START WITH TITLE SLIDE

*If you haven’t already worked it out, our main service today looks very different.*

*Essentially what we are going to do today is the overarching narrative (or story) of the Bible.*

*We’re not picking a theological theme. We’re telling a story.*

*Lots of people know Bible stories, but they don’t know how they fit together.*

*People know about Noah, but they don’t know how Noah fits with Jesus.*

*For some, that’s fine, but some of us are big picture people* **🞕** *and it helps to have a coat rack to hang things in order. (If every story is a coat that belongs on a hanger, you want to be able to hang them in order).*

*Hopefully, you’ve had a moment or two to have a go, but don’t worry if you haven’t. Either way, start on a clean timeline and, if you want to, add in the names as we go along – there is no compulsion to do so, of course.*

*We need to start by praying for ourselves –*

*because this is God’s story. We need to have ears, not just to gather information, but to hear what the Lord has to say to us. So let’s commit the next 60 minutes to the Lord.*

*Thank you for Bible.*

*You knew we’d forget who you were, what you’d done,*

*so you had it written down.*

*Please be with us as we hear your story today.*

ALRIGHT… HERE WE GO –

**🞕** The Bible tells us that in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

He separated the water from the land, he created the birds and the animals and it was very good.

It also tells us that God created humanity. He created everything in pairs. If you read Genesis, everything was in pairs. He created human beings in his image in a pair. I’m trusting that most of you would be able to put 🡺**ADAM &** **EVE** in the right place!

If you read the Old Testament in Hebrew, which I know you all can do(!), (I can’t) – you’ll recognise that the first few chapters of Genesis are written as a poem. So some of the dilemmas that we get ourselves into, like... “Oooh, God created the world in seven days, or not”, I just want to throw out, Genesis is a poem. Think that one through.

The poem says, God created humanity, male and female. He also did it in a very different way from all the other ancient myths about how the world came about. Every ancient culture had its own ideas about where we came from. The most famous remaining one we have is called “The Epic of Gilgamesh” and it’s a Babylonian myth and it says that the gods created the earth and humanity by warring with each other and killing each other and bringing human beings out of the carnage and the bloodshed.

The *Hebrew* Bible says that God ***spoke*** and his word created and it was good. It was very good. However, that poem at the start of Genesis tells us that almost immediately, the human beings rebelled against God. The ***one thing*** he told them not to do, they did. And so, within 2 chapters of the beginning of God’s story, those made in God’s image, to steward the earth, to look after it on God’s behalf, have disobeyed him, have rebelled. We call it the ***fall*** story, eating the apple... although it was probably an apricot (there aren’t too many apples in the Middle East).

However, immediately, in Genesis 3:15 (3:16s are usually good verses, but here it’s 3:15), we get God’s first promise. And the first promise God made immediately after human beings disobeyed him was that he would send someone to sort the mess out. He says to the serpent, “she will have a child and he will strike your head and you will strike his heel” – you will ***not*** have control here Satan. So right at the beginning, as soon as we’d blown it, God had a rescue plan that he put into action.

The next name that you’ve got on your list, that fits into this time period is 🡺**NOAH**, because what the first chapters of Genesis tell us is that, from Adam and Eve onwards, it got worse. Their sons – one of them killed the other... and humanity just spirals downwards and downwards and downwards...

and by Chapter 10, God is saying “I wish I hadn’t bothered”. The Bible says that there was nothing in their hearts except evil continually. Humanity wasn’t a little bit good and a little bit bad. Humanity was so despicable in the way people behaved to each other that God said “This can’t go on”.

And so he said, “The waters that I parted, the waters above and the waters below, I’m going to bring them back together... because this can’t go on, because all they do is evil to each other”.

However, Genesis says “BUT...”

Almost every ancient culture has a flood narrative in its mythology. Almost every group on earth believe that there was a great flood once upon a time. The difference between the Hebrew narrative and everyone else’s is that BUT. BUT Noah.

There was ONE righteous man and there was one man whose heart was not continually evil. And God said “we’re going to start again – we’re going to start with the one man who can be trusted”. And so he tells Noah to build a big boat, in the middle of a desert, in a drought, hundreds of miles from the sea.

And you’ve got to love Noah, because he DOES IT! He builds the boat. And Noah and his sons, 🡺**SHEM, HAM AND JAPHETH,** get on the boat with their wives.

And Genesis that God brought back together the waters above and below and that evil was washed away.

God then starts humanity again from Shem, Ham and Japheth. Genesis has a thing it calls the table of nations, that tells you who came from who.

But the other book that may be a surprise to you that fits in the beginnings, of God starting again, is the book of 🡺**JOB**. The book of Job is the oldest book in the Bible. It’s not even a Hebrew book. Scholars think that Moses nicked it (and adapted it) from the Midianites because it was such a great story. And the reason that we know Job is so old is because of the description of the culture that he lived amongst, which is very similar to the person who comes at the beginning of the next time period. The book of Job is a wrestle with “why do bad things happen to good people?”. None of us ever ask that question, do we?! But right at the start of humanity, people were already asking God that question.

And the book of Job doesn’t answer it. God just says to Job “I’m big, I’m good and I know what I’m doing”

And Job says “Ok Lord”.

