeneutic coherent or consistent with progressive Christian theology that takes the Bible seriously but not literally.² The broader remit of this

² If not original to Marcus Borg, it is he who has made this phrase something of a maxim or mantra among Progressive Christians, cf. Borg, *Reading the Bible Again*.

question is better addressed in chapter 7, but with respect to this congregation, the “experiment” in midrashic approaches and outcomes to the exploration of the Bible has been successful in a number of ways, outlined in what follows. To quote one participant in the project, this approach “liberates the Bible, and liberates me from older, more constricting ways of being told what it means.” (FG/#53).

2. Can this midrashic imaginative method be applied to all parts of the Biblical Canon? Yes. Although as a congregation we have yet to use the method with each of the 66 books of the Protestant canon, we have effectively discovered that it works with Gospels, Epistles, Acts in the New Testament, as effectively as it has worked with Torah, Prophets and Writings of the Old Testament.³

3. Can this midrashic imaginative method be used by everyone? Yes. Insofar as the *Texts and Textures* groups included people of all ages, genders, gender orientations, Francophones as well as Anglophones, people with long, briefer, or little-to-no connection with the congregation, and insofar as some participants are members of other more conservative Christian congregations, and a small number who profess to be “done” with church but somehow found their way to the study group, yes. Insofar that the midrashic turning of a text was used consistently in the children’s worship/KidZone throughout the period of the project; yes. Insofar as we used the interpretive and performative dimensions of the midrashic process in worship weekly, and significantly, on Easter Sunday and Pentecost Sunday, and on a baptism Sunday with non-churchgoing

³ I could go on at length about the need to be attentive to the halakhic or haggadic nature of the source text, or the midrashic characteristics of for example the Gospel of Matthew,³ but these are questions I have tried to be attentive to throughout this process, and find that the method we have developed can accommodate these varieties of form and context.

extended family members in attendance; yes. Insofar as one Focus Group interviewee said, with nods from a number of others “I’ve found myself midrashing everything I read!” the answer is “yes.” This last comment suggests that not only is it an approach that is usable with and by people in the context of worship or community discipleship, it is also being used by people individually in their homes.

4. Can this midrashic imaginative method bridge gaps (curiosity, competence, confidence)? Yes, No, Maybe? For me, this is a “rubber hits the road” question, and one of the pivotal questions that has guided the longer nine-year journey. The gaps that most concerned then and now are these; what can we do to help those indifferent to Scripture become curious? What can we do to help those skeptical of its value or relevance to their everyday lives see possibilities for this text as one that can inform or shape their discipleship? What might happen in a community if we were able to move beyond indifference and skepticism to a place where we were collectively open to being transformed, or transcribed by this “inscripturated Word”?⁴ While I conclude at this point that this last question is still a long way from being accomplished (and perhaps it is in the nature of this work that it is never accomplished), I do believe we are on our way with respect to indifference and skepticism. The following two comments, from the final Focus Group may help to give concrete substance to this. Among the participants in the group were a number of people who have been part of the full journey. When asked if this method had been able to “close any gaps, overcome any barriers [they] may have about the Bible,” one participant happily admitted that they normally preferred to attend

⁴ Brueggemann, *The Word That Redescribes the World*, 37.

the congregational book studies rather than Bible studies, and that they tended in any reading material to “skip over all the biblical passages...but since we’ve started this process, I’m going to start reading them too.” This speaks, I believe, to the ability of this approach to pique curiosity, but also to engender sufficient self-confidence in a lay person’s ability to be a reader and interpreter of the text that they are willing to try.

5. Can this midrashic imaginative method foster a generative biblical imagination? Possibly. “Generative biblical imagination” is something that emerges over time, and needs to be seen outside the sanctuary, in the missional activities of the community as a whole, as well as in individual lives. The limits of the thesis meant that testing this in a quantifiable way was not possible, except to ask participants about their understanding of the role of the Bible in their daily lives. As noted in chapter 5, most participants in the first study I conducted in 2008 said that it had little to no direct bearing on their lives; this despite the congregation’s expressed value of keeping “the message of Jesus relevant and real”(CPU Identity Statement). As this journey, and particularly the final project, has shown, there has been a shift from a largely unattained “ideal” where that message of Jesus was primarily distilled through preaching, towards a more concrete experience of personal engagement with diverse texts within the Biblical canon. The following comment, from a Focus Group participant who has been associated with the congregation for about twenty years, is indicative of this change in one person’s life as a result of their participation in the elements of this thesis project, in particular the Midrashic Imagination Project:

For me this [midrashic method has] made the Bible a relevant piece of literature, which really beforehand ...it had no meaning as far as my life was concerned. This has made the whole thing quite different, it has a purpose and it’s

relevant, and I'm interested and I wasn't beforeIt's brought the Bible back to me. And yes, I want more, and more. (FG/#68)

6. Can this midrashic imaginative method encourage a reverence for the “Lively Word of God?” At time of writing I would offer a tentative “Yes.” It has been possible to perceive, in the data, an increase in willingness to contest and wrestle with troublesome texts in order to search for the Lively Word hidden within, rather than to dismiss them as inconsistent with liberal-progressive theological principles. This method has encouraged serious engagement with the polyvalent, sometimes contested textuality of Scripture, and provides a framework within which to wrestle, contest and even disagree with biblical texts without rejecting the Bible. The extent to which this has fostered a “reverence” for the text is perhaps still a way off for many, especially among the Baby Boom and Silent Generation cohorts. On the other hand, the imaginative midrashing of a number of texts, for example, the Nicodemus narrative (John 3) proved to be spiritually evocative for many worshippers, creating liminal space for encounter with self, and the Holy through the re-telling of the narrative.

7. What can be done to improve the method? I discuss this at greater length in the last two sections of this chapter.

b. Anticipated Outcomes

A project of this nature is more than academic, it is deeply personal. I had high hopes for the final thesis project, building as it did upon years of previous experiments in biblical imagination. To the extent that it delivered in so many areas covered by the research questions means that it exceeded my expectations. I anticipated a lot of work on my part would be necessary to prepare all the materials for the *Texts and Textures* series, for the performative delivery of Scripture each week, the midrashic elements for the

children's programme, and for preaching. It was a lot of work, but it was also fun, enriching, and full of transformative learning for me and for those who participated.

I also anticipated that this would only be one step in an ongoing process of discovery and rediscovery of ways to cultivate biblical imagination within and beyond congregational worship. This has indeed been the case, as new questions emerged from reflection upon each experience. Refinements also emerged, as, for example, in the ways in which voice and text might be used to convey spiritual or emotional fields within the text. These will be explored more fully in the final section of this chapter.

Strengths of the Thesis

The strengths of the thesis are derived in large part from the benefit of a long-term ongoing relationship with the congregation that has changed over time from being a 'resident theologian' / voluntary associate minister to becoming their Minister of Word and Sacrament almost seven years ago. This made it possible to use a longitudinal qualitative research methodology, which served to add dimensions to the research that would not have been possible otherwise. Although this methodology is not normally recommended for D.Min. thesis projects, in this case, it proved to be a strengthening factor as it enabled me to identify valid markers to plot previous change, and to identify parameters for measuring change within the thesis project itself. Longitudinal qualitative research methodologies are also apt for analysing the iterative process of Appreciative Inquiry strategies for organizational change, something I have used in my overall pastoral ministry practice, therefore this method allowed me to incorporate the relevant data from this larger dimension of our community's life and missional witness.

Length was also a strengthening factor for the Midrashic Imagination Project, which spans four liturgical seasons, incorporates 14 worship and preaching events and 18 plus study and reflection events over a ten month period. This allowed time for modification, recalibration and refinement of implementation between the four liturgical seasons, using an AI reflective process *within* the time frame of the project.

Extensive time also creates opportunity to develop multimodal research protocols, resulting in a greater variety of research modalities, not limited to literature review, but in this case also including exploratory personal participation in a Reformed synagogue *minyan* for weekly *haftorah* studies in order to experience contemporary Jewish midrashic processes in action.⁵ It also enabled me to use a variety of data sets for analysis, including all the content notes for the *Text and Texture* studies, plus a teaching log, and including sermons, teaching files, and audio-visual records, as well as various evaluative instruments, which included episodic, formal and informal interviews and conversations with congregants involved or influenced by the project over time. In most qualitative research methodologies it is well-argued that the greater the variety of data sets, the more likely it is that one can build a valid, or useful, thick descriptive analysis.⁶ I found this to be the case.

Weaknesses and Shortcomings

Sometimes strength can also become a weakness. The length of time, both for the longitudinal points of reference, and for the ten-month/four season Midrashic Imagination Project generates a huge amount of data, and covers a wider range of

⁵ Robert A. Stebbins, *Exploratory Research in the Social Sciences* (London: Sage, 2001).

⁶ See Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 78–93; John W. Cresswell, *A Concise Introduction to Mixed Methods Research* (London: Sage, 2015), 63–72.

methodological material than can easily be managed. This required of me a steep learning curve in spreadsheet and data base capability, not fully mastered, as the use of coloured pencils on paper in my archived box of data can attest. I had intended to include more of the thorough analysis of the *Text and Textures* content and evaluations, as well as to provide a close analysis of a number of the sermons from this and earlier phases of the research and project, than space permitted. Similarly, the dimension of orality and participative performance of Scripture barely gets a mention, even though this was a significant element of the work, again due to word limit constraints.

Focussing more tightly on the research methodology used in the Midrashic Imagination Project, a significant weakness was the lack of congregational surveys. There is a congregational backstory to the decision not to use them which I choose not to share here, but this omission weakens the vision of the thesis considerably, in that the voices of those at the edges of this midrashic imagination project are not heard. While I did conduct a number of interviews with those less involved in either worship or study components of the project (the feedback from which was genuinely helpful, and provided insights which were incorporated into the refining of the Midrashic Imagination Project in its second and third seasons), it does not amount to a broad data set from those who remain indifferent to or resistant to biblical imagination in worship and preaching or weekday learning in learning community.

Another weakness also arises from strength; this community has given wide latitude for experimentation, based on the mutual commitment to this pastoral relationship. Until the method is tested in other progressive-liberal congregations, any extrapolative conclusions from the work done at Cedar Park United must remain tentative

and suggestive. One external reviewer of this project has perceptively asked if it requires the particularities (and peculiarities) of this pastoral relationship in order to work. This is the point at which to ask “What would I do differently?” and “What comes next?”

Benefits and Improvements: Things to do differently

I would find ways to include more voices from the margins. Firstly, I would include a congregational survey component for one week of each seasonal series (a total of three, spaced over time, should not prove too onerous on worshippers). I would expand the interview field to glean qualitative insights from a broader cross-section of those who have not been involved in the *Textures* studies, or in performative delivery of Scripture, including those who attend worship less frequently and do not engage in many of the discipleship activities of the community, asking; how might this midrashic imaginative approach affect their experience of God in worship? How might it encourage an engagement with Scripture if it were modified to incorporate their insights? I would also recruit others to conduct those interviews, so that those who might hold back from offering forthright and direct criticism to me may offer it more willingly with a different interviewer.

I would want to incorporate more careful analysis of the impact of the project upon the children’s programming, and on the children and their families. I do not second guess that decision not to include children in this research, believing it to be a solid pastoral one, given the public nature of a D.Min. thesis, although I will want to do this analysis in-house, with all the appropriate protections in place.

I would have wanted to find a way to incorporate my own learning in community with Jewish Talmud study more transparently in the writing of the thesis. Participants in

the study groups were aware of this element of my research, as it more evidently fuelled the content, and format, of those studies. Space simply did not allow me to include the retrospective analysis of this feature of my preparations for the project.

Next Steps

This project, though over, is not done! Three avenues for further inquiry are on my immediate horizon. First, I want to take time to figure out how to make the connection between the formative Word and missional identity more obvious. In a congregation for whom missional activity for social justice is already profound, this may well be simpler than I fear, so I look forward to discerning with the community how we can bring these two facets of our congregational life closer together.

Secondly, new work is beginning to emerge in the scholarly community in the field of “visual exegesis.”⁷ What I have discovered in the fourfold strategy for hearing the Word (2011-2015), and in the Midrashic Imagination Project, is that the visual imagery within the text is worth exploring visually! There are at least six incidents in this project where a correlative visual exegesis of a biblical text alongside a visual midrash of that text (for example, Crijn Hendricksz’s *Nicodemus*, or the photo essays produced for the sermon “Rise up, Hannah!” (1 Sa 2) or Ezekiel 37) speak volumes about the potential for visual exegesis in 21st century, where images not only enhance communication, but are in many cases the primary vehicle for it. I would add to this something I’m calling “visceral exegesis.” What happens when we get our bodies involved in the interpretation of Scripture? Performative delivery that is participative (e.g. sitting in the dark with

⁷ Vernon K. Robbins, Walter S. Melion, and Roy R. Jeal, eds., *The Art of Visual Exegesis*, Online (Society of Biblical Literature, 2017), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1pk86wt>, (accessed December 29, 2017).

Nicodemus and Jesus, or standing close by as Jesus heals the one born blind) has been a primary access point for many of our worshippers, and newcomers to worship, and this is worthy of further study and reflection. As we already do in our sacramental practice of baptism and communion, what sacramental impact might the Lively Word of God have on bodies who are invited to experience the narrative of the text in an embodied way? Any such invitation need not to be a gimmick, but something as solidly grounded biblically and theologically as our sacramental practice. While the work done by scholars for the recent Emory project⁸ will be a crucial scholarly element, I would like to approach the topic from the pews and the pulpit, where the Bible belongs.⁹ I intend to get on to that next.

Finally, the next steps in the congregation are to fulfill a promise made to the final Focus Group, and to the twenty-three people who were involved in the Congregational Response Group processes over the past three years; we will continue to use this process regularly in our congregational practice going forward. The increased sense of community ownership of the interpretive process which this project has engendered is a wrestled blessing of such significance, I will be happy to walk with that limp into the future God has in store for us together.

⁸ Robbins, et. al, *Visual Exegesis*.

⁹ Johnson, "Imagining the World Scripture Imagines," 7.

CHAPTER 7

PASTORAL REFLECTION

“A story, a story... Let it come, let it go.”¹

This thesis has been, in essence, a love story about the Story, as it is contained in the polyphonic, heterogonous texts of the biblical library. Nine years ago I set out to help one progressive-liberal congregation to fall in love with the Bible again, or for the first time. I had this belief that if I could somehow infect this community with a similar curiosity, enthusiasm, even love for Scripture, this would enrich our community's life and witness as a people of God, and ground our vocational sense of purpose within the larger narrative of the biblical canon. And, as fools and lovers do, I've rushed in, repeatedly, trying this way, then that, to let loose the Lively Word amongst us. In the process of this pastoral call, and the research and projects that contribute to this thesis, I've discovered a number of things, of which I shall name three. Firstly, this work of finding a faithful, authentic way for progressive Christians to engage the Bible matters. Secondly, that this midrashic imaginative mode of interpretive activity in the community of faith is harder than it looks. And thirdly, that this process of “turning the text” has turned me, re-written me as a pastor-theologian and preacher.

¹ Thanks to Professor Richard Ward for introducing me to this way of prefacing the biblical narrative as a performative, potentially transformative event.

Implications

It matters. Progressive Christians need to hear God's echo,² and the echoes of their own stories within the Story contained in Scripture. I have proposed throughout this thesis that postmodern, post-everything progressive Christians might have a particular affinity with the transgressive, "subversive protest and alternative vision" of God that recurs throughout the biblical canon. At a time- once again- within the "perilously momentous realm of history,"³ when this divine vision is sorely needed as a counter-testimony to the hegemonic voices of prevailing culture,⁴ progressive-liberal Christians are being called upon to articulate with greater confidence, and with solid biblical foundation, our trust in God's Dream for abundant life, covenantal justice, redemptive love and radical, reconciling welcome of *all* humans and all creatures within the diversity and complexity of human society and cosmic creation.

A Long Journey in the Same Direction

This is harder than it looks. Getting involved with the God of the Bible involves, as Debbie Blue suggests, "an intimate sort of tangling with the uncontrollable.... Jacob wrestles, Abraham haggles, Israelites resist, the prophets wail..."⁵ and progressive-liberal Christians must first admit to the possibility that there *is* a liveliness to the Word inscribed in the Bible. In the context of Cedar Park United, we have needed first of all to find our way back into the transcendence of these ancient texts which our liberal/

² Sasso, *God's Echo*, 5.

³ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 189.

⁴ See chapter 3.

⁵ Debbie Blue, *From Stone to Living Word: Letting the Bible Live Again* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 29.

academic ancestors have demythologized and domesticated.⁶ Midrashic biblical imagination has been particularly effective in stepping around the roadblocks both of demythologizing and of inerrant literalism to presuppose a plurality of possible meaning in any one text, as it meets new interpreters and new contexts of interpretation.⁷ At the same time, midrashic imagination at its best involved a reverence for the text because of what it contains. In my experience with this congregation, this was not a particularly appealing feature of midrashic exegesis to begin with; it was alien to their culture of suspicion of traditional claims for the “sacredness” of the Bible. For those who have experienced more than one season of our Texts and Textures explorations, this reverence for the text is emerging out of a midrashic approach, rather than beginning with reverence. As we continue to make connections between ancient text and contemporary context, some are now at least open to the possibility that a divine Word breathes still in these written words of Scripture, waiting to be loosed again into “*exactly* this world.”⁸

Deficits in content knowledge and in biblical interpretive method among progressive-liberal communities are significant. At Cedar Park, we have discovered with each successive phase of the projects described in this thesis that it has, and it will take a “long obedience in the same direction”⁹ for us to become curious, competent, even confident interpreters of biblical texts. Nevertheless, we have made a beginning, and as the midrashic imagination method has become more familiar to participants in study groups, and as we have consistently used midrashic approaches to presentation of texts

⁶ See Johnson, “Imagining the World Scripture Imagines”; Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Theology Went Wrong*.

⁷ Sasso, *God’s Echo*, 7, 70.

