



‘A Great Story’
Sermon – Rod Harding
December 4, 2022

Genesis 12:1-5 (John 1:1-14) Revelation 21:1-4; 22:1-5

‘Stories’ have been very much in our thinking since last Sunday’s visit by Christine Dillon. What a clever way to share the stories of the Bible and to let the stories have their own impact on those who hear them!

I have to admit it was because I knew that Christine was addressing the topic of ‘Telling the Gospel through Story’ last Sunday that I deliberately chose the topic for today, as we begin a short three-week Advent series leading up to Christmas. The theme for the whole Christmas period is ‘Make it a Great Christmas’, so it was pretty obvious that ‘A Great Story’ would follow on from last week, tie in with the theme, and also hopefully help us to be more prepared for all that Christmas offers, when it comes.

We know that the Bible is made up of 66 ‘books’ with many different authors, who wrote across a period of around 1300 years, during which the known world underwent several major changes, with the rise and fall of empires well chronicled in ancient history textbooks. We’d therefore expect there to be lots of stories, probably some inconsistencies and, more than likely, some things now completely out-of-date and no longer relevant.

Except for one very important thing... And that is that the Bible not only tells lots of stories, it also tells *one* story – one continuing story that begins at the beginning, develops throughout the narrative of the Bible as a whole and comes to a spectacular conclusion at the end – and it is *that* story which today I am calling the *great* story, sometimes referred to as the *meta-narrative* of the Bible. And it is only as we understand that great story that we begin to see that all the stories we know so well link together to make sense of the whole. And even more significantly, it is as we take hold of that great story that we also appreciate the real meaning and purpose of Jesus, and his all-important place in God’s purpose for the world.

John begins his account of the life and ministry of Jesus with an introduction – and, as it happens, his introduction also draws our attention to this one great story. *‘In the beginning was the Word ...’* (John 1:1) wrote John, immediately connecting with the beginning of the story, where God spoke the creation into existence. John’s profound words continue to connect with the Genesis account as he recalls that *‘the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.’* (v.5) God’s very first creative word was *‘Let there be light,’* and that light is still not vanquished. But neither is the darkness – the world remains broken and suffering from the curses of Genesis 3, resulting in continued separation from God and his presence with his people. But, says John, *‘The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.’* (v.9) God’s purpose has not been prevented from its fulfilment and he will make *‘his dwelling among us.’* (v.14), such that his glory will be revealed to all.

But I’ve rushed ahead – let’s go back and take it a little more slowly.

We began today with a reading from Genesis 12, where God’s plan for putting the world right is first declared to Abram. But (as Christine suggested last Sunday) every story needs some kind of introduction and Genesis 1 to 11 is just that. Here we read of God’s perfect world – the Garden of Eden, where (as we saw a few weeks back) everything and everyone lived with a sustainable balance between all facets of the creation – God, the humans, fauna and flora – every aspect worked in harmony with the rest. God the Creator was himself fully present, as he wandered through the garden, engaging with his creation. But it all went wrong when the humans decided they knew better and chose to go their way, rather than God’s – and, as a result, they were separated from God’s presence and the whole creation lost its sense of shared purpose.

As matters got worse from there, God exercised a terrible judgement on his world, destroying all living things with a massive flood, from which only one righteous family (and representatives of the animal world) escaped –but even that extreme measure did not fix the problem. So the humans tried to restore themselves to God’s presence, by building a tower by which he could come down to them – but the feeble plans of

fallen humanity were never going to work. So God himself now introduced his own plan of restoration. And here the real story begins.

The Lord had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. ... So Abram went ...” (Gen 12:1,4).

The Lord had made three great promises to Abram – first, that he would have a great land to live in; second, from him would come a great nation; and third, not only would both he and the nation be greatly blessed by God, but the nation would become the conduit of God’s great blessing for all peoples on earth. Unlike the attempt at Babel, this was now God’s doing – but it was always a plan that would involve the faithful obedience of his people to make it effective. Thus, Abram is told to go – and go he does!

From this point, the story progresses through the ups and downs of those God chooses to be the bearers of his plan for the world. There’s the grand story of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, leading to his twelve sons becoming the leaders of the future twelve tribes of Israel; the story of the formation of the nation through the exodus event, escaping slavery in Egypt and becoming an independent nation in their own land (the land of God’s promise); the eventual establishment of the kingdom of Israel, drawing all twelve tribes together under a single king, initially through Saul, and then David, to whom the further promise is made,

‘I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will ... establish the throne of his kingdom forever.’ (2 Sam 7:12-13).

The kingdom, so successful, so glorious in the days of David and Solomon, broke apart and separated into two nations, the northern kingdom of Israel (where kings occasionally followed brief dynasties, but more often were replaced as a result of violent overthrow by usurpers to the throne); and the southern kingdom of Judah (where the dynasty of David continued unbroken, according to God’s promise to David). Subsequently, both these kingdoms were overrun –

Israel by Assyria in the late 8th century BC and Judah by Babylon in the early 6th century BC. Israel never recovered, but Judah (or at least a few of the faithful remnant of Judah) returned to Jerusalem after 70 years of exile, to rebuild the city and re-establish the temple, both of which had been destroyed by the Babylonian army.

