

Out of the Depths: Preaching in the Wake of Mass Trauma

REV. DR. KIMBERLY WAGNER

(SHE/HER/HERS)

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF HOMILETICS

AXEL JACOB AND GERDA MARIA (SWANSON)
CARLSON CHAIR IN HOMILETICS

LUTHERAN SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AT CHICAGO

Content Warning and Invitation to Self-Care



Plan for Our Time Together



- Understanding Trauma and Impacts on Individuals and Communities
- Preaching in Trauma-Responsive Ways
- Considering a Living Case Study: Covid-19 Pandemic
- Seeking Wisdom from Biblical Resources
- Engaging Questions and Conversation

Challenges of Defining Trauma

- Colloquial Term
- Catchall Term for Multiple Kinds/Categories
- Trauma vs. Traumatic Event
- Nature of Trauma



Trauma: A Working Definition

Trauma is a blow or wounding of the mind, body, and spirit/self that occurs when a destructive experience or event exceeds a person's or community's resources to process or assimilate the experience into preconceived frameworks of understanding.

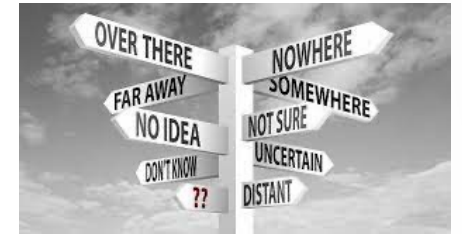
Impacts of Trauma



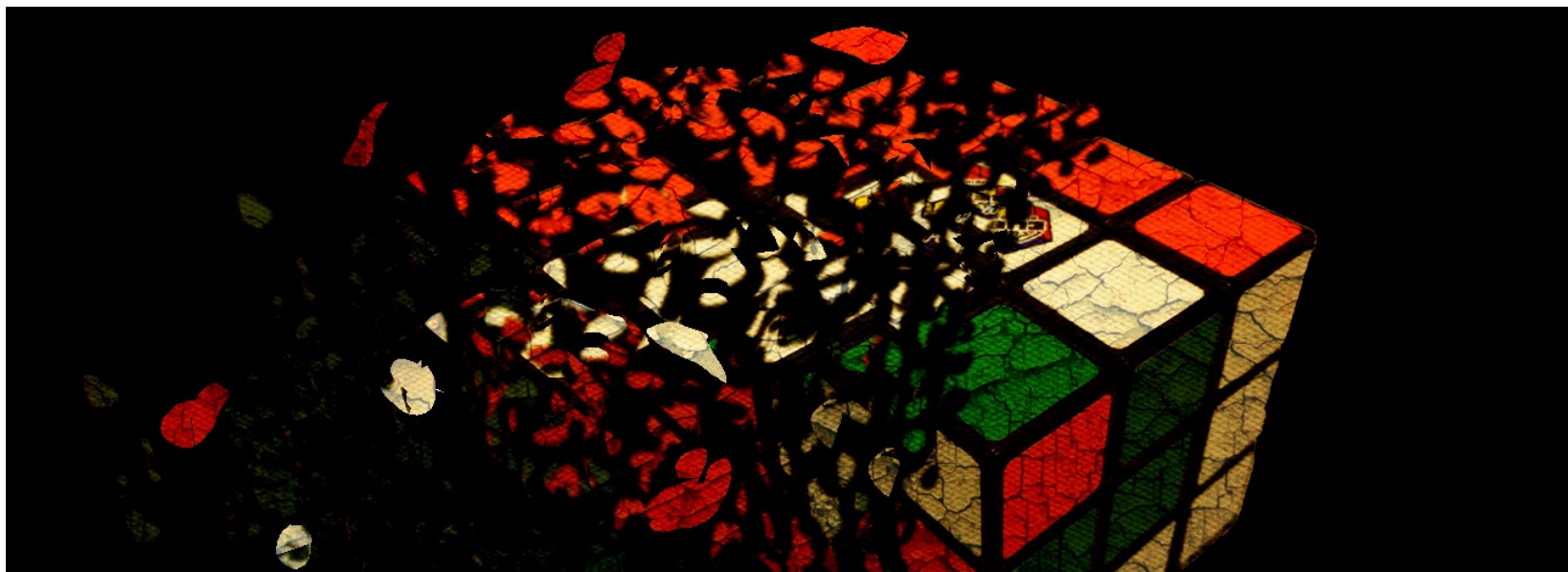
Major Impact #1: Crisis of Time

- Trauma/traumatic experience becomes an eternal present
- Distortion of connection between past-present-future

Major Impact #2: Crisis of Coherence



- One's world and story no longer feel:
 - Comprehensible
 - Safe/Helpful
 - Meaningful



Crisis of Time
+ Crisis of Coherence =
“Narrative Fracture”

Leads to Disconnection from or Disorientation of....