⁸ Blue, *From Stone to Living Word*, 215.

⁹ Eugene Peterson, *Long Obedience*.

and preaching in worship, this community is taking on more characteristics of a *bet midrash* (a house of study/searching), which centres its life, its mission and its ministries around this pluriform engagement with Scripture. Moreover, there are signs that use of this method is now capable of holding space for the community to begin to contest with those texts that terrify¹⁰ progressive Christians, rather than to dismiss them out of hand. It is a beginning, and an encouraging one, given that I am now (at time of writing) hosting a fifth “Texts and Textures” study, worship and preaching series, by congregational popular demand, long after the thesis project has been completed.

Personal and Pastoral Reflections

Finally to my third, personal/pastoral discovery; this cumulative experience of using a midrashic biblical imagination in community to “turn and turn” the biblical text until it yields a Lively Word, has turned me, as perhaps it should. After all, a preacher is but a servant of the Lively Word¹¹ in all its undomesticated, uncompromisingly faithful Otherness.¹² Midrashing, rather than academically studying a text in preparation for preaching is a still-emerging praxis for me, one that requires an ever closer attention to the syntax, language, contexts, and interpretive history of the text. The texts consistently demand a hearing, a reading, and a re-writing before they will crack open to interpretive possibility. Midrashic practice also, by its nature, involves a community of interpreters of the dead and the living who draw the preacher out of the sanctuary of solitary study into the public scrutiny of the curious, and the skeptical, with whom we will wrestle the text until it yields its blessing. (Gen 32).

¹⁰ Kunst, *The Burning Word*; Tribble, *Texts of Terror*.

¹¹ H. H. Farmer, *The Servant of the Word* (Fortress Press, 1964), Kindle.

¹² Exodus 15:11. See Brueggemann, *Theology Old Testament*, 297–313.

Midrashic biblical imagination practised among a multigenerational, multisensory community has also provoked me to become a more imaginative preacher. Where once I would have relied on a more intellectual approach to the preaching text, I have learned, through this method to expand my homiletic and performative vocabulary to give voice to the emotional range of the biblical narrative. I have become more certain of the uncertainties and gapped nature of biblical testimony, which in turn has made my preaching more, visceral, contingent, using exegetical rigour not to get it right, but to crack things open. And my preaching has become more political, in the sense that the politics of God's Dream as articulated in Scripture are brought into conversation with the politics of the community, and of the culture(s) within which we live as the people of God.

Speaking of the politics of community; I have been aware throughout this process that midrashing biblical texts is a practice alien to much of our Christian history of interpretation, which has aligned itself more to Platonic notions of (singular irrefutable) and objective truth than to the inherent polyvalence and relational messiness of Jewish, rabbinic reading and interpretation of biblical texts.¹³ For many within the Christian tradition, including some in my own congregation, this multiplicity and complex unruliness is experienced as deeply unsettling, even dangerously irresponsible. It has not been my purpose in this thesis to engage that particular debate head on, but rather instead to present a tentative, yet thoroughly grounded alternative approach for those Christians who have given up on the Bible because it fails the "objective, singular irrefutable truth"

¹³ This paragraph relies upon the scholarship of, among others, Susan Handelman, *Slayers of Moses* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1982); Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Karin Hedner Zetterholm, *Jewish Interpretation of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012).

test. This midrashic imaginative approach allows the multiple testimonies of the biblical library to speak with their own voices in witness to the life of God in the life of the world, and to encourage us to add our own testimonies to the Dream of God at work in our own generation. For after all, as Debbie Blue muses in her typically colloquial prose,

“Maybe the Word [of God] in all its crazy uncontrollableness can be let loose and trusted,.... in some way slightly unfathomable to us, to break, save, love, and redeem the world.”

“A story, God’s Story, let it come, let it go.”

APPENDIX A

RESEARCH CODES, PROTOCOLS, AND SAMPLES

1. Midrash Event Codes

| EVENT | Sub-category | CODE |
|--------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------|
| GROUP A 2008-2011 | | |
| Struggling with Scripture (2008) | | SWS |
| | Prior Learning Evaluation | SWS/PLA |
| | Course Week/Sessions | SWS/1,2, etc. |
| | Participant Evaluations | SWS/Ev/# |
| | Journal | SWS/Jnl |
| Ways and Means | | WAM |
| | Course Sessions | WAM 1,2, etc. |
| | Participant Evaluations | WAM/Ev/# |
| Reading the Bible in Community | | RIC |
| | As above SWS | |
| Politics of Prophetic Imagination | | PPI |
| | As above | |
| Psalms: Songs of the Soul | | PSOS |
| | Prior Experience Questionnaire | PSOS/PLA |
| | Course Sessions | PSOS/1,2, etc. |
| | Participant Evaluations | PSOS/Ev/# |
| | Focus Group | PSOS/FG/# |
| Threatened with Resurrection | | TWR |
| | As above SWS | |
| GROUP B Sermons 2011-2015 (Selected) | | |
| Lent 1B (2012) Ps 25 | Sermon Text | SB/Ps25 |
| Easter 6C: Acts 16: Down to the River to Pray(Lydia) | Sermon text Respondent notes | SB/Lyd |
| Epiphany 2C: John 2: Cana Wine | Sermon text Respondent | SB/Cana |
| Advent 4B/4C: Luke 1-2: The Way the Women Tell It | Sermon text SRG | SB/WWT SB/WWT/# |
| Epiphany 4B: Mark 1: Possessed | | SB/Mk1 |
| GROUP C Midrashic Imagination Project 2016-2017 | | |
| Follow the White Rabbit (1, 2,) | Notes Focus Group Eval | FTWR/1 or 2 FTWR/FG/# |

| EVENT | Sub-category | CODE |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------|
| Advent Texts and Textures | | ATT |
| | Course Sessions | ATT/1,2,3,4 |
| | Sermons | ATT/Ser/1,2,3,4 |
| | Worship/Scripture elements | ATT/Wsp |
| | Participant Evaluations | ATT/Ev/# |
| | Journal | ATT/Jnl |
| Lenten Texts and Textures: Lent | | LTT |
| | Course Sessions | ATT/1,2,3,4 |
| | Sermons | ATT/Ser/1,2,3,4 |
| | Worship/Scripture elements | ATT/Wsp |
| | Participant Evaluations | ATT/Ev/# |
| | Journal | ATT Jnl |
| This Changes Everything: Easter | | TCE |
| | Course Sessions | TCE/1,2,3,4 |
| | Sermons | TCE/Ser/1,2,etc. |
| | Worship/Scripture elements | TCE/Wps/1,2, etc. |
| | Participant Evaluations | TCE/Ev/# |
| | Journal | TCE/Jnl |
| Ordinary Time Texts & Textures | | |
| Pentecost 9A: Jacob (Gen 28-32) | | OT9/JAC |
| | Study Workshop | OT9/JAC/Wk/# |
| | Sermon | OT9/JAC/Ser |
| | Response Group | OT9/CRG/# |
| | | |
| Pentecost 13A: Weeds (Matt 13) | | OT13PAR |
| | Study Workshop | OT/13/Wk/ |
| | Sermon | OT 13/PAR/Ser |
| | Response Group | OT 13/CRG/# |
| | | |
| PROJECT/CRG FOCUS GROUP | Transcript(Anon) | FG/# |

2. Participant Response Codes

Using Wordsift technology and transcript analysis, participant responses to the above events were tabulated against these response categories. Over time it is possible to track shifts, for example, of levels of participant perceived competence or confidence.

| | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|
| Curiosity | |
| | Text |
| | Implication |
| | Do again? |
| Competence | |
| | Technical |
| | Textual |
| | Interrogative |
| | Imaginative |
| Confidence | |
| | technical |
| | interrogative |
| Inspiration | |
| | textual |
| | spiritual |
| Imagination | |
| | Visual |
| | Narrative |
| | Creative |
| | Extrapolative |
| Missional motivation | |
| | community engage |
| | individual discip |
| | relevance (soc-pol) |
| Track change | |
| | new knowledge |
| | new insight |
| | new questions |
| | new method |
| Transformation | |
| | new actions |
| | new attitudes |
| Confusion | |
| | Content |

| | |
|------------------------------------|----------------------|
| | Method |
| | Rationale |
| Suspicion | |
| | textual |
| | interpretive |
| | hermeneutic |
| Challenge | |
| | Wrestling (+) |
| | Struggling (-) |
| | Rejective/dismissive |
| Community of Interpretation | |
| | Discussion |
| | safety |
| | cross-gen |
| Identity | |
| | Progressive |
| | Affirming |
| | Open |

3. Midrashic Imagination Codes

This set of codes is used to analyse fourteen sermons delivered between 2012- 2017, all of which have deliberately midrashic elements. Tracking the changes over time adds valuable data to a longitudinal research methodology. Because this is an internal analysis, not verified by an external reader, I have included it here, but not in the body of the thesis.

The same codes were used to track participant engagement in the Midrashic Imagination Project using a similar process, tracking responses in each course week to track shifts, changes, ruptures, and consistencies.

| MIDRASHIC IMAGINATION CODES | SB Ps 25 Lent 1B 2012 | SBWWT Adv4B 2014 | SBLYD Easter 6C 2015 | Etc. |
|----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------|
| Midrash (N) | Y | Y | Y | |
| Midrash (V) | | Y | Y | |
| Midrashc (A) | | Y | Y | |
| Polyvalence (Text) | | Y | Y | |
| Polyvalence (Interp) | Y | Y | | |
| Open Ended | | | Y | |
| Lively Word/Word of God | | Y | Y | |
| Generative | | Y | | |
| Gaps | Y | Y | Y | |
| Textures/Layers | Y | | Y | |
| Guide to life/Inspiration | Y | | Y | |
| Imagination | Y | Y | Y | |
| Extrapolation | | Y | | |
| Playful/humour | | Y | | |
| Redemptive | | Y | Y | |
| Comments/Qual | Giving the psalmist an identity, imagining a context for singing | Retelling | Fem midrash. Layers from hist context | |

4. Final Focus Group Transcript

This transcript of the audio recording of the final Focus Group for the Midrashic Imagination Project, conducted on September 10, 2017, has been edited to remove comments tangential to the study, and has been double-coded to protect the identity of participants.

FOCUS GROUP TRANSCRIPT

[Prayer, gathering exercise, review of IRB protocol, and opening remarks]

ERJ: Please name some of your surprises, revelations, discoveries, having been involved in a Texts and Textures study group, or a participant in worship presentations of Scripture, or in the D.Min. sermon response groups in which we used the midrashic imaginative approach.....

[first few minutes not recorded]

#19 Thought deep scrutiny of texts was weird, discover that this method does that. In good company.

#6 Reading awkward...rejection/dismissive (writing/edited)... challenged to read the layers, tease them out, and see if the intentions are 'worthwhile today' or not. Is there kernel that is 'rabbit' or the hole it leads you down... worth following, and I think that's the midrashic process, it's work, and it takes time. Useful to bring up consciousness around intent.

#2 What is the sacred, what is the holy? Why is this book/bible? Why do I care? Why is it important. Friends who are evangelicals who want simple answers, want it to be a literal guide. Atheists also want simple answers. It seems to me that the sacred lies somewhere in accepting the complexity of the universe that we can't understand. Dealing with stories that are so paradoxical or mystifying lead me in to the sacred.

What I find with this process. I bring myself to a text in a certain way, but if I do this work, prepare myself, then I hear your sermon, I'm confronted by my own prejudices and I'm better able to see the richness and holiness of the text because it is complex.

ERJ(Researcher) Midrash as method, eccentric to this people of CPU. Some have approached scripture in other ways before, so comparative, for the first timers, what is there about this makes it worthwhile.

#52 Reminds me of early universities, (Socratic method). "Midrashing as an approach Method is vital if you want to understand this in the best way possible, because it's an anthology. To treat it any other way is like trying to divide by 0 and it's not going to work." To see the anthology as an interpretative act, so you need to come at it as interpreters.....

#32 Postmodern context/ Post Christian. Method seems to take you into a subjective way of experiencing the text, which I think fits with our context. Barrier we're up against as this sort of church, is that there's a big negative assumption about what we are, which necessitates innovation to break that down, and to create opportunity for encounter, and this is innovative and has potential for an experiential approach, and an avenue for those exploring their spirituality.....

#69 For me it's made the Bible a relevant piece of literature, which really beforehand ... I went to a school where we had to read it..... It had no meaning beyond

learning about it,but had no meaning as far as my life was concerned. So when I no longer had to, I stopped reading it, because it wasn't relevant. There's been a huge gap of goodness knows how many years before coming back,. This has made the whole thing quite different, it has a purpose and it's relevant, and I'm interested and I wan't before, it was a chore. Crazy, I find I'm doing it with other things. I can't read anything without texturing and layering. It's brought the Bible back to me, and I love the sharing, the discussions, that's terribly important. I want more, and more.

#2. It allows us to test and discern.... discern, not judge.

ERJ: creating a sort of environment is not an adjunct to the work, but integral, creating hospitable space for outlandish ideas, when 2 people are midrashing, the pushing to the limits.

#62: For those reasons I hope you want to keep doing these CRG groups.

#34 Before coming here, just recently, I've been doing this in my own way for years, which made people think I was a weirdo and it caused me to leave the church. Now good, it's converged, and I've found others who can do this, kindred spirits. really awesome. It's not just words, it's holy, but there is relationship between God and humans, and reminded me that relationship is messy, fear-filled, and knowing it was in Scripture makes me feel better about today's context. If Elsa's weird, I want to be weird with her. The synergy of groups doing this together is enriching, not scary, amazing, uplifting, and yes, God is creating...still.

#2 Themes in the two passages: Jacob the cretin, and wheat and weeds.... complexity is found in so many of the texts. It's tiring, sometimes we just want it simple, butlife is complex, so I guess...

#??? (voice unclear) Polyvalence and plurality don't repeat, they refract and enhance....

#56 Background used to looking for answers, but this is about questions. And those are values I want to share with my children, to be mindful, to reflect on experience, and what is spiritual is worth the work. I'm moving towards that and this method seems to honour that.

#??? This is counter cultural in looking for questions, wisdom rather than facts.

59 Midrashing is a bit depressing, you have to realize you can't answer the questions.

#69 I used to envy those with concrete faith. But now I begin to realize it's alright to wonder, it's okay to not have a concrete faith, it's reassuring to be okay not to know, and this whole process is doing this together.

46 Open and questioning is more resilient.

#2 Is this in mystic tradition? I hope so, cuz I wan't to be one!! To those who are concrete certain, what we're doing is fluidity, complex, humour and mystery, are usually decried, and dismissed as mystic...yes... is that why we get dismissed, yes... and don't be ashamed of being mystic. We just have a hard time being clear, we don't want to get too clear. But this is a defining moment that call us to be clear. It serves us well to see this method as deeply rooted.... was Jesus a mystic to a scribal tradition.

The finding peace with a lifelong journey in search of wisdom, and finding that the answer to knowing is unknowing, another question. The enriching to the whole congregation that five or 10 or 20, have sat with these texts using this method, so it's our sermon as well as yours.

#69. And will you please finish the thesis before I die!

END.

Transcribed September 25, 2017

APPENDIX B

PROJECTS 2008-2011: OUTLINES AND ANALYTIC SUMMARY

1. Struggling With Scripture Samples

Note to reader: The digital files for much of this course material no longer exist. Hard copy/prints of all analysed data is archived.

Struggling With Scripture (2008)
A Bible Study Course for People who aren't sure why we read it.

COURSE OUTLINE

Session 1 Scriptures in Communities of Faith

Other Religions have texts too

How we got a Bible, and why we call it holy

Session 2 What's in a Bible? And Why?

The "canon"

Words about God = Theologies in the Bible

Session 3 More on the Content

Narrative arc: Genesis to Revelation in 40 minutes (*slide presentation*)

"Old, New, Hebrew, Christian." Why labels matter.

Session 4 Texts that Terrify

What to do with the horrendous passages

Babies and bathwater

Session 5 Battles about the Bible: Then and Now

Three snapshots (4th Century, 16th Century, Liberal vs. Literal)

Session 6 Texts for our Times

Reading the Bible in a post-everything generation

Challenge(s) for "Liberal/Mainline" Christians

Struggling With Scripture: Preliminary Questionnaire

Name _____

1. Why did you decide to take this course at CPU? (More than one reason is ok!)

2. Which of the following statements/questions do you want to examine during this course? (Circle your top choice, check all that apply)

- ☐ Why do we call the Bible Holy?
- ☐ Does the United Church have a different understanding of the Bible than Billy Graham, or Sarah Palin?
- ☐ How did the books of the Bible get in there?
- ☐ I want to know the difference between "literal" interpretations and what Rev.Sharon does in her sermons
- ☐ What do we do with the violent parts of the Bible?
- ☐ Do we still need this book to be a Christian?
- ☐ Who wrote it?

3. What question(s) do you want to add to this list?

4. Make a mark in one of the boxes indicating where you stand in relation to the following statements:

| | | | | | | | | |
|--------------------------------|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|-------------------------------------|
| The Bible= a guide for my life | | | | | | | | Bible = no bearing on my faith/life |
| | | | | | | | | |

| | | | | | | | | |
|----------------------------|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|---------------------|
| Bible= literal Word of God | | | | | | | | Bible = all fiction |
| | | | | | | | | |

| | | | | | | | | |
|--------------------|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|-----------------------------|
| I read Bible daily | | | | | | | | Bible: don't read it at all |
| | | | | | | | | |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--------------------------|
| Read books to understand Bible better | | | | | | | | Read nothing about Bible |
| | | | | | | | | |

5. If you have read books about the Bible, what have you read?

6. Complete the following sentences:

- I am most excited about learning.....
- The thing that bothers/terrifies me about being in this course is.....
- If I were to describe my understanding of the place of the Bible in the Church (CPUC or generally) I would say.....

7. How do you like to learn new things? What works best for you? What doesn't?

Rate the following 0= eugh! and 5= I love that!

