



THE STORY



Date: April 7 - 8, 2018
Speaker: Paul McIlwraith – Teaching Pastor
Scripture: *The Story* – Jesus – The Birth of a King

I honestly hadn't heard about "This is Us" until the week heading up to the Super Bowl this past February. While I was focused on whether the New England Patriots could win another NFL Championship, I was hearing this buzz, specifically from some of the ladies around North Park about being more excited for a much anticipated show that was to follow the Super Bowl this year.

"This is Us" and the episode that was to answer the question that this show's fans had been asking since season 1, "How Did Jack Die?" Did anyone watch this post Super Bowl episode of "This is Us?" You along with almost 30 million other teary eyed viewers.

"This is Us" premiered on NBC in September of 2016. The series follows the lives of siblings Kevin, Kate, and Randall and their parents Jack and Rebecca Pearson. The show has an intriguing format as it takes place in the present with the children all in their thirties and living their own lives but it also flashes back often to various times in the past when Jack and Rebecca were raising them as young children and they were a family of five.

As I said, I had never heard of the show until February and hadn't watched a single episode until three weeks ago. Carolyn and I had an evening free and I asked her if she wanted to watch a new show I had heard about. She was in and we were hooked. Over the next three nights, we binged watched the entire first season on Netflix. We were emotional wrecks. It is well done but also often pulls at the heart strings. At any given moment you can be taken from joy to sorrow to grief to laughter. So it may not be the best for binge watching, you may need a little time in between to decompress.

Honestly, I feel like I am taking you on a bit of a "This is Us" rollercoaster ride with our topic for today. As you know, just ten days ago in this auditorium, we had a very sombre and poignant Good Friday service when we gathered to remember the death of our Saviour Jesus on the cross. We read scripture, sang songs and participated in communion all to praise and worship of the one who gave his life for us.

Just three days later, on Easter Sunday, we gathered again, right here, but this time the mood was completely different. It was celebratory and upbeat as we reflected on the resurrection of Jesus. That death could not contain him and his new life means our new life, when we put our hope in him. It was a good weekend, a very good weekend, but by Monday this past week, I was a little tired, physically and emotionally. Anyone feel that way after a busy weekend? So, we could all use a relatively uneventful sermon this week, right?

A main point, a couple of sub points, a good conclusion and then wrap'er all up, Paul. That will do for this weekend, agreed? Unfortunately, I can't do that, because this week, we jump back into our series on *The Story* that we put on pause for three weeks during Easter.

Our topic for today is the birth of a baby, a new born and there is little else that generates as much emotion as the birth of a baby, would you agree?

If you are just joining us, we are in week 22 of a massive 31-week message series we started last September and it will take us all the way to June. (with two short breaks for Christmas and Easter). We are studying, *The Story*. God's plan and purpose for humanity, and the world.

And we are using as our resource, the book called, *The Story*, which is really just scripture, Genesis

right through to Revelation is contained in this book. I know I repeat that almost every week but here is why. I received a note from a woman a few weeks ago, she said to me, *Paul I am glad you are preaching about Jesus, I just wish you were using the NIV Bible, not The Story.*

The Story, is the NIV Bible, word for word, the only difference is that it has been arranged in chronological order, which actually makes it easier to follow and understand. It sets out God's story, what we have been calling the "*Upper Story*" and then our place in it, referred to as the "*Lower Story*".

Since we have been away from it for a few weeks, let me give you a brief snap shot of what is happened over the first 21 chapters. It is important for us to know the context of what is going on to be able to jump back into the text today at Chapter 22.

In Genesis the first book of the bible, we have the creative work of God. He made the heavens and the earth, animals and then, his masterpiece, he made us, humanity. He had a plan and provision for us but almost immediately we have the first sign of what would distinguish humanity's ongoing relationship with our creator, disobedience. Sin enters the world in Genesis 3, but God restores and provides for his people as they turn back to him.

In Genesis 12, God promises a nation of people to his chosen man Abraham and He makes a covenant that He will bless Israel and use them to be a blessing to other nations. The population of Israel begins to grow but there is more disobedience

In Exodus, the second book of the bible, we find the Israelites in slavery to Pharaoh and the Egyptians. They cry out to God for help, he gives them Moses, who rescues them and begins to lead them to the Promised Land. But the people grumble and complain along the journey and their lack of faith leaves them wandering in the desert for 40 years and that generation of Israelites never reaches the Promised Land. In their wandering, God gives them worship guidelines, sacrificial rituals and the Ten Commandments to restore relationship with him when they sin.