- Sense of Self/Identity
- Body
- Community
- Faith/Relationship with God

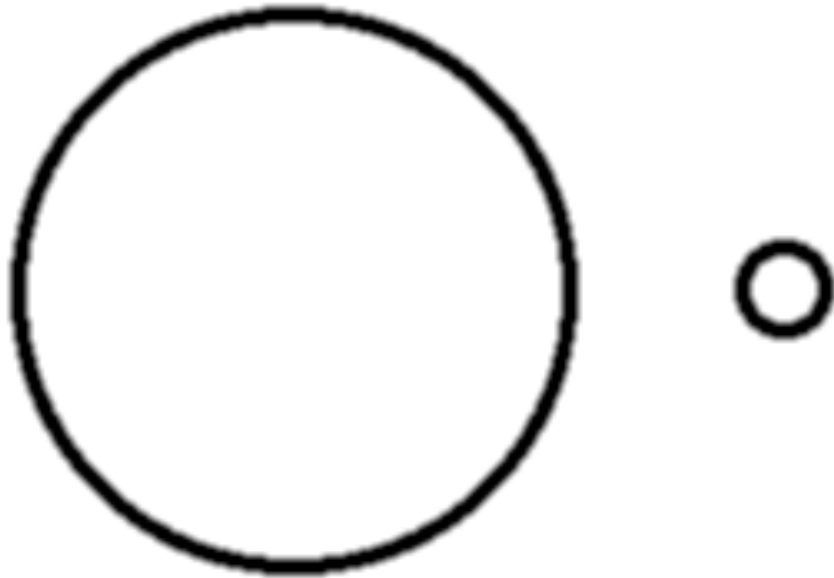


Communal/ Collective Trauma

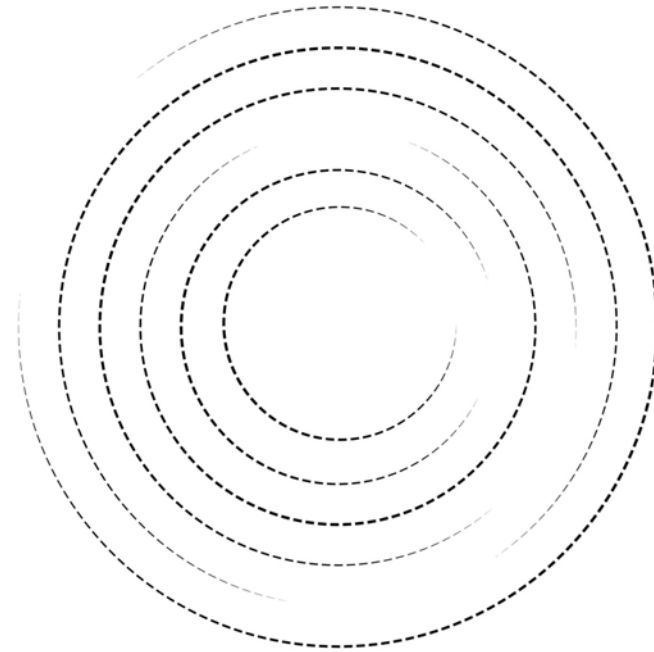


Collective Trauma

Uniting Forces



Separating Forces



How might preaching (and worship) faithfully respond to these traumatic realities?



- Offers language
- Creates space for honest reflection
- Models faithful traumatic response
- Facilitates Communal Connection, Support, and Empathy
- Centers us in the patterns of our life together and stories of our faith
- Reminds us that we are not alone

What Do We Say?