- Presentations
 - Large group discussions
 - Small group discussions
 - Sharing experiences
 - Watching a video/slide presentation
 - Discussing something we've all prepared
 - Reading background materials before a session
 - Using web-based resources at home or in a session
-

Struggling With Scripture – Participant Evaluation

It would be really helpful to Rev. Elisabeth and to Cedar Park to have your feedback on this course, to help with future planning.

Please take a moment to fill this out, and leave it on the table at the end of the session.

REMINDER: The **PURPOSE** of this course was to “struggle” a bit with the vexing questions we have about the Bible, and its place in the life of the Church, and in our own lives.

CONTENT

1a. Please identify one element of the course which was most helpful to you?

1b. Was there a burning question that you had at the beginning of the course that was either not address, or that you’d like to do more work on in future?

1c. If you like number ratings: how would you rate the course in terms of delivering what it set out to do?

0= missed by a mile! 10 = spot on!

Comment:

FACILITATOR/FORMAT

2a. Did you experience teaching/learning styles that helped your learning at least some of the time?

Yes/ No

Name what was helpful, and/or what was not

Helpful

Not helpful

2b. Rate the facilitator on the following 0= not helpful 5= great

- ___ Knowledge of the material, and ability to share it
- ___ Capacity to encourage others in learning
- ___ Being prepared with appropriate materials
- ___ Ability to facilitate discussion
- ___ Ability to create and hold ‘safe space’ for learning

2c. Was there sufficient variety in the format to keep you engaged? (slides, discussion, presentation, audio, visual, etc.)

FUTURE PLANS

3. If you had the chance to continue with study of the Bible, what would you want to see included? (Would you come again if this were offered?)

2. Struggling with Scripture Data Analysis.

The study course *Struggling with Scripture* is analysed in some detail to be illustrative of the analysis conducted on this and three of the other courses offered between 2008 and 2011.

Eighteen adults (age range 27- 78)¹⁴ participated in all or most of the six sessions. All eighteen participants completed the prior learning questionnaire (SWS/PLA above), and eleven completed a written course evaluation which combined Lykert scale, open ended and multiple option questions (SWS/Ev, also above). These evaluations, the course content (SWS/C1,2,3,) and my teaching Journal (SWS/Jnl) form the data field for the analysis.¹⁵ From these data a number of elements emerge. Firstly, personal engagement with the content of the Bible (outside of Sunday worship) was, in most cases, minimal, or non-existent. Only three of the eighteen participants self-identified as sporadic or regular readers of the Bible. When asked to place themselves on a scale rating the current role of the Bible as a “guide” for framing their personal discipleship, most responses fall towards the “not much/at all” end of the spectrum:

| | | | | | | | | |
|--------------------------------|---|--|--|---|---|----|---|-------------------------------------|
| The Bible= a guide for my life | | | | | | | | Bible = no bearing on my faith/life |
| | 1 | | | 1 | 1 | 10 | 2 | 3 |

Despite this initial indication of a minimal direct impact of the Bible upon these participants’ lives, the degree of curiosity was surprisingly and encouragingly high, and worthy of closer analysis here. Eleven participants had taken at least one study course

¹⁴ I include generational information where it will be used as part of the analysis. I have chosen not to identify participants by gender, except where such identification is germane to the particular analysis.

¹⁵ In the interests of full disclosure: I have a large amount of data related to this course because I used it as an anonymized case study in a seminary course - “Education in the Church”- which I taught between 2007-2011 at the Montreal School of Theology.

about the Bible in their recent past, and thirteen had read secondary literature to help understand Scripture better (with John Shelby Spong, Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, and Tom Harpur being the most commonly cited authors). Other questions designed to qualify and quantify curiosity asked participants to identify on a 0-5 scale their eagerness to address a variety of topics. Most used 4 or higher for most of the topic options listed, with the greatest interest shown in a) “who wrote the various books,” b) “how the various books in the Bible got there,” and c) “what are the differences between *literal* interpretations and what Rev. Sharon does in her sermons.” In questions requiring a written response, sixteen of eighteen people responded to the question “Why did you decide to take this course?” with hermeneutic or interpretive objectives; one participant hoped for a way of reading biblical passages that would not leave them “perpetually confused or appalled”, (SWS/PLA/#68), with three hoping to address or even resolve the issue of contemporary relevance (SWS/PLA/#67, 66, 14).

The character of the biblical curiosity identified by these participants shows a clear bias towards what I would call “intellectual curiosity *about*” the Bible, rather than “spiritual curiosity *for*” the Bible. However, an interesting generational weighting emerges: nine of eleven participants who fall into the Baby Boomer and Silent Generation cohorts, all alumnae/I of previous Borg/Crossan/Spong type studies, were wanting more information about historical context, canonical construction and redaction. Spiritual curiosity *for* the Bible was expressed only by the two youngest participants and the one practising Roman Catholic who attended.

The Minister’s initial characterization of “scriptural skepticism,” or a shared/common hermeneutic of suspicion within this group is indeed borne out by analysis of

the data, but with some interesting nuances. Three responses made no detectable indication of skepticism in their written answers, partly because they wrote very little (perhaps an indication of skepticism they would rather keep to themselves?). Others were more forthcoming with their suspicions directed to the biblical text, for example: “the Bible should be read in church, and left in church” (SWS/PLA/#14); “It’s all fiction, but it can be very damaging fiction” (SWS/PLA/#6); “I fail to see how misogynist or violent passages have any benefit to contemporary society” (SWS/PLA#64) being among the most evidently skeptical. Again, as was the case with expressed curiosity, it is possible to detect a generational difference; the hermeneutic of suspicion is strongest among those in the older Baby Boomer and Silent Generation cohorts, and least evident in the younger Baby Boomer and GenX/Millennial cohort. These last were “bothered by literalist interpretations so strong in other parts of the church” (SWS/PLA #9), but also expressive of a desire for a different way of approaching, or even reading the Bible to inform their spiritual and personal life.¹⁶

Analysis of the concluding evaluations, when compared to the initial goals and objectives reveals a number of interesting points of comparison. First, all eleven participants who completed the final evaluation were able to identify a significant learning, and in most cases what each identified was closely tied to their initial goals. In other words, those who came seeking more facts about the Bible got them; those asking questions about the continued relevance of Scripture to contemporary life were less completely satisfied, while those looking for a different hermeneutic approach to the Bible were all “satisfied.” All eleven responded in the affirmative to the question “Would

¹⁶ See my analysis of the congregation in chapter 1. 7ff.

you be interested in more courses like this?”, and three non-readers of Scripture expressed interest in studies of biblical texts themselves, something I would categorize as a shift towards a “curiosity *for*” the Bible, not merely *about* it.

While individual responses are crucial to the process of fostering a biblical imagination, my goal has always been to foster a community approach to biblical interpretation (see chapter 2). To what extent does the creation of a learning community enhance or hinder this goal? Although my evaluation form did not ask specifically about the community of learning, all eleven respondents made affirmative comments about the community learning process as an enhancement to their learning and experience, with five mentioning that we had created a safe time/place to share questions and doubts, as well as insights (SWS/Ev/#6, 67, 66, 22, 49).

Related to this is the question of Christian identity (PEC/13), as self-defined by the participant. Ten of the group are life-long UCCan members with four others who have come from other denominations over twenty years ago; the remaining four included one practising Roman Catholic, and three newcomers to the congregation, all of whom arrived from more conservative/evangelical denominational backgrounds. To quantify what this means, for example, with respect to their attitudes to biblical literalism, see the table below:

| Bible =Literal WoG | | | | | | | | Bible =fiction |
|-----------------------|--|---|--|--|---|----|--|-------------------|
| | | 2 | | | 4 | 10 | | 2 |

It is worth noting that from the initial questionnaires, the final written evaluations, and the session discussions, only three people made a direct reference to the Bible as guide or inspiration for their spiritual life, or sense of personal discipleship. That said, there were six who wrote or said that the Bible “should” be more significant. I do not want to

extrapolate too much from this data, because, after all, the course was offered as a “Bible Study for people who aren’t sure why we read it,” and not as a biblical spirituality/discipleship course. Nevertheless, when this data is combined with the fact that many of these participants became involved with subsequent opportunities to explore the Bible imaginatively offered over the coming years, it becomes possible to suggest that the seeds of a culture of appreciative, yet still critical, inquiry were sown in this progressive-liberal community.

3. Analytic Summary:2008-2011

| Course Topic | Teach/Learn Objectives | Outcomes/New Goals |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Struggling with Scripture | Addressing “Scriptural skepticism,” creating a safe environment for biblical exploration | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not lack of curiosity: • Indifference to seemingly irrelevant texts. • Participant identified incompetence as readers of the text. |
| Ways and Means | Address sense of incompetence with interpretive/exegetical methods for lay adults | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Isolation when reading alone • recognizing that texts have communicative intent |
| Reading Bible in Community | A Readers’ workshop to explore how to communicate the ancient text in community and in family settings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OT lacunae - content, theology and relevance |
| Politics of Prophetic Imagination | OT Prophets paired with contemporary ‘prophets’ as a window into biblical political/cultural relevance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shapes new perspectives and possibilities for OT as a relevant “Word that journeys with us” • Content is overwhelming |
| Psalms: Songs of the Soul | Spiritual, multisensory and creative approach to engage familiar biblical psalms in conversation with modern songs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • relevance/correlation of OT with contemp. culture • Multisensory opens up new imaginative possibilities for interpretation |
| Threatened with Resurrection¹⁷ | The first lectionary based biblical exploration of themes of resurrection in the Easter season preaching texts. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • connection with preaching text/worship a bonus • multiple interpretations of a text encouraged |

¹⁷ The course title comes from Julia Esquivel’s poem of the same title. For full text see, <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/41552> (accessed February 21, 2018)

What follows here is a brief analytical summary of three of the above identified courses. subsequent forays into biblical imagination, using the content, teaching log and participant evaluations retained from these events. This analysis identifies discernible change in attitudes to the role of the Bible in the life, mission and witness of this particular community. Questions asked of these data fields included the following: is there a measurable increase in curiosity about and for the Bible? Is there any discernible shift in the nature of scriptural skepticism? What impact (if any) are these studies having on participants' sense of capability and confidence as readers/students of the biblical texts? It should be noted immediately that a severe limitation of this portion of the longitudinal study arises from the relatively small number of evaluations for each of the courses (a total of twenty-two evaluations for the three courses combined). A second limitation arises because these courses pre-date the framing of the research questions relating directly to "midrashic biblical imagination," a concept not even on our radar screens until about 2013. Notwithstanding these limitations, the following summary does identify a number of changes.

The course, *Prophets and the Prophetic Imagination*, (2009), designed to explore the question of contemporary relevance of the Bible by pairing biblical prophets with contemporary "prophets," was deemed by all extant evaluations to have been a success. Curiosity *for* the Bible becomes measurable in this data set, as five respondents named their surprise and/or interest in the variety of literary forms and notably the historically grounded social-political themes within the prophetic texts. On the other hand, with relevance come some thorny issues, which were addressed in the course materials and discussions, and are also reflected in the evaluations. One comment encapsulates this

well; “If we continue to read these texts, then it raises the stakes; does God condone violence, slavery, misogyny? How do we navigate that?” (PPI/Ev/#28). This appears to be re-casting of a “culture of disdain/despite” into a laudable hermeneutic of suspicion when applied to so-called “texts of terror” within the biblical canon.¹⁸

The course *Reading in Community* (2010) recruited a diverse age-range and interest level of participants, as it was advertised as an opportunity to practice for reading the Bible in Sunday worship during the pastoral interim and transition, as well as to offer suggested resources for reading biblical texts at home with family. Every evaluation responded to the question about future opportunities with a concrete suggestion, which I take to be a signal of curiosity. I was at the time startled by the highest ranking “significant learning,” which, to quote one respondent, was “the whole idea of having something to communicate when reading the Scripture in church.” (RIC/Ev/#45). This comment stayed with me for the next four years, influencing a number of strategies for “communicating” rather than merely “reading” the biblical text.¹⁹ In analyzing the data for evidence of a shift in attitude or action in relation to the place of Scripture in discipleship, four respondents identified intentions to purchase a (suggested) one-volume commentary for home use, to replace their hand-me-down Readers’ Digest Bible with a current study version, or to read the Sunday preaching text. Perhaps because of the deliberate use of Appreciative Inquiry methods in this course, the tone of the responses

¹⁸ Tribble, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*.

¹⁹ I explore this in detail in my Integrative Paper, submitted in partial fulfilment for the Doctor of Ministry Degree, Luther Seminar. See Jones, “‘They Have Eyes but See Not, Ears but Hear Not.’ The Community and the Word of God.”

was markedly less skeptical, and more expressive of an increased capability, or desire to read with understanding.

As already outlined in chapter 4, the course *Psalms: Songs of the Soul Unwrapped* charted new teaching territory for me by deliberately incorporating “imaginative” strategies in the exploration of a selection of Psalms of orientation, disorientation and reorientation.²⁰ The stated intention for this exploration series were to generate curiosity *for* the Bible at a textual and spiritual level. The evaluation questionnaire was therefore designed to assess the success (or otherwise) of both these two teaching objectives. Of nineteen participants in the course, there exist only eight evaluations, so I rely here as well on my teaching journal. Of the significant learnings identified, three stand out as illustrative; the first points to the “complexity of biblical ignorance” that is often present in progressive-liberal congregations, where members with diverse denominational backgrounds are not necessarily exposed to clear teaching about the way(s) scripture is read in the United Church of Canada, as a “living word, passed on from generation to generation to guide and inspire” as the testimony of “human experiences and cultural assumptions of another era.”²¹ One participant wrote that their significant learning was “that the psalms were written by many people over hundreds of years. They are **to** God, not **by** God, which makes a whole lot more sense to me than anything I’ve heard before!” (emphasis theirs, PSOS/Ev/#60)

The second illustrative comment refers to impact of the multisensory and imaginative strategies used in the course:

²⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1984).

²¹ United Church of Canada, “A Song of Faith,” 2006, <http://www.united-church.ca/community-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/faith-statements>.

I found the imaginative approach both challenging and liberating. I did not have the images and words before to express my rage and grief in prayer, but here they are, all ready for use! Thank you for sharing this with us. (PSOS/Ev/#57)

In this one comment, a number of criteria are present; the capacity for Scripture to effect transformation of attitude or action (PEC8 a, b), the use of Imagination to explore Scripture (PEC5, a,b,c,), Challenge, expressed positively (PEC11a), and an increase in competence as a reader of Scripture (PEC2,d). The final comment I want to draw attention to relates to the question of a “generative relationship” with biblical texts (MEC 11, PEC 5c). Three respondents identified strategies they planned to use to incorporate biblical learning or imagination into their daily personal discipleship. One serves as an example. “Now I know anyone can write a Psalm, I’m going to.” (PSOS/Ev/#20) Of the six courses taught between 2008 and 2011, this one had the most impact upon me as a teacher of biblical topics in the congregational setting an imaginative creativity I frankly didn’t know I had.

APPENDIX C

2011-2015 BIBLICAL IMAGINATION IN WORSHIP AND PREACHING

Much of the work of analysis of this four year period in the long project for biblical imagination in a progressive-liberal community is addressed in the Integrative Paper completed in partial fulfilment of the course requirements for the D.Min. in Biblical Preaching at Luther Seminary.²² Included here are some prefatory analytical comments on some of the sermons preached during this period, followed by a selection of transcripts of three of the fifteen sermons delivered in this period.

In 2011-12, the use of midrash was infrequent, and tended to present “a” midrash (noun), offering an imaginative “filling of a gap” in the biblical text, or a turning of the text to put ourselves into it, as is the case with the sermon on Psalm 25, preached in Lent (Year B), 2012. This structure and strategy developed in the ensuing months, leading to the sermon preached on Easter 6C 2013 on Acts 16:11-40, which ‘re-tells’ telling the story of Paul’s visit to Philippi from Lydia’s perspective, adding imaginative elements culled from a careful study of first century Asia Minor. This method is particularly conducive to a feminist homiletic, as it allows for a carefully crafted, scripturally grounded “turning” of a normally patriarchal text to reveal not merely “a woman’s perspective,” but also the profound liveliness of the Word when it is unbound from gendered norms. An example of this can be found in the sermon preached in Advent 2014 on the encounter between Elizabeth and Mary, and the births of their sons, as told in

²² Jones, “‘They Have Eyes but See Not, Ears but Hear Not.’ The Community and the Word of God.”

Luke 1 and 2. Bringing all the elements of the four-fold strategy together, a five-voice dramatic sermon called “The Way the Women Tell It.”

Reviewing these sermons preached with a midrashic twist, two elements emerge which have direct bearing on the Midrashic Imagination Project which followed. The first is the use of what can be called a “serious playfulness” characteristic of rabbinic midrashic exegesis. As Robert Alter points out, although our Christian tradition, particularly since the Enlightenment, has “encouraged us to take the Bible seriously...the paradoxical truth of the matter may well be that by learning to enjoy the biblical stories more fully as stories, we shall come to see more clearly what they mean to tell us about God, man [humanity], and the perilously momentous realm of history.”²³ Secondly, using a midrashic-imaginative “turning” of a text, with a mixture of question, debate, scrutiny, and humour in order to uncover its redactive or interpretive layers has proven to be an effective way to bring the best insights of higher criticism into the preaching moment without killing it with technical jargon.²⁴ This is of particular importance for the continued development of a solid progressive biblical hermeneutic which insists that while “God-breathed” (2 Tim 3:15), the biblical canon is also a product of human historical, social, political and religious contexts in which God and humanity interact in complex ways. As such, it should therefore be studied, cherished, contested, scrutinized, turned every which way, and above all, imagined with the best we can bring to it in search of the Holy One within and beyond its pages.

²³ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 189.

²⁴ “One of the most destructive results of the historical-critical methods’ hegemony over biblical studies has been its suppression of imagination.” Johnson, “Imagining the World Scripture Imagines,” 12.