Finally, they enter the land God has given them, He provides direction for his people through leaders such as Joshua and David and there are some good

times, but mostly the vicious cycle continues. God's people doing evil in his eyes, worshipping other gods, idolatry and getting themselves into trouble. Then out of desperation turning back to God. He restores them but very soon they go back to their old ways. Until finally, during the time of Solomon, the nation of Israel self-destructs.

It splits and divides into two kingdoms, Israel in the North and Judah in the South. Kings continue to try to lead these two kingdoms but much more often than not, they do evil in the eyes of God, until finally, the kingdom of Israel in the North is over taken by the enemy forces in 722 BC.

The southern Kingdom of Judah holds on a little longer but finally around 586 BC, they succumb to Babylon led by King Nebuchadnezzar who destroys the city of Jerusalem and takes thousands of Israelites into exile in Babylon. In time, Babylon is defeated by the Persians and the exiles are eventually allowed to return home to Jerusalem to restore the temple and the city of God, but old habits die hard. The Israelite people continue in their apathetic ways, until finally, finally God goes silent. For 400 hundred years, the people don't hear from God. But His Story, and our story are not finished.

When the time was just right, God spoke again. The Apostle Paul put it this way in,

Galatians 4:4

But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law,

It is the dawning of the New Testament that reveals Jesus, God's own Son, whose birth, life, death and resurrection changed everything. The promises of the prophets that had been anticipated for centuries came to life through Jesus. Now the people could see God's grace, compassion, unfailing love and plan to redeem and restore his people, personified in the very person, of Jesus.

Jesus, the Messiah who has come to set his people free. Jesus, is God's final word to his people and at the risk of pulling a "This is Us" technique, we are going to do a flashback, today. We are going to move from Easter, Jesus' death and resurrection that we talked about last week and we are going to flashback to Christmas, Jesus' birth this week.

That's right, Christmas in April. But with all the snow the past few days, it kind of set the mood already, didn't it? That is why the worship team sang a Christmas carol. We wanted to get you in the Spirit. At Christmas we celebrate the birth of a King, Jesus and this is how it happened. Long before there was any of the hoopla of the shopping mall Santas, the elves and reindeer, the Christmas lights and stockings, there was just tiny, nondescript Bethlehem. And God did something extraordinary through ordinary people and places to bring his hope to the world. The essence of it is captured in one of the greatest paragraphs in all of the scripture.

John 1:1-3, 14 or Pages 309-310

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

Verse 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.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

The word became flesh through the birth of Jesus. Let me give you some context to these words. Very late in the first century, a wise elderly Jew in a Greek city took up a pen and began to write. Nearly 70 years had passed since he last saw and touched the face of Jesus. This wise old man was the Apostle John. The same John who had walked closely with Jesus when he ministered on earth.

John was now advanced in years, undertook his last divine assignment. It was to record an account of the life of Jesus. We know it today as the Gospel of John in the bible. Oh, his buddy Mark had already done one version, Matthew had written another and Luke had as well, but John's writing would be somewhat unique. He was a Jewish man living in a Greek city with a heart for non-Jewish, Gentile people. His nudge was that the life of Jesus needed to be told again but this time, tailored to a non-Jewish, second generation Christian audience.

As we know, the Christian movement of the 1st Century had been birthed through a predominantly Jewish culture. The leader of the movement, Jesus was a Jew, the founding members, the Disciples were Jews and except for a few brief forays into Gentile territory, Jesus did most of his preaching, healing and teaching in the Jewish countryside. Christianity began among Jews and reflected Jewish thought and culture but then came the move of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost just after Jesus' resurrection.

Acts 2:1-4

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

In this moment, the Apostles of Jesus became equipped to do cross cultural ministry. They could now understand languages that were foreign to them before and as a result, the movement of Jesus, Christianity crossed the borders of Jerusalem and began to spread like wildfire throughout the land, into other nations and cultures.

