

**Message Notes January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021**  
**The Bible In One Year Week 1: The Greatest Story**  
(Genesis 1:1-4, Psalm 3:1-8, Matthew 4:12-17)

• **In the Beginning**

- *“In the beginning, God...”* That’s how the Bible, this huge book, this epic story, begins. *“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and void, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.”*
  - There’s so much foundational wisdom and truth contained in the very first chapter of Genesis. Already, we’re told so much of what we need to know about God: God is eternal, God is transcendent, God is Good, God is powerful. We see the Creator God, we see the Spirit of God, and we even see the Word of God. We see that God doesn’t bring about Creation to fill some need or void in Himself, He doesn’t Create everything to be His slave, but He out of His own joyous, creative goodness. And He makes everything *good*. He makes humankind in His own image to represent His Kingdom on the earth.
  - There are so many important themes we could delve into in the opening words of the Bible, but today, I want to draw our attention to a really interesting and mysterious part of the first few verses. The Word says that in the beginning, when God was creating the heavens and the earth, “...the earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.”
  - “Formless and void.” In Hebrew, the phrase is *tohu vavohu*. It’s this primordial chaos; it’s “wild and waste,” it’s darkness shrouding violent waters. This is kind of mysterious: why is there “chaos” in God’s creation? “Tohu vavohu,” formless and void, darkness. If God makes everything Good, why does He have to bring order and light in this chaos and darkness? And what does this first creative act in Genesis 1 tell us about the God the Bible reveals?
  - Well, I’m going to keep you in suspense and we’ll come back to “tohu vavohu” at the end, because I think it tells us something really wonderful and significant that impacts the whole story. But first, let’s get our bearings and lay some foundations for this journey.

• **Starting the Journey**

- A New Year has come and we’re beginning an exciting new journey that will last all of 2021: as a church, we’re going through the whole Bible together in one year.
  - Hopefully you’ve heard about it already, but if not, read our newsletters, check our website and social media, and all the info you need can be found there to join us on this journey. As we read and pray through Scripture daily, we’ll be preaching through the Word each Sunday in worship. And while there’s no way I can actually preach through *the whole Bible* in just one year (to hit everything would take many years!), I am going to try to give you the broad brushstrokes and main themes week by week, so you can better understand, appreciate, and follow the message.
  - So, are you ready for a new adventure? Let’s do this!
- John Wesley, the founder of the Methodism in 18<sup>th</sup> Century England, said he wanted to be a person of *one book*. Here’s his quote: *“I have thought, ‘I am creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air. I am a spirit come from God and returning to God; just hovering over the great gulf, till a few moments hence I am no more seen. I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing, the way to heaven—how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: for this very end he came from heaven. He [has] written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price give me the Book of God! I have it. Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be [a man of one book].”*
  - *Let me be a person of One Book.* Let us be a Church of One Book. We know that Book. We have that Book. We probably have a dozen copies of that Book and every translation available at the click of a screen.
  - *Why don’t we want it more? Why don’t we read it more? Why don’t we listen to it more and wrestle with it more and talk about it more?*