So, in the beginning, God creates humanity, it screws up, God puts a plan in place to save it. **🞕** And then, he calls another man. This man is an Iraqi, from the centre of world excellence at the time, from Chaldea, Ur. And he says to this guy, 🡺**ABRAHAM**, “leave your people and follow me”... and, bless him, Abraham does! Abraham, with his wife, 🡺**SARAH**, and his nephew 🡺**LOT**, wander off into the desert with God. And God says to Abraham, “I’m going to make you a promise. Because you’ve been faithful to me, because you’ve obeyed me, because you’ve taken risks for me, I am going to make you the father of a mighty nation. Your descendants will be more numerous than the grains of sand on the sea shore”.

Now in the ancient world, they weren’t quite sure what happened when you died, so having lots of descendants really mattered, because then you knew that your name wouldn’t be forgotten.

So NOT having children is a really big deal. And God making this promise to Abraham is a really big thing. So Abraham says “Great! Thanks God. Slight problem – I’m really old, so is my wife, and she’s barren”.

But God says “No, I AM going to do it”. And it says that Abraham believed God and it was credited to him righteousness. Well, that’s all well and good, but God took quite a while in the baby arriving, REALLY long time, like decades. At which point Sarah thought “God needs a bit of help with this promise” and she came up with a cunning plan. Her cunning plan was to give her maidservant to her husband to have a baby with! We go “Eeeurgh!”. But in the ancient world, 🡺**HAGAR**, an Egyptian slave, is the property of her mistress Sarah – she belongs to her, she owns her. So any child that Hagar has, Sarah also owns. So this is like the ultimate forced surrogate. Sarah says “these children we’ve been promised, we’re going to get through Hagar”.

And Abraham, mighty man of God that he is, says “yeah, alright!!!”

And so Abraham sleeps with (presumably the young) Egyptian maidservant and does indeed conceive a child. That child is called 🡺**ISHMAEL**. God says to Abraham “No, that was NOT the plan – the plan was that you were going to have a child with Sarah”

Sarah laughs – “yeah right”, but God says “No, it IS going to happen”

and eventually it does. Sarah has a little boy, called 🡺**ISAAC.**

And you would think this would be one big happy family now... but no, Sarah now feels threatened by her maidservant Hagar and her son Ishmael, so she says to her loving, Godly husband, “Get rid of them – they are a threat to the inheritance of our son”.

So, Abraham, mighty man of God, takes his concubine and her son and dumps them in the desert to die.

The Bible tells us that God heard Hagar crying, in the desert dying and watching her child die of dehydration, and he promised Hagar, “I will save you and your son. And through him, I will make a mighty nation. He’s not the one I’ve chosen, but I’m going to make him a mighty nation – his name will not be forgotten either. I am not going to let you be treated like this”.

And Ishmael DID become the father of many nations – he’s the father of what we call the Arab nations. And they are cousins to the descendants of Isaac, who we call the Jewish nation.

Those of you that pay attention to the news in any way, shape or form will see that tensions between the Jewish and Arab nations have never gone away. In the beginning, this is where it started. Always a good thing to help God out... or not as the case may be.

Isaac marries a woman called 🡺**REBEKAH** and Rebekah was barren... bit of a theme there! But the Bible tells us that Isaac prayed for his wife and she eventually gave birth to twins, 🡺**ESAU** and 🡺**JACOB**. And Genesis tells us that Esau was a hairy man and Jacob was a smooth man.

Esau was a man’s man – all wild at heart, into beating his chest and all that manly stuff. He’d have been a rugby lad. He’d liked to go out hunting for meat.

Jacob however, was in touch with his feminine side. He liked to hang around the tent with the girls and, you know, do the cooking.

Esau was his dad’s favourite and Jacob was his mum’s favourite.

And you may know this story, but the short version goes...

As Isaac was getting old and blind, Jacob’s mum decided that he should get the blessing due to the first born, even though he was the second born and, while Esau was out of action, she dressed Jacob up in goat skin and sent him into dad who’s blind, and he steals his brother’s birthright, he steals the inheritance, the blessing.

Esau, when he finds out, not best pleased and threatens to kill Jacob.

So Jacob, mighty man of God that he is... whose name means ‘deceiver’ by the way, runs away.

He runs to his Uncle 🡺**LABAN**, his mother’s brother. And there he meets a really pretty girl near a well.

Ever come across a well in the Bible? It seems they’re often places where you go to chat up girls, not just fetch water!

The pretty girl Jacob meets is called 🡺**RACHEL**, and it’s very sweet – he’s SO enamoured with her that when he asks her father, his Uncle Laban, if he can marry her, Laban says “course you can – this is a great match. Work for me for seven years and you can marry my daughter.”

And Jacbob DID work for seven yrs. And the Bible says he loved her so much that seven years felt like a moment. Which is lovely.

And then they have a wedding... but in the morning, when Jacob wakes up... in his bed... there was 🡺**LEAH**, Rachel’s sister. Now, HOW do you do that? How do you sleep with the wrong sister and not know you’ve done it? I can only think - dark, tent, veils, alcohol.

Nonetheless, Jacob the deceiver finds he’s been deceived and is married to the sister that he’s not in love with. On complaining to his uncle that he’s been deceived, his uncle says “well, if you do another seven years, you can have the other one too”

And because he’s smitten with Rachel, Jacob does it and he ends up with two wives.

**🞕** The Book of Genesis says that Jacob loved Rachel but he did not love Leah.

Fair enough, you might think.

But it also says that because Leah was not loved, God had pity on her and he opened her womb... and she had a baby. And she called the baby 🡺**REUBEN** and said “perhaps my husband will love me now, because I’ve given him a son”.

