Our scripture readings for today are both stories, stories that have been told and retold over the centuries about God. The first story—which is really the conclusion of a longer story—comes from the book of Genesis. Brian McLaren features the story of Noah and the Flood in the chapter of We Make the Road by Walking that many of us read this week. He points out that it represents an improvement on the other flood stories that were floating around the ancient Middle East at the time it was written. Those others spoke of the great flood as a consequence of the gods being disturbed by all the noise on earth. At least the story of Noah and the Ark shows God being upset with human wickedness and violence. But, as McLaren points out, wiping out all but a remnant of creation through large scale destruction seems a harsh and violent way to proceed. As he says, “one would think God would have more creativity, moral finesse, and foresight than to create a good world only to destroy it because it went so bad so relatively quickly.” It depends on your view of God, I suppose, but I happen to agree with McLaren’s critique. The portion of the story we read is near the end, picking up with the 8th verse. As you hear the story of the rainbow, think of the bow as what is was originally intended to be, a weapon of violence and warfare, not being used, in this case, but being laid down—as if to say, no more violence, no more large scale destruction.

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ‘As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.’ God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.’ God said to Noah, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.’

Our second passage is a parable that the Gospel of Matthew has Jesus telling in the last week of his life. It, too, portrays God as resorting to violence in response to human violence. As you hear it, bear in mind that many scholars see it as evidence that the Gospel was written after 70 A.D., when the writer would have known of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans. This parable surely would have been a way to make sense of that—and it would have been a way to make sense of the inclusion of the Gentiles, the non-Jews, into the community of faith—the great wedding feast.

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: ‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, “Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and

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1 McLaren, Brian. We Make The Road By Walking. ISBN 1455514004
everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.” But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, “The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.” Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

‘But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, “Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” For many are called, but few are chosen.’

Philip Pullman, who wrote the children’s book The Golden Compass² (the one that was made into a major motion picture several years ago), is right, I think. We do need stories. After nourishment, shelter, and companionship, stories may indeed be the thing we need most in the world.

Whether we need them or not, it is a profoundly human thing to tell them and listen to them. Humans have been doing this for many thousands of years. We share them as we relate our or others’ experiences. We tell them to make sense of why things are the way they are, to provide a narrative framework, a plot, some sense of direction to our life and its events. Stories shape the way we view the world and people around us and understand ourselves as individuals, as families, as communities.

The stories we tell and listen to matter. They do shape us and our views of life. And of what God, the One whose love is embodied in Christ Jesus, has to do with all of this, with all of us.

That’s why I’ve been thinking this week about why we keep telling the story of Noah and the Ark.

After all, Brian McLaren hits the target when he writes “Although many people think of this as a cute story about animals and a boat ride, those who think more deeply find it deeply disturbing. The image of violent oppressors and innocent victims drowning together seems only to make a bad situation worse.” And, “God’s violence doesn’t really solve anything in the Noah story, since Noah’s family quickly starts cooking up more trouble so that soon, things are just as bad as they were before the flood.”

The story of Noah and the Ark is disturbing indeed—it is unsettling. If you saw the movie starring Russell Crowe in the title role³ earlier this spring—as a number of us on the worship committee did—you were given a glimpse into how psychologically and spiritually wrenching it must have been to be in Noah’s shoes, to have watched and listened as people around him clamored to get on the ark, screaming as the waters rose, and to have known, on closer reflection—that he himself was flawed, morally imperfect. It is a heavy burden to bear, to think you are supposed to be the lone righteous family on earth.

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² Pullman, Philip. The Golden Compass. ISBN 0679879242
³ Noah. Directed by Darren Aronofsky. DVD Release date July 29, 2014
The story of Noah is a troubling story to be sure. So one way we handle it is by saying, "Of course, it's a story. Not to be taken literally. It's just a tale some ancient people told to make sense of a big flood." True enough, the Noah story is outlandish enough that we know it is fabulous—in its original meaning, like a fable. No way you could pack a boat or ship of those dimensions with a pair of each of the species clean and unclean in the world. The story is indeed not meant to be taken literally. It is fabulous.

But fables communicate truth, too. The tortoise and the hare lets us know that slow and steady wins the race. The wolf in sheep's clothing lets us know that appearances can be deceiving. The lion and the mouse lets us know that little friends can be great friends.

Perhaps Noah and the flood lets us know that violence is not finally the right or best answer. There are situations where people do and must respond to the violence of others with violence (I'm of the firm belief that ISIS is not going to go away without being confronted with force). And yet, according to the storyteller, after the flood, even God lays down the bow, perhaps repenting of the damage God has done. Perhaps the story of Noah and the flood lets us know that feeling like you, or your family, or your tribe, or your nation alone are righteous exacts a heavy toll. So when the bow goes in the sky, according to the storyteller, it is God's covenant with all creation, not just one little tribe of people like us.

The stories we tell matter. Sometimes they are fables. Sometimes they are parables like the ones Jesus told (and that Tom Long will be here to speak to in two weeks). And sometimes the stories we tell are real life occurrences that shape us in their own way, as we tell and retell them.

On an anniversary Sunday, we know about the power of those stories, too. We need them.