Preach and minister
in the eschatological tension



Role of the Preacher/Worship Leader



“Prayer of Habakkuk” by Peter Gorban

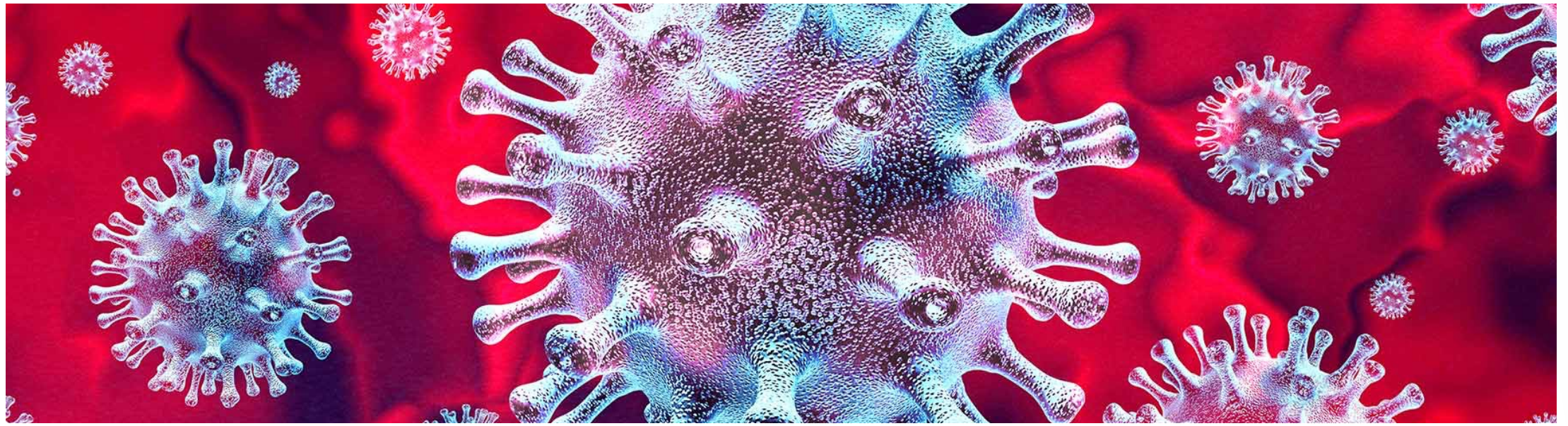
I will stand at my watchpost
and station myself on the
rampart;
I will keep watch to see what the
Lord will say to me,
and what the Lord will
answer concerning my
complaint.

~ Habakkuk 2:1

How Do We Say It?

Honor narrative fracture by resisting moving to
quick answers or easy resolutions