But he didn’t. He loved Rachel.

Leah conceives and has a second son, who she calls 🡺**SIMEON**. She says “I’ve given him TWO sons – perhaps he’ll love me now”.

But he didn’t. He loved Rachel.

She has a third son, who she called 🡺**LEVI**. And she said “SURELY, he’ll love me now – I’ve given him THREE BOYS!”

But he didn’t. He loved Rachel.

She gives birth to a fourth son, who she called 🡺**JUDAH**, which means “Praise God”.

Rachel on the other hand is NOT having babies. This is bad news – she’s throwing a proper hissy fit about this. So she comes up with a plan to solve her childless state. She gives her maidservant, 🡺**BILHAH**, to her husband to have a baby for her.

Jacob says “fine!” and, sure enough, Bilhah has a baby.

Leah keeps having babies. Rachel doesn’t. Bilhah does.

Leah, not to be outdone says, “well, if you’re having HER maidservant (literally), you’re having mine aswell”

and so, 🡺**ZILPAH**, Leah’s maidservant is also given to Jacob and SHE starts having babies.

Jacob has now got FOUR wives on his hands, 🡺 **TEN SONS AND ONE DAUGHTER**.

Eventually, Rachel DOES have a baby. She calls that baby 🡺**JOSEPH.**

And her comment on giving birth to that child she’s waited decades for? “I want another one!”

She does have another one, eventually, but she dies giving birth to a little baby called 🡺**BENJAMIN**.

And Jacob finds himself with twelve sons.

And the Bible calls them the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel... and twelve is kind of a magic number in the Bible. It means “God’s people”. Wherever you come across 12, it’s code for ‘God’s people’. And THIS is the beginning of God’s people.

Most of you will know, courtesy of Andrew Lloyd Webber, the story of Joseph and his happy family of siblings. Eventually they get fed up with golden boy. He’s the eldest son of daddy’s favourite wife and he’s got a special coat which daddy gave him, so they flog him... by which I mean they sell him into slavery in Egypt.

Joseph rises from slavery to prime minister (as ya do!). At the end of Genesis we read that Joseph was reconciled to his brothers and the whole family moved to Egypt to avoid a famine.

All goes pretty well in Egypt. The Jews are starting to do what God had promised to Abraham... which is breeding like bunnies! They are prolific at reproduction. This is great – it’s a sign of God’s blessing in the Old Testament.

But what happens is there is a coup in Egypt. One set of Pharaohs is overthrown by another set of Pharaohs and the new lot are not happy that these Hebrews, these Jews are breeding so prolifically, because frankly they are a political threat.

And so what they do is to turn God’s people into slaves.

And this is where the book of **🞕EXODUS** kicks in. Because 400 years of slavery and the people start to cry out to the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob to say “HELP US!”.

One of the things that Pharaoh does, in order to stop them breeding quite so prolifically, is he tries to kill the babies. And so they take the new born baby boys and they kill them – they try to slaughter a whole generation of the Hebrews.

And the one mother, who had a particularly beautiful baby – she hides her baby, she manages to keep her baby hidden from the Egyptian soldiers for 3 months, which is pretty good going.

And eventually she comes up with a genius plan to save his life, of putting him in a pitch-lined basket and floating him down a crocodile-infested river Nile. You would get child services in, if someone did that nowadays!

Nonetheless, little baby 🡺**MOSES** is saved by his mother’s ingenuity and by his big sister 🡺**MIRIAM**, who follows the basket down the Nile, sees that Pharaoh’s daughter pulls it from the water. And little baby Moses is raised as a Prince of Egypt. Again, you’ve possibly seen that cartoon.

Moses, living in the land of Egypt, in the lap of luxury, realises that his people are being oppressed as slaves, and one day, he says an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew slave and he loses his rag and he kills the Egyptian taskmaster and buries him in the sand. On realising that when Pharaoh hears about it he’s not going to be best chuffed, Moses follows that good Biblical principle... of legging it!

Out into the desert, he comes across a group of people called the Midianites who he hooks up with and becomes a shepherd. He spends 40 years learning how to herd sheep in the desert – that’s quite a big fall, from Prince of Egypt to shepherd.

However, one day, as he’s with the sheep, he comes across a bush that’s burning, but not burning up. It’s on fire, but it’s not burning up... so Moses goes to have a look. And he meets the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who says “I’m going to send you to Egypt, to set my people free”.

And Moses says “Yes, I’d LOVE to go Lord, what a privilege!”.... well, not quite! Moses basically says “NOT A CHANCE!” and God says “Yes you will”... Moses says “No I wo...” “YES YOU WILL!” - “Ok!”

And so God sends Moses with someone to hold his hand. That someone is his brother 🡺**AARON**, and they go have this showdown with Pharaoh. They say to Pharaoh, “God says, THE God, Yahweh says, “Let my people go” “.

Pharaoh says “No” and he says no repeatedly. So we have this story of a series of plagues sent on Egypt. Now, it CAN seem like God’s up there picking items at random...

“Oooh, the frogs didn’t work, let’s try.... oh, I dunno... boils, haha!”

But actually, if you study Egyptian history, all of those things represent an Egyptian deity. The Egyptians had loads of gods. And these plagues are God’s way of saying “Hey, Egyptians – you know your frog god? Watch who’s bigger! You know the Nile that’s your god? Watch who’s bigger”

And so all of those things, they’re not just about getting Pharaoh to let his people go, but it was about saying to the Egyptians “I AM God – **I** AM God”.

