

Pat Conover: From Fear to Risk to Hope

Sermon given to Seekers Church on 12/22/96, second sermon in a [series](#),

Pat Conover

Lectionary Scriptures: [II. Samuel 7:1-16](#); [Luke 1:23-45](#)

From Fear to Risk to Hope

Begin with holding up the picture of Tiamat and explaining about chaos and opportunity.

(Tiamat is the Sea Monster in the [21st verse of Genesis 1](#). Naming God as the creator of Tiamat means that even the scariest and most chaotic realities have their place in God's design. The link in my mind between Tiamat and Jesus is based on the wilderness themes in the Jesus story. In my last sermon I talked about Jesus following the wild man, John the Baptist, and of being baptized in the wilderness. From the law and order viewpoint of Rome and of the Temple, Jesus, like John, represented chaos. I've drawn Tiamat carrying the egg of opportunity because chaos and fear are part of any important change. I've drawn Tiamat dancing, and I hope this picks up some of the imagery of Seekers as a [Jazz ensemble](#).)

I have been a "seeker" in a most practical way the last few months. I've been seeking for a new home for Seekers Community. I've put in over a hundred hours in my car or on foot looking for options and reviewing options. I've felt very much a part of a wider seeking process that has involved many in this congregation by now. From our own seeking, and from the lists various Realtors have provided, we have generated well over 100 possibilities. After initial reviews we have at

least thirty possibilities. After on site inspections we have several options that could work for us and are in the process of scheduling another dozen inspections. We need to continue the work of generating possibilities because it is clear that we are finding a lot of possibilities that are not on the Realtor computer lists. We need to keep on, as well, with investigating shared space alternatives. Several have been reviewed and dismissed and others are still under review.

Other Seekers have been focusing on financing and budget questions and on constructing a good decision making process for the community. In addition, after interviewing four agents, we have built a good working relationship with one. We have been talking with several financial people and are preparing to work with architects and zoning lawyers. Seekers has become engaged in moving and I am enjoying working with my Mission Group to help facilitate this activity.

I am very clear about how important it has been to provide the facilitation for this process out of a mission group and not just taking on this work as a practical task through some committee. This seeking repeatedly lifts up questions of value and vision for Seekers. For me, the goal is not to find the perfect space, which I regard as impossible anyhow, but rather to make the most spirit filled decision possible so that we can make our move with a deepened unity and a deepened readiness to use our resources to grow more closely aligned with the dreams God has for our common life. It seems to me that the goal of Seekers is not to have a perfect space but to invest together so that we have as strong a physical base as possible for our common life and our ministries.

Kate Cudlipp joined Mollie and me on Friday to investigate three buildings. At the end I asked her what she thought. She replied that it was a challenge for her to see physical possibilities in spaces but that the bigger challenge was just to get engaged with the reality that we are getting ready to move. I've become so engaged with the seeking process that I'm

getting a little forgetful that many Seekers are still at the point of letting it get into their consciousness that we are getting ready to move.

This sermon emerges out of the middle of this seeking and follows up some of themes of moving from fear to hope.

I was sort of surprised that the lectionary story in Second Samuel is so relevant. In verses 5-7, Nathan says to Daniel:

"Are You the man to build me a house to dwell in? Down to this day I have never dwelt in a house since I brought Israel up from Egypt; I made my journey in a tent and a tabernacle."

On its face, these verses suggest that the presence of God is not dependent on a fine building, on being established, on having a fixed location. Such values are important to Seekers to this day. It seems to argue against buying a space or investing in bricks and mortar.

But Nathan is actually making a different point. Starting in verse 11, Nathan is recorded as recounting the will of God, saying:

"When your life ends and you rest with your forefathers, I will set up one of your family, one of your own children, to succeed you and I will establish his kingdom. It is he shall build a house in honor of my name and I will establish his royal throne for ever. I will be his father and he shall be my son."

This is a bold position for Nathan to take. He is telling David he cannot control the temple as well as the palace. He is saying, "You build your palace and one of your children will build the temple, a child who will accept my guidance as a father to a son." I am using the patriarchal language because Nathan is making a patriarchal point about power and control.

Nathan is taking a position in favor of the separation of

church and state, a position against theocracy. He is saying the temple should not be a statement of political triumphalism, but rather a place committed to the ongoing engagement of God's presence. The temple is not built to capture God's presence and fix God in one spot, with controlled access. That is the lesson we must carry from our wilderness experience. With that in mind, a proper temple, committed to God and not to a triumphal state, a triumphal culture, can be built. And, of course, Solomon goes on to build a magnificent temple.

For Jesus, the temple was a big problem. Jesus followed John the Baptist in returning to the wilderness to renew spiritual roots, to remember that the presence of God is not fixed in one place. The temple was magnificent in the time of Jesus and journeying to Jerusalem and paying the temple tax was a key ingredient of being part of Judaism in that time.

In the [23rd to 45th verses](#) of the opening chapter in Luke, we have a repeat of the opening theme of each Gospel, that Jesus is greater than John the Baptist. This underlines most brightly that the ministry of Jesus was closely identified with that of John. In the story of Elizabeth and Mary, Luke has found an ingenious story line to respect John but to have Jesus trump John. John is born of an old woman, a story that recalls the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac. Such a birth to an old woman is remarkable but the birth of Jesus to a virgin by angelic intervention is miraculous. Furthermore, it underlines that John was of the old order while Jesus is the start of something new. I dislike the tone of Jewish sectarian politics that underlies this story. In verses 31 to 33 we also get a dose of triumphal Zionism.

