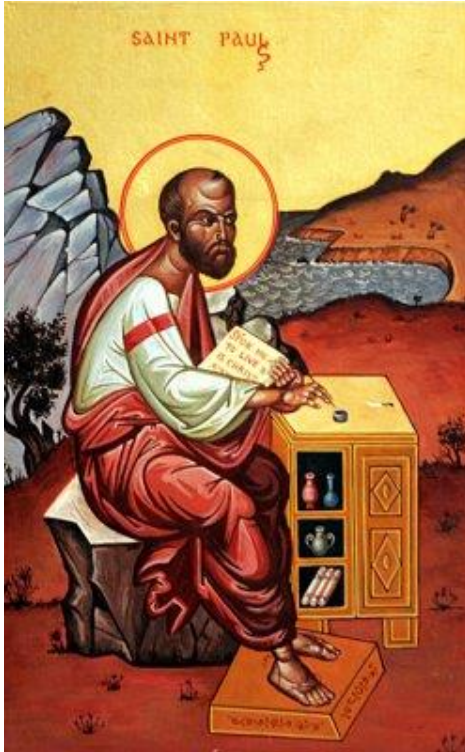


Setting the Scene for Listening Afresh to Paul in his Context An Outline of Worshiping and Learning with Brentwood in 2024



The earliest preserved writings that formed the faith of early Christian communities come from letters written by the apostle Paul to communities of Christians that he had founded and/or led. His life was transformed by an encounter with the living Christ of our Creator, Jesus of Nazareth, and nurtured into increasing maturity and influence by the Spirit of that Christ. The letters emerged from conversations about what it means to be ambassadors of the world reordering initiated by our Creator's forgiving and reconciling love in their Christ, Jesus of Nazareth.

Paul felt deeply that he was living in Christ and for Christ. In that relationship of safety and significance, he enjoyed a steadfast and eternal flow of mercy and grace with every breath he took. Breathing that air of freedom in Christ, he was constantly energized by the possibilities of generating faith, hope, and love through all of his conversations.

The letters of Paul we have preserved in our Bible are windows into the way our Creator was forming Paul's faith in the context of various conflicts among the communities he was influencing as they matured in their understanding of what a relationship with Christ meant for their world and their personal contributions to its welfare.



My current conception of Paul's maturing in his faith is that he experienced a freedom in forgiveness for flourishing when Jesus encountered him on the road to Damascus. His letters document a story of growth, mostly a maturing growth, in his understanding of just what his relationship with Christ meant for his contributions to the thriving of all the interdependencies that generate life in this creation.

My prayer is that our conversations with Paul over the course of 2024 will bring us a maturing together to bless our context by growing into the sanctifying significance of our lives.



Each Sunday from January 7 through November 24 of 2024, we will focus our attention on the 2nd readings in the Revised Common Lectionary. Towards the end of the year, we will be reading from letters written after Paul had written his. They will give us an opportunity to see how Paul's understanding of the community's faith was carried on and/or questioned and/or reformulated by later writers and their communities.

Brentwood convenes an hour-long Bible Study every Wednesday afternoon on Zoom at 2pm Pacific time. You are welcome to join the conversations whenever you can. We have dubbed ourselves 'The Rabbit Hole Gang,' picking up and playing with an image from Elisabeth R. Jones' work on midrash for Christian congregations.¹

¹ See Appendix #1

Here are the 2nd readings for the year that will provoke our considerations and conversations week after week:

January 7 – Acts 19:1-7
January 14 – 1 Corinthians 6:12-20
January 21 – 1 Corinthians 7:29-31
January 28 – 1 Corinthians 8:1-13
February 4 – 1 Corinthians 9:16-23
February 11 – 2 Corinthians 4:3-6
February 18 – 1 Peter 3:18-22 (Lent 1)
February 25 – Romans 4:13-25 (Lent 2)
March 3 – 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 (Lent 3)
March 10 – Ephesians 2:1-10 (Lent 4)
March 17 – Hebrews 5:5-10 (Lent 5)
March 24 – Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 (Palm Sunday)
March 31 – 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 (Easter Sunday)
April 7 – 1 John 1:1-2:2
April 14 – 1 John 3:1-7
April 21 – 1 John 3:16-24
April 28 – 1 John 4:7-21
May 5 – 1 John 5:1-6
May 12 – 1 John 5:9-13
May 19 – Romans 8:22-27 (Pentecost Sunday)
May 26 – Romans 8:12-17 (Trinity Sunday)
June 2 – 2 Corinthians 4:5-12
June 9 – 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1
June 16 – 2 Corinthians 5:6-17
June 23 – 2 Corinthians 6:1-13
June 30 – 2 Corinthians 8:7-15
July 7 – 2 Corinthians 12:2-10
July 14 – Ephesians 1:3-14
July 21 – Ephesians 2:11-22

July 28 – Ephesians 3:14-21
August 4 – Ephesians 4:1-16
August 11 – Ephesians 4:25-5:2
August 18 – Ephesians 5:15-20
August 25 – Ephesians 6:10-20
September 1 – James 1:17-27
September 8 – James 2:1-17
September 15 – James 3:1-12
September 22 – James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a
September 29 – James 5:13-20
October 6 – Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12 (World Wide Communion Sunday)
October 13 -1 Timothy 2:1-7 (Thanksgiving Sunday)
October 20 – Hebrews 5:1-10
October 27 – Hebrews 7:213-28
November 3 – Revelation 21:1-6 (All Saints Sunday)
November 10 – Hebrews 9:24-28 (Remembrance Sunday)
November 17 – Hebrews 10:11-25
November 24 – Revelation 1:4b-8 (Reign of Christ Sunday)



For those who want to dig more deeply into the dynamics at work in the forming and reforming of Paul's faith, we suggest that you consult Calvin J. Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul: Conversations in Context* (6th edition 2015) and Harry O. Maier, *New Testament Christianity in the Roman World* (2019).