- Jesus quoted the Old Testament in his struggle in the wilderness with the Devil: “*Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.*” (Matthew 4:4)
- This year, we want this to be become people of One Book. 2021 is the Year of the Bible.
- What’s your earliest memory of the Bible? I remember getting my first Bible as an elementary schooler and sitting in church as a kid, being bored with the sermon, and trying to read through it. Very quickly, I got confused. They told me this was the Word of God: so I had a sense of reverence and awe, but I didn’t know how to understand it. It’s been a great journey ever since, filled with questions and treasures, and it’s changed my life.
- When St. Augustine the 4<sup>th</sup> century church father pondered the mystery of God’s Word, he prayed this prayer: “*O wondrous depth of Thy words!...It is awesome to look into them: an awesomeness of honor and trembling and love!*” Oh, if we could have just a portion of that heart for God’s word! As we read through the Bible this year, may we approach with that same wonder, love, and faith: *O wondrous depth!*
- **4 Things to Consider when you Read the Bible**
  - To prepare for this journey, there is *so much* we could say and do. But, because time is limited, and we have to get started somewhere, here are just 4 quick thoughts to consider as you read the Bible this year, whether it’s your first time reading the whole Bible or you’ve done it often:
    - **1) *The Bible is Inspired.*** “Inspired” means “breathed into”—God breathed-into people, inspired them, to proclaim His message. We don’t prove this by reason alone, rather we trust it by faith, just as we choose to trust (or not trust) the testimony of other people. And you can trust it: the Bible is reliable, accurate, and true. It’s not just myth that someone pulled out of thin air: it comes from real people who witnessed real things that we can situate and study within real history. Most of the New Testament comes directly or indirectly from *eye witness testimony*. These are reliable and authentic words from history, and followers of Jesus believe that they are also inspired Words from God. Therefore, it has the greatest authority in our lives.
    - **2) *The Bible is Complex.*** Don’t expect to always understand it—at least not right away. Instead, expect to be *astonished*—that’s what a mentor of mine says, *come to the Scriptures expecting to be astonished*. In our fast-paced, digital-information-age, social-media saturated culture, the Bible is something really different. I like to say the Bible is not like a Pop Song, it’s more like a Symphony. It’s complex. It’s rich. It’s nuanced. It’s not something you take in with one sitting, knowing everything: it’s something you come back to again and again, always seeing something *new*. Dynamic, living and active. Don’t rush. Journey with God’s Word through a lifetime. Let God speak to you anew in each season. When you encounter challenges, focus on the places you understand and let the deeper questions become clearer over time.
    - **3) *The Bible is Dangerous.*** Yes, I’m being intentionally provocative. I mean it in two ways: It’s dangerous to our comfortable, status-quo, self-centered lives. If you let it, it will sweep you into an adventure you never imagined. It will turn your life upside down, it will change you. It’s the Word of God! But, it’s also dangerous in the wrongs hands, used in the wrong ways. When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, the Devil twisted Scripture out of context to provoke him to evil. Throughout history, the Bible has been used to do evil in the name of Good. If we’re not careful, we can twist the Bible to mean whatever we want it to mean and bring harm to ourselves and others. We need to be careful with this precious gift. Remember, like Hebrews says, *the Word of God is a double-edged sword*. So, handle it with care—and ask for help!
    - **4) *The Bible is One Big Story Centered on Christ.*** The whole Bible, from start to finish, points to Jesus. In Luke’s Gospel, when Jesus appears to a few disciples on the road to Emmaus, it says that he explained to them: “...beginning with Moses and all the Prophets...what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.” (Luke 24:27) When you accept this, you can read all of the Bible through the lens of Christ. This often helps bring perspective to the more challenging parts of the Story, viewing the parts in light of the whole. And the Bible is many parts that form one Big Story—the *Greatest Story*. The Bible isn’t simply a rule book that tells us everything we’re supposed to do, and it isn’t just an answer book for every conceivable question we can come up with. The Bible is the True Story of God that points to we need most: Jesus.

