

## THREE FORMATIVE CONVICTIONS

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### Genesis 1:1-2:3

*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.*

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For the past several years I have been telling our 9th grade confirmation students the three formative convictions that shape and cultivate our disposition, or our way of being, in the world. The first is this: *the world is good and that includes us.*

That's the first conviction and, in case you hadn't notice, that's the first movement in our worship service every Sunday. *Behold it is good.* WOW. What a privilege to be included in this wondrous web of life.

Even when things are grim we trust that the power within the world is good. Not perfect, whatever that is, but good. We may lean away from love again and again but the Spirit within nudges us back toward love again and again.

That's the first conviction. The world is good and that includes you and me. So we learn to celebrate and give thanks for the goodness of the world.

But something else is true: *we mess up in ways that other species have not and cannot.* That's the second conviction and the second movement in our worship service every Sunday.

As good as we are, there's something about us that make us susceptible to corruption. And it's more than accidental. It's willful.

Nevertheless, we believe "evil" is a corruption of the good not something independently created. If God is One and God is good then evil must be a corruption of what is good, not a thing in and of itself.

So, yes, there is much to celebrate. But there is also much to lament.

And so we confess and admit our sins in words such as these: *We violate the image of God in others and ourselves, accept lies as truth, exploit neighbor and nature, and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.* (from *A Brief Statement of Faith*, PCUSA, 1983). And that, according to the Brief Statement of Faith, deserves "condemnation," something more than a "time out" or a slap on the wrist or a tweak on the cheek.

We may say (as the Brief Statement says) *we deserve God's condemnation* but God does not condemn. *God acts with mercy and grace to redeem creation.* And that includes us.

As it turns out, "judgment" is not the first or last word of our formative convictions. In its very first words the Bible portrays the goodness of creation in a rhapsody of delight. The world is good. Celebrate.

But the great ancestors were not stupid or naïve. They saw what we see. The world may be good but many things are not so good. Human beings mess up. We deliberately hurt the earth, ourselves and others.

To pretend we are innocent is to fall into great darkness and delusions. We become strangers to the truth. We begin to think ourselves exceptional or chosen, more righteous than others and thus with a license to destroy those who are lesser! (Do you know any people or any nation that claims to be *exceptional*?)

The Great Ancestors saw through that arrogance. No, they said, we are all—all of us—very much alike. We all come up short. We all go astray.

In a series of pithy, mythic folk tales from Genesis 2-11 the Great Ancestors portray the universal and lamentable human predicament or condition.

The first tale is about the first humans, Adam and Eve, in a garden of trees. Even though God forbid it, Eve grasped the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, which meant knowing A-Z, everything.

Our ancestors could see that humans have much in common with animals but what makes humans different from other animals is an unquenchable thirst for knowledge. According to this first folk tale, not even God can stop us.

But of course with knowledge comes responsibility. Suddenly, Adam and Eve were exposed—vulnerable and afraid the way we often feel guilty for what we have done or ashamed of whom we are.

Adam and Eve ran and hid. But God found them and made garments to cover their shame.

The first tale ends with a divine act of mercy and grace. A protective garment.

The next tale is of Cain and Abel—the first children. Remember this is a mythic folktale, which means “something that never was but always is.”

Cain was jealous of his brother Abel. He could not get over his anger and thus killed Abel in cold blood. Cain ran and hid, terrified that others would treat him as he had treated his brother. (Sound familiar?)

But God found Cain and gave him a “mark” of protection. And, according to the tale, Cain went on to build the first city in order to keep dangerous people outside the wall. But guess who was inside? (So much for security walls.)

Still the tale ends with another divine act of mercy and grace. The mark of Cain. A protection.

Cain’s homicidal act became a toxic precedent. Violence beget more violence. Human beings became so increasingly violent that God determined to kill them all and start over with a few righteous souls. (We know that feeling!!)

And that brings us to the next mythic tale—Noah and the Flood. This story reflects an ancient and perpetual belief in “redemptive violence”—*kill enough bad people and the world will be safe and good!*

But by the end of the Flood story, God repents. God says “never again” just as we say it time and time again—after the holocaust, after Rwanda, after Jim Crow, after Sandy Hook, after...

Our Great Ancestors could see that killing bad people would not change the world or the human heart. Another way must be found. And so this tale also ends with a divine act of mercy and grace. The rainbow in the sky—the universal sign of peace and hope.

And then we come to the final tale in this series. “The Tower of Babel.” (Genesis 11)

Once upon a time all people spoke the same language. It’s not true, of course, but remember this is a folk tale conveying truth deeper than facts alone can tell.

Humans created a city and built a tower into the heavens to make a name for themselves. But the gods were not amused. So the gods zipped down to earth and scrambled their one language into many and thus the human community was fractured into tribes and tribalism—unable to communicate or cooperate.

Of course, that's NOT how it happened. *But that's the way it is.*

We are a fractured and fractious species, alienated from each other. Tribalism haunts us still. Sunni. Shiite. Kurds. Turks. Hutus. Tutsis. Israelis. Palestinians. Hindus. Muslims. Christians. Jews. Whites. Blacks. Where will it end? When will we stop drawing lines and building walls?

The tower of Babel tale ends with the seven saddest words in the Bible. *And they left off building the city.* Humans stopped cooperating.

Now if we're paying attention we notice something missing from this tale, something we've come to expect from the preceding stories. *There is no divine act of mercy and grace as there was with the others*—the garment, the mark and the rainbow.

Now what? What's to be done about tribalism and alienation?

And then we notice something up ahead in the very next chapter. (Genesis 12.) A story is about to begin and it doesn't sound like myth. It sounds like history. In fact, it's the story of which we are now a part.

God "called" Abraham and Sarah to leave their tribal homeland (today's Iraq) and kindred behind—all that confined and defined them—in order to find and cultivate a new kind of city or community in which all people would be blessed with peace, justice, freedom and love. Not one tribe or one people or one race or one nation. But all people.

The many as one, which sounds to me like the Trinity. One yet many. Many yet one. Unity with diversity. A community of love.

That ancient promise, the "Great Perhaps," keeps us going. As it turns out, the hopeful promise that arose in the hearts of Abraham and Sarah is the act of mercy and grace that concludes the Tower of Babel.

And that is our third formative conviction. It's in the Bible but you can hear it almost anywhere, including in poems and songs. *Imagine all the people living life in peace. Imagine the world as one.*

And so here is what I tell our confirmation student each year:

Of all the many things we do together in our worship service Sunday morning, there is one main purpose: *to cultivate a particular kind of people who despite all appearances believe and celebrate the goodness of the world; who lament and humbly confess their own complicity with evil; but who finally are open to receive and embody mercy and grace for the good of others.*

Together we resolve to mend ourselves, others and creation with healing grace. And Sunday morning is a particular time to practice together how to listen for a certain voice.

And if you listen here, there or most anywhere you just may hear that voice calling you—as Abraham and Sarah were called—to leave selfism and tribalism behind, calling you to bless the children, heal the sick, bind up the broken hearted and eat with outcasts like that certain child of Abraham and Sarah we call Jesus, the Beloved.

And you too are a child of that promise. Can you believe it?!