Sermon 1: Lent 1B, 2012

Psalm 25:1-10. Singing in the Wilderness

There's a cherished tradition of engaging with Biblical texts which is called "Midrash."²⁵

Instead of the usual habit we have in the post -Enlightenment West of pulling it apart to see how it's made, who really said it, when they wrote it and so on, Midrash looks at it with head and heart on one side, and says, "Hmm, let's tell a story about it." In the telling of the story, Midrash uncovers many possible layers of meaning in the lively texts of Scripture.

I'm going to follow that cherished tradition with this Psalm, and tell a couple of stories to see what emerges in this text that may be of value to us as a community, and as individuals as we begin this year's Lenten Journey, paying attention to the ways of God in our world, and to the ways we go in in God's world.

Imagine a young girl, say 15 or 16.
Her grandfather, now dead,
was a priest in the Temple in Jerusalem,
back in the day when her people were free.
Her mother has sung her and her brothers to sleep every night
with Psalms she learned from that Grandfather.
Songs of God's steadfast love,
of God's protection like a fortress in the mountains,
of God the shepherd leading her people beside calm waters.
Every night, her mother would kiss her head with
"God Blesses, cherished one, Never forget."

She doesn't, this nameless one.
Instead she begins, as she grows, to sing her own songs,
beside the rivers of Babylon, where harps hang silent,
where the desert wind from the west scours the landscape,
and the skin,
where the foreman cracks his whip across her back
for the fun of it,
where some have turned away from God in shame, or despair,
because they are here, slaves,
not there, free.

²⁵ See Judith Kunst, *The Burning Word: A Christian Encounter with Jewish Midrash* (Paraclete Press, 2006)

This is her song.
 “To you I lift my soul,
 don’t let me be shamed,
 silence the cruel laughter that mocks our plight,
 God whom my grandfather called “Steadfast.”²⁶

Each night, before she sleeps, her eyes turn west,
 across the desert, and her heart carves out a highway across the wilderness,
 home.²⁷

“Show me the way” she sings,
 “Order my steps in your word, Lord,
 Show me the path that leads back to you.”²⁸
 Teach me how to live here,
 while my soul is there,
 wherever, with you.
 Keep me from forgetting,
 keep my feet on your path,
 no matter how far it is, no matter how long.
 No matter how excruciatingly distracting life gets,
 if you are Steadfast, God of my Grandfather,
 teach me to be steadfast too.” *pause*.

My second story is more familiar perhaps,
 perhaps not, given that we’re telling it slant.

Mark gave us few clues about this compulsion by the Spirit
 to send Jesus into the wilderness,
 save that he spent it with angels, and wild beasts,
 and the temptations that come to anyone
 pushed to the edge, the limits, of human endurance.
 I wonder what the Psalm song sounds like on *his* lips?

He is days hungry, unspeakably thirsty,
 dusted from head to foot by the desert sands.
 His calloused hands
 crush the milk from a shrivelled cactus.
 Every night for days now,
 when his feet want to take him home,
 he remembers the blessing of his mother, passed
 down, generation to generation,
 “We are blessed, Cherished One, never forget.”

²⁶ Psalm 25, a modern paraphrase.

²⁷ Previous paragraph contains references to Psalms 23, 46, 62, 91, and Isaiah 40

²⁸ Reference to the Choir Anthem, *Order My Steps* Glenn Burleigh, (Hope publishing)

His eyes then pierce the frosty darkness of the eastern sky,
 tracking back to that forsaken land of Babylon,
 and his cracked voice
 sings to the God that brought his ancestors home,

“Holy, We are home, but we are not free.
 This world keeps changing,
 but still we are not whole, nor holy.
 Show me how we can be whole,
 in here (heart), and here (head), and here (hands).
 Teach me your ways, order my steps,
 set my feet on the path
 that leads us back to fidelity,
 to hope, to a future, to You.
 For the sake of your goodness, remember us.
 For you are the God called Steadfast,
 the One who shaped me in my mother’s womb,
 the One who calls me cherished one.

Order my steps in your word,
 and I promise,
 I too will be steadfast.
 I will show your people the Way.
 Lead me in the way that is good,
 from this day to life’s end.
 Be the covenant, the promise, the care, the food, the water,
 the light, the sustenance, the safety,
 the ground upon which we walk.”

And what about us?
 How might we sing this psalm this Lent?
 Anthem: *Order my Steps*

Sermon 2: Easter 6C 2013

Acts 16:9-15. **As I went down to the river to pray.**²⁹

Intro

This is a tight little story, one of a whole string of exploits of Paul, (along with Philip, Timothy, Luke and others) as they seem to be blown hither and yon by the Spirit of God, like dandelion seeds on a spring wind, spreading the Good News of Jesus from “Judea and to the ends of the earth.”

Forgive the sexism inherent in my next remarks, but doesn't it sound like a 'guy's story'? We get more details about the itinerary, more of a sense of the adventure of the sea crossings, than we do about their destination; it's all action and adventure, and thin on conversation and nuance, and emotion. So it's striking, really striking, that in the middle of this guy's travelog, in the middle of the Book of the Acts of the male apostles of Jesus, Luke, the writer, lets slip the name of a woman. Lydia. In fact, if truth be told, this story is not so much Paul's story as it's hers. It's the story of her encounter with the Dream of God in the Gospel of Jesus.

Trouble is, other than her name, her occupation, her ethnicity, do we get enough from this story about her to be inspired by her? Luke, so intent on capturing the video clips of the guys' next stop on their missional Mapquest, simply leaves her, baptismally newborn; named, but unknown, when if truth be known, we share more affinity with her, trying to live a Gospel life close to home, than with those adventuresome peripatetic preachers.

So, this is my tip of the hat to Mother's Day. Lydia will take centre stage. We'll engage in the risky business of midrash, of holy imagination, asking questions of the text, and where there are unfillable gaps, we'll spin a tale, so that Lydia lives enough in our imagination to inspire our own faith in the Gospel of Jesus and the Dream of God.³⁰

Let Lydia speak. (*“Lydia” walks in to the performance space, humming, then singing this song*)

*As I went down in the river to pray,
studyin' about that Good old way,
and who shall wear a starry crown,
Good Lord, show me the way.....
O sisters, let's go down,
let's go down, come on down,
O sisters, let's go down,
Down in the river to pray.*

“What do you do,
with three children around your knee,
a household to run,

²⁹ Sermon title is a reference to the Appalachian song of this title, which may have its origins in the African American song tradition (see <http://www.choralnet.org/view/257262> for more details).

³⁰ The story of Lydia as presented here is fictional, but it is based on research into the social history of first century Asia Minor and Hellenistic Roman culture, as found in the following works: *The Historical Jesus in Context*, eds. Amy-Jill Levine, Dale C. Allison & John Dominic Crossan (Princeton UP, 2006); John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity*, (Harper One, 1998); Richard Horsley, *God and Empire*, (Fortress, 2002).

when your husband is drowned
in one of those spring storms that rake the sea
and smash boats against the rocks?

He was a good man, really.
Took over his father's business, back in Tyre,
crushing seashells to make purple dye.
Messy as all get out,
but worth its weight in silver, that stuff.

When he went down
with a boat load of it not yet paid for,
what was I supposed to do?
You can't feed your kids with grief and regret.
I sold the business to liquidate
what was left of my assets,
and like a good widow, moved here,
to Philippi,
where my brother was stationed
with the Roman garrison.
Until he was sent on to Gaul, and we stayed on alone.

With all these retired Roman generals
and senators around these parts,
they needed clothing, and I knew cloth.
I knew Tyrian dye merchants too, from back in the day,
and so I set to, hand-sewing at night,
while the children were small,
making purple striped togas better than any in town,
until mine were the only ones in town.

That's what you do, isn't it?
You make do and get by,
and if hard work and the blessing of God allow,
you get along.
I don't sew any more;
I have 12 orphaned girls who do that,
living and working alongside my own daughters.
I haggle with the merchants, and sell purple
to vain men to feed fatherless children.

You hear things, being in this trade,
because people travel far to get Lydia's cloth these days.
I heard of trouble in Palestine
because of a man they crucified
about 20 years ago now,

but whose story won't die.
 A righteous Jew he was,
 a believer in one Creator God,
 like me, although I know that's odd
 here in this Pagan metropolis
 with its statues to gods of everything.

I'm too busy to keep track of all those gods
 who seem greedier than a pack of teenage boys!
 Me, I come down to this river, to pray.
 Here I feel connected to life, even to death.
 I see water that drowns, and water that gives life.
 One of my sewing girls gave birth right here,
 the water caressing her labour,
 then lapping at her newborn,
 soothing his cries while we tied the chord.

How can you **not** believe in the
 Maker of Heaven and earth,
 the sea the sky, the land,
 Maker of all that breathes air and drinks water?

They say, those men,
 the ones that came down to the river to pray that day,
 that the crucified man
 liked to talk often of living water,
 life-giving water,
 and of one God of the living, and the dead,
 holding all things, healing all things,
 from palsied limbs to grieving hearts.
 That spoke to my heart all right!

They told me about some of the things
 this crucified one did.
 No wonder they killed him!

He healed people, they said.
 Broken people this world casts on the dung heap
 when they're no longer useful.
 He touched them, looked into their blinded eyes,
 smoothed their wrinkled hands,
 and showed them love only a God can give!

They also said he could walk on water!
 That's foolish, but then there are days,
 when this water is the most solid thing I know,

more constant than the fragile life
we try to cobble together for ourselves.

They said he ate with tax collectors and sinners,
that's chutzpah in my world, I can tell you!
That he taught fishermen to catch people up
in the Dream of God,
that he touched and prayed for all the nobodies
who are pawns in this empire,
people like the fatherless girls I protect
from groping hands.
They say he fed people like the farmers around here,
whose crops are taken to feed soldiers
while the bellies of their own children growl with hunger.
They say he lashed at all the trinket sellers in their temple, saying God is about prayer
and healing, not money-grabbing.

No wonder they killed him!

But the stories aren't dead are they?
Those men, ordinary earthbound creatures
just like the rest of us,
were still fire-breathing his Gospel
as if it happened yesterday.
Talking of this Jesus as if he is still here,
down by the river, praying.
Still alive, free, generous, welcoming,
healing, mending,
salving like flowing water on a wound;
like a river flowing from a mountain in spring,
washing away the muck and mess,
the bitterness, the grief and the hatred,
everything the world needs, if only it knew it.

I suppose that's why they've gone, those men,
to tell others.
I should too, I think.
Yes.

Sermon 3: Advent 4 B/C 2014

Luke 1. The Way the Women Tell It.

First presented 2012/Modified in 2014.

A Reader's Theatre for five readers. A Midrashic expansion and re-telling of the Annunciation – and more – is interspersed with a 'traditional Scripture reading' and Marian hymns

Reader/Luke:

Elizabeth:

Mary:

Susanna:

Ruth:

Introduction to reading Luke 1:5-55

Today, we lay to the side our traditional “reading+ sermon+ hymn” for a midrashic retelling of Luke’s story of Mary and her Cousin Elizabeth. (Midrash being the way we come at a Biblical text, asking questions about the gaps in the text, and allowing one’s faithful imagination to fill those gaps with possibilities that inspire our faith and living).

Mary, the mother of Jesus has tended to be overlooked by the Protestant wing of the Christian family; we’re not so into the RC blonde, blue-eyed, serene virginal portrayals, which is to our advantage, as we are more free to imagine how the story would be told if real women were to tell it.

We begin with the Gospeller Luke, but the women take over, and invite you into the story through the singing of some “Mary” carols at appropriate moments in the telling. Remain seated, sing the verses indicated on the screen or in your bulletin.

Reader/Luke 1:5, 8-20

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, his wife’s name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly all the regulations of the covenant of God. But Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. Then, one day when Zechariah’s duties took him to the sanctuary of the temple to make offerings of incense, an angel of the Lord appeared. Zechariah was terrified. But the angel said “Don’t be afraid, Zechariah! Your barren wife will bear you a son, and he shall be a prophet of God, like Elijah. He will turn the people of God back to the ways of God.” But Zechariah was incredulous, “Impossible!” he declared, and for his disbelief he was struck dumb.

Elizabeth

I am Elizabeth. Herod was king in Judea when Zechariah my husband

met the Angel Gabriel.

You'd think, given that Zachariah was a priest, he'd be used to angels,
but really no one is, are they?

Zech, quiet at the best of times, was silent. Spoke not a word. To anyone. He stayed up into the night, burning oil we couldn't afford to read the scroll of the prophets; Elijah became his obsession, wild prophet of the wilderness, eating locusts and wild honey. I'd no clue why, but he kept looking at me with tears in his eyes. Joy? Fear? Awe? I'd no clue.

Just after the angel visited him, the unthinkable happened to me.

All my adult life I'd longed for a child, but it was not to be.

I'd become resigned to the role of town crone, "Poor Elizabeth",
"aunt" to the neighbourhood children, mother to none.

Then it started, the sickness, the sore breasts, the desire to sleep the day away, and the hunger. My aging body was carrying a child! At first I couldn't believe the signs in my body. I thought I was ill, so I stayed in my house, seeing no one until I could be sure it was true.

Luke 1:26-30

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a young girl engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, a descendant of King David. The girl's name was Mary. The angel said "Greetings, favoured one! God is with you."....

Sing: Carol: To a Maid whose name was Mary. v.I, 4.

Mary

How would you respond when your tiny house is suddenly filled with brilliant light, and a fierce, tall, winged creature with golden eyes, drops by for a visit?

Luke says I was "perplexed."

Well, that's an understatement!

The creature speaks, and says,

"Don't be afraid, Mary, but you're pregnant with God's child, the Messiah."

Which part would I **not** be afraid of?

The angel? The news? The Messiah bit? Take your pick.

I didn't know what to do! Do **you** know what to do when visited by angels?

You nod, piously, kneel on the ground and hope to goodness they go away without doing anything awful to you.... "Yes, sir. Okay sir!"

I still can't tell you what happened,
or how..., and frankly does it matter?

Maybe to some it matters,
but I'm not sure it matters to God.

To God, any child's a miracle.

Humans sharing in God's creation of something new and beautiful,
that's a miracle if you ask me.

Sure enough, I missed. Once, then twice. (You know....,but I'm not saying).
 I told my mother, and she said "Not you too, already!"
 "What? Who else?" I asked.
 She said, "Your aunt Elizabeth"
 I said, to my eternal embarrassment,
 "Old Auntie E?? Impossible, she's older than you!"

Mom told me,
 "Go to her. Work this out between you. Take care of one another."
 So I did.

Luke 1:39-46(*reading 'piously', with little inflection, no awe*)

Mary went to the hill country in Judea, and entered the house of Zechariah, and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child within her womb leapt, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and proclaimed with a loud cry "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child in your womb!"
 And Mary said,
 "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour....
 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
 and Holy is God's Name!
 God's mercy is for those who revere him,
"
(trail off, as you are interrupted)

Susanna:

Luke, I think we'll take over from here.
(to the congregation) Luke missed out Elizabeth's story.
 Let me tell you.
 We, Ruth and I, we lived in the same town as Elizabeth.
 We were bowled over when Elizabeth told us her news.
 I guess it's not totally unheard of for a woman her age to find herself pregnant, but as far as we were concerned it was a dangerous miracle.
 She's not young. At first we thought she was deathly ill.

Ruth

She thought she was ill! Sick as a dog poor thing, and she had splitting headaches, and a metallic taste in her mouth.
 Then she started to swell. Breasts and bump!
 No hiding either on her rake handle frame!
 That's when we knew for sure.
 Because of her age, we all got involved.
 My sister had lost four babies early on in her pregnancy,
 and we weren't about to see Elizabeth grieve this longed for child.
 I took on her laundry, and Miriam took over her garden and the goat.
 No bending, straining, lifting and pulling for Elizabeth.
 She held on to that baby, slept like one too, for the first few months,

then she got to the glowing stage; big and beautiful, with rosy cheeks,
and a proud waddle! Who'd blame her?!

Elizabeth

Then Mary came, sweet dreamer Mary, my sister's girl.
I was sitting on the wall of the well when she came, fire in her eyes.
I thought she was excited for me, carrying news from her mother,
but I looked and I knew she was carrying more than news...

Sing: VU 12 "She walked in the summer" v.1,3.

Elizabeth

Luke says "the babe in my womb leaped,"
and that I said some pious words to her, recognizing the holiness of her child.
That's a bit of a stretch.
I enveloped her in my arms, squeezed her to my breast, hugged her tight, and my babe
kicked alright – squashed, poor thing!
Did I know who she was carrying? Did she know? Did I know about my John?
All either of us needed to know is that we were miracle mothers!
Like every mother.
Every child who kicks against its mother's belly is a miracle baby,
as full of God and of hope and of possibility as it's possible to be.

Susanna

I've had three, and you're right. All were miracle babies, knitting together uniquely,
flesh and tiny bones, red curly hair, toenails, and fierce little lungs that can't wait to fill
with air to bawl to the world their arrival!
And as a mother, it takes you over.
Your world is turned upside down.
You believe you're carrying the universe in that growing babe!

Ruth

But don't get us wrong. Luke does have it right. These two were special.
Mary and Elizabeth, child and crone.
And their boys.

Who was to know, that summer time of bliss,
of womanhood bonding as only women know how,
around the heaving push of a labouring mother,
the wet head of the newborn against a swollen breast,
who was to know just what those two boys would grow up to be?
Maybe they did?
But if they did it would have broken their hearts.

Mary

Luke says I sang this marvellous song.
But we all did!

It was Hannah's song, Hannah the mother of Samuel, from long, long ago.
 I'm surprised Luke didn't know that,
 but then, it's a woman's song.
 Every daughter of Judah learns it at her mother's knee.
 We sing it to every swelling belly, humming like a secret joy.
 But oh! We sang it together,
 the day Elizabeth and I met,
 and every day until her John was born.
 And I sang it all the way back home,
 until the day my Jesus was born.

And when we buried John's mangled body,
 we sang it again,
 defiant against the forces of darkness that would cut him down...

