

“Evolution, the Doctrine of the Trinity, and Salvation” by Pat Conover



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Scripture References Is 49:1-7, Ps 40:1-11, I Cor 1:1-9, John 1:29-42

About a year ago I helped Seekers participate in the Evolution Sunday movement which is continuing to grow and spread across the United States. The title of my sermon a year ago was “When Good Theology and Good Science Meet.” For those few of you who do not immediately recall that sermon I’ll share a few lines from the concluding paragraph.

“...the power that science is unleashing makes it...important that we share the work of creating and sustaining a society, a world, that can make such power a blessing and not a curse. That requires a lot of ethical work, a lot of political work,

a lot of social and cultural imagination. First of all it requires a lot of theological and spiritual work that begins with the following kinds of questions. Are you thankful for your life and the world we live in. Will you be generous and caring with others as God has been generous and caring with you? Will you give thanks for the light that lures you toward the best potential God makes available?

Last year's sermon worked at showing the possibilities of a constructive and positive relationship between science and Christian theology. This year's sermon assumes that perspective and seeks to develop more of the implications. This year's sermon is also a response to postmodern philosophy that is good at critiquing the texts of others and weak about proclaiming an understanding of what is true for the guidance of individual and common lives. I am bold to set out the good news of salvation grounded in what we can know through science and what we can engage through the narrative of Jesus as our Christ, our savior. Please note that you will not find speculations in this sermon that you just have to accept on faith, and that the final confirmation of the good news can be discovered in your personal experience and what you can appreciate from our life together.

You may not have noticed, but I just slipped in the Christian doctrine of the trinity. I don't wish for you to accept a trinitarian understanding of God just because it has the authority of Christian doctrine. Let's see what makes sense, what is life-giving.

About 13.7 billion years ago, give or take a few seconds, the universe we can know came into existence. It took a long time and a lot of exploding stars to create the 92 kinds of

elements that came to make up the Earth about 4.55 billion years ago, give or take 70 million years. The current best estimate of when life began on earth is 3.85 billion years ago, very soon after the Earth had cooled enough to have a solid crust. Then it took a long time for the 23 kinds of life to emerge. All but 3 of the 23 are microscopic and most of them have been discovered in our lifetimes. The three kinds of life that include species you can see with your naked eye are plants, animals, and fungi. Even there we have some curiosities that make a mess of classification efforts. Slime molds are animal-like when they are in their tiny parts and plant-like when they join together. It took scientists a long time to realize that slime molds are both things in different phases of their lives.

We animals got started about 540 million years and most of the species that showed up have passed away. One species named Opabinia had five eyes and a claw on the end of its snout. It passed away because of embarrassment. The first hominids, creatures in the line leading directly to us, emerged about 7 million years ago, with modern human dating back to about 100,000 years ago. Depending on your definitions, language and culture came into existence about 20,000 years ago. The stories in the Bible refer to events as far back as about 4,000 years and the high point of the Jewish nation, the kingdoms of David and Solomon was about 3,000 years ago.

Compared to the natural history of life on Earth, not to mention the time spans of creation, human beings are pretty new and recorded history is hardly a single breath of a lifetime of breathing. A lot of potentials for life forms have been tried out and, like poor Opabinia, have passed away. To meditate on this natural history, the potentials that have thrived; to appreciate this natural history, to wonder about

God as the Creator of such natural history, points us to the question: What are we part of that is emerging today? What potentials are we carrying? What is being revealed as we walk our walks and talk or talks? This is the turning question that leads us from science to story. Story helps us work with appreciating what is happening and what matters. Some tell us that the Christian story is just one more story among many with little about it that is special or noteworthy. I think the Christian story is special and deserves the investment of significant exploration and engagement.

This gets us to Jesus of Nazareth, the one we call Jesus Christ, the second "person" of the trinity. Our witness is that Jesus has led us to salvation and we will talk about the meaning of salvation in a few minutes. My point here is that we can know some few things about the real human Jesus that matter a lot. I'm going to jump directly to the good part because of time limitations today.

The best sources for appreciating the real human Jesus are the Gospel of Mark and the parables found in Matthew, Luke and Thomas that seem likely to date back to Jesus himself. If you start with this picture of Jesus, then the rest of the Gospels can help us understand why Jesus mattered so much to the early Christian community.

Here is the story. Jesus, following John the Baptist, believed that the forgiveness of God was freely and directly available. In the context of the Jewish tradition that treasured living by the law, the good news of forgiveness was radical and life-giving. Forgiveness makes the law a treasured gift and not just a source of guilt. Many authors in Hebrew scripture point to this truth but Jesus centered the theme as a primary

landmark of the path to salvation. We are saved by grace and not by works. We can't cut any special deals with God by offering animal sacrifices or by any other magic. Jesus shows us that forgiveness and salvation is freely available before any dealing at all.

Because we are forgiven we can respond to each other with love, thanksgiving, and celebration instead of guilt and resentment. We don't have to wait for anything because we see that we have already been given what we need to live well. We do not have to wait for the Messiah. The Messiah has come. We do not need to wait for a revolution. The revolution has come.

You can start living well right now, experience the blessings of living well right now.

Justice and law point to the forms of living well and the Jewish part of our story is precious. Pursuing justice is worth the investment of a lifetime. But love, caring, respect, and hope do not need to wait on justice. Forgiveness encourages us to jump right into the dynamics of loving and caring for each other.

