

Immerse The Worth of the Bible
2 Tim: Luke 1:1-4, 3:1-6; 2 Tim 3:14-17

Good morning! This is an exciting day—today is the day we are kicking off Immerse! This is our congregation-wide adventure reading through the New Testament together. We are starting our reading this week, then next Sunday we will be preaching about that first week's readings and groups will begin meeting next week to discuss what you've read. We also have a family guide that provides shorter readings and conversation starters so families can easily participate together. You can find it all on the Immerse page on our website!

All of this emphasis on Immerse raises the question—Why? Why make such a big deal out of this ancient book? Isn't it just a bunch of myths and stories written much later by the winners of history? What difference does it make to my life, today anyway? Those are great questions—my answer to you today is that the Bible is absolutely unique and is absolutely essential to our lives—to our faith, to living healthy, meaningful lives, and to our purpose on earth.

Historians and Bible scholars tell us that the New Testament books were all written within about 60 years of Jesus' death and were mostly written 20 or 30 years after Jesus died. That is WAY too soon for any myths to develop—the eyewitnesses were alive and could have easily contradicted it—if it were false. The New Testament was written by a small, struggling group of believers; people at risk from both Rome and the Jewish authorities. They were not the winners of history, they were outsiders announcing the surprising Good News of Jesus about God's kingdom breaking into our lives.

Our reading from Second Timothy has some very powerful verses about Scripture. Listen to how the Message puts it: "There's nothing like the written Word of God for showing you the way to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us."

Wow—this Book that we get to read shows us the way to rescue! Not only that, it shapes how we live right now—correcting our mistakes, training us to live God’s way, showing where we are rebelling against God—it prepares us and equips us to do all the good things that God plans for us. Church, Scripture molds us into the kind of people that God made us to be. It helps us live the lives God wants us to live! All of this is because the Bible is different from any other book—it is inspired by God. Literally that means God breathed. That changes everything about how and why we read this book. Paul tells Timothy that ALL Scripture is inspired. When we read the New Testament, we will encounter verses and paragraphs that challenge us. As you find them, remember this—ALL scripture is breathed out by God and is useful. We need to let Scripture read us, not put ourselves in the position of judging Scripture. We need to let Scripture read us. If we decide to pick and choose what to pay attention to, we are really making *ourselves* the ultimate authority—instead of God! So when you encounter those challenging parts, pray that God will show you what he is trying to tell you through them. Open yourself up to the possibility of being changed by what you hear.

Paul tells us that the Bible is worthwhile because it shows us the way to salvation, how to live in a healthy way, and gives our lives purpose and meaning. Whether you love reading the Bible, or have always avoided it, the New Testament is worth reading. God was willing to send us a love letter. Let’s bother to read it! With Immerse you can even listen to it read aloud to you—just 20 minutes or so 5 times a week is all it takes!

Today I want to share three main ideas about the New Testament. The first is that it is history, not make believe. Second, that it fulfills the Old Testament story. And third that it describes the true story we are living in today. The Bible is not just a long-ago story, we are living in it today! The New Testament explains the reality of our world and gives us the model and purpose for how to live!

First—it is history, not something made up. Look at how Luke starts his gospel—he talks about how there are number of accounts that have been written, and that they all use eyewitness testimony. Luke carefully investigated everything and writes an orderly account so that we can know the truth about what we’ve been taught! This is not a just-so story, it is based on eyewitnesses and investigation. It is factual, telling us about what *really* happened

among *real* people. The second part of our Gospel reading is from the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Luke goes to great lengths to set the scene. It was the 15th year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius. Then Luke lists four more Roman officials who were in power in the area— Pilate, Herod Antipas, Philip, and Lysanias. These are all actual, historical people that you can learn about, wholly separate from the Bible. Luke is spelling out exactly when and where this happened. This is the total opposite of “once upon a time.” He is nailing down this account to a specific place in history. I know that there are skeptics listening-- if God actually inspired this book and if Jesus really lived the life we read about in the gospels, what does that change for you? I hope you will give this book a chance.

My favorite Bible teacher is a man named Tom Brewer. He led the trip to Israel I went on last fall. Remember back when we could travel to foreign countries? Hard to believe that was less than a year ago! Tom likes to say that the Bible is God's story and it is rooted in geography, it emerges in history, it is a unified literary work, and it is the inspired Word of God. That is a great summary of how to think about the Bible. It is rooted in geography—this is why our Bibles have maps in them. Your Immerse Bible has maps in the very back. It emerges out of history—God is telling his story through real events that happened to real people. It is a unified work—it tells one big story even though it was written over the course of more than a thousand years by dozens of human authors. And it is, like we read today, the inspired Word of God; God breathed. When we read the Bible, we are opening ourselves up to God's breath, his Spirit, moving in us and through us! Reading the Bible is dangerous---it can change your life!

The New Testament is history—it tells a true story about real people that really lived. But it also takes place in the context of a BIGGER story—it is part of the whole Bible story. That's our second point--- the New Testament fulfills the Old Testament. The story of Jesus in the Gospels is the climax and culmination of all that came before. Luke says that he and others are writing about the events that have been FULFILLED. FULFILLED. Not just “here is an interesting story” but something important has happened that we've been waiting for. Luke understands that the Jesus story is not merely a good tale, it is the fulfillment of the story God has been living out with people for millennia. The Old Testament points to Jesus. God didn't

give up on Israel and start over with Jesus, Jesus was the answer God was working towards all along.