Because the promise that God had made to Abraham was that he would bless his descendants in order for them to be a blessing to the world. Abraham’s descendants were meant to be the first evangelists, they were meant to show the world what God is like.

And so here, God is trying to show the Egyptians “Your gods, they are NO God. I am God, I’m bigger, trust me”

And eventually, there comes a showdown between Yahweh and the one who the Egyptians saw as the top god, Ra. And Pharaoh was believed to be the living embodiment of Ra.

So the final showdown (after Pharaoh had said “no, no, no, no, no”) was between Ra and Yahweh.

And what God does – the final plague – is to do to the Egyptians what they have done to his people. He says to Moses “tell the Hebrews to take a lamb without any scars, a perfect lamb – kill it, daub its blood on the doorposts of your houses, go inside, cook the lamb, eat it and PACK. Do NOT go outside, whatever you do. Because just as the angel of death took your babies, I am going to release the angel of death again and you will only be protected if you are under the blood of the lamb”.

The Jews call this Passover, because death passed over them.

And in the morning, as the firstborn Egyptians lie dead, Pharaoh says “Get out of here. Just GO. Leave”.

**🞕**God’s people pack up and they leave, they walk out into the desert. They don’t get very far before Pharaoh changes his mind and comes after them. And so 🡺**Moses**, with they think up to 2 million people (and no PA system), not all healthy people – the old, the pregnant, the sick, the tiny babies – 2 million people, packed up out in the desert, NO IDEA where they were going...

You can see why Moses didn’t want the job! Would you?!

He’s got his staff and his brother- that’s it. And now, the world’s greatest superpower is closing in behind him. Think of the modern-day equivalent as being chased by a helicopter gunship and tanks!

They get to the place where they have the sea in front of them and Pharaoh behind. He’s got 2 million panicking people around him. You’d pray, wouldn’t you?

And he does. And God answers – he says “Hold out your staff”

So Moses holds out his staff and the sea parts. And the book of Exodus says that God’s people went through, but as the helicopter gunships came (well, ok, the chariots!), as they came, God CLOSES the water. And the world’s greatest army was destroyed.

And God’s people came out to dry land on the other side.

Now this is where “Prince of Egypt” stops. Because God says to Moses “We’ve got 2 million people here, but they know diddly squat. They know nothing about me and we have to sort this out. Come and have a chat”.

So Moses heads up a mountain to have a chat with God about what they’re going to do, because with 2 million people, you need a plan.

Whilst Moses is up the mountain, getting what we now call the law (the Ten Commandments), the people at the bottom start to panic. Because, without Moses, how do we talk to God?! And he’s been gone a few days, so oooo, errr!

So they turn to Aaron and say “Do something!”

And Aaron, WHAT a genius, says “give us your earrings”. REALLY, that’s what he said.

So the people say “Yeah, ok”, give Aaron their gold and then Aaron creates a golden calf and says “here is the god who led you out of Egypt – worship him!”

and they do! But they worship in the way that they know. And the way that they know is Egyptian, because they’ve been living there for hundreds of years. And the way that the Egyptians worship is SLIGHTLY different from what God’s been talking to Moses about up on the mountain. The way the Egyptians worship... is with an orgy!

And so the people of God surround an idol made of their melted down earrings and have an orgy to celebrate their escape from Egypt.

God, up the mountain with Moses, is somewhat ticked off and says “I’m going to wipe them out”.

Moses says “no, don’t do that – what would the Egyptians think? Give them a chance”

So God relents.

Moses comes down the mountain, with the 10 commandments written on two tablets, sees what’s going on and he’s so outraged that he smashes the tablets.

He says “Those who are for the Lord, come to me NOW”

ONE of the twelve tribes responds. The tribe of Levi.

And Moses says to them, “Go through this camp now and if you see anyone worshipping like an Egyptian – KILL ‘EM”.

And the tribe of Levi do. And there is a massacre.

Not easy stuff, is it?

The people repent

and God sets up a covenant with them.

That covenant is basically an unbreakable promise – God gives them a set of laws and he says “If you will ally yourself with me, I will be your God, I will protect you, I will provide for you, I will give you everything you need – here’s the blueprint, here are the terms and conditions”.

And the people say “ok, sign us up”.

The terms and conditions contain things that are in Deuteronomy called the blessings and the curses, and they basically say, ‘If you obey God, if you keep the covenant, you will be protected, you’ll have loads of kids, loads of livestock and life will be good. If you disobey God, he will send enemies who will defeat you until you repent and come back to him. And if you keep doing it, he will keep sending those enemies, because he wants you to learn that the best way is to obey him, because he is good and his laws are good.”

And the people say “alright, you’ll be our God and we will be your people, sign us up”.

God also gets them to create and ark, a box, and this box has what they call the mercy seat – a space between two cherubs. And God says “this space is going to be symbolic of my presence with you. And so, build a big tent and wherever you go, carry this tent with you, carry this ark with you and I will be with you”

This all starting to sound great, isnt’ it?

And God says “right, I promised Abraham some land... let’s go get it”.

So when they reach the edge of the Promised Land, they decide to go and scout it out before they all go piling in - sounds ok, a bit of forward planning for a change! So they send in 12 spies, one from each of the tribes.