- **The Greatest Story in 5 Acts**

- That's why I find it extremely helpful to think of the Bible as an Epic Drama or a Play with multiple Acts. There's a lot of ways you can break it down, but the simplest way, I think, is in 5 Acts. Think of the Bible as God's True Story in 5 parts:
- It starts with **Act I: Creation**. God, the eternal, transcendent, Holy One, created all things out of His overflowing, joyous goodness. God created all things *good* and blessed creation. But some of the beings He created were given *free will* so they could choose to freely love Him—because real love is not possible without real freedom. And in that freedom, some turned away, and evil was introduced into the goodness of this Story.
- That brings us very quickly to **Act II: The Fall**. The people God made in God's image used their freedom to turn away. Sin entered the world because of deception, pride, and fear. And this choice to reach for life apart from God brought death: spiritual death, physical death, and all kinds of brokenness and suffering that rippled through history like a shockwave, like a virus. Most of the Bible, and the part of the story we're now living in, takes place *out of Eden*. We're living *out of Eden*—things are not as they should be, we experience evil and trials.
- But that's not the end of the story! **Act III: The Promise**. God could have left us there, God could have scrapped the whole thing. But His mysterious plan from the beginning was to redeem all creation in Christ. And so, God made a promise to an unlikely person, a people. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the family of Israel, became God's special, covenant people. They were chosen *out of the world* for the sake *of the world*. They were blessed to be a blessing. And through them, one day, the greatest blessing would come: the Messiah, the King of kings. But, as you, they often failed in their special purpose. From the Exodus of Egypt, to the wandering in the wilderness, to the Promised Land, to the era of the Kings, to the Exile, they struggled to fully keep God's covenant. God never broke His Covenant, but they continued to wait for the promised King. The Old Testament ends with the prophet Malachi proclaiming one who would come to prepare for the Day of the Lord, then, there were 400 years of silence, of waiting.
- **Act IV: Redemption**, began in a quiet way, in a small forgotten place of the Roman Empire when no one was really paying attention. Jesus was born to a poor girl and her husband. Immanuel, God-with-us, entered His own story to do for us what we could not do for ourselves: to save us. To fulfill all of His promises to His chosen people so that they could truly be a blessing to all nations. Jesus came and showed us the way of the Kingdom. He lived, died, and rose again to bring redemption to a fallen world, to open the way of salvation to all people who would receive it. Sin and death do not have the final word; they've been defeated at the Cross.
- **Act V: Restoration**, hasn't been fully completed yet. We're still living into it. Jesus ascended to Heaven where He reigns, and from which He'll return at the end to make all things New. The Holy Spirit came and the Church was born. We're the New Covenant people of God who have inherited the promises of Israel which Jesus fulfilled. We live by the power of the Spirit to point the world towards God's Kingdom of Restoration. By His power, we live lives of holiness, of transformation, in a world still full of darkness. We point to a New Day that is coming. Until then, we seek the Kingdom, we love extravagantly with Christ's love, and we wait for His return. When that Day comes, it will not be the end, but the Beginning of the Real Story.
- This is the Gospel. This is the True Story the Scripture gives us, from Genesis to Revelation. And the beautiful thing is, by God's invitation, we get to be *a part of His Story*. So, we read the Bible to know and fulfill our part in God's Great Story.

- **In the Beginning...**

- So let's finish but going back to the beginning: remember in Genesis 1 how we are talking about "tohu vavohu"?
  - It says that when God created everything in the beginning, "the earth was formless and void," *tohu vavohu*. It's this image of primordial chaos, of darkness shrouding vast, violent seas. It's strange to think that this is how God's creation would begin. Did God *make* the chaos? That doesn't seem to fit. Maybe, what seems like chaos to us is just a part of the way God brings about His creation to the place where it can foster life. Or, maybe, already at this part of the

story, the powers that God had created good but rebelled and became evil—that Serpent that was somehow in the garden already—maybe they already opposed God’s good creation? We don’t know for sure. But for some reason, here at the beginning, the earth is “formless and void” and “darkness covers the face of the deep.”

- The Spirit of God is hovering over the waters—like a mother bird, hovering over her young to protect and provide. God’s first work of creation is to bring order and life in this churning chaos and to bring light out of the darkness.
- And the amazing this is, that’s what God continues to do through the story: God brings order in the chaos of life and God brings light in the darkness. He does this in huge, cosmic ways and He does this in small ways in our personal lives. He does this for me and for you. The God of the Bible is perfectly good and all powerful. He is above the chaos and greater than the darkness and He comes to make us New.
- Maybe you’ve felt what it feels like to be “tohu vavohu,” maybe your life has felt or even now feels “formless and void.” Maybe you feel like you’ve just been living on the brink of chaos and darkness. The Good News is that the God who made all things is an expert at bringing goodness out of the chaos, and bringing Light in the darkness. And this whole Story will tell you all about how He does that and how He offers that newness of life to you.
- Let’s keep reading! Amen.