

# Pat Conover: The Advent of Justice

Sermon for Seekers Church

December 12, 1999

Pat Conover

## The Advent of Justice

The third part of the book of Isaiah, chapters 56-66, was compiled from many authors after the return from the Babylonian exile in the era around 500 B.C. Third Isaiah is very different from First Isaiah which was written in a time of impending doom and calls for faithfulness and repentance to ward off God's judgment. It is also quite different from Second Isaiah, my favorite part of Isaiah, which seeks to comfort the people in exile and looks forward to a future day when a new kind of leader will rescue the people.

Third Isaiah has diverse themes all of which need to be understood in the context of the question, "What do we do now?" The people had gained the release they longed for and it was not wonderful. They had returned to Jerusalem and the surrounding areas to find the city in great disrepair, the fields and wells ravaged, and the land inhabited by people they called foreigners, people who had moved in while the Jews were in Babylon. It was a time of chaos, confusion and weakness.

Isaiah 61 is a liturgical poem. The poem was well known. Luke, in his fourth chapter, has Jesus quoting the opening verses as the signpost of his ministry. I am going to read the opening of the poem again with an adjustment that brings it into keeping with Luke. Verse 2 in Isaiah 61, is translated in most Bibles as proclaiming a day of vengeance. The Interpreter's

Bible, at least, argues that the Hebrew word translated as vengeance can better be understood as the word "rescue." That usage is in better keeping with the rest of the poem. The fact that Luke does not refer to vengeance suggest that at least in his day the Interpreter's Bible understanding made the most sense. I also follow the Interpreter's Bible and Luke in rendering an underlying Hebrew word as poor rather than humble.

## ***Isaiah 61: 1-3***

*The Holy Spirit has entered me,  
God has anointed me,  
I have been called to announce good news to the poor,  
to support the broken-hearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives and release them from  
prison,  
to tell you that this is the favored time of God,  
a time of rescue,  
a time of comfort for mourners.  
There shall be garlands of flowers instead of ashes,  
the shared oil of gladness instead of the tears of those in  
grief,  
even the heavy-hearted shall dress in splendor.  
They shall be called the trees of righteousness planted to  
show God's beauty.*

*Transliteration based on the Revised English Bible with changes made based on the Interpreter's Bible and the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 4.*

The claim that this is the time of God's favor takes the language of apocalypse, the language of the end of days, the themes that our children are studying upstairs, and says that special time is here and now. This is a poem that challenges us to move from waiting and hoping to embracing each other, to celebration and to action. We shall share flowers and oil even

in the midst of all the old hurts, the remaining burdens of old oppressions, and in the face of uncertainty and weakness. Adventuring is about willingness to live into such a reality, trusting that this too is God's favored time, even if it does not look like our imagination.

For at least ten years, Advent has been the most challenging of the Christian seasons for me. About ten years ago I figured out that the real spiritual challenge of Advent was to believe that things could be new, that we are not stuck in doing what we've always done and getting what we've always got.

Advent is a time for waiting, a time of darkness. However, God does not leave us alone in such a time. We have promises and hope to shape our waiting, smells and feelings, which lure us toward what we cannot yet see. I put Isaiah's flowers and oil on the altar this morning to remind us to give thanks even while we are in the dark, even when we emerge into a newness that is not quite the shape we were hoping for, but God's favored time nonetheless.

The year of Jubilee is when debts are forgiven and opportunity is restored was part of the longing for a new time when the old rules no longer bind so tightly. Such a theme is linked to the phrase, the time of God's favor. The Jubilee concept was developed out of the concept of Sabbath. The numerology was seven times seven. It may seem impossible to you that we could ever have a Jubilee year but the concept of Sabbath has proved attainable. The institution of Sabbath was and is immensely good news to the poor. It was the first law to protect laborers and it included protection for aliens and sojourners. It created the one-day weekend, a break in the rhythm of endless toil. For Chinese laborers, mostly women, who have been tricked into forced labor in the sweat shops of the Northern Mariana Islands, working seven days a week for pitiful pay to make garments which bear the tag "Made in the USA," recovering the Sabbath as a labor law would be an act of

great relief.

Sabbath was also a concept of healing for the land, a guidance in agriculture to let the land lie fallow for two years so it could recover its strength. For all the land that has been turned into desert in Africa, the Sabbath is good news indeed. In a season when U.S. farmers are in great distress despite producing bumper crops, marginal farmers in developing countries have been forced into the marginal lands that becomes deserts, or become otherwise unusable, by those using the good land to grow the export crops we find in our supermarkets every day.

In the poorest nations of the world, it is common that about 70 percent of the population is engaged in marginal or subsistence farming. Furthermore, most development plans continue to call for squeezing capital from these farmers so that urban industrial development can occur. Squeezed by international institutions into paying off debts from which they received little if any benefit, and squeezed often by their own governments which are grounded in whatever there is of an urban elite, such marginal farmers often have little hope that their circumstances will ever improve.

It does not have to be this way. Japan showed us in Taiwan and Korea that real land reform and agricultural investment could contribute substantially to overall economic development. Japan and Western Europe have shown us that farmers can be protected and enjoy a good life instead of being exposed to every whim of change in the price of agricultural commodities.

Multi-national corporations have turned the marketing of agriculture into a force that sees land and farmers only as economic resources to be exploited in the name of profit. Under-capitalized marginal farmers cannot compete and so they are prone to lose their land if it can be better exploited by those with capital. Without their land third world farmers, as well as their wives and children, are literally dieing to

become very cheap labor for the new plantations or the urban factories.

Half the population of the world is living in absolute poverty with incomes of less than \$3.00 a day, 1.3 billion live with incomes of less than \$1.00 a day. The children and the elderly die the fastest but even the strongest struggle on in situations with little hope that any development strategies will help them in their own lifetimes. There are wonderful examples of progress against this background of gloom and doom, including examples that we Seekers are involved with, but we need to also be transforming the economic and political deals. In addition to pulling people out of the flood downriver, we have to move upriver and stem the floods and stop those who are throwing folk into the river. When you hear the statistics about the millions of people dieing from hunger each year think of these marginalized farmers and their families and think of those displaced from even the remnants of marginalized farming to wander and to die.

There are many folk in Seekers who have gotten their feet wet in this flood, Seekers who are sharing flowers and oil in the darkness. It strikes me that we might find each other and share our conversations so that we can claim each other, claim our work, share our light and makes Seekers as a whole, not just in our separate works, a growing place for the seeds of world-wide economic transformation.

Most of you know that I have spent my career in the United Church of Christ working on economic justice issues within the United States so you may be surprised that I am talking about poverty and development in a global context. Part of the reason is that I have recently been assigned the task of helping the United Church of Christ begin to do more of its justice work within a global perspective. Lately I have been putting a lot of energy into developing a conference in Kansas City for next March 18, a conference that will address the issues of global economic integration as they affect farming

and ranching. One significant part of the design for this conference will be conversation between a first world and a third world farmer.

For a long time I've understood that a major cause of poverty in the United States is that there are so many who are working for very little income and with few or no benefits. Wages have not kept up with inflation over the last 20 years for workers in the bottom 40 percent of employment. Well-paid, and unionized manufacturing work has been exported to the third world where people are thankful to work for a dollar an hour instead of starving, where governments are glad to forget about environmental niceties so that they can receive