It was during these turbulent times of the kingdoms that the prophets began to reinterpret the story and to create a new kind of expectation and hope for the people of God. I don't want to say too much about the prophets – that's where our focus will be over the next two weeks, as Greg and Trevor continue this series, leading up to Christmas. For the purpose of our story today, suffice it to say that, by the time of the New Testament, this now small and relatively insignificant nation, centred in Jerusalem, had become a vassal state, subject to the power and authority of Rome.

I don't want to spend too much time at this point of the story either – that will be our focus on the Christmas weekend – but it must be noted that when Jesus came, he did so as the most important part of the great story. Here was everything to which God's plan had pointed, as God's presence returned to the world in the person of his Son, and the world was turned upside down as a result.

There are two themes in the story which we need to highlight before we move on to the end, because they are both important to our understanding of Jesus and of God's plan to put the world right.

The first is the idea of 'temple' – the significant symbol of God's presence for the nation of Israel – the presence they once had, but lost, in the Garden of Eden. In the ancient world, when a temple was built for a god, the final and most important inclusion in the temple was an image of the god to be worshipped there. In the same way, in the Genesis 1 account of God building his own temple (the creation) his final act is to place his image in his temple –

God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Gen 1:27).

The humans in the creation are God's image-bearers, in whom his presence will rest, and whose responsibility it is to faithfully represent God in his temple and to effect ongoing worship of him.

The temple remains important to the story – first, the tabernacle, which accompanied the wanderings of the nation, finally arriving in the land of promise; and then the temple built by Solomon in Jerusalem, in which the prophets describe the presence of God with his people. John says, *'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.'* (John 1:14) – the temple is back in Jesus himself, who said, *'Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.'* (Jn 2:19), and then is further understood by Paul, who tells the Corinthian church, *'we are the temple of the living God.'* (2 Cor 6:16) The temple motif in the great story draws attention to God's plan to restore his presence with his people!

The second theme of the great story is the idea of kingdom, which we also must not miss. When the fledgling nation of Israel first asked for a king, Samuel had warned them they would be sorry, after God had told him, *'it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king.'* (1 Sam 8:7) The earthly kingdom, or kingdoms, were never going to be the final answer as, once again, they were a rejection of the reality that God was their king and his kingdom is all that really matters. So, as we have seen, they ran into serious difficulty, and faded into non-existence – except for one major outcome of the kingdom story... God had promised David that the throne of his kingdom would be established for ever – so when Jesus came, announcing that *'the kingdom of God has come near'* (Mark 1:15), we see the fulfilment of this promise. The story of the kingdom points us to the one who is King – the 'Son of David', come to earth to establish his kingdom, and reign as King for ever. The story tells us that Jesus is King in God's kingdom, and that where he reigns, the kingdom is already present – and will be 'present' for eternity.

So, with these two themes in mind, the great story comes to its conclusion (as we've read from the last two chapters of Revelation today). These chapters paint a picture which draws to a climax

the purpose of God and the final fulfilment of his plan to restore all things to himself. It is interesting to note that in John's vision of *'a new heaven and a new earth,* (Rev 21:1), he saw *'the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God,'* (v.2), and heard a voice saying, *'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them.'* (v.3). Does it not seem to you that here at the story's end, we have a picture of both heaven and earth combined, where God's kingdom has come and God's will is done, *'on earth as it is in heaven.'* (Matt 6:10)?

We didn't read verse 22, further down in Revelation 21 – *'I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.'* No longer is there any need for symbolising the presence of God – once again (as in Eden) he is fully present in his dwelling place, and *'they will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.'* (21:3). Here *'there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain'* (21:4); here the river of life flows, bringing abundance of all things; here we find *'the healing of the nations,'* (22:2), the blessing for all, promised to Abram at the beginning; here the darkness is finally expelled and the light is victorious – *'there will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light.'* (22:5); here we see *'the throne of God and of the Lamb ... in the city,'* (22:3) the King in his kingdom, reigning gloriously over all!

How much do you look forward to enjoying all that this great story has in store in its ending? That's the joy, the fulfilment, the eternal life and love, promised to the inhabitants of God's kingdom – and God invites us to share in the richness of that hope and expectation – not starting when you die, but when you come alive and enter God's kingdom – starting now!

Genesis 12:1-5

12 The Lord had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

*2 “I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;*

*I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.*

*3 I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.”*

4 So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. 5 He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

Revelation 21:1-4; 22:1-5

21 Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

22 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. 3 No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in

the city, and his servants will serve him. ⁴ They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵ There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

John 1:1-14

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

⁹ The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

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