Lived/Living Case Study: Covid-19 Pandemic



Understanding Covid-19 through the Lens of Trauma



Recognizable Features of a Mass Traumatic Event

Impacts large groups
of people

Impacts different
people to differing
degrees

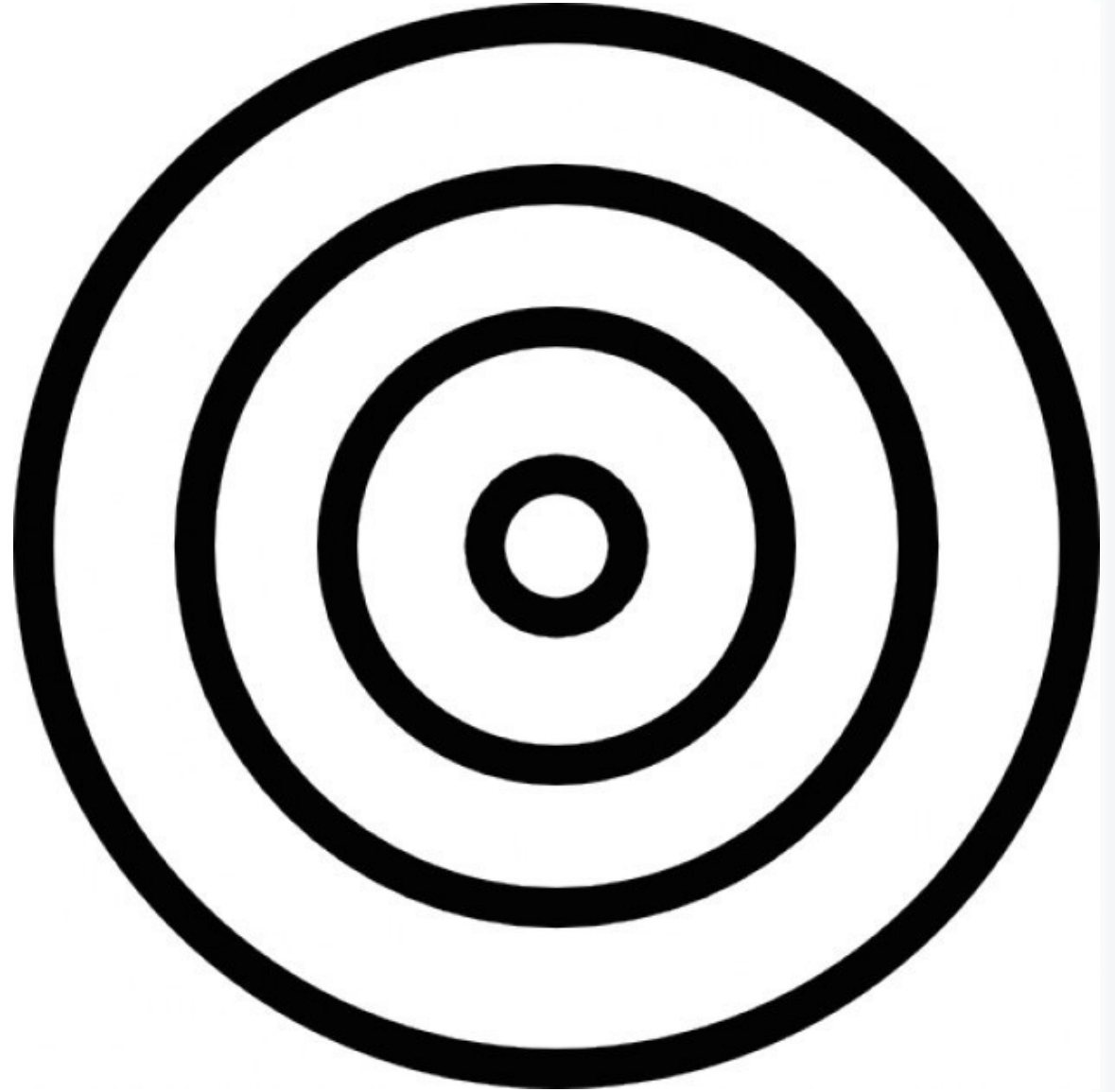
Interacts with,
exacerbates, and
highlights other
traumatic realities
already present

Disorders time and
coherence

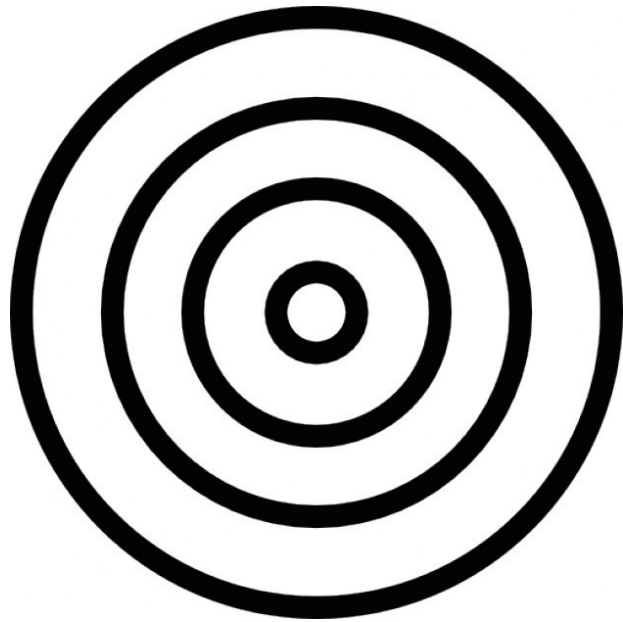
Impact at Individual
and Communal
Levels