..... and.....

Susanna

And, we who were left,
 we sang it again when we gathered Mary's boy,
 his body broken,
 from that cross,
 and wrapped him in linen,
 swaddling him like a newborn from the dead.
 We sang it then, too.

Elizabeth.

Because it's true.
 Every time a child is born,
 God knows,
 the world is about to turn!

Sing: My Soul Cries Out.

APPENDIX D

MIDRASHIC IMAGINATION PROJECT SAMPLES

| | Week/Theme | Text | Sermon |
|---------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| ADVENT | Advent 1: Intro to Midrash: Hearing the Gospeller | Matthew 24:36-44 | Wait... what?! |
| | Advent 2: Hearing Advent Oracles | Isaiah 11:1-10, Is 7:10-16 | Anticipation of a Peaceable Kingdom |
| | Advent 3: Layering the Texts/YHWH's Justice | Isaiah 35, Luke 1:47:55 | Magnificat |
| | Advent 4: Reinventing the Texts | Matthew 1:18-25/Is 7: Isa 9:2-7, Luke 2:1-14 | <i>Joseph's Dream (Interactive Drama)</i> |
| LENT | Lent 1: Jesus walking with Satan | Matthew 4:1-11 | Jesus with Satan |
| | Lent 2: Jesus with Nicodemus | John 3:1-17 | Night |
| | Lent 3: Jesus with the Foreigner | Matthew 15:21-28 | Stranger Wisdom |
| | Lent 5: Walking with the Dead | Ezekiel 37:1-14 | Can These Bones Live? |
| EASTER | Easter 4: Abundant Life | John 9:13- 10:10 | Abundant Life |
| | Easter 5: Stoned for the Gospel | Acts 7:55-60 | Proclaiming Life Anyway |
| | Easter 6: God by Other Names | Acts 17:22-31 | Proclaiming the God (we think) we know |
| | Pentecost | Ezekiel 37 | <i>Breath of Spirit (Cross Gen)</i> |
| ORDINARY TIME | Pentecost 9A (Aug) Biblical narrative /current context | Genesis 28 and 32 | Jacob the(Heel, J**k) |
| | Pentecost 13A (September) Parabolic stories, meshalim, midrashim? | Matthew 13:24-30 | What shall we do with the Weeds? |

The highlights on this table indicate the samples included in this appendix. The highlighted sermons are included in Appendix E.

Texts and Textures Study Series Samples

Lenten Textures We Walk this Road Together

Adult Bible Study, exploring the Lenten biblical texts with a "Midrashic Imagination"

In this Lenten Bible study course, we'll be using "Midrashic Imagination" to discover the layers and textures of the Biblical texts which we will be using for each of the Sundays of the Season.

This year's Lent texts take us onto the road walked by our ancestors in faith. What would happen if we were to meet these characters? What would they teach us about how this journey of faith that we are on? What might happen if we choose to walk this Road together with them?

Come to this study, or participate through the blog, and expect to walk the road together with Satan, Nicodemus, a foreigner, with children, and with the victims of war.

You can participate in this course in a number of ways

- a) In-person participation on Wednesday evenings 7:30 to 9:15 pm
- b) In-person participation on Thursday mornings 9:15 to 11:00 am
- c) Via the CPU blog: 'BeyondWoodandStone' – <http://cpuc.edublogs.org/Lent-textures/> (blog posts will be updated following the Thursday sessions, so expect to see them online by Friday morning)

OUTLINE

| Date | Topic Focus | Biblical Text |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Week1 Wed March 1, Thur Mar 2 | Jesus with Satan <i>(Introduction to Lent, and to Midrashic imagination)</i> | Matthew 4:1-11 |
| Week 2 Wed March 8, Thur Mar 9 | Jesus with Nicodemus | John 3:1-17 |
| Week 3 Wed March 15, Thu Mar 16 | Jesus and the Foreigner | Mathew 15:21-28 |
| Week 4 Wed March 22, Thu Mar 23 | With the Dead | Ezekiel 37:1-14 |

Session 1 Outline

1. General Introductions
2. Midrash? Product and Process
3. Getting Midrashic with Advent Texts

1. General Introductions

- Who are we all? Why are we here?
- What do we hope to gain from the experience?
- Creating safe space and welcome
- General Course introduction

Why “Texts and Textures”?

Some general ‘assumptions’ about Scripture:

- It is a human text, compiled over thousands of years in multiple locations by multiple authors
- It is multilayered
- It was compiled for a ‘sacred purpose’ – a window into God.
- What makes a text sacred is how it connects the holy with the lived experience of those who read/study it
- Texts are meant to transcend time, ‘capturing’ the ephemeral’ of one generation to be shared with subsequent ones.

Why Texture?

- What does the word imply?
- How might it apply to any text, this text?
- Images of ‘textured texts’

2. Midrash = ?

דרש = derash – to seek, study, inquire, probe, pursue.

It can also imply either a Product or a Process. We will be focussing most of our attention on process not product.

Midrash as Product

If Midrashim are stories about the stories in the Bible, then Midrash is Biblical!

Without the Bible there would be no midrash. But how did we get from the Bible to Midrash? The following grid tracks the process:

Written Torah = Five Books of Moses,
Other Biblical Texts= Prophets, Histories, Wisdom, Psalms

Oral Torah = Interpretation of Scripture.
From late first century C.E. Oral Torah begins to be written into a compilation called the Mishnah.

Mishnah = Six Orders divided into 63 tractates
Each tractate is divided in chapter/verse,
e.g. Tractate Avot 1:1

Gemara = Written commentary on the Mishnah.

Mishnah + Gemara = Talmud

Two Talmuds : Babylonian (begun by exiles c. 100, completed c. 500)
Palestinian (completed c. 480)

AND

Collections of Midrashim compiled throughout the first millennium CE. Some midrashim remain embedded within the Talmud. Others are compiled Biblically, e.g. *Bereshit Rabbah* (Genesis) is a collection of midrashim on the book of Genesis.

Some collections focus on the Law = Midrash Halakah.
The ones which focus on stories, morality are collectively known as
Midrash Haggadah.

Midrash as Process

It is a fallacy to think that any given Biblical text has only one meaning. That's a very recent twist in the long yarn of Biblical interpretation, and a pretty bland, Christian one at that. For much of Jewish and Christian history, the Bible has been seen as a text open to infinite interpretation.

Here are some comments by Rabbis, Christians, ancient and modern to show you how deep and rich the 'interpretation' or 'searching out' of Scripture can be.

Rabbi Ben Bag Bag (1-200 CE)

On reading Torah: "Turn it, and turn it again, or all is in it; and contemplate it, and grow grey and old over it, and stir not from it, for you can have no better rule/way of life than this. (Pirke Avot 5:26)

Marc Gellman (20th C)

Explaining stories from the Bible only makes sense if there is just one right way to understand that story. But the stories in the Bible are so rich and deep and packed with a thousand different meanings that they cannot be explained just one right way. The best way to understand a story in the Bible is to make up another story about it.
(*Does God Have a Big Toe?*)

.....

Robert Alter (20th C)

Religious tradition has by and large encouraged us to take the Bible seriously... but the paradoxical truth of the matter may well be that by learning to enjoy the biblical stories more fully as stories, we shall come to see more clearly what they mean to tell us about God, man [humanity], and the perilously momentous realm of history. (*Art of Biblical Narrative*)

Midrash as Method

1. Hearing/ Marking the Text

- Colours?
- Underlines, circling words
- Punctuations: * ? !

What stands out? What is puzzling? What feels personal? What provokes a strong reaction (what reaction?)

Following a trail – is there a repeated word or concept you want to follow

MIDRASH – A METHOD

1. Marking the text
2. Mind the gap – what’s missing, what don’t you know?
3. Texts in Contexts: Who can help mind the gap?
 - Which community wrote it?
 - Which communities passed it on?
 - What other communities have read?
 - What community (individual) is reading it now?
4. Follow the Rabbit – what intrigues you enough to follow it?
5. (re)Tell the Story
 - Stories within the story
 - Stories beyond the story
 - What story would you tell?

2. Mind the Gap(s)

This step helps us to realize that we have a partial written record, that even though this is “Scripture”, it’s incomplete.

It also gives us permission to demand things of the text that it may not be able to deliver... we become its conversation partner rather than merely its consumer/recipient.

- What comes before this passage, and might that shed light on this story?
- What follows this passage? Does that fill in any gaps?
- Very truly I tell “you” – who is you?
- Are there fact gaps you need to fill?
 - Why sheep, gates, folds, shepherds? What do I need to know about 1st century Palestinian sheep farming that might help me understand Jesus’ metaphor?
 - Did/do sheep know the voice of their shepherd?
- What does “abundant life” mean? (was this a code term of the time?)

3. Texts in Contexts

Any passage is situated first in the textual context of the biblical book. Will knowing more help me understand this passage, and fuel my imagination and faith?

It is always worth remembering the following: even if you don’t find any answers to the questions, just asking them serves as a reminder that the texts we read are

- a) written after the events they record
- b) by an author (or authors) *for* a particular community, and with a particular perspective guiding their writing
- c) that other communities received the texts and chose to pass them down to the next generation
- d) that we too read *in community*, as well as individuals.
- e) that the texts are communications – attempts to convey.

4. Follow the Rabbit.

What part of the text are you prepared to follow, even if it takes you somewhere you'd not imagine? What is the White rabbit you're prepared to follow to wonderland?!

5. (re)Tell the Story

This part is often the most daunting, but also the most 'engaging' part of midrashic imagination. The head and heart come together and play with the text, flesh it out, fill in gaps, add colour and tone, drama or depth.

When we engage in retelling, we are in a creative process; we begin to internalize and integrate some aspect of the text into our lives. It has left the bondage to the page and taken up residence in your world. It has become a lively text.

Lenten Textures 4: Ezekiel 37

Session 4 Outline

- a. High and lows on the preparation for this week.
- b. Midrash appetizer
- c. Midrashing Ezekiel

A. Highs and Lows

What midrashing occurred in worship on Sunday with the Syro-Phoenician Woman passage?

- What other insights have you had?
- What questions do you have and rabbits do you want to follow with regard to the story of "Dry Bones?"

B. Midrash Appetizer

- a) "Hear the Word of the Lord" Linnea Good, and the Delta Rhythm Boys

C. Midrashing Ezekiel 37

(text removed; normally printed, so folk can mark it)

1. Hearing/Marking the Text

Words, ideas, questions, problems, favourites, turns of phrase, patterns.

2. Mind the Gap

- Where are you missing information/narrative/detail you wish you could have?
- Is there a fact gap you want to fill?
- Are there deliberate gaps in the text that you wonder about?

3. Texts in Contexts

- Ezekiel is speaking from exile in Babylon (597-539 BCE). His nation, Judah, is dead. Ezekiel believes this has happened because Judah's rulers and people have disobeyed God's Torah. He is understandably pessimistic about the future.
- This is a "vision" or "dream" not an event, but the valley of bones is suggestive of a battlefield long after the battle, or the decimation of a region of civilian dwellings, something Ezekiel is likely to have seen.
- This "vision" fuelled the development of belief in resurrection in both Judaism and Christianity. (re: Midrash Appetizer, and see #5 below, for a contemporary re-telling)

4. Follow the Rabbit(s).

My rabbit:

- a) The (unspoken) testimony of the Dead, and the life of the Spirit.
- b) Your rabbits.....

5. (Re)Tell the Story

Retelling is where you 'turn and turn it again', seeing nuances, perspectives, adding colour and tone, and depth. It has left the bondage to the page and taken up residence in your world. It has become a lively text.

a) 21st Century Rabbinic Midrashic Thought:

One of the questions that arises in discussing it is what Ezekiel's vision of the "resurrection" of the Jewish people from exile in Babylonia might say to us, the generations soon after the Shoah. (Holocaust)

For me, the teaching that arose from the passage in connection with the Shoah is about how the post-Shoah resurrection comes. Some people view the State of Israel AS the resurrection; I see it as the "muscle" part of the dry-bones vision, but Ezekiel teaches that the resurrection can't be complete until the Breath/ Spirit enters, and that the Breath/ Wind/ Spirit comes from all four corners of the earth.

That openness to the Holy Inter-breathing of all life is happening much more (not yet enough) through the spiritual renewal of Judaism in America than through the State (especially the government) of Israel.

In the State of Israel, it is as if the muscle is celebrating its own reappearance as if muscle were self-sufficient and as if the People Israel stood on its own, and is actually rejecting the sense of the Breath/ Wind/ Spirit that comes - **must** come- from all four corners of the earth.

We might ask: what would a "resurrected" Jewish people look like in our own day if its body were strong and it was profoundly conscious that its life must be infused with the Winds that come from all the earth, from what unites ("Echad") all cultures and the breathing of all life -- from YHWH our God, *Ruach HaOlam, Ruach HaKodesh*, the Interbreathing of all life that praises God's Name YHWH because it IS God's name?

Rabbi Arthur Waskow. <https://theshalomcenter.org/node/248>

- b) Re-telling with a contemporary Canadian context (e.g. Red Dress Project, re Missing and Murdered Aboriginal women)
- c) Picking one piece of the narrative and fleshing it out (yikes, pun!)
- d) Find an experience of your own that "feels" like some aspect of this story.
e.g. Rev. Elisabeth. Struthof, 1998
- e) This is an incarnational story, how might you tell it without words?
(e.g. body drama)
- f) Music, Art, Tactile 're-telling'. Baking
- g) Photographic midrash (see powerpoint slides: a photo essay on the breath in the bones)

APPENDIX E

SERMONS 2016-2017 MIDRASHIC IMAGINATION PROJECT

The following sermons are the result of the community midrashic imagination process carried out in study sessions with lay members of the congregation. Some engage study participants in the delivery of Scripture, or a Midrashing of it.

1. Advent 3A: Sermon

Advent 3A Magnificat Anima Mea (Luke 1:46-55)

This is not the sermon I planned back in October
when I began to read and think and dream
and pray and plan for this Advent season!!!....

I imagined that today we would sit with Mary,
her enigmatic presence,
her elusive absence.
I hoped we could enter – spiritually at least -
into her pregnant state;
that embodied expectancy,
that waiting for the unknowable known.
I wanted, as preacher, to sanctify somehow this Waiting Season with
Mary's pensive knowing, her choice that every pregnant mother knows,
vacillating between the "I can't wait to see this child"
and the wiser course:
"Stay there little one until your time is right..
grow, become strong before you emerge!
Take your time!"

But that was October, and this is now.
Since October, the world has darkened.
While we sit north of a border,
we know that the world has turned, and not in a good way,
as the ugly faces of misogyny, racism, totalitarianism
seep like an oil spill into our own communities, local and national.

We sit here as a worshipping community,
grateful for our relative health,
for our lively programming,
but we too can see all around us
the lengthening shadows of a waning Christianity

or worse, the ugly deformation of it.
 We hold on here to our belief that
 God's great Dreams are leading forward in faith;
 But in this December darkness, we begin to sense the cost,
 and it's worrisome.
 We worry about how to keep all this together,
 building, and people, body and soul,
 all of us with our private burdens,
 and not so private burdens,
 and our human shortcomings,
 and our outright failures to be people of grace.
 And yet God is still calling **us**,
 to be this life-giving light-bearing difference....
 to one another, and to neighbours, strangers,
 and even to a family from Syria
 whose world has not merely turned,
 but been shattered.

Who are we to think this light in darkness thing is easy?
 Or even possible?
 That God should call such ordinary people like us,
 and think we can do it?

If I peer into this Advent lectionary
 in search of a placid Mary,
 sitting still, shaded,
 silent-dark- blue-before- the- dawn with Buddha-like calm,
 her belly expanding smoothly to contain
 eternity to a pregnant term of earthliness,
 I cannot find her! She is beyond me!

But God be thanked for this Lively Word,
 because, she's actually not that still.
 Calm is not the key signature for her song.

Magnificat anima mea Dominum!
 "My soul magnifies..."
 "My soul exults, rejoices, delights....
 I cannot be still!" She sings!
 "My being cannot be contained!
 Because God **has**....!"

In our Midrash study groups this week
 we expressed our difficulty in believing
 that a young woman, a girl really,
 who finds herself dubiously pregnant,

in a world where a woman's right to her body
 was severely constrained - may we never go there again!
 that she would open her mouth and her first world would be
 "Magnificat!"
 Joy. Exultation.

This magnitude,
 this expansiveness of vision
 the worldliness of her concern,
 this massive geopolitical agenda resolved on behalf of the poor,
 erupting from her lips
 in the light soprano of a pregnant teenager
 seems so incongruous,
 and frankly, incredible.

It's the same faithful folly we sang in Isaiah's
 minor to major promise of "joy coming even to the wilderness."

Listen to them both!
 The desert will bloom,
 crocuses will trumpet God's glory,
 the lowly will be lifted,
 and the mighty brought down from their thrones,
 the exile will return home,
 the refugee will rebuild their shattered dreams,
 the hungry will be filled with feasting!

The greatness,
 the magnitude of their awesome folly
 is that it's **all true**!

Mary sings because God **has**....
 Her soul explodes in joy
 like a crocus blooming in the desert because
 "God **has**....!"

And she's right!
 God has lifted the lowly before, and God will again.
 Magnificat!
 God has brought home the lonely before, not once, not twice,
 but three times, more... and God will again.
 Magnificat!
 God has brought down the mighty before,
 and God will again.
 Magnificat!

God's strength and mercy have been poured
on those in need before,
and God will again.

Magnificat!

God has brought life where death once reigned before,
and God will again.

Magnificat!

God has birthed newness, mercy and forgiveness before,
and God will again.

Magnificat!

God has.....and God will again.

She had to sing so loud this week for me to hear her!

Do we believe her?

Can we hear it?

Dare **we** sing it?

Well goshdarn it, I'm going to try!

Magnificat! Joy in the wilderness,

- a bag of baby clothes will be taken to the Refugee Detention Centre: clothes that
have been passed through the baby boys of this congregation, will now clothe a
tiny 4 month old refugee child awaiting asylum.