Within 30 years of Jesus' death and resurrection, non-Jewish Christians vastly outnumbered those with a Jewish background. The Apostle John, a Jew, was a missionary to the non-Jewish people. He found himself in the Greek city of Ephesus. As he began sharing the story of Jesus and pastoring the church at Ephesus, he discovered that what mattered to the Jewish people didn't always translate well to the Greeks.

Has that ever happened to you? Something just didn't translate well for you? As I was working on this message in my office this week, I got a call on my cell phone. Against my better judgement, I answered it. It was from my bank. Now, just a bit of a confession and I am not necessarily proud of this. I know where my bank is and I know how to take money out of our account but everything else, I am virtually clueless.

I don't know how to pay bills on line, I don't know how much money we have in the bank, I don't know what mortgage or line of credit we have. Carolyn does all of that, and I am extremely grateful. Once a year, we go and meet with someone in the bank to discuss things. I go to show my support for Carolyn but the fact is, my eyes start glassing over the minute the banker starts to speak. No offense against any bankers out there. It is just not my language. Now I know how some of you feel, having to listen to me each week!

So, a call from the bank when I don't have Carolyn there as my translator, sets me into panic mode. The banker went on some spiel about being in the 45 day period to lock something in, this or that and I assured her that I would pass the message on to Carolyn. That night, as Carolyn and I were walking, I mentioned to her, that the bank had called, something about locking in something. Of course, Carolyn wanted more information of which I had nothing and that is when she said, to me, *Okay, let me explain our banking situation to you in case something ever happens to me.*

That is where we find ourselves at this stage in our lives. We say to each other, *in case something ever happens to me.* So, for the next several moments Carolyn proceeds to explain to me all about our banking information of which today, I remember nothing. Give me a sports or food metaphor, then I would soak it all up. Maybe you can relate to that.

The Greeks of John's day, cared little about the way Matthew started his gospel with the genealogies or Luke's attention to detail or the historicity Mark chose to highlight in his gospel. None of that mattered to them. John needed to start somewhere else in his writings about Jesus in order to grab the attention of his audience. How could he present the Christian story so that those who were non-Jews could engage with God? Even in our world today, we are still faced with this dilemma.

Like the Apostle John, we too need to be aware of our culture around us as we are proclaiming the Good News of Jesus to the world.

I had a chance to sit in on a discussion this week with Pastor Oscar Muriu. Pastor Oscar was a guest of North Park all last week. Perhaps you had a chance to hear him speak. He and his wife pastor a

large church in Nairobi, Kenya that has to date, planted over 170 other churches around the world.

In one fascinating observation, he compared the African culture which is very shame based with the North American culture which is very guilt based. He explained that a shame based culture is usually one where community is an important value whereas a guilt based culture tends to be very individualistic. So, that when you teach biblical concepts like,

Romans 3:23

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

When we tell people, they are sinners, for a North American from a guilt based, individualist culture, to be called a sinner we interpret that to mean, *I did a bad thing.* But an African from a shame based, community minded culture, if they hear, "I am a sinner", it translates to them, *I am a bad person,* because their actions gets filtered through how they perceive themselves in their community. To them, to be a sinner means to be a bad person in the eyes of your community, so they must also be a bad person in the eyes of God. So, you can imagine when a white North American missionary arrives in Africa and goes around spreading the message, *you're a sinner, you're a sinner. Repent.* It could cause more damage than good. Something would be lost in translation.

This is why there are a plethora of books on how to understand the bible in different cultures so that the context of the words and passages can best understood.

For John, a missionary in a foreign culture, God gave him an answer on how he could catch the attention of the Greeks as he began to write his gospel. He gave John, the word, *word.* While Matthew and Luke listed ancestry and genealogy to engage their mostly Jewish audience and Mark discussed history, John began his gospel with this profound phrase,

In the beginning was the Word... The "Word" in the Greek is translated Logos which means, *word* or *speech* or *thought.* In Greek philosophy, Logos also refers to that which is *universal, divine reason or the mind of God.*

What John is stating at the beginning of his gospel is that Jesus is the word, he is logos. He is reason, he is eternal, he is God.

In the beginning was the Word, Logos. It's Jesus. He was, from the beginning of time. This was a way for John to connect with the readers of his day and to introduce Jesus to them as God. The Greek, non-Jewish audience of this day would have picked up on it. They would have leaned in after hearing the opening line and said, "tell us more, John, you're speaking our language." And John does something else with this opening paragraph of his gospel, did you catch it?