The spies come back saying “It’s great – the land is AMAZING! But we can’t possibly take it because it’s full of giants”

and the people go “Ohhh, we can’t fight giants!”

But TWO of the spies, 🡺**JOSHUA** and 🡺**CALEB**, say “Hang on guys, remember the Red Sea, remember the Red Sea?! We can do this! Come on people, let’s go”

The response of these people who’ve just signed up to the covenant? They try to stone Joshua and Caleb.

So God says, “Well, if you won’t trust me, after everything you’ve seen, you won’t get the land, your children will get the land. Because you just WON’T trust me! We’re going for a walk guys, we’re going to walk for 40 years, until this generation has died and then your children will inherit the land”

At that point the people decide they WILL go and fight after all... and they get slaughtered!

God says “Will you ever listen? When I say do it, do it. When I say don’t do it, don’t!”

We then have 40 yrs of God’s people going round and round in circles, following a great big pillar of cloud during the daytime (because you need a great big cloud in the daytime in the desert) and a pillar of fire at night (because what do you need in the desert at night? Heat).

And God provides food in the form of manna, he provides water

and the people are incredibly grateful and appreciative... NOT!

My favourite bit of their grumbling (and there’s a LOT to choose from) is “There were cucumbers in Egypt and watermelons and this is rubbish, we want to go back”.

For 40 years, God’s people who signed up to the covenant to trust him, wander round and round in circles, whining about watermelons and cucumbers!

**🞕** Eventually, that generation does die out, all of them, even Moses. And God says “It’s time to take the land now. We’ve got a new generation – maybe they can be trusted”.

The people are led to the edge of the Promised Land. And of the previous generation, there are only two men left alive – the two men who said “God can do this”

And so 🡺**Joshua, assisted by Caleb**, leads the people into the Promised Land.

Joshua takes over from Moses and Caleb, the deputy, is brilliant – he’s in his 80s, but he says “give me all the hard places to battle – come on!!! Let’s kick some butt”

They cross into the Promised Land and God says to Joshua – “right, let’s see if this lot will trust me. One of the covenant agreements was that you would circumcise all the baby boys. And this generation have been wandering round the desert for 40yrs without getting circumcised. So boys, circumcision time! All of you, every single man is going to be circumcised now. I know that you’re in enemy land. I know that you’re surrounded by enemies and I know that this means disabling your entire army. Will you do it?”

And bless them, they do! And then for 3 days they sit VERY STILL!

And after 3 days, God says, “Right, let’s take the land” and a series of battles commence.

We’re into the book of Joshua now.

And the people take the land. 🡺**RAHAB**’s name appears on this list – she helps them.

Once they’ve taken the land, God says to his people “Drive out the Canaanites, drive out the people that lived here, because what THEY do is vile and it cannot be allowed to continue.”

And we read the book of Joshua and we say “Ahh, poor Canaanites”, but I need to explain to you that the Canaanites practiced human sacrifices (including little tiny babies).

There were also fertility cults for Canaanite religions. And one of the ways that they celebrated fertility was that when teenage girls reached puberty, they would be taken to the temple and they would be gang-raped by every man in the community as an act of worship.

This is one of the reasons that God kept women out of the temple. So that no-one could ever get confused about how you are to worship Yahweh.

And God said “You DO NOT worship in the way these people worship. That is NOT how you will worship me... and just so you don’t get confused, I want you to drive them out, because this has gone on too long”

And so the Israelites say “Ok then”. And there’s a series of battles as they try to drive out the Canaanites.

But actually, they decide that it wouldn’t be TOO big a deal just to keep a few as slaves. Slaves are good. And so they keep just a little smattering of Canaanites as slaves.

And what happens from thereon in, is pretty much downhill.

Because, over a period of time, Joshua’s generation are great, but after them it starts to descend.

The people find themselves left with a choice.

They can either worship Yahweh with animal sacrifices, as laid down in the covenant

or they can worship him in the Canaanite way, which involves sex with temple prostitutes.

And so the people of God say “how shall we worship him? This way, or this way? This way or this way?.... Well, we’ll do a bit of this... but DEFINITELY do a bit of that!”

So God’s people start to involve themselves in religious practices that God says are an ABOMINATION. Not just a bit naughty. He says they are vile. “You are supposed to be a light to the nations, don’t DO that”.... but they do.

God goes “TERMS AND CONDITIONS PEOPLE, TERMS AND CONDITIONS! Hellooooo!”

and so, what he does is send a group of people called the Philistines, of whom you will have heard, to persecute and attack the Hebrews.

He told them he was going to do it – if you disobey me, this WILL happen.

And so we end up with a time period called the **🞕** “Time of the Judges”.

Because the way it works is this –

The people disobey God by falling into Canaanite practises.

God sends the Philistines to punish them.

They then cry out to God and God sends them someone to save them.

Those people are called JUDGES. They are a mixture of a political leader, military leader and religious leader.

🡺**OTHNIEL** is the first of the judges.

He comes in, drives out the out the Philistines, everyone’s happy... until the judge dies.

Once the judge dies, the people say (sing song) “Which way shall we worship? This way, or this way... THIS way looks good!”

 God sends in the Philistines again. The Philistines kick their butts.

The people cry out to God again, God sends a judge, who drives out the Philistines. Everything’s fine until the judge dies....

And you get this thing called the CYCLE OF THE JUDGES – it goes round and around and around.