On a day like today, when we celebrate the anniversary of this congregation's chartering, 53 years ago this past Wednesday, we can't help but think of stories. There are certain stories that come to mind when we look back over this congregation's history—stories that shaped our self-understanding.

The way for instance, our practice of having lay worship leaders started during Rev. Dick Grear's illness. Some Sundays he was too weak to do anything but preach attached to an IV pole. And on the Sundays Dick couldn't even preach, John Chase would step in at a moment's notice to fill the pulpit and deliver a sermon.

There are the stories of how, back in the day, people would volunteer to clean the church and mow the lawn, and even though much of that is paid for through our pledges now, we retain a sense of ownership and involvement in the church in our twice yearly workdays and our strong committee structure.

There are stories of heated conversations around the building of buildings like the sanctuary and the meeting house and the insistence that if we were going to spend big money on a building we had to spend big money on a major mission project. That idea launched another set of stories—our involvement in the lives of children and youth and now adults in Anacostia through the dreamer program. By the way, as the Dreamer program hits its 25th anniversary next year and winds to an end. We are already working on what the next big thing that Immanuel commits to will be.
We remember the stories of the healing power of prayer, for instance, the time in a worship committee meeting people joined hands to pray for Greg Stanton, and those who were there could feel the heat moving through you and into him. But we also remember how this community supported us when the people for whose healing we desperately prayed did not get well. So many stories. The times people have gathered around someone sharing a particularly painful concern; going to embrace them even as the worship service continued with a hug and a prayer, and a real life embodiment of Immanuel—God with us.

If you were here on September 7th, our Welcome Back Picnic Sunday, you saw another story play out that is destined to be one that we can’t help but associate with Immanuel. Craig Saunders led the Moment for Young Disciples. Before the service, he had our youth pass out cups of fruit to different people in the congregation. Strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, blackberries. When the time to call the children forward came, he carried up a great big metal pan, and he gave me a bowl filled with dough—flour and oats. Then after greeting the children, he sent them out to gather up those cups of fruit from people all over the congregation—in the balcony, in the choir, in the “amen corner.” They brought all that fruit forward, and as he dumped it in the pan, Craig asked me to bring over the dough. He put that in there with the fruit. Then he told the kids that he would be taking that over to the kitchen and putting it in the oven to make a berry crisp that we would eat at the picnic.

Craig asked the kids which of their fruits were their favorites and then he told them he didn’t much like blueberries, but when they were mixed in with all the rest of the fruit and baked, all of it tasted good. The dough, he said, was like God and the fruit was all of us—we all had something to contribute, something to bring to the mix that made up something wonderful.

That’s a memorable story of Immanuel. It speaks to who we are.

All of these stories tell us about how God works in the world, too, and one of the clear messages you get is that God works through people like you and me, imperfect, flawed, frail people like you and me.

Speaking of stories, did you happen to see that Malala Youfsazi won the Nobel Peace prize this week? I went back to hear some of her story through an interview done with her and her father back in 2009, back when she was a nine year old girl going to school her father ran in the Swat Valley of Pakistan. The Taliban closed down the school, chased her and her family away from the Valley, but she kept going to school elsewhere. Over time, she moved from thinking she wanted to be a doctor to thinking that she needed to be a politician to effect wide scale change. Her issue—the education of girls. And, as you know, the Taliban found her and shot her, but she didn’t die.

“A talib fires three shots at point-blank range at three girls in a van and doesn’t kill any of them. This seems an unlikely story,” she wrote in her memoir “I Am Malala.” “When people talk about the way I was shot and what happened I think it’s the story of Malala, ‘a girl shot by the Taliban’; I don’t feel it’s a story about me at all.”

But it is. Malala’s story, the story of “a girl shot by the Taliban” has tremendous power because it is a story not of tragedy but of faith. Her father used to tell her she would be free as a bird.

What I’ve just shared is from a powerful piece about Malala that Alexandra Petri wrote in yesterday’s Post. Here’s how it ended.

Malala’s story is a powerful testimony to what we miss whenever we miss the chance to educate a girl.

Her father told NPR\(^6\) that when people ask him what he did to train his daughter, “I usually tell people, ‘You should not ask me what I have done. Rather you ask me, what I did not do... I did not clip her wings to fly. I did not stop her from flying.’”

“Malala will be free as a bird.” It sounds simple. It should not be revolutionary. But it is.

Look at Malala — penning a memoir, continuing her own education in England, poignantly addressing the U.N. on the power of pens and books, now, winning a Nobel Prize. This is what happens when you don’t clip girls’ wings.

Imagine if we’d never gotten to know who Malala was.

We nearly didn’t.

“I didn’t see the two young men step out into the road and bring the van to a sudden halt,” writes Malala. “I didn’t get a chance to answer their question ‘Who is Malala?’ or I would have explained to them why they should let us girls go to school as well as their own sisters and daughters.”

Instead there was a bullet. Malala could have been just “a girl shot by the Taliban” — a sad, too-short story. But instead she survived, and she’s using her voice.

Thank God for that.

That’s why we need to tell good stories.

And that’s why we need to make our lives stories worth telling.

In Jesus’ name. Amen.