As you read Immerse notice how often it quotes Scripture (that is, our Old Testament) and how often it announces that what was done was fulfilling Scripture. The web of connections between the two parts of our Bible is very thick. Here in our reading Luke quotes from the prophet Isaiah—something written about 700 years earlier! Luke sees John the Baptist and Jesus fulfilling that ancient promise--- God is returning at last to his people! Incredibly, the way God is returning is in the person of Jesus! No one was expecting God to come as a human being. No one was expecting salvation to come through this carpenter from the sticks with questionable parentage. You see—the New Testament fulfills the Old Testament story but it does so in ways that no one was anticipating.

The big Bible story from start to finish is about God wanting to be with people. That is how it begins and ends. But we messed up God's plan with our selfishness, greed and desire to be god ourselves. So for most of the story the focus is on how God is going to rescue us, along with all of his creation, from the mess we made of things. Here is Luke announcing that is finally happening, just like Isaiah said, "all people will see the salvation sent from God!" This sense of fulfillment runs all through the Jesus story. Jesus himself announced that "the time was fulfilled." At last God's kingdom was near and rescue was available. Jesus understood that his story was not a new beginning, it is the culmination of the story that the Bible has been telling all along. We are stepping into a story already in progress.

The New Testament gives us an eyewitness view of the turning point of world history. In Jesus God is rescuing the world and launching his new creation. Jesus opens the door for all people to live as God's beloved daughters and sons. This Gospel story is the true account of the climax of history.

We've seen that the New Testament is history and it's the fulfillment of the Old Testament. But there is more! It is also actually OUR story! This is not just a story that happened long ago and is only for history nerds. No—we are living in this story too! It shows us where we are in the great sweep of all of human history and gives us the tools to live out our part in that story. Jesus announced that God's Kingdom was near. He taught us to pray that his

kingdom come on earth as in heaven. We are living in the working out of the revolution that Jesus began. Because of the New Testament we know that God is acting in the world through his people and is renewing everything! Not only that, but people who follow Jesus—US – have a part to play in that rescue mission! The New Testament shapes how we live today and gives meaning to what we do. In the middle of all of our storms, pandemic, and political fighting, what a reassurance that we have an anchor we can trust.

Tuesday of this past week was a very special day. It was the ribbon cutting ceremony for the new Pamela's Place apartments. This is a remarkable accomplishment—a brand new building designed to help the homeless population in Salt Lake. It provides 100 apartments where our homeless friends can live in safety. It also offers counseling, mental health services, physical health services and more. What a blessing this place will be! Of course it is named for our own elder Pamela Atkinson! Congratulations Pamela! What a great way this is to recognize your decades of care and service to the least of these, our brothers and sisters.

It was remarkable to listen to the remarks at the ceremony. There was our governor, Gary Herbert, saying: "When Jesus said in the New Testament, Love your neighbor as yourself, Pamela not only understands the words, but she in fact shows that by her actions. She does love her neighbors as herself and does everything she can to help improve their situation." How remarkable that the highest elected official in our state is moved to quote the New Testament and use it as the example for how we should live. But the governor is tuned in to a basic truth—Pamela is living out her part in the Bible story. Jesus' teachings are not ancient history, they are living realities that are shaping our town!

Of course, Pamela was humble in her remarks, saying it really isn't about her and instead focusing on the people who would live in the building. Jesus and the New Testament guide how we live and help us understand what is important, just like Paul told Timothy--- All Scripture is God-breathed and useful to prepare and equip us for every good work. Thank you, Pamela, for helping us as a community to do a little bit better job of loving our neighbors and thank you for being led by Jesus as you encourage us.

The Bible story is not made up. It is not something just about back then—it is still going on. We are living in it! At the end of the New Testament we get a peek ahead at where the

whole story is going—to the spectacular conclusion where God renews everything and all of the hurt, harm and hate are finally gone forever. But for now, the fact is we are living in this Bible story—God is real, Jesus came and started God’s rescue program, and now we have our part of the story. All of Jesus’ followers, then and now, are his body in the world and are called to join in God’s rescue mission to the world. That is what we are made to do. Pamela is living that out. So are so many of you in so many ways! That is what Pamela’s Closet is for, that is why we provide meals to Ronald McDonalds and make sandwiches for the homeless. That is why we call our neighbors to see if they need help or a friendly listening ear. The New Testament describes our role as the people who bring the Good News and God’s love to a broken, hurting world. We find a meaningful life worth living in the pages of the New Testament. I can’t wait to read them together with you!

Let’s pray—Holy Spirit—thank you for moving in the writers of Scripture. Thank you for inspiring US as we read. We ask your blessing on all of us as we launch into reading the New Testament. Encourage us, inspire us, help us to engage with each other as we read. Draw us ever closer to you. In Jesus’ name we ask it, Amen!

Benediction:

May the God of hope
fill you with all joy and peace in believing,
so that you may abound in hope
by the power of the Holy Spirit.