My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Eternal God of our Lenten bodies, minds, hearts and spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight. Our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

This week is the final one in our three part sermon series. Do you remember the first two parts? Let’s review just a bit. The first one was all about “My Story”, and how it’s almost unavoidable that for the first 20 years or so of adult life we are consumed with forming our own identities, family roles, careers, and figuring out how much stuff we desire and what to do with it. Some folks get stuck there. But for most of us, that also leaves us unfulfilled at some point, and we seek to go out beyond ourselves and identify with a group that seem to like us…it can be a work group, Facebook group, social group, fan club, or anywhere there is commonality with which we identify. This is okay too, because as social creatures we have to live with one another and our brains need other brains to banter and work with. But which groups are life affirming? Which ones are negative and no good? And how will we know if we’re being fulfilled or sucked into something where we should not be spending our time, money, energy, and talents?

We might say, my goodness Pastor Mark, do we have to get all existential each and every Sunday? To which I might say….what? (take all answers). Well, yes, we do. It’s good for us to ask ultimate questions, and that’s today’s topic, too.

Do you remember out Gospel lesson today? No? That’s good, because there wasn’t one that was read out loud. If you want to look it up, it’s Mark 1:9-15, which we read back about a month ago. So today, I’d like us to focus not on My story, or Our Story, but on THE Story. The one that is in the realm of universal meaning for our lives.

We can think of THE Story as the one that contains My Story and Our Story as a set of nesting tables. You remember those? Three tables that are sized so that they fit together, one atop the other so that the big table is most often used, but the other ones can be pulled out for use as well. The smallest table can be used just like the others, but it fits so nicely under the second table, which fits so nicely encompassed by the third table. THE Story is always true, a pattern that every culture and religion discover in some manner. THE Story is large enough to contain and include the other two, holding them in sacred meaning. This is the true transcendence, authentic Spirit, which can inform our souls.

From a biblical perspective, individual lives—and the whole of the history of the nation of Israel—are both arenas for God’s action, but they are also connected to something more infinite as well, beyond just our own anecdotes and our own cultural history. But THE Story is not limited to any one religion or denomination. All religions and philosophies will tell it on some level. Forgiveness. Mercy. Compassion. There is nothing Buddhist or Hindu, Catholic or Protestant, white or black or latino or Asian, or gender specific about ways to feed the hungry, steward the earth, or protect the dignity of each human soul. Symbols and motivations for love might be different, but love undergirds everything. Forever.

This completeness is uniquely the work of God and healthy religion. Biblical tradition honors and combines all three levels of the story: personal journeys as the raw material, communal identity as school and training ground, and true transcendence as the integration and gathering place for all three parts together. This holiness, as we call it in Christianity, is the ultimate form of wholeness.

So today we’re reading about Noah and the flood. Do we think that the flood happened as it was written in the Bible? No, not really. But that doesn’t make the allegory untrue.

The Bible was never intended as a science book, a history book, or a geography book. In today’s lesson from Genesis, we read this as demonstrating this threefold relationship of holiness that includes an individual’s struggles (Noah), his community (the animals and his family) and the transcendent God who talks TO Noah in these passages.

This message is one of a series of covenants that are made between God and all future generations—not just Israel, but everyone. AND this covenant is not just made with humans, but with all the creatures of the earth. AND, most dramatic of all, only one party to the agreement—God—speaks at all. No response on Noah’s part or his sons is called for or given. There is no acknowledgement of acceptance. The covenant to never destroy the world by water again is an act of a free and gracious God on behalf of a world that did not have to ask for it or earn it, or even respond to it.

We know all about covenant in the Congregational Church, don’t we? Our forebears in New England wrote one of the most famous in 1629, beautiful in its simplicity: ‘We covenant with the Lord and One Another, to walke together in all his ways according to how God is pleased to reveal himself in God’s blessed Word of Truth.”

Covenants are sworn agreements between God and people or among human beings. Covenants are different from contracts, which are legal agreements attested by witnesses and enforced by the law. Covenants have two basic elements: the promise, in which something is said regarding the future relationship, and the stipulations, to which both parties swear. Most covenants are also between two unequal partners in the Old Testament. The central covenant of the Old Testament was on Mt Sinai, where God said to Moses “I will be your God and You will be My people.” Covenants often had signs, such as a pile of stones erected to remind them of their agreement.

So in our story today, God’s stipulation is backed by the certainty that the earth is God’s, and God has decided that it will remain, and that all creatures from here on out can count on the stability of nature. The sign of that covenant promise is the rainbow. Naturally, we assume that the rainbow is a reminder to us of God’s divine promise. There we go again! We are thinking about us first—it’s not like that.

Read it again—verse 16. God gives the rainbow to keep GOD aware of the covenant made with Noah, his children and their children’s children, and all the Earth. So this story, like the many stories in the Gospel and Epistles we read, has to do with God’s response to our frail human condition realistically. The fact that we are ego-centric at heart and wrapped up in My story all the time is taken for granted. God’s response in the Noah narrative is to take the initiative, make a covenant, and provide a stable condition for all life on Earth. The alternative to chaos is God’s covenant. The End.

How does that make you feel? Good? Scared? What am I getting into, what did I sign up for? How will this all end and what’s the outcome? Jesus might say at this point, “be not afraid”. Let me leave you with these final thoughts.

Without great stories like this that free us from ourselves and our selfish foolish fears, we are trapped in small private and little group cultural worlds that have tiny patterns in which we can get lost. Without great patterns that are always true, we cannot be transcendant of our fears, fears of the tyranny of “I Am” in the My Story and “We Are” in the Our Story. If we bypass the hard work of facing our fears, we are in danger of faking a leap to this third level, and we will miss the authenticity needed to understand God’s Great Promises. We’ve all met folks who love God talk but really lack spiritual grounding, and this is the most dangerous kind of cotton candy spirituality. Tastes great, but will rot your teeth and make you sorry for having done it, and the repair work will be lengthy and substantial.

But if we take these three nesting stories seriously, we will have a fully human and fully divine life that is whole, giving us permission and even direction. Biblical revelation, if we accept these three story levels, give us conscious agency of our own story at every level, and God will use all of this, even the negative stuff, to bring us to life and love.

Now that’s good news—we are neither trapped inside of our little culture or group identity, nor our private pain and hurts. We’re people of the Big picture and live with a lovely set of nesting tables full of meaning, where nothing is eliminated and all is used to bring us to life.

Jesus teaches us to call that the Kingdom of God, and for that, I give thanks this and each day.

Amen.