Appendix #1

***Midrash* for Christian Bible Study**

Midrash: A Way of “Turning” a Biblical Text

You know how when you turn a cut-diamond to catch the light, different facets of the same diamond refract the same light differently, so you see many colours of the spectrum? This metaphor may be what the second century Rabbi Ben Bag Bag had in mind when he encouraged people to take any Biblical text and

*Turn it, and turn it, for everything is in it.
Reflect and grow old and grey with it.²*

This way of turning sacred texts this way and that, so that God’s light catches the text in different ways, depending on changing contexts and circumstances, is as old as the Bible itself, where we find younger texts (for example Paul’s letters or the Gospels) which ‘turn’ an older text (e.g. from the prophets or psalms), to show how they can be reinterpreted in light of new contexts for God’s people. The process of turning a text is known as “midrash” (from the Hebrew verb שָׁדַד *darash*, which means to search, probe, ponder, seek). While individuals can turn texts, the process is far livelier – and far more likely to transform the way we live our faith – when done in community.

Midrash as an interpretive process is deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition and continues to this day. One contemporary Rabbi has described the process as “reading the Bible with question marks”, not just as an intellectual activity but as a “personal journey” in which we

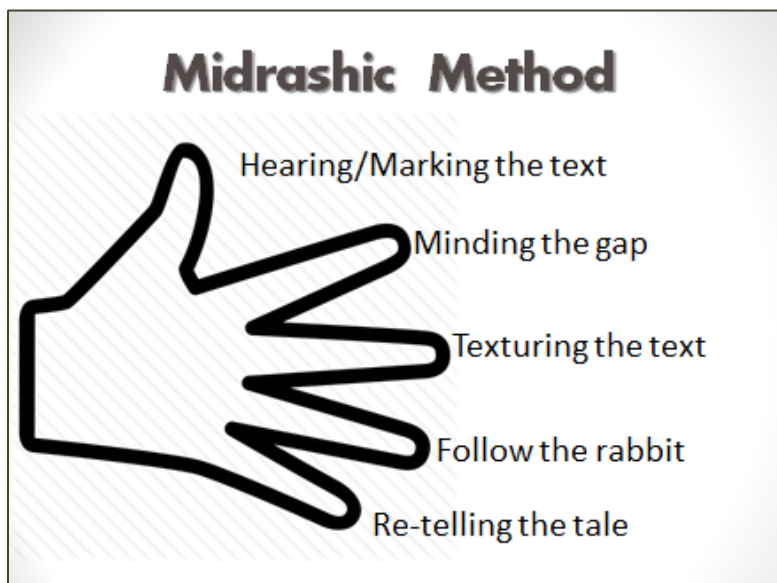
² *Pirkei Avot, Sayings of the Fathers 5:22* (Koren Publishers, Jerusalem, 2015)

can “glimpse the light of old souls” who saw the Holy in the words of Scripture, but also “to find that light within our own souls” and lives.³

Some Christians may worry that this is not “the way” to study a Biblical text; we’ve become used to thinking one text means one thing, as if it were some sort of mathematical equation. However, Jesus was a master “darshan” (one who turns a text), as you can see so many times when he turns an ancient text (like Deuteronomy 6) to bring new light to bear on its meaning, as it meets the present circumstance (See Matthew 22:34-40). In similar fashion we see Peter “midrashing” the prophet Joel to bring light to the resurrection, when he preaches to the crowd at Pentecost (Acts 2), and Paul sees Isaiah’s description of holy mystery as the best way to describe the apparent folly of faith in the crucified Lord of glory (1 Cor 2:9;16), Jesus Christ.

A Christian Midrashic Method

This simple way of using a “midrashic approach” to Bible study has been developed over the past eleven years in the Christian community of faith of Cedar Park United in Pointe Claire, PQ. It’s a five-finger process:



³ Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *Midrash: Reading the Bible with Question Marks*, (Paraclete Press, 2007, 2013),153.

1. Reading/Marking the text

*Hear it first (listening is how most people have encountered Scripture)
Next, print off or mark up the text- with any of YOUR reactions,
questions, shocks, surprises. Note repetitions, odd words, gaps (what's
missing?)*

2. Minding the Gaps

*Share everyone's "gaps" (discovered while marking the text)
(DON'T answer the questions yet, let them fill the room!)
Identify the key or pressing ones. Be ready to use commentaries, online
resources, and human wisdom.*

3. Texturing the Text (Putting the text into its biblical context.)

*Who wrote it, when, for whom? Who shared it? Who passed it on?
What layers are added now that the text has come to us?*

4. Follow the White Rabbit *(a reference to Lewis Carroll's Adventures in
Wonderland; Alice followed the rabbit, and entered a world both
recognizable and strange). Some element(s) of a text just beg to be
followed; go there! Look things up, and see how this particular point
intersects with your own life.*

5. Re-telling the Tale

*When Scripture re-writes us, we get to re-tell it!
How would you re-tell this text? (As artist, poet, pray-er, preacher,
person of faith?) Share others' re-tellings of this text (e.g. Songs, art, or
contemporary re-tellings, e.g. Godspell, etc.)*

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To find out more about using Midrashic Method in a Christian
community, see:

https://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1029&context=dmin_theses

The Rev Dr Elisabeth R Jones studied and taught at Vancouver School of Theology, was Director of Studies at United Theological College in Montreal, and completed her Doctor of Ministry degree at Luther Seminary with a project on using midrash to help people engage the Scriptures in ways that transform their lives. She is minister with Cedar Park United Church in Pointe Claire, PQ.