We fall short and disappoint ourselves, and each other, in so many ways. The promise of forgiveness lures us toward humility, encourages us to begin again, to pick up the lost threads, the broken threads, to pick them up and find the art that remains in them.

Hope that the good potentials in our lives and in the world

can be found or reclaimed creates a willingness to risk trusting each other despite our failures. When we take our place in the potentials of the story begun by Jesus, take and retake our place right now in Seekers as one paragraph in that story, we are saved from loneliness and invisibility, from confusion and hopelessness, from alienation and a descent into negativity.

As a result of trusting God with our lives, the hard part, we can face death with acceptance, and, among other things, link-up again with our Christian brothers and sisters who are so concerned about facing into death without fear. Trusting Seekers can be part of trusting God, but Seekers isn't perfect. Like any other human community, Seekers needs large doses of this healing medicine of forgiveness and salvation. We who do trust Seekers can testify that it is one good place to explore and engage the good news.

We don't possess the good news of salvation. But, when we forgive each other, trust each other in the midst of our failures, hope ourselves into the best emerging potentials in our common life, the good news possesses us. We understand that we can write a good paragraph in the Christian story that is both historical and still emerging. We are not intimidated by the challenges of joining a community risking into caring and ministry, not afraid of giving our lives to loving and caring for each other and for the world, because we know we are forgiven when we fail. And we have failed each other enough to know how precious such forgiveness can be. In our trying, and in our repentance when we fail, we come face-to-face with the third "person" of the Christian trinity, the Holy Spirit. Jesus points us not only to God as creator but also to God as an ever available Presence for those who have eyes to see. Several Christian theologies are framed as

speculative secrets. I am pointing to a secret that is right out in the open but often unnoticed. Sometimes we don't see it because we are distracted with selfishness or by the idols of success, bodily pleasure, fame, or wealth. Many religions weigh in against such distractions. But we can't find salvation just by saying no to what is ultimately unsatisfying. Instead, when we find ourselves distracted by fear, guilt, anger, sadness, loneliness, addiction of all shapes and sizes, accumulated injuries or just plain old comfort, the Jesus story reminds us to listen for the Holy Spirit, to be thankful for the words of judgement and grace that can help us pick up our lost and broken threads, help us repair our loom, help us remember the generative and creative patterns for linking our threads together.

We can't claim the Holy Spirit but we can relax into the Holy Spirit and find each other at the points of deep transformation. The direct experience of releasing the pains of life, of embracing and being embraced in shared thankfulness, shared creativity, and shared ministry, tell us that the Jesus story is good enough to live by, good enough to live for.

We don't need to speculate about the Holy Spirit. The signs of the presence of the Holy Spirit, active in judgement and in grace, are all around us and in us. We are not just thinking creatures, not just creatures who make things, we are creatures who ask and answer the questions of the meaning of life, who hunger and thirst not merely for happiness, but for the joy that comes when the best potential within us are recognized, claimed, and shared.

When we meet judgement with humility and a resolution to make

things better, we are true inheritors of the tradition of living by justice and the law. When we meet grace, when we embody grace and share it through our love and caring, we are true inheritors of the gospel message that love triumphs, that generosity brings us together, that faithfulness in the midst of distress and confusion can see us through to better days. It is the Holy Spirit that lures us toward these best possibilities that are hidden away within us, the best possibilities to be uncovered in the 92 naturally occurring elements that make up our body and our world. By avoiding speculation I have not, in turn, descended into humanism. Thinking about life in the context of emerging new possibilities doesn't look back to our least common denominators, to the kinship we share with Opabinia. This perspective looks forward to the emergent miracles that come with appreciating what is possible for us as creatures of God, appreciating what we have been shown in the story of Jesus and all who have contributed to that story since his death, and alert to what the Holy Spirit is making possible among us here and now.

I was intentional about slipping in the word miracles. I'm talking about the things that have happened in my lifetime that I couldn't anticipate, couldn't even imagine as possible. I could begin by naming some of the many technological breakthroughs that I didn't anticipate and didn't appreciate when they first happened. I remember doing research with mechanical card sorters, the prelude to a lot of computer programs. I couldn't imagine then that I would spend so many of my waking hours not just using a computer but enjoying the creativity of millions of people that I can taste through my computer.

Instead, I want to use this precious time to lift up a couple

of salvation miracles that were unimaginable to me in earlier years. You may not have noticed, but a leader from Slovenia will be the next president of the European Union. I regard the European Union as a miracle in itself, considering the centuries of enmity to be overcome, the barriers of languages and currencies to be overcome, and more. But that a leader should come from Slovenia, a little country South of Austria that was the first area of the former Yugoslavia to claim independence, is surprising to say the least. A leader who grew up under communism in a little country that has just barely claimed its freedom, will lead the capitalist European Union.

When I was growing up we had not even created the word transgender. Talk about invisibility and loneliness... Now Margaret Barusch is helping to create a legal clinic that will primarily serve transgender sex workers in the Boston area.

My mother explained to me that racial integration was a good idea but it could never happen. I got involved in the 1960s anyway and now it seems possible that the United States will elect an African-American president. If you think about it I'm sure you could add multiple examples to this short list.

Salvation was, and is, a miracle we can embrace. Let the dancing begin.