Preacher/Pastor
Cannot Avoid
Impact

Unique Feature:
Global Pandemic



Unique Feature: Prolonged Crisis



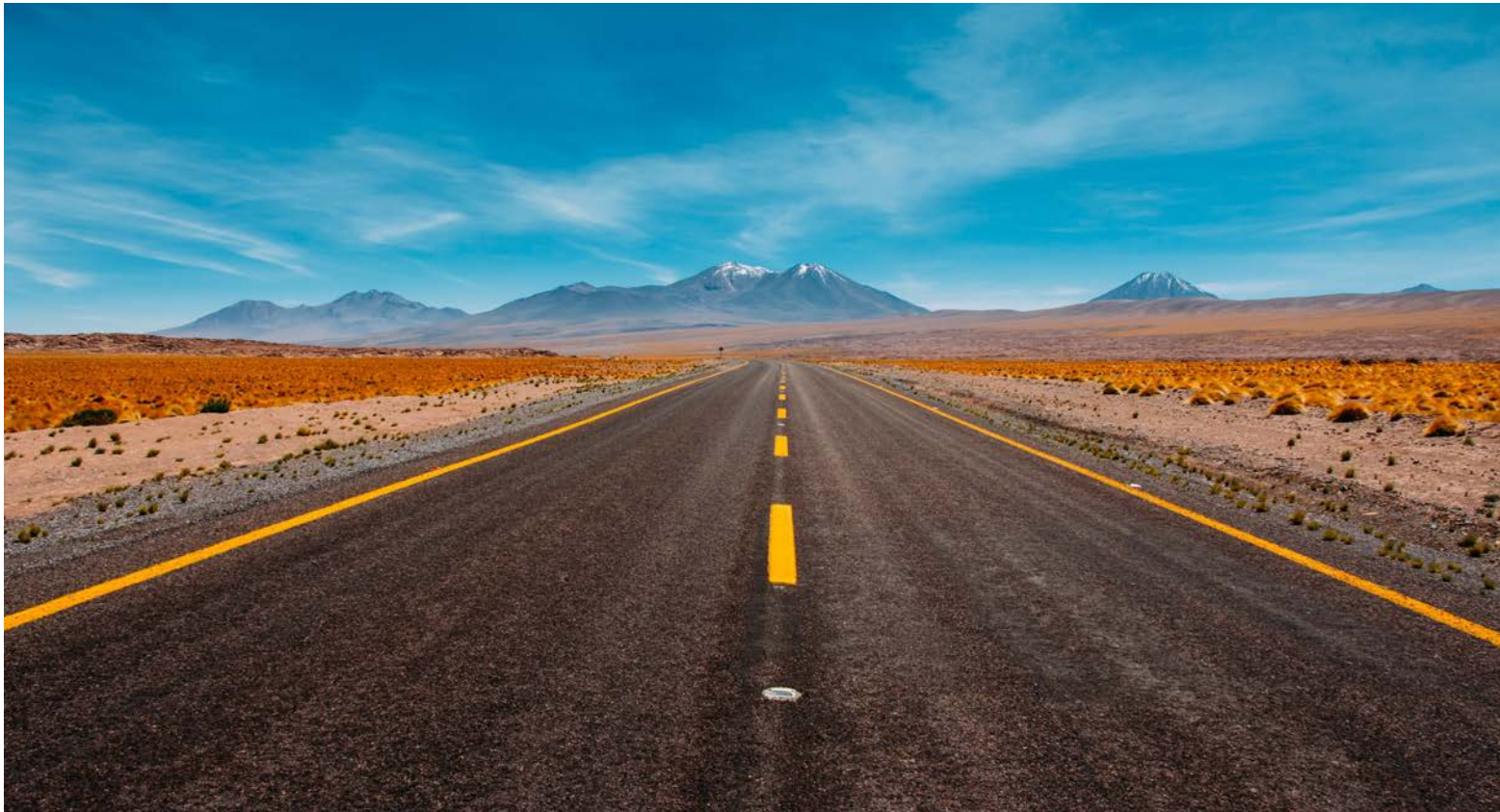
Lack of
clarity about
what marks
the end

Impact
ebbs and
flows over
time

Stress does not
disappear with
longer time or
resuming
“normal” life

People more
inclined to deny,
push against, or
shut selves off
from the
traumatic reality

A Biblical Guide: Wisdom from Wilderness Wanderings



Four Pieces of Wisdom from Wilderness Wanderings

1. Recognize, with the exilic people the painful, traumatic reality and grieve what has been lost
 - As given voice in the Psalms, Lamentation, & Prophets, among others
2. The Importance of Cultivating Right or Truthful Memory (temptation to remember a “golden age”)
 - Exodus 16