Magnificat, joy in the wilderness,

because sickness has been soothed, and grief enfolded by our Prayer shawls.

Who knew ordinary yarn, two sticks could turn someone's pain to joy? Huh!

Magnificat, joy in the wilderness,

as this Church and its choir tonight will sing sanctuary for a Muslim family, as we
sing of Mary's Christ Child, born in a darkened hostile world, no worse, no better
than this one.

Magnificat, joy in the wilderness

as 110 people (not that we're counting) from as far away as Ukraine and Egypt, S.
Jerome and S. Hubert, share a feast of food and care and community, here on
Friday Night.

Magnificat, Joy in the Wilderness,

as our children face into the darkness with their own Magnificat, a song of
joy, proclaiming to a world, that they are unstoppable! *(ref to the KidZone song
"Kids are Unstoppable")

Magnificat! My soul exults because,

God has,

and God will again!

There is no waiting stillness in Mary's Song!
 Instead there is a ferment, a resilient, joy!
 A bubbling forth of artesian water
 hidden underground,
 finding its way, seeking out the lowest ground
 because that's where it's most needed,
 where it will burst forth with joyful conviction
 that God has....
 and God will again!

Through a pregnant girl,
 who sang on the edge of disaster,
 and bids us sing,
 a hard-wrought, defiant, song
 against the fear, the fright, the darkness,
 the wilderness, the ugliness that grips our world.

"My soul is overflowing with joy,
 Because God has, and will again,
 and again, lift up the lowly,
 God has and will again do great things"

Through her.
 Through our unstoppable kids,
 Through our one family given sanctuary and hope,
 Through this community forged with care, grace, and forgiveness,
 Through me, and through each one of you.

Magnificat!
 God has!
And God will again!

2. Lent 2A: Midrash Monologue

John 3:1-17.

Night.

I came to him in the night.
 I didn't want to draw attention to him,
 after all, he'd done that for himself already with his behaviour.
 And, to be truthful,
 I didn't want to draw attention to myself either.

Such an encounter in the light of day
 between a Pharisee and this man
 would have caused,
 ... ripples, a stir, a disturbance.

You see, being a Pharisee carries with it
 certain expectations, and assumptions.
 My faith, my life,
 my place within the system
 depends on the scholarly pursuit of truth
 and certainty.
 I'm supposed to be the dispenser of wisdom.
 I'm supposed to have answers
 at the tip of my fingers.
 For every "Thou Shalt" in Torah
 I must have six reasons why.
 For every "Thou Shalt not"
 I have twenty more.
 My mastery of God's Law
 is mathematical, precise, exact.
 I am expected to read the gaps
 between the words of God's Holy Truth.
 I'm not supposed to have questions
 that disturb the faithful order of things.

But if I let you look inside my soul,
 you'll discern a deeper, darker truth;
 I am a question mark in search of an answer;
 I am a man of shadows in search of light,
 I am a soul in search of God.

So, perhaps now you'll understand me
 when I say I went to him in the night.
 I couldn't be seen to be seeking answers
 in the company of someone like him.

Him?
 You know what first caught my attention about him?
 You maybe didn't hear this.
 But this carpenter.... from Nazareth,
 with his homespun cloak and dusty sandals,
 walked into the temple courtyard,
 stopped dead in his tracks.
 I assumed, that he,
 like every yokel from the countryside
 was blown away by its sheer size and majesty!

But no, he invaded the space,
 his being occupied it, owned it.
 His eyes raked over the unholy hubbub
 that is the unfortunate
 but necessary commerce of this place -
 haggling money changers,
 and the bleat of sheep,
 and cacophonous fluttering of throttled pigeons -
 Fire burned in his gaze,
 until he bellowed above the din
 in a voice so full of righteous anger
 I swear you could have heard a feather fall
 in the stunned silence his lashing words provoked.
 "My Father's House shall be a house of prayer!"

When they threw him out,
 I confess I was among those
 who thought it right and proper.

Until my dreams that night and following
 were filled with a righteous parade
 of God's prophets:
 Amos condemning kings and fat-cats for eating the food of the poor,
 sending his verbal rivers of justice pouring through the precinct.
 Jeremiah smashing pots and rattling chains at the willful disloyalties of
 God's people,
 Ezekiel's clattering bones,
 and now this man, whose zeal for God's House consumed him.

I awoke to the sweat-drenched certainty
 that God had sent into my time and place
 another of God's prophets.
 I have never seen such embodiment,
 such incarnation of God's Righteous Dream in all my days.

I was undone.
 So it was that I went to him, at night,
 hiding my confusion under cover of darkness.

Believe me when I said to him,
 "Rabbi, you are, you must be from God."
 I believed so, he rang so disturbingly true.

I had so many splendid things I wanted to say to him;
 I'd rehearsed my questions so that they sounded sensible,
 I'd practiced my rebuttals of his simplistic ways,

to be clear and wise, but not condescending.
 My best recollection is that I hoped to weave between us
 some satisfactory, sellable truth.

But,....
 It was not my wisdom, but his,
 and his alone that filled the night,
 blinding me, silencing me, with light and truth.

I asked him....
 I asked.....
 I don't even remember what now!
 And he with mere words,
 no! With words filled
 with Spirit,
 with wind and flame,
 with water and life,
 he stripped me naked of all my worldly wisdom.
 The prayer tassels of my convictions knotted about my throat
 like a twisted umbilical cord,
 suffocating my self-satisfaction,
 until I emerged into the dawn,
 my fists curled, eyes tight shut,
 like a newborn from my mother's womb.

I won't tell you how long it took for me to open my eyes,
 my fists, my heart, my life, to this man.
 You only need to know that when..... they killed him,
 I came out of the shadows;
 I was there to bury him;
 to dress his broken body for the grave
 with enough dignity and myrrh for a king!

I cannot tell you how many more times
 in the years since that I've been rebirthed
 by the words he spoke to me that night.
 Usually in the night-time of self-doubt;
 sometimes in the harsh light of my stubborn willfulness;
 all too often when the world is harsh,
 when honesty and truth and love seem to have
 vanished in the cacophony of belittled humanity.
 Then, there is this yearning in my bones
 to be pressed again into the dark womb of that night,
 to be midwifed by his words of spirit and truth.

I beg you, hear them for what they are:
words of life, for your own night-times
and for your own rebirthing.

He said,
“God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoso believeth in him
should not perish but have everlasting life.”

You know,
God so loves this world.
So loves... this benighted, troubled, fragile
beautiful, resilient world.
God so loves the humanness of us all,
God so loves you, me, all of us,
that God has chosen to be, to dwell with us,
in this one, (cross)
and in each of us, here, (heart)
for our salving and saving,
all the days of our life on earth and in heaven.
Always.”

+++++

We walk this road together

Intention for Week 2.

How will we seek God's wisdom for living this week?

- I will practise mindfulness each day this week
 - I will read some inspirational poetry
 - I will listen to a Ted-talk or podcast that expands my mind
 - I will listen to the questions of my children, open to learning from them
 - I will face into my fears, and pray for God's guidance
 - I will seek out the wisdom of another person
 - I will learn about another person's faith journey
-

3. Easter 4A Scripture and Sermon

John 9:13-10:10

This Changes Everything: Abundant Life.

As I said at the beginning of worship,
this is “Good Shepherd Sunday.”

Our psalm has prepared us to hear this Gospel portion, from the Gospel of John,
in which we will hear Jesus identify as the one in whom
God’s shepherding life-giving, abundant love is made known,
referring to himself as the gate of the sheepfold, and as the Good Shepherd.

It is however, one of those passages that suffers for being familiar to some of us,
- we think it merely a pleasant metaphor, with no real claim on our lives, except
perhaps when we are in need of some comfort.

It is also rendered innocuous when used out of context, which is what happens when we
only hear Jesus talking in metaphors, and we don’t hear the circumstances which led him
to use it in the first place.

I am so grateful for those who came to the Midrash Bible study this past Thursday
morning;

your reactions, questions
and discoveries through lively discussion
have given me the impetus
to take this text head on this morning,
to reconnect it to the events
which provoked Jesus to speak as he did.

I will trust the Scripture to do its own work,
because when we put it all back together,
it fair leaps off the ancient page,
right into our current context.
And this changes everything.

So rather than a ‘reading’
followed by a sermon,
we’re going to work together
to hear, and to participate in this Gospel
as it unfolds.

So as we go through the story I will ask for people to help populate the story.
You can also participate from where you are

Let me set it up for you.

This is the Gospel of John, written about 2-3 generations after Jesus' life on earth, and written for a small community of followers of the Way of Jesus, now living effectively as persecuted refugees after the destruction of Jerusalem.

John writes his gospel as a repeating three-part sequence

of 'significant actions' by Jesus,

which provoke a reaction or lively debate,

which Jesus resolves by means of these lofty 'discourses' or speeches about who he is.

We're going to pick up the narrative as Jesus performs one of these significant actions.

He is in the vicinity of Jerusalem, being followed by disciples, and a crowd on the lookout for some new buzz from Jesus, and watched by the religious authorities hoping that whatever happens can be contained, and not rock the political or religious boat.

A Story, a story

Let it come, let it go.

Jesus was walking along, on the Sabbath, when he noticed a person by the side of the road. (*person*)

This person had been born blind.

She had her begging bowl out, as the crowd studiously avoided her, stepped over or around her,

because in those days,

anyone with a physical deformity

was considered cursed because of some sin.

If they were unlucky enough to be born with that deformity, as this one was,

perhaps the sin was that of their parents.

Jesus, saw this one.

Stopped his journey,

bent down to the ground beside her.

And spat into the dust,

mixing earth and water,

and as at creation when God formed a being of the earth,

Jesus made a paste with the mud,

he salved the blind one's eyes it...

"Go now, wash your eyes in the pool of Siloam."

She did, and she could see!

At which, the neighbours (*gather a small crowd*)

and those who had seen her beg for morsels and pennies were astounded.

They chattered together saying,

"It's her, she's healed!"

"No it's not her, can't be!"

Pharisees, (*more*) the teachers of the Law also got involved in the hubbub,
and they interrogated the healed one,
while everyone looked on;

“What happened to you?”
“How come you can see?”
“Who did this to you, and when?”

To all of this the blind one looked at them all,
with newborn sight,
and said,
“All I know is, a man saw me,
and stopped his journey,
and spat into the dust of the earth,
and put cool mud on my eyes.
I washed them clean in the pool,
and now I can see!
I can see **you!**”

“Inconceivable! Impossible!
The crowd and the Pharisees agreed.

“And not on the Sabbath, surely!
That’s not allowed!
It can’t possibly be something God would want,
that this (point to blind one)
undeserving product of someone else’s sin
would be worthy of God’s attention,
let alone God’s healing!
Whoever did this is most assuredly
not our sort of believer!
How dare he!
And how dare you!”

Now, there were those in the crowd
who had thought they might support the blind one, but in the face of all this anger, they
inched away too, fearful of the consequences
of being caught on the less powerful side of this ugly debate.

The crowd and Pharisees protested yet more
and they dragged the blind one’s parents in to the scene (*two people*),
accusing them of fraud,
of lying about their child’s true condition.

Quaking and fearful that they too would be cast out,

they answered, timidly,
 “This is our child.
 They were born blind.
 But we have no idea how it is they can now see.
 You should ask her, not us.”

And again the blind one said, simply,
 “I once was blind, but now I see!
 It is amazing, this grace!
 But that is all that matters to me.
 And as for the one who healed me,
 I would follow him the rest of my days.
 For I was blind, I was lost, I was cast out,
 I was ignored by all of you,
 I was persecuted, left for dead.....
 I had no place to call home.....
 my life was threatened simply because I was born this way.....
 none of you even know my name...
 But now this one touched me, and gave me back my life!
 I choose to belong to whatever grace it is he shares with me.”

For this, she was cast out, again
 and driven out of town, (*down the aisle a little*)
 for there was no place in their hearts
 for what had happened.

And Jesus himself was called to account for his actions by the teachers of the Law, and the crowd.

And this is what he said.
 “Verily, verily, I tell you truth,
 anyone who doesn’t enter the sheepfold
 by the gate,
 but by another way is a thief and a bandit.
 The shepherd comes straight to the gate
 and enters,
 and the sheep hear his voice when she calls them,
 each, by name, and they follow the shepherd,
 and no other.
 In fact they will run away from any stranger who might attempt to steal them.”

The crowd and the Pharisees, no-one,
 really understood him at first.
 What did this have to do with what had just happened to the one born blind?

So he said, drilling down deeper,
 “Truly, I am that gate,
 I stand guard to protect God’s own sheep,
 all of them, from whatever and whomever attempts to hurt or destroy them.
 I tell you the truth,
 I came into this world so that they – *walk to the blind one and her family*
 may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Pause for reflection

4. Pentecost + 9A: Worship, Scripture, Sermon

Summer Worship August 13, 2017 Genesis 28 and 32:22-31. Worship is intergenerational.

At the beginning of Worship.

Introducing Jacob.

Jacob was a wrestler
 from the day his cells formed into little fists in his mother’s womb.
 Born holding on to the heels of his older twin Esau,
 Jacob spent his entire life always grasping for more, more especially of what others had.
 Did Jacob live in God’s world?
 If he did, most of the time he was not aware of it;
 He would be what we call now a functional atheist;
 going along as he were the author of all his days;
 as if everything was up to him to make his own world work
 for him.
 he paid God next to no mind at all.....
 – most of the time.

Except this one time, when, on the lam,
 running for his life away from trouble
 - that he had caused –
 with nothing, nothing, to his body or his name
 but the ashen promise of a stolen birthright,
 fully spent - both Jacob, and the day-
 he folds his fearful body into the shadows of the night,
 and crouches, cowers, camouflages himself
 into the hollow of an age-worn rock, where he lays his head.
 And sleeps.

And in that sleep of fear of death,
 oh what dreams may come!

This happened.

As the storytellers of ancient Israel preserved it in their book of beginnings, called Genesis, let me tell you what happened.

Jacob dreamed.
 He dreamed that there was a ladder, a staircase,
 set up upon the earth,
 the top of it reaching to the heavens....
 and on it the angels – the messengers - of God
 were ascending
 and descending on it.
 And as he dream-watched this most amazing sight,
 Yhwh, the Holy One, God
 came and stood right by his head!
 And spoke.
 “I am Who I am
 I am God, the God of your grandfather Abraham,
 I am the God of your father, Isaac,...
 Here, where you lie,
 this land, I will give you,
 to your children yet unborn,
 and to their offspring,
 until you are numberless as the dust of the earth.
 and spread to the west and to the east,
 to the north and to the south
 so that through you, and your children
 the nations
 shall be blessed.

Yet more God spoke, saying
 “ Know this, I am with you in this world,
 I will be with you wherever you go,
 until you return to this place,
 and I will not leave you
 until all that I have promised you
 is done.”

Jacob woke!
 That fearful waking from a powerful dream,
 and taking the stone that had cradled his dream-filled
 head, he set it upright, poured blessing oil on it,
 as he muttered over and over to himself,
 “Surely, the presence of the LORD is in this place,
 and I did not know it.”
 Surely the presence of the LORD is in this place,
 I can feel his mighty power and this grace.
 I can hear the brush of angels’ wings,
 I see glory on each face.
 Surely the presence of the LORD fills this place.”

Music.

Let us pray. (*Reader: Lay Reader*)

Alone we sleep, our heads on holy stones,
under stars that blaze fierce and countless
as the dust of shattered dreams and stolen promises
of cratered sadness, and gaping meaninglessness.
Alone, so alone, we dream,
or we long to dream of angels,
messengers to us of God's healing grace,
messengers from us to God of our confessed folly,
the deep sighs of our troubled, fearful hearts.....

Yahweh, Holy One,
come stand beside us,
cradle our heads on holy stones,
mantle us with the healing whisper
of your promise....
that beyond the fear there is a future,
held strong and safe in your heart,
and that you will not leave us alone, ever.
That you are there,
you are there.
You are there.

Hymn: In The Quiet Curve of Evening. VU 278

Children continue worship in KidZone by making a ladder of Angels.

Continuing the story.

You'd think, wouldn't you that,
after a night like that,
the story of Jacob continues simply:
"From there on, Jacob lived in God's world,
living God's Dream for him,
using those angelic messengers between earth and heaven
to keep him connected to the Almighty,
the Promise-Maker Holy God of Abraham and Isaac...
until he died, old and full of years,
and loved by all his children...
Thanks be to God... Amen!"

Not so much!
Jacob, the Twin, Jacob the Heel,
Jacob the Quiet One,
Jacob the smooth one,

who hung around the tents, plotting with his mother
 to steal his brother's birthright,
 earning him the death-threatening enmity of Esau,
 well this Jacob carried on, much as before,
 living in a world of his own making.
 Plots, trickery, both given and received,
 fill the verses of the next chapters in Genesis:
 He finds his mother's brother Laban,
 marries both his daughters – Leah and Rachel,
 fathers 11 sons and a daughter officially,
 and numberless others by dint of patriarchal privilege;
 Jacob the con-artist, Jacob the Hustler tricks his way to fat wealth
 with a unique line on speckled sheep,
 But despite his living in his own world,
 he's carried that angel-ladder promise of God with him,
 the promise of a home in the land of Abraham and Isaac.
 We catch up with him on the road back towards Canaan,
 now Jacob, the father of Many,
 Jacob the Patriarch,
 Jacob with too much to lose,
 he approaches the territory of his wronged brother,
 Jacob the Coward,
 Jacob the Fearful.

Hear the story as it comes down to us from the writers of Genesis 32,
 and told by some of the members of the CRG.

Reader 1: As Jacob neared the border lands, he sent messengers of peace ahead of him, to
 find Esau and to gauge the sort of welcome he might receive. The messengers returned,
 out of breath and full of fear, crying,

Reader 2: "We found Esau alright!
 With four hundred soldiers at his back!
 This will be your welcome, Jacob!"