In the beginning.... Where have you heard this phrase? The opening of the gospel of John bears a striking resemblance to the opening of the bible. Do you remember it? All the way back in the first book of the bible, Genesis that we talked in September when we kicked off this series on *The Story*. The bible's opening line is;

Genesis 1:1
In the beginning.....

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

Now look at the gospel of John,

John 1:1
In the beginning...

It is harkening back to Genesis. To the very beginning. It is beckoning the reader to remember how *The Story* all began.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

What John is emphasizing in the opening of his gospel are similar to the things that are emphasized in Genesis:

In the beginning was the Word- Jesus is eternal, he has been since the beginning.

and the Word was with God- Jesus was with God before even coming to earth.

and the Word was God- Jesus is God

Through him all things were made- Jesus is creator
without him nothing was made- Jesus is the giver of life.

Does all of that make sense? For the Greeks, it would have been a bridge to understanding who Jesus is and who he has been since the beginning. And most importantly, it was a hook for them to continue to learn and understand more about this Jesus. John is speaking their language. The passage goes on to mention some of the great attributes of Jesus; he is life, he is light, and then John comes to this great Christmas declaration just a few verses later.

Do you remember how Luke announced Jesus' birth in his gospel? Through a voice of an angel to some shepherds, it says in

Luke 2:10-12
"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

What a wonderful picture of the birth of Jesus. We have all seen it presented in Sunday School Christmas pageants over the years, but John's declaration about Jesus' birth is just as powerful in his gospel account,

John 1:14
The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. (isn't that powerful?!) It goes on... We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

This is Good News of good joy! A Saviour has been born. The Logos, the word has come to be with us. The word, Jesus became flesh and lived among us. It is the incarnation. It's the coming of God in the flesh to live among his creation. God is with us.

Just think about that for a moment. Why is that so important? God is with us?

My oldest daughter will be 27 in a few months. I find myself a little nostalgic these days. I remember her first day of school, 22 years ago. Leah, in her new outfit and shining backpack, we all walked her down the street. Carolyn pushing the stroller with our infant twins. Me, pulling the wagon with my three-year-old son, our two dogs and the cat. Everybody was along for this significant milestone.

Leah was a little nervous but when the time came for her to let go of my hand and take her place in the line, she was ready. We weren't. As the bell rang and she made her way into the school. I remember thinking, I wish I could just be with her. Parents do you ever feel like that with your children. Not to be some sort of helicopter parent. Not to get in the way, but if she needs anything, I would be there for her. To comfort her or help her or just be there and tell her not to be afraid, it would all be okay. As a father who loves my child, I just would want her to know that I was there, no matter what.

What is the big deal about Jesus coming to earth? What is so significant about, *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us*. When God entered our world, he wrapped himself in human form. He didn't become a star in some distant place. He didn't come as a bug on the wall. He actually walked the face of the earth. He moved into the neighbourhood. He was so human, we could touch him. He was so mighty, he could heal with a word. He was so available, we could call out to him. He was so powerful, he could walk on water. He was so normal in appearance that he could blend into society for 30 years and go unnoticed in a little town called Nazareth and yet he was so historical that he changed the world in such a profound way that here we are, still talking about him 2000 years later.

The most amazing event in human history was the moment that the word, the logos, the reason, the mind of God became flesh and he chose to dwell among us; around us; next to us and in us; so that we would know, that he knows exactly how we feel.

The Word became flesh. Why?

Jesus was born into poverty and spent his first night in an animal feeding trough. Why did he come to

the earth, poor? Do you think maybe it was because he knew some of his children would be poor?

In the slums of Calcutta or the streets of London, Ontario. Did Jesus' own poverty send a message, God is with you? I know how you feel.

Have you ever wondered why God chose Mary, an unwed, teenager to bear this child. The mother "to be" of God was the subject of rumours, gossip and innuendo. Do you think it was because God was sending a message; if someone turns on you, bullies you, slanders you, gossips about you, when it seems like everyone else is against you. God is still with you? He knows how you feel.

Wherever you are today, can you hear these words, *God is with you*. Whether you are going through times of struggle with a job loss, a relationship strain, a health problem, an uncertain future, a sketchy past or you just sit in these seats today and feel so all alone. God is with you. Do you believe that?