"You shall give him the name Jesus. He will be great; he will bear the title 'Son of the Most High', the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David, and he will be king over Israel."

This is the kind of triumphalism we hear so brightly expressed in Handel's "The Messiah". It is treason. It is rebellion. It is the kind of statement that got John the Baptist and Jesus killed by a fearful state. It is the kind of spirit that led to repeated rebellions against Rome, to the genocide by Rome against Jerusalem forty years later. It is the kind of statement that leads some scholars to believe that Jesus was a Zealot, or at least had a significant following among the Zealots.

But there is a subtle shift in this triumphalism in the Magnificat, the famed Song of Mary. In verses 52 and 53 we read,

"He has brought down Monarchs from their thrones, but the humble he has lifted on high."

Here we have more delicious treason with a flavor of "Power to the People." I do read such scripture as important to liberation theology, a passage against monarchy and in favor of democracy.

The Magnificat is as hard on economic oppression as on political oppression. Following the remark about bringing down monarchs from their thrones the Magnificat reads,

"God has satisfied the hungry with good things but sent the rich away empty."

The Magnificat closes with God choosing to "stand by the side of servant Israel." This anticipates the classic rebuttal of patriarchalism, of political and economic oppression, when Jesus says, The greatest among you shall be your servant.

The guidance I get from this scriptural work is that it is all right to buy a building as long as we are not seduced by the process or the outcome. We must not pick a building that smack of triumphalism, of identity with the dominant political and economic classes. We must not try to build a temple that fixes

God in one place and draws all our attention inward. Our relocation must not proclaim any of the following spiritual messages.

- We Have arrived.
- Come join us for the prestige of having a beautiful place to worship.
- Come join our protected little world where we can wall out the distractions of everyday life.

I am asking Seekers to stand against the spirit of "**A Mighty Fortress is Our Church**, a bulwark never failing,"

At least two important implications of rejecting triumphalism come to mind. The first has to do with the building we are in right now. At the time this building was acquired it was not a symbol of triumphalism. It was a symbol of the mighty brought low and required an enormous amount of rehabilitation to become serviceable for the Church of the Savior. But, in the beginning of Seekers, and for those of us who have come since, our setting is a setting of dominance, a building on Embassy Row suitable for housing the representatives of a foreign political power as official representatives to the United States. And, bluntly, it has something of the feeling of a fortress. Furthermore, so much nostalgia is attached to this building that it also has something of the feeling of a museum. We cannot afford anything so prestigious, and I think that is a good thing.

The second implication has to do with image issues in any shared space arrangements with an existing institutional church. Several of the alternatives under consideration are decidedly triumphal buildings. While there is something to be said for reclaiming sacred space from fortress like imagery, as renters we would have little capacity to do such spiritual work. In too many institutional churches we would be like children who lack the confidence to leave home and be on our own. This doesn't mean that sharing space is a bad idea. On

the contrary, for all the energy I have put into reviewing the purchase options for Seekers, I am still very much in favor of shared space under the right conditions. It just seems to me that it shouldn't be triumphal space.

While many Seekers do not feel particularly triumphal, I think we do need to remember our identity points with middle class culture. That is, we tend to identify with, or at least be in silent collusion with dominant culture while feeling that we are not responsible because we are not in control. We like our safety and security. We like the feeling of knowing how to get things done in this society. If we are going to be the people who claim our own space for a new home then we need to be clear it is too facilitate our opportunities to draw close to God without attempting to fix God in one spot to make God easier to find.

The fear element comes from the other side of this coin. Do we have the resources to get a new home? You know I think the answer is yes. Lately I've been thinking that perhaps the larger Seekers fear is that we will have to take the step of facing our freedom and claiming Seekers visions in ways that are appropriate to our gifts. We have been kind of comfortable in our near invisibility here. But we have been taking steps toward visibility. We have a [brochure](#). We have a [web site](#). In our new space I deeply hope there will be a sense of released energy for our gifts and callings.

- Room for our artists of all kinds
- Room for our international people to find their synergy
- Room for our children without so many "Nos"
- Room for people that are having more trouble getting around
- A Seekers flavored welcome that frames the entrance into the space we create

If we do indeed turn to buying we need to think both spiritually and practically about the stewardship of acquiring

property and the stewardship of using property. But stewardship is not the only relevant spiritual issue at stake. We can choose for beauty without building an art museum. We can choose for relative safety without choosing a fortress. We can choose for service possibilities without thinking spiritual service is utilitarian.

We have commonly used the language of seeking a new home for Seekers. Our Mission Group is named the "[Homemakers](#)." I think the word seems obvious to most Seekers. We need to move from this home to another home. It seems most striking that we are not naming our search as a search for a church. The youth really got it right last week.

Moving is a solemn responsibility. We need lots of duty, lots of planning, lost of counting of costs. But we also need to dance with Tiamat, to let go, to join our hands, join our spaces, to have a little fun, to imagine what we might do there, or there, or there. So come, dance with Tiamat and Nathan. Dance with all your Seekers Friends. Dance with the Christ, coming again and again as a child in our midst, full of the hope that things can truly be new, that we do not have to repeat the errors of our parents, nor our own errors. Come dance with Emma Goldman, who said something like, "If I can't dance at your revolution, I'm not coming."