Reader 1: So Jacob the Shrewd One
 found his knees, bent them,
 and called upon YHWH,
 the God of Abraham and Isaac,
 begging for God's protection,
 all while reminding God of
 the promise that he and his children
 would number as the stars and inherit the land.

Reader 3: Then, he divided his wealth, his flocks and his servants,
 and sent them ahead of him in separate droves.

He told each group to offer themselves
 as gifts to Esau in an attempt to appease him.
 Jacob stayed well behind, with his two wives and his children.
 They came to the ford across the river called Jabok,
 on the threshold of Canaan.

Reader 1: And as night was falling he sent his wives and children across the river so that
 he, Jacob was alone.

And a person, a being,
 came and wrestled with him all through the night.
 Neither prevailed against the other,
 but as dawn was almost breaking,
 the unknown stranger put Jacob's hip out of joint,
 and tried to leave.

Reader 2: But Jacob, the Heel, held on to the other,
 "I will not let you go unless you bless me"

Reader 1: "Tell me your Name?" The stranger asked.

Reader 2: "I am Jacob, the Heel. Who are you?"

Reader 1: The Stranger simply said,
 "Jacob you were, but now you will be called
 'Israel' the one who struggles with God,
 for you have indeed struggled with God
 and with humans, and have prevailed."

Reader 3: With this, the stranger blessed him,
 and left.
 And Jacob, the Wrestler,
 Jacob-now-Israel?
 He walked into the morning,
 and into the world,
 with a limp.

Sermon. Jacob the(fill in the Blank)

I have at least one burning question about this Jacobean drama!
 It's in the Bible, right?
 He's the one after which God's people are named, for Pete's sake!
 Isn't he supposed to be one of the good ones?

And yet, you heard us;

I can assure you, as can those who studied
 this text with me earlier this week,
 we have not been guilty of outrageous
 trash talk or fake news.
 What we've told you is what's in the book.
 Jacob was a bit of jerk.
 He was everything we named,
 Jacob the self-made cad,
 Jacob the coward,
 Jacob the cheat,
 Jacob the liar,
 Jacob the heel.

If truth be told, he's everything we despise;
 he's making headlines on the news right now,
 you can read about his exploits in the
 white collar crime section of the news journals.
 He has his own TV shows,
 making a fast buck off someone else's idea.
 She's the smooth operator on House of Cards, Scandal, Game of Thrones,
 He's the hustler on Better Call Saul,
 he has a starring role in every series or movie,
 or real- this- world exploitative escapade
 that needs a fast-car, fast-woman- chasing
 con artist.

To get biblical a moment,
 and quote the Psalms,
 he's among the "scheming evildoers
 who whet their tongues like swords
 and aim bitter words like arrows
 to ambush the blameless with impunity." (*Ps 64:3-5*)

So here's my burning question:
 How did this one,
 this Jacob, the...
 Heel,
 this antithesis,
 the enemy, of all I cherish in my moral universe,
 end up being one whom God blesses?!
 Blesses with a stolen birthright,
 with a wrestled blessing,
 with angelic dreams,
 and promises of progeny
 more numerous than the dust of the earth?

I don't get it!

Did we miss something?
 We must have, surely!
 Jacob must have some hidden traits that we don't know about,
 that only God can see,
 some redeeming qualities that must render him
 worthy of such generous blessing, yes?
 That must be it...an incomplete tale...
 we just don't have all the data.

Or, another possibility:
 has this trickster played even
 God for a fool?
 Duped God, wrestled God
 out of a reluctant blessing
 that should have gone elsewhere,
 just as he did to his father Isaac?

Neither answer is particularly consoling!
 If I suggest for a second
 that this last possibility is true -
 that God can be duped for a fool by a charlatan -
 then why on earth would I want to live in God's world,
 ordering my life according to God's Dream?
 How could I trust God to be the One
 who can bless with life and hope,
 to be the One who can answer the deepest lamentations and supplications
 that crawl up from the craters of my sadness?
 How could I trust that the goodness of the world is intentional,
 and ultimately redemptive?

So let me go back to my first somewhat vacuous, answer,
 that there must be something about Jacob
 that God would deign to bless him.

The implication of this is daunting;
 because, if God can bless Jacob
 the coward, the liar,
 the opportunist,
 the politically savvy crook,
 the less than devoted husband and father,
 the heel grabbing sibling,
 then not one of us morally imperfect creatures is beyond God's blessing.

Oh, but I do have a list God should look at!

I want God to stay out of reach,
 beyond the sacred canopy of heaven,
 send no angelic messengers of grace,
 withhold all blessing, wrestled or otherwise,
 from..... the people who think it's okay to carry Nazi swastikas in Virginia,
 from the perpetrators of racial violence,
 the bullies who beat and kill gay and trans teenagers,
 the internet trolls,
 the ... well, you get my point.
 For many of us, our moral universe cannot expand to bless such as these
 and we don't want God to either.

But...God it seems,
 from this Jacobean dystopian drama,
 is intent on blessing.
 God blessing all this,
 this, God's world.
 All the mess, the mayhem,
 the wars, and warmongers,
 the leaders and followers,
 on every side of every political,
 every ideological divide.
 God blessing the refugees,
 those who made them flee,
 and those who would keep them out;
 God, blessing the fearful mothers who send their black sons out of town,
 safely away from the hate marchers,
 and, God knows how,
 God is intent on blessing the marchers too.

I don't get it.
 I have yet to fully wrestle
 that difficult, hip-wrenching blessing from this text.
 I still watch fearfully a world hell-bent
 on curse not blessing.
 I still crave that God's justice would rain down
 on this broken world,
 but it seems, God's justice is
 and always was
 the fruit, first,
 of God's blessing.

God said it to Abraham,
 "I will bless you, so that through you the nations will be blessed." (*Gen 12:3*)
 God said it to Isaac,
 "I will bless you, so that through you, the nations will be blessed." (*Gen 26:4*)

God says it again, to Jacob, the jerk,
 “I will bless you, so that through you, the nations will be blessed.” (*Gen 28:14*)

God says it again, to us, descendants of this Creator’s creative promise:
 “I will bless you, so that through you, the world can be blessed.”

The sort of blessing that shares the goodness of God
 with the creatures of earth,
 all of them. All of them.
 The sort of blessing that hurts,
 that wrenches, and twists,
 and wrestles the coward in us, the heel in us,
 the liar, the bigot, the self-serving in us,
 the falsely prideful in us,
 the fearful isolation in us...
 Wrestles and will not yield, not let us go,
 until we walk, with a limp,
 into the dawn of tomorrow,
 with God’s healing blessing, for God’s world.

The question for us all now, then, is
 with what God-given blessing
 shall we bless our corner of God’s world?

Silence for reflection.

APPENDIX F

IRB FORMS, PROTOCOLS, QUESTIONNAIRES

Formatting and font of the original are preserved, but spaces, and some graphics have been removed from some forms to save paper.

1. INFORMED CONSENT FORM**Cultivating a Midrashic Imagination****(Congregational Response Group Participants)**

You are invited to participate in a research study exploring the impact of a “midrashic imagination” upon our congregation’s engagement with Scripture, both in worship, and as a conversation partner in our life and witness as a faith community in the Christian tradition. By participating in this Bible Study (TITLE), you will be able to provide valuable insight into this project. Please read this form carefully, and do ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be a participant in the research.

This study is being conducted by the Rev. Elisabeth Jones as part of my D. Min thesis project at Luther Seminary. My thesis advisor is Rev. Dr. Richard Rehfeldt.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to develop a particular, imaginative way of approaching the Bible that enables a “progressive-liberal” Christian community like ours to see the connections between these ancient texts, our own cultural contexts and personal lives, and God, who has inspired both the Biblical communities and ours to faithful living. While I can do a lot to create this “midrashic imaginative” approach, I need your input and feedback to examine its impact and develop its potential.

Procedures:

If you agree to participate in this research, you will be asked to do the following things as participants in addition to the guidelines for the Congregational Response Group (blue handout):

- a) participate in a group evaluation process in the concluding meeting for each post-residency sermon, and allow your comments to be used in subsequent writing of my thesis
- b) participate in a one-on-one interview (some participants only, and selected to ensure as broad a cross-section as possible)

c) complete the written CRG sermon evaluation of the course, which will include questions directly relevant to the sermon itself, but also include questions related to my research

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

The study has no risks for you as a participant. At all times YOU are free NOT to disclose anything of a personal or spiritual nature.

The direct benefits of participation are, again, personal and spiritual. There will be no inducements or enticements associated with this research. Indirect benefits to yourself and others in this or other faith communities are of a discipleship nature. We will be contributing to a lively conversation about the place of Scripture in progressive faith communities.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept confidential. If I publish any type of report, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. All data will be kept in a locked file at my home, and in an off-line digital file; only my advisor, Richard Rehfeldt, and I will have access to the data and, if applicable, any tape or video recording. If the research is terminated for any reason, all data and recordings will be destroyed. While I will make every effort to ensure confidentiality, anonymity cannot be guaranteed if members of our faith community read the finished thesis (due to the nature of Christian community the size of ours).

If audio recordings or videotapes are made, (for example, during verbal interviews), only the researcher (Rev. Jones) will have access.

Raw data will be retained until May 2021, in accordance with US Federal regulation, but please note that all identifying information will be removed not later than May 2018.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Luther Seminary and/ or with the faith community of Cedar Park United Church. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Elisabeth R. Jones. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me/us at emailcotcom, or by phone at 514-111-1111.

If you have questions regarding the Luther Seminary requirements as laid out in this form, or in any of the research questionnaires, you may also contact Richard Rehfeldt at(removed)

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information or have had it read to me. I have received answers to questions asked. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature _____ Date _____

Signature of investigator _____ Date _____

I consent to be audiotaped (or videotaped):

Signature _____ Date _____

I consent to allow use of my direct quotations in the published thesis document.

Signature _____ Date _____

erj/LS/CRG/Informed Consent 2015-2018

2. Congregational Response Group Sermon Feedback forms.



DATE XX/XX/XXX

SERMON TITLE:

Date Preached:

- Please complete this form, if possible using a computer in editable format.
- Please identify yourself on the form. Your responses will be identified to me, but not to other members of the CRG, nor to the faculty of Luther Seminary.
- Send your completed evaluation form to me at [emaildotcom](mailto:erj@lutherseminary.edu) not later than **(ten days post-sermon)**

Tips for completing the evaluation.

- Read all the questions before the Sunday worship, so you have them in the back of your mind.
- You may want to make brief notes during or after the sermon, but the goal is for you to 'experience' the sermon and worship as you normally would. See next point.

- *You will be able to access both a transcript (via email) and an audio file of the sermon (via CPU Website) within 24 hours of the Sunday worship.*
- *Complete the evaluation when you have 30 minutes to give this your prayerful attention. This should not take more than an hour.*
- *If a question makes no sense to you, don't answer it! No prior knowledge is required, no study, no research; this is a polling of a "congregational" response, not a scholar's response. The only correct answers are YOUR answers, even if that's "I don't know."*
- *I really value the feedback I've received from CRG responses; they have helped me to hone my skills and become more attentive to the listeners' needs and responses. Outright condemnation is not helpful, but constructive, instructive feedback is vital, 😊 especially if it's a comment about something that didn't work.*
- *Thank you for your participation in this process!*

Name: *(for researcher only) any recording of responses will be anonymized.*

| | | |
|--|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| | What memorable points/ words/ impressions stand out for you from this sermon? (What is your 'take away'?) | |
| | How did the preacher help you and the congregation "enter the world" of the Biblical narrative? (give e.g.) | |
| | Did (how did) the preacher make connections between the biblical world and contemporary context(s) – personal or cultural? | |
| | What was missing for you in this sermon? What missed its mark? | |
| | Was there anything provoked by your reading of the texts and/or the sermon that you still want to pursue on your own? | |
| | "Midrashing the text" is a faithfully imaginative process of 'minding the gaps' in the text; filling in blanks, adding creative imagination in order to make connections. Did the process of preparation and/or the sermon do this effectively for you? | |
| | In what ways was this sermon connected to the other parts of worship? | |
| | Your comments about the experience of participating in a CRG process. | |

3. Preaching the Word in Context. Sermon Survey Questions

Implied Consent

You are invited to participate in a questionnaire/survey for my research being conducted as part of my D.Min.. degree through Luther Seminary. I am working on the development and impact of a “Midrashic Imagination” for faith communities like ours, who like to take the Bible seriously as a conversation partner with God and the world. By agreeing to take part in this survey you will be helping me to measure the impact of this approach to Scripture upon the lay members of this congregation.

If you decide to participate, please complete the enclosed survey. Your return of this survey represents your **implied consent** to have your responses included in my research, and in my thesis. All attempts will be made to keep your identity confidential.

As per US federal regulations, I need to inform you in writing that no benefits accrue to you for answering the survey, and any discomfort or inconvenience to you derives only from the amount of time taken to complete the survey. Also, your decision whether or not to participate will not prejudice your future relationships with Cedar Park United, nor with Luther Seminary. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will not be disclosed.

If you have any questions, **please ask**. You can contact me by email at erjones.cpu@gmail.com or by phone: 514-111-1111

Note : A cross-section of adults in the congregation will be asked to respond, and they will be given the option of completing this in written format, or by face-to-face interview. The same questions will be used in all cases.

SURVEY

For one of my courses this year I am required to interview a number of people who worship regularly at Cedar Park United, with a view to hearing your answers to the following questions:

1. What do you hear regularly in the sermons I preach?
2. What do you never hear from the pulpit, that you would like to hear?

3. What do you hear in my sermons which you “don’t need to hear again”?
4. Is there an urgent spiritual question/issue that you would like us to engage in a sermon?
5. Is there a Biblical passage or a Biblical book you’re curious about?

Because of my specific research I’d like to add one more question:

6. Is there anything about the scripture explorations and/or the sermons which resonates with the way you live your faith during the week? (Or do you wish there would be some connection that I’m not making?)

Date of interview/ Return of Survey: _____

4. Scripture Participant Response: Midrashing a Text in worship

Thank you for participating in the presentation of Scripture this morning. These Scripture presentations are being used to help my research for my D.Min., “Rediscovering a Midrashic Imagination for the Progressive-liberal Christian Community.”

If you are willing to complete a short, anonymous survey about this experience, please read the following “implied consent” letter prior to completing the questions. If you do NOT wish your information to be included in my research, but would still like to complete the survey, be sure to highlight that on the form. I will value your input as your pastor, but not include your data in any subsequent writing.

This should take less than five minutes of your time. Completed surveys should be placed in the box outside my office, or handed to the Church AD.Min.istrator, to protect your anonymity.

Implied Consent

You are invited to participate in a questionnaire/survey for my research being conducted as part of my D.Min.. degree through Luther Seminary. I am working on the development and impact of a “Midrashic Imagination” for faith communities like ours,

who like to take the Bible seriously as a conversation partner with God and the world. By agreeing to take part in this survey you will be helping me to measure the impact of this approach to Scripture upon the lay members of this congregation.

If you decide to participate, please complete the enclosed survey. Your return of this survey represents your **implied consent** to have your responses included in my research, and in my thesis. All attempts will be made to keep your identity confidential.

As per US federal regulations, I need to inform you in writing that no benefits accrue to you for answering the survey, and any discomfort or inconvenience to you derives only from the amount of time taken to complete the survey. Also, your decision whether or not to participate will not prejudice your future relationships with Cedar Park United, nor with Luther Seminary. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will not be disclosed.

If you have any questions, **please ask**. You can contact me by email at email@cedarpark.org or by phone: 514-111-1111

Scripture Participant SURVEY

Circle ONE:

I am willing for my responses to be used in your research.

YES/ NO

1. Briefly describe your participation in today's presentation of Scripture (e.g., Did you play a role? What was it? Did you participate by observation?)

2. Did your participation help you to discover/learn or remember the story better than if you had merely heard it read aloud?

Yes / No

Comment:

3. Did this style of presentation give you new insights into the meanings and possibilities of this passage of Scripture?

Yes / No

Comment:

4. Did this style of presentation of Scripture help you to hear the sermon?

Yes / No

Comment:

5. BIBLE STUDY PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Cultivating a Midrashic Imagination

You are invited to participate in a research study exploring the impact of a “midrashic imagination” upon our congregation’s engagement with Scripture, both in worship, and as a conversation partner in our life and witness as a faith community in the Christian tradition. By participating in this Bible Study you will be able to provide valuable insight into this project. Please read this form carefully, and do ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be a participant in the research.

This study is being conducted by the Rev. Elisabeth Jones as part of my D.Min.. thesis project at Luther Seminary. My thesis advisor is Rev. Dr. Richard Rehfeldt.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to develop a particular, imaginative way of approaching the Bible that enables a “progressive-liberal” Christian community like ours to see the connections between these ancient texts, our own cultural contexts and personal lives, and God who has inspired both the Biblical communities and ours to faithful living. While I can do a lot to create this “midrashic imaginative” approach, I need your input and feedback to examine its impact and develop its potential.

Procedures:

If you agree to participate in this research, you will be asked to do the following things in addition to your regular participation in the Bible Study:

- a) participate in a group evaluation process of the study in the final session, and allow your comments to be used in subsequent writing of my thesis
- b) participate in a one-on-one interview (some participants only, and selected to ensure as broad a cross-section as possible)
- c) complete a written evaluation of the course, which will also include questions directly related to my research.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

The study has no risks for you as a participant. At all times YOU are free NOT to disclose anything of a personal or spiritual nature. The direct benefits of participation are, again, personal and spiritual. There will be no inducements or enticements associated with this research. Indirect benefits to yourself and others in this or other faith communities are of a discipleship nature. We will be contributing to a lively conversation about the place of Scripture in progressive faith communities.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept confidential. If I publish any type of report, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. All data will be kept in a locked file at my home, and in an off-line digital file; only my advisor, Richard Rehfeldt, and I will have access to the data and, if applicable, any tape or video

recording. If the research is terminated for any reason, all data and recordings will be destroyed. While I will make every effort to ensure confidentiality, anonymity cannot be guaranteed if members of our faith community read the finished thesis (due to the nature of Christian community the size of ours).