After Othniel comes 🡺**EHUD**. A fab story! Ehud plunges his sword into a king’s belly and the king is so fat that the sword gets stuck inside! A GREAT Sunday school story!

🡺**DEBORAH** – another judge – a bit of girl power.

🡺**BARAK –** bit of a scaredy cat, but comes good in the end.

🡺**JAEL** – while a soldier is asleep in her tent, she nails a tent peg through his skull to kill him. This is guts and glory time.

🡺**GIDEON** - needed a lot of persuading and proof.

But the thing with the judges is that the nation deteriorates – it slowly spirals down and down and down and down.

And in the end, the best that God can come up with is 🡺**SAMSON**, who quite frankly should have spent less time chasing after girls – that was his downfall.

The low point of God’s people is at the end of the book of Judges. A woman is raped to death and her husband cuts up her body into twelve pieces, posting one piece to each of the tribes of Israel to call them to battle. Light to the world? Show them how good God is? Show them what justice looks like? Show them what it’s like to be God’s people?! Posting body parts out – it’s despicable, it’s disgusting.

However, there is also good news.

Because alongside the book of Judges, there’s a little tiny story of little tiny people who cling onto the covenant with God.

It’s the story of 🡺**RUTH**, 🡺**NAOMI** and one of the good guys, 🡺**BOAZ.** The book of Ruth is like a little candle, flickering in the dark time of the Judges.

**🞕** The last of the judges is a guy called 🡺**SAMUEL**. And the people come to Samuel and say “We don’t want you to lead us, we don’t want God to lead us. We want a king. Everyone else has got a king, we want one too.”

And Samuel says “I don’t think you do. Kings are rubbish, they’ll exploit you and rip you off”.

And the people say “No, we want a king. Everyone else has got a king – give us a king”

And God says to Samuel, “Alright, give them a king – if they want a king, give ‘em a king”

And so, they get a king – King 🡺**SAUL**. Looks the business – tall, good looking, looks like a man of God. Unfortunately, he’s not – he’s a chump!

God eventually removes the crown from Saul and gives it to a little shepherd boy, a man after God’s own heart. A kid called 🡺**DAVID**. The youngest of the smallest tribe – a complete nobody. But he loves God and will keep the covenant.

Some of these characters you’ll know well. You’ll know the story of David and 🡺**GOLIATH**.

David himself is not squeaky clean. He sleeps with one of his closest friends’ wives, 🡺**BATHSHEBA**. She gets pregnant and David tries to sweep it all under the carpet, but eventually has the husband murdered. A man after God’s own heart!

🡺**NATHAN** is the prophet that God sends to say “You can’t do that – I dont’ CARE if you’re in charge. My leaders do not slaughter their people, understand?”

To his credit, David falls flat on his face, repents and says “yes, I understand Lord”

🡺**JOAB**’s an interesting one. He’s King David’s Mr Fixit... except that he doesn’t always obey orders and sometimes goes a step too far. Is he a goody, is he a baddy? It’s hard to tell.

David does what God says you shouldn’t do and he accumulates a shedload of wives. Sorry ladies, this is NOT a girlpower bit of the Bible. David’s wives have lots of children.

Eventually, one of the children born is 🡺**SOLOMON.**

Because David is a man after God’s own heart, God has promised him that one of his descendants will reign forever, which is the biggest honour God could dish out.

And David says, “I’d really like to build you a temple – your ark is still in this tent. Can we stick a temple up?”

God says “No, YOU can’t. You’re a man of blood. But your son will be a man of peace and HE can.”

And Solomon, when he’s king, does that. He builds a temple that is SO huge it’s called the mountain.

And it’s covered with gold. Apparently, you’d have been able to see it from space, it was so big and impressive!

And that’s where the people came to worship God.

However**🞕**, when Solomon dies, the people come to his son, who is a guy called 🡺**REHOBOAM.**

And they say to Rehoboam, “Look, we worked really hard for your Dad – we built him this temple. Can we go and be farmers now?”

And Rehoboam says “Hmmmm, my father whipped you with whips – I shall whip you with scorpions. My little finger is thicker than my father’s loins.”

Yes, the Bible DOES say that and yes it DOES mean what you think it means.

He basically says “If you think my father was tough on you, you ain’t seen nothing”.

And so the people of Israel turn to each other and say “Why would we want this chump to be our king? He’s promising to exploit us!”

And so the 10 northern tribes (remember there were 12 tribes who had split the land between them) – the 10 northern ones literally say “To your tents!” and they pack up their tents and go home. And they say “we are NOT following the line of David any more – all the line of David does is exploit us”

So the nation of Israel RIPS in half.

The ten northern tribes become known as Israel and the two southern tribes become known as Judah. And there is constant civil war from hereon in.

The northern kingdom is initially led by a guy called 🡺**JEREBOAM**, and Jereboam doesn’t want the kingdoms to reuinite, so he says “We’re not going to the temple in Jerusalem any more – we’ll worship on our own turf”.

He then sticks up a couple of golden calves, kicks out the Levites (the priests) and says we’ll worship God our own way thank you, we’re not joining in with them.

What happens gradually, because they are playing by their own rules, is that the kings of the north descend slowly further into anarchy, further and further away from God.

Some of them you may have heard of, 🡺**AHAB** and his lovely wife 🡺**JEZEBEL** for starters, but there are loads more and you can read in Kings and Chronicles all about what nutters they were!