That is the promise that comes from this proclamation, *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us*. God is with us no matter what. He is there for you. Will you turn to him? Surrender your pain, hurt, anxiety, worry and loneliness to him? He knows what it is like. He made his dwelling amongst us. He is there for you. The world changed on that day that the word became flesh and made his dwelling among us and the world continues to change when the word becomes flesh in us. The first incarnation happened in a stable in Bethlehem but the second incarnation comes through the church, through those of us who declare that we follow Jesus.

As Christians, scripture tells us that the Holy Spirit lives in us and every time we are spirit led to do something that Jesus would do, the word becomes flesh through us. Do you understand that? When you speak a kind word of encouragement to someone, the word becomes flesh. This week, I had someone write me such a kind and thoughtful note. Thank you for allowing the word to become flesh through you because it was life giving to me.

When you take a stand against bullying in your school, the word becomes flesh in you. When you forgive someone that is hard to forgive, the word becomes flesh. Every time you refuse to pass

judgement on someone before you know all the facts, the word becomes flesh. Every time you serve the poor or demonstrate an act of kindness to a stranger, the word becomes flesh in you. We are a part of the incarnation.

Galatians 2:20

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.

Because of Easter, my old way of life, is gone and because of Christmas, the living Christ dwells in me to take out into the world. Isn't that amazing? In the Spirit of Celebrating Christmas in April. Let me end with a Christmas Story.

For over 25 years, North Park Church has been hosting a Christmas Dinner for Lord Elgin Public School. A school located in one of the more economically challenged neighbourhoods of London, but through David Cottrill and the LRC we have established a great connection with them over the years. Each December, dozens of you volunteer your time, money and energy so that we can welcome every student and teacher from this school into our gym for a full Christmas meal with all the trimmings. We have a short program with music and games and there is even a visit from Santa with gifts for everyone.

Oh, and Jesus is there too. Jesus shows up in a powerful way every year, through you. Many of you who volunteer to serve, love on these children in such a generous way that the *Word is made flesh* through you and these children's lives are touched. Many of them come from difficult family situations but they see Jesus through you.

Each January, we receive thank you notes from the students and do you know the theme of a lot of those notes? Many of the students mention how many years they have been attending the Christmas Dinner at North Park. This is my 4th year, this is my 7th year and then they state how much they look forward to it every year. One card read,

This is my 4th year going to the Turkey Dinner. I look forward to it every year. My favourite part is seeing people that I know.

This is us. Can I steal that title from the TV show? *My favourite part is seeing people that I know.* This is us!

Never underestimate the impact your life can have on another when it is empowered by the word, Jesus made flesh in you. This is Us.

When our lower story is woven into God's upper story the results are extraordinary. It begins with that Christmas proclamation,

John 1:1-3, 14 or page 309-310

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

Verse 14

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

Those of us who profess to be Christians, have this Word, in us through his spirit. The mission of our lives is to then take Jesus in our flesh, out into the world. To whatever culture or situation God calls us and live as Jesus calls us to live. To demonstrate his love, hope, joy and peace-the Advent themes of Christmas-to all of those we encounter each day. This has been our flashback to Christmas.

Amen? Amen. Let's Pray

Points to Ponder

THE STORY - Jesus

The Birth of a King

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Have you ever traveled to a different culture and experienced a potentially embarrassing situation because you were unaware of a cultural nuance? Share your experience with your group.
2. Have you ever been in a situation when something about Jesus or his teachings was “lost in translation” with you or someone around you? Share the circumstance and what led to the confusion.
3. In John 1:1-3, John reveals some important qualities about Jesus. How does this passage help clarify the relationship between God and Jesus? Why is this important?
4. In John 1:14, John writes, *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.* Can you think of examples of when you have “seen” Jesus and his glory around you in your day to day life? How has he made his dwelling among you?
5. For bonus points, as a group, look at John 3:16, *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* Brainstorm how you could reword this verse so that it could be best understood by a non-Christian living in London, Ontario today. Feel free to email Paul your best attempts at paul.mcilwraith@northpark.ca.

Prayer and Action Item

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Pray specifically for ways that you can best model and speak about Jesus in the increasingly diverse culture of London and surrounding area.