“Couple Reaching Up” by Evelyn Williams



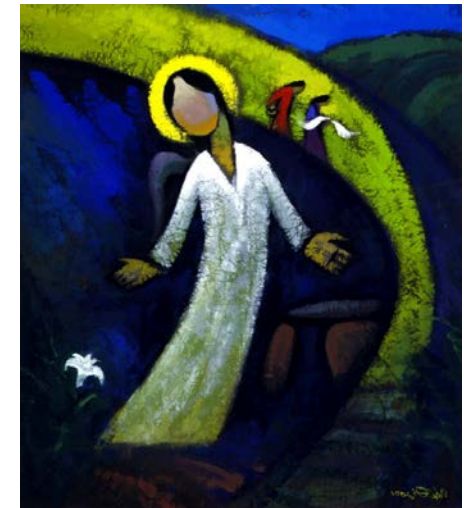
“Manna reigning from heaven on the Israelites (Exodus 16),” from the Maciejowski Bible, c. 1250

Four Pieces of Wisdom from Wilderness Wanderings

3. There is no true “return”
 - May be familiar sites/locations, but we are not the same
 - Do we truly want a return?
4. We are invited to ground ourselves in who we are, God’s claim on us, and our formative sacred stories
 - In midst of traumatic disorientation, reorient ourselves individually and collectively in foundations of faith (even if held in trust for us)



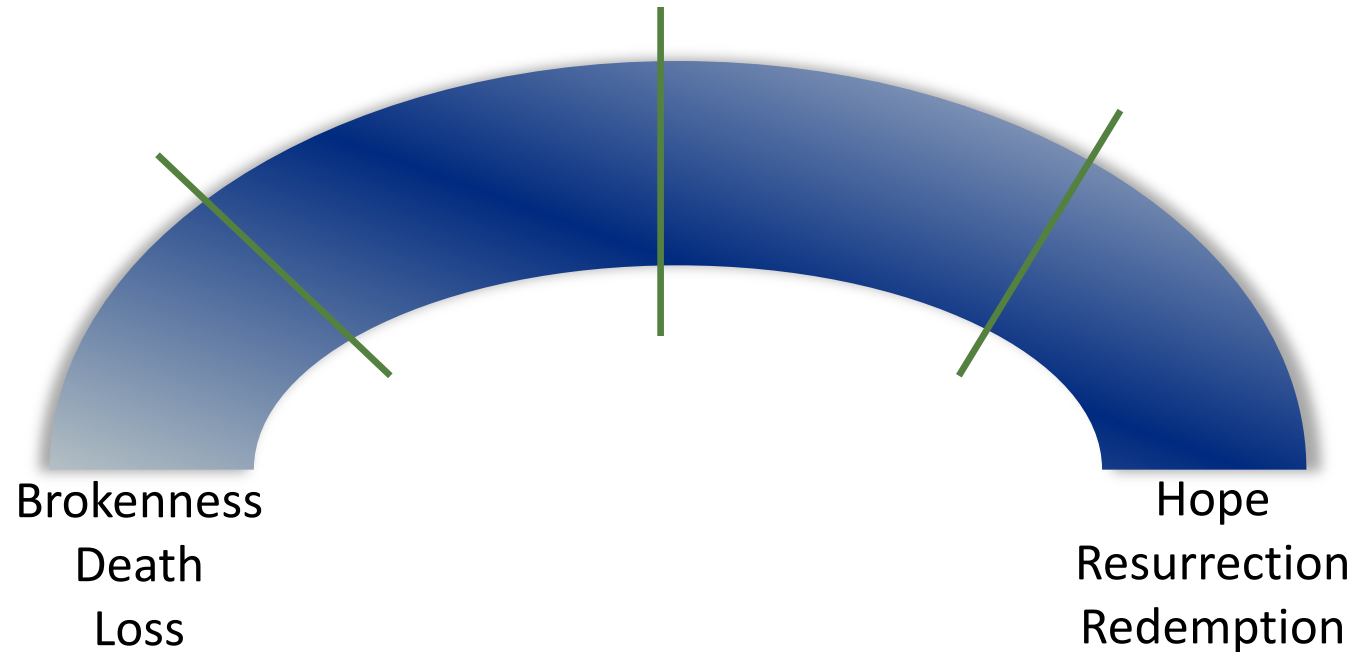
“Biblical Jerusalem,” biblical-jerusalem-hp.jpg



“He is Not Here” by He Qi

Navigating the Ongoing Reality

- Living into the Tension
- Discerning the Ongoing Location(s) of the Community



Navigating the Ongoing Reality

- Reconnecting the Community Around Narratives of Faith
- Inviting Community Inward to honor one another's griefs and experiences
- Preach in trauma-aware ways conscious of the ongoing traumatic reality, even if not discussing it directly



Questions and Conversation