Covenant of God? I don’t think so!

What God does in his incredible mercy, is say “Hello? Terms and conditions? Covenant anyone?”

And he sends a group of people to try to haul Israel back to him, because he want to try to bless them! He sends this group of people that we call the Prophets.

And the prophets say the same thing over and over again, which is why it gets really boring reading them, because they all say the same thing! “Come back to the covenant. Come back to God – he wants to bless you. Please come back. Please?.... God’s getting ticked now, please come back!”

The response of the kings of the northern kingdom to prophets like 🡺**ELIJAH**, 🡺**ELISHA**, 🡺**HOSEA**, 🡺**AMOS** and🡺**OBADIAH**, is to kill them. “We don’t care what God wants – we’re gonna do what WE want.”

And eventually, God says, “that’s enough”. He sends a prophet to the nastiest people on the planet, the Assyrians, who skin their captives alive and impale them on spikes.

And when 🡺**JONAH** eventually goes to the Ninevites and says “Repent of your sins”, they do it.

God’s own people won’t.

And eventually God says “That’s enough. It’s enough now. You’re supposed to be showing the world what I’m like, and all you’re doing is exploiting the poor and abusing those you should be protecting”

And so he sends in the world’s biggest superpower, the Assyrians. The Assyrian army sweeps through and carries the 10 northern tribes into exile. And they are lost. They are GONE.

10 of the 12 tribes are gone – game over.

**🞕** The Southern tribes do a little better. Some of the kings are about to appear on the screen.

🡺**ASA**’s a good one. 🡺**UZZIAH**’s a good one, 🡺**HEZEKIAH**’s a good one. But they gradually go downhill aswell. 🡺**MANASSEH**’s a psycho!

God does the same again – he sends prophets - 🡺 **ISAIAH,** 🡺**JEREMIAH,** 🡺**OBADIAH**

“Please come back to the covenant. I love you. Don’t make me punish you. PLEASE come back”.

But Judah goes the way that Israel did

and eventually God says “That’s enough – this has to stop”.

And so **🞕** he sends in another superpower, who by this time had overthrown the Assyrians.

That superpower is the Babylonians.

And in 586 BC, the Babylonians, led by 🡺**NEBUCHADNEZZAR**, sweep through, trash the temple and take the remaining two tribes of God’s people into exile. Game over.

Light of the world, blessing to the nations. Gone.

The thing that’s doubly difficult for the Hebrews about this is that their worldview said, if there’s a battle on earth, it means there’s a battle going on in the heavens. So if a team wins on earth, it means their god just won. So, for the Babylonians to sweep in and destroy the temple means to them that the god of the Babylonians is stronger than Yahweh.

That is devastating. Their God has just been beaten.

However, there’s a man that’s had a vision.

And in his vision there’s a throne on wheels. And there are wheels within wheels and there are eyes all over the wheels and what he saw in his vision, is the throne rise up from within the temple, hover over the temple... and leave the city. And so 🡺**EZEKIEL** knew that God had not been beaten. God had stepped away. God had said “These people cannot be trusted – I’m outta here.”

God had left the building.

However, he had also promised that although his people would go into exile, he had also promised that it would not be forever... and a tiny little handful of God’s people managed to hang onto him.

🡺**DANIEL** is the most famous of them. Even though his universe had been ripped apart, Daniel still believes that God is big and God is good and he will keep his promises.

And after 70yrs, Daniel prays and says “Lord? Can we go home? Can we go and rebuild the temple?”

You know the Psalm, “By the rivers of Babylon, where we sat down, there we WEPT when we remembered Zion”. Israel’s heart was broken.

Daniel says “You DID say we’d be able to go home... can we?”

And God says “Yeah, you can go home”

**🞕** And so God raises up a King. Actually, the prophet Isaiah, several hundred years beforehand had named this man. God raises up King 🡺**CYRUS**.

And Cyrus says “The worshippers of Yahweh can go home, rebuild the temple of God and I will foot the bill”.

And so they do, led by a guy called 🡺**ZERUBBABEL** – GREAT name!

And Zerubbabel is a descendent of David. The line of David is intact... just.

Zerubbabel takes a tiny group, just a few thousand people and they return to Israel and rebuild the temple.

A scribe called 🡺**EZRA** goes with them and he records that, when they finish the foundations of the temple, a great cry went up. The people shouted “We’re rebuilding the temple of God!”.

And the young men cheered with excitement...

And the old men wept... because they remembered the old temple... and this is a shed in comparison.

Nonetheless, they rebuild. A guy called 🡺**NEHEMIAH** goes to help them rebuild the walls so that they are safe.

God sends some prophets – like 🡺**HAGGAI** and 🡺**ZECHARIAH** to help them keep going. “Come on people, it’s not game over. I know it’s tough, but come on! Let’s try the covenant again.”

The people realign themselves to God and the covenant.

And the last of the prophets, 🡺**MALACHI**, says “Now wait. God knows that you struggled to keep this covenant. He knows your hearts are hard, that you can’t keep the rules. He knows that you can’t be merciful to the poor.... but wait. He’s gonna send someone to sort the mess out.”

The prophets have been saying it all along – “God’s gonna send someone. Someone’s gonna come along to sort the mess out”

But Malachi says “Wait. Stay faithful and wait”

What then happens, according to Jewish records, is that’s what they do! They wait... and wait... and wait. The Jews call it **🞕** “The 400 years of silence”.