If audio recordings or videotapes are made, (for example, during verbal interviews), only the researcher (Rev. Jones) will have access.

Raw data will be retained until May 2021, in accordance with US Federal regulations, but please note that all identifying information will be removed not later than May 2018.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Luther Seminary and/or with the faith community of Cedar Park United Church. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Elisabeth R. Jones. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me/us at email@lutherseminary.edu, or by phone at 514-111-1111

If you have questions regarding the Luther Seminary requirements as laid out in this form, or in any of the research questionnaires, you may also contact Richard Rehfeldt at (removed).

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information or have had it read to me. I have received answers to questions asked. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature _____ Date _____

Signature of investigator _____ Date _____

I consent to be audiotaped (or videotaped):

Signature _____ Date _____

I consent to allow use of my direct quotations in the published thesis document.

Signature _____ Date _____

6. Bible Study Questionnaire

Midrashing the Season: *(Enter Specific Title)*

Name: _____

1. What was the highlight of this series for you?

2. *Circle all that apply, and use the notes space to explain if you wish.*

Did this approach to exploring Scripture . . .

. . . give new insights into familiar passages?

. . . change my attitude /opinion about one or more texts?

. . . cause great discomfort that I don't want to repeat?

. . . cause some discomfort that was worth it?

. . . encourage me to try to use this approach again, in a group or on my own?

Notes

3. The supporting materials were relevant and helpful

With 1= Not at all, and 5 = very much so

| | | | | |
|----|---|---|---|--------------|
| No | | | | Very Much so |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

4. The time and room/space used was conducive to my learning experience and to connecting with other group participants

With 1= Not at all, and 5 = very much so

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|

5. My most significant learning in this study series was . . .*Rate them 1-5 with 1 being most significant.*

___ Learning what Midrash is.

___ Reading texts from the Bible in new ways.

___ Learning how to "midrash."

___ Exploring possibilities for interpreting one text in a number of ways.

___ Discovering that it's possible for one scripture to have many interpretations.

6. Would you be interested in participating in a future study course like this?

7. Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview/conversation to help Rev. Elisabeth with her Doctoral research? *(If yes, indicate preferred contact medium)*

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Airhart, Phyllis D. *A Church with the Soul of a Nation: Making and Remaking the United Church of Canada*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014.
- . *Serving the Present Age: Revivalism, Progressivism and the Methodist Tradition in Canada*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992.
- Allen, Joel S. *Jewish Biblical Legends: Rabbinic Wisdom for Christian Readers*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013.
- Allen, Ronald J., and O. Wesley Allen. *The Sermon without End*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2015.
- Alter, Robert. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 1981.
- Ammerman, Nancy T., Jackson W. Carroll, Carl Dudley, and William McKinney, eds. *Studying Congregations*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998.
- Angle-Young, Teresa. "'So What?' Preaching to a Postmodern World: Using Midrash and Deconstruction to Approach the Sunday Sermon." D.Min. thesis, Aquinas Institute of Theology, 2014.
- Austin, Michael Ridgwell. *Explorations in Art, Theology and Imagination*. London: Equinox, 2005.
- Avis, Paul. *God and the Creative Imagination : Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Balthasar, Hans Urs von. *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, Vol 2: Man in God*. Translated by Graham Harrison. Vol. 2. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990.
- Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics*. Vol 1.1, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*. Edited by G.W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. Translated by G.W. Bromiley. 2nd ed. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1963.
- . *Homiletics*. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991.
- Bartow, Charles L. *God's Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1997.

- Bass, Diana Butler. *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*. New York: HarperOne, 2013.
- . *From Nomads to Pilgrims*. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2005.
- . *The Practicing Congregation*. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004.
- Bausch, William J. *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith*. Mystic, CT: Twenty Third Publications, 1984.
- Blue, Debbie. *From Stone to Living Word: Letting the Bible Live Again*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008.
- Boomershine, Thomas E. *Story Journey: An Invitation to the Gospel as Storytelling*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1988.
- Borg, Marcus J. *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously but Not Literally*. Reprint edition. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002.
- Boyarín, Daniel. *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.
- . *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.
- Bramer, Paul, and Mark Chapman. “Action Research for Doctor of Ministry Project: A Practical Definition.” *Journal of Christian Ministry* 6 (2017): 27–41.
- Bree, Ronan T., and Gerry Gallagher. “Using Microsoft Excel to Code and Thematically Analyse Qualitative Data: A Simple, Cost-Effective Approach.” *AISHE-J* 8, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 2811–14, <http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/281>. Accessed October 29, 2017.
- Brown, Delwin. *What Does a Progressive Christian Believe? A Guide for the Searching, the Open, and the Curious*. New York: Seabury Books, 2008.
- . *What Does a Progressive Christian Believe?: A Guide for the Searching, the Open, and the Curious*. New York: Seabury Books, 2008.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination*. 2nd ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.
- . *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1986.
- . *Texts under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993.

- . *The Word that Redescribes the World: The Bible and Discipleship*. Reprint edition. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011.
- . *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997.
- Brueggemann, Walter, William C. Placher, and Brian K. Blount. *Struggling With Scripture*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.
- Bryant, David J. *Faith and the Play of Imagination*. Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics 5. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1989.
- Caputo, John D. *Hoping Against Hope: Confessions of a Postmodern Pilgrim*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015.
- Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. London: Wisehouse Classics, 1865. Kindle.
- Cawley, Janet R. *Who Is Our Church?: Imagining Congregational Identity*. Herndon, VA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006.
- Cedar Park United Church. "Identity and Values Statement," 2009. <http://cedarparkunited.org/beliefs/identity-and-values-statement/>. Accessed February 15, 2016.
- Cherry, Shai. *Torah Through Time: Understanding Bible Commentary from the Rabbinic Period to Modern Times*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2007.
- Childers, Jana. *Performing The Word: Preaching*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016.
- Cohen, Shaye J. *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999.
- Colby Smith, Christopher. "Preaching as Performance: The Appropriation of Skills and Elements of Acting Performance for Preaching." D.Min. thesis, Luther Seminary, 2007.
- Cooperrider, David, and Diana D. Whitney. *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2005.
- Cresswell, John W. *A Concise Introduction to Mixed Methods Research*. London: Sage, 2015.
- Crossan, John Dominic. *How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian: Is God Violent? An Exploration from Genesis to Revelation*. Reprint edition. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2016.
- Dorrien, Gary. "American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, Decline, Renewal, Ambiguity." *Cross Currents* 55, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 456–81.

- Eliot, Susan. "Using Excel for Qualitative Data Analysis." *The Listening Resource*, (blog) July 2011. Accessed July 11, 2017. Url no longer accessible.
- Farmer, H. H. *The Servant of the Word*. Fortress Press, 1964. Kindle.
- Felten, David, and Jeff Procter-Murphy. *Living the Questions: The Wisdom of Progressive Christianity*. New York: HarperOne, 2012.
- Fennell, Robert C. "How Does the United Church Interpret the Bible? Part II. 1950s-1990s. Tradition and Liberation." *Touchstone* 26, no. 3 (September 2008): 31–42.
- . "How Does the United Church of Canada Interpret the Bible? Part I. 1904-1940s. Tradition and Resistance." *Touchstone* 26, no. 2 (May 2008): 14–23.
- Fishbane, Michael. *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*. Revised Edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.
- . *The Exegetical Imagination*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- , ed. *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought, and History*. New York: SUNY Press, 1993.
- Florence, Anna Carter. *Preaching as Testimony*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.
- Fraade, Steven D. "Rewritten Bible and Rabbinic Midrash as Commentary." In *Current Trends in the Study of Midrash*, edited by Carol Bakhos, 59–78. Leiden: Brill, 2006.
- Fraser, Brian J. *The Social Uplifters: Presbyterian Progressives and the Social Gospel in Canada 1875-1915*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1988.
- Frye, Northrop. *The Educated Imagination*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1997.
- Frymer-Kensky, Tikva. *Reading the Women of the Bible*. New York: Schocken, 2002.
- Gafney, Wilda C. *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.
- Gauvreau, Michael, ed. *The Catholic Origins of Quebec's Quiet Revolution, 1931-1970*. Montreal: McGill University Press, 2005.
- Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation Of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1977.
- Gellman, Marc. *Does God Have a Big Toe? Stories About Stories in the Bible*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993.
- Goldstein, Elyse, ed. *The Women's Torah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Weekly Torah Portions*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2000.

- Goodstein, Laurie. "Religious Liberals Sat out of Politics for 40 Years. Now They Want in the Game." *The New York Times*, June 10, 2017.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/10/us/politics/politics-religion-liberal-william-barber.html>.
- Goulder, M. D. *Midrash and Lection in Matthew*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004.
- Grant, John Webster. *The Church in the Canadian Era*. Revised edition. Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1998.
- Green, Garrett. *Theology, Hermeneutics, and Imagination: The Crisis of Interpretation at the End of Modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Greenberg, Irving (Yitz). *Sage Advice: Pirkei Avot*. Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2016. Kindle.
- Grypeou, Emmanouela, and Helen Spurling, eds. *The Exegetical Encounters between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity*. Vol. 18. Jewish and Christian Perspectives. Leiden: Brill, 2009.
- Handelman, Susan. *Slayers of Moses*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1982.
- Hargreaves, David J., Raymond MacDonald, and Dorothy Miell. "Explaining Musical Imaginations: Creativity, Performance, and Perception." In *Musical Imaginations: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Creativity, Performance and Perception*, edited by David J. Hargreaves and Raymond MacDonald. Oxford University Press, 2011. Oxford Scholarship Online.
- Harris, Maria. *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989.
- Harrison, Trevor W., and John W. Friesen. *Canadian Society in the Twenty-First Century. An Historical Sociological Approach*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2015.
- Hauerwas, Stanley. *After Christendom?: How the Church Is to Behave If Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991.
- . *Resident Aliens*. Anniversary ed. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016.
- . "The Christian Difference, or Surviving Postmodernism." In *Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, edited by Graham Ward, 144–61. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002.
- Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976.

- Hicks, Edward. "Peaceable Kingdom." National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. Accessed May 2017. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peaceable_Kingdom#Art.
- Hirshman, Marc G. *A Rivalry of Genius: Jewish and Christian Biblical Interpretation in Late Antiquity*. New York: SUNY Press, 1996.
- Holtz, Barry W. ed. *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*. Reprint Edition. New York: Simon and Shuster, 1986.
- Horsley, Richard A. *Christian Origins*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016.
- Howard, Ken. *Paradoxy: Creating Christian Community Beyond Us and Them*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010.
- Jacobs, Irving. *The Midrashic Process: Tradition and Interpretation in Rabbinic Judaism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Johnson, Elizabeth A. *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*. New York: Crossroad, 2002.
- Johnson, Luke Timothy. "Imagining the World Scripture Imagines." In *Theology and Scriptural Imagination*, edited by L. Gregory Jones and James J. Buckley, 3–18. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.
- Jones, Elisabeth R. "'They Have Eyes but See Not, Ears but Hear Not.' The Community and the Word of God." Integrative Paper, Luther Seminary, 2016.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by Paul Gyer and Allen W. Wood. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Kay, Edward N. "Cultivating Biblical Imagination Through Preaching." D.Min. thesis, Luther Seminary, 2016.
- Keller, Catherine. *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- King, Rebekka. "The New Heretics: Popular Theology, Progressive Christianity and Protestant Language Ideologies." Ph.D. thesis, Toronto, 2012. https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/34082/1/King_Rebekka_201211_PhD_thesis.pdf. Accessed July 1, 2017.
- Kunst, Judith M. *The Burning Word: A Christian Encounter with Jewish Midrash*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006.
- Levine, Amy-Jill. *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. Reprint edition. New York: HarperOne, 2015.

- Lubac, Henri de. *Medieval Exegesis, Volume 1: The Four Senses of Scripture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998.
- Lundblad, Barbara K. *Transforming the Stone: Preaching Through Resistance to Change*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001.
- Malone, Scott. “‘Religious Left’ Emerging as U.S. Political Force in Trump Era,” March 27, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-religion/religious-left-emerging-as-u-s-political-force-in-trump-era-idUSKBN16Y114>. Accessed April, 30, 2017
- McAuliffe, Jane Dammen. *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- McFague, Sallie. *Metaphorical Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1982.
- . *Models of God*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987.
- McLaren, Brian D. *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.
- . *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith*. New York: HarperOne, 2010.
- “Michael Card | Biblical Imagination Series.” Michael Card. Accessed December 7, 2017. <http://www.michaelcard.com/biseries>.
- Morrison, Bradley T. *Already Missional: Congregations and Community Partners*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016.
- Moss, Otis, III. *Blue Note Preaching in a Post-Soul World: Finding Hope in an Age of Despair*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015.
- Neusner, Jacob. *Judaism and the Interpretation of Scripture: Introduction to the Rabbinic Midrash*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004.
- . *The Midrash: An Introduction*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994.
- Oppenheimer, Todd. “Schooling the Imagination.” *The Atlantic*, September 1999. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1999/09/schooling-imagination/309180/>.
- Ostriker, Alicia Suskin. *The Nakedness of the Fathers: Biblical Visions and Revisions*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994.
- Pace Gallery. “Picasso & Jacqueline: The Evolution of Style.” Pace Gallery. Accessed February 20, 2018. <https://www.pacegallery.com/exhibitions/12690/picasso-jacqueline-the-evolution-of-style>.

- Pentland, John. *Fishing Tips: How Curiosity Transformed a Community of Faith*. Toronto: Edge:Network for Ministry Development, 2016.
- Peterson, Eugene H. *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*. 20th Anniversary edition. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006.
- Pirkei Avot: Sayings of the Fathers*. Accessed July 7, 2015.
https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_Avot.5?lang=bi.
- Placher, William C. *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.
- . *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Theology Went Wrong*. Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1996.
- Powell, Mark Allan. *What Do They Hear? Bridging the Gap Between Pulpit and Pew*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007.
- Reuther, Rosemary Radford. *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1983.
- Rhoads, David. *Characterization in the Gospels*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2004.
- Robbins, Vernon K., Walter S. Melion, and Roy R. Jeal, eds. *The Art of Visual Exegesis*. Online. Society of Biblical Literature, 2017.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1pk86wt>.
- Rohr, Richard. *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation*. Whitaker House, 2016.
- Rollins, Peter. *How (Not) to Speak of God*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2011.
- Roussel, Bernard, and Guy Bedouelle. *Le Temps Des Réformes et La Bible*. Bible de Tous Les Temps, 5. Paris: Beauchesne, 1989.
- Saldaña, Johnny. *Longitudinal Qualitative Research: Analyzing Change through Time*. Lanham, MD: Rowman Altamira, 2003.
- Sandu, Antonio. *Social Construction of Reality as Communicative Action*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016.
- Sanguin, Bruce. *If Darwin Prayed: Prayers for Evolutionary Mystics*. Vancouver: Evans and Sanguin, 2010.
- . *The Emerging Church: A Model for Change and a Map for Renewal*. Kelowna: Copperhouse, 2008.

- Sasso, Sandy Eisenberg. *God's Echo: Exploring Scripture with Midrash*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2007.
- . *In God's Name*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1994.
- . *Midrash: Reading the Bible with Question Marks*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2013.
- Schleiermacher, Friedrich. *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*. 1898. Translated and Edited by Richard Crouter. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Schweitzer, Don, ed. *Intersecting Voices: Critical Theologies in a Land of Diversity*. Montreal: Novalis, 2004.
- Searcy, Edwin J. "Figural Preaching in a Missional Congregation: A Descriptive Case Study of the Relationship between Figural Preaching and Ecclesial Formation." ..D.Min. thesis, Columbia Theological Seminary, 2002.
- . "God's Own Gift: Glimpsing Tomorrow's Church Today." *Touchstone* 31, no. 1 (February 2013): 6–13.
- Sensing, Tim. *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011.
- Skoglund, Kathryn L. "Telling the Old, Old Stories: Reconnecting with Jesus' Parables through Biblical Storytelling." D.Min. thesis, Luther Seminary, 2016.
- Smith, James K. A. *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014.
- Spong, John Shelby. *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism: A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture*. San Francisco: Harper One, 1992.
- . *Resurrection: Myth or Reality? A Bishop's Search for the Origins of Christianity*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994.
- Stebbins, Robert A. *Exploratory Research in the Social Sciences*. London: Sage, 2001.
- Stern, David. *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998.
- Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Trebolle Barrera, Julio C. *The Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible: An Introduction to the History of the Bible*. Leiden: Brill, 1998.
- Trible, Phyllis. *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. Overtures to Biblical Theology, 13. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984.

- Tutu, Desmond. *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time*. New York: Image Books, 2004.
- Volf, Miroslav. *A Public Faith*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011.
- Vosper, Gretta. *With or Without God*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 2008.
- Wallis, Jim. *On God's Side: What Religion Forgets and Politics Hasn't Learned About Serving the Common Good*. Grand Rapids MI: Brazos Press, 2013.
- Ward, Richard F. *Speaking of the Holy: The Art of Communication in Preaching*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001.
- Ward, Richard F., and David Trobisch. *Bringing the Word to Life : Engaging the New Testament through Performing It*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013.
- Wilder, Amos. "Story and Story World." *Interpretation* 37 (1983): 353–64.
- . *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1976.
- Williams, Delores. *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*. New York: Orbis Books, 1993.
- Wolsey, Roger. *Kissing Fish: Christianity for People Who Don't Like Christianity*. Kindle. Lexington, KY: Xlibris, 2011.
- Wright, N. T. *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture*. San Francisco: Harper, 2006.
- Young, Brad H. *Meet the Rabbis : Rabbinic Thought and the Teachings of Jesus*. Kindle. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007.
- . *The Parables : Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998.
- Zetterholm, Karin Hedner. *Jewish Interpretation of the Bible*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012.