There were no prophets, nobody came and spoke, they just waited and waited, wondering who was going to come and sort the mess out for 400yrs.

The only exception to the silence is that many people now believe that the book of Ecclesiastes was written during this 400yr period. But that book isn’t exactly a laugh a minute.

And then **🞕** one day, this weird bloke pitched up out of nowhere, dressed in the freakiest clothes, eating locusts. And he looked just like the prophet Elijah. He looked like one of the old-style hardcore prophets.

And his name was 🡺**JOHN** **THE BAPTIST**. And he said, “Repent. The Kingdom of God is about to break it. The one you have been waiting for is nearly here”

And the people say “Are you him? Are you him? Is it you?!”

And John says “No, it’s not me. I’m not even fit to tie his sandals... but he’s coming”

And one does come. His mother is a peasant girl who has an encounter with an angel and finds herself miraculously pregnant. A little handful of faithful people, a tiny remnant, an old man named 🡺**SIMEON** and a widow called 🡺**ANNA** are in the temple, when 🡺**MARY** and her husband bring the baby in to be dedicated... and they go “*(big intake of breath)* This is him. This is the one”.

Simeon had been promised by God that he would see the Messiah before he died. And this old man’s words are “I’ve seen him now, I can die in peace. God is doing what he said he’d do”

And this little boy, 🡺**JESUS,** grows up into an itinerant preacher, who goes around telling people to repent, who casts out demons, who heals the sick, who talks to the prostitutes, who is hated by the religious leaders – they LOATHE him, because he says “All that law, all that religion – God wants it written on your HEART. He wants your heart to be soft, not just for you to keep a bunch of rules. Because you CAN’T keep the rules. It doesn’t work. We KNOW it doesn’t work. Look! It doesn’t work! Do justly, love mercy, walk humbly with your God. Come back to God! Come on, you’re his people. BE the people he wants you to be”

The response to this prophet, to this voice, to this man, who deals with the poor and the impoverished, who loves them? They do to him what they always did to prophets – they kill him.

The difference being, that according to his disciples, three days later he was back alive again.

And he told his disciples - “The things you’ve seen me do, go do them. The things you’ve heard me teach, go teach ‘em. Be a light to the nations. Go tell the world that I love it. Go tell the world that my Father wants them to come and be blessed, because he loves them. Go and tell ‘em.”

**🞕** And bless those disciples – they DO.

🡺**PETER**, Mr Scaredy Cat, runaway, say stupid things... becomes this amazing preacher... who is murdered for his faith in Jesus.

🡺**JAMES**, Son of THUNDER!... is also murdered for his faith in Jesus.

But 🡺**STEPHEN** was the first one. As he is stoned to death, he sees heaven open and he sees Jesus beside the Father.

🡺**PAUL** – We’re here because of Paul. Paul was the one who went to the Gentiles.

And 🡺**JOHN (THE BELOVED)** – the only one of the disciples who was not martyred for telling the world about Jesus, God’s plan to save the world.

John was put in a prison camp by the Romans, on an island called Patmos.

And on that island, he had a vision. A crazy vision. A trippy vision.

The short version of the vision is...

God wins – Jesus is coming back, as a rider on a white horse whose name is truth and justice.

And anyone who calls on him will be saved.

Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be part of a new heaven and a new earth, where there will be no more pain and no more suffering and no more body parts chopped up, and no more defiance of God. No more tears. A new heaven and a new earth.

John wrote it down and called it the Revelation. It’s pretty trippy.

But the really short version is “What God promised in the beginning, God will do in the end, because God has been faithful the whole way through. God has always been faithful, he has always been just. He has always been slow to anger and abounding in mercy. But he’s still God”

And the reason there’s an arrow at the end of the timeline is that the story goes on.

The canon of Scripture is complete – there’s no more books to go in.

But God’s kingdom is still going.

And I can’t speak for you, but I really hope that the names of the saints are still being written... and I hope that MY name will appear somewhere in a far corner of a timeline somewhere.

Because in EVERY generation, no matter how bad it got, there was always a small handful that would be faithful,

starting with “But Noah”,

going on to Moses, Joshua, and Caleb.

Ruth, Boaz, Naomi

David

Zerubbabel

John the Baptist.

There hasn’t always been many.

But there has always been SOME.

And God has done amazing things through the some.

And we’re not done yet.

The whole world does not yet know that Jesus died and rose again so that they could have a relationship with God.

The arrow’s still going and it’s going to keep going, until the rider is back.

But God has kept every promise so far.

And we have faith that he is going to keep keeping his promises.

God is good, all the time. That’s what the Bible tells us.

**🞕** Let’s begin to draw this service to an end with a prayer.

Father, that’s a LOT of information. A lot of stories. We’ve skipped over a lot.

But please take whatever it is that has struck each of us here today.

And let it sink deep into our spirit.

Of your faithfulness.

Of your long suffering with a world of people that let you down all the time.

Father, we repent, that WE do it too.

And yet you still keep blessing us. You keep accepting our apology and keep us moving forward.

So, we pray that we will be people that keep this story of the kingdom alive and going,

that we would be a light to the world,

that we would be blessed to be a blessing,

that your kingdom will come, that your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

We pray this in the name of the one who came to save us,

In the strong name of the resurrected Jesus, we all say... AMEN.

NOTICES…

BLESSING:
Go now in peace,
knowing that you have been born again,

not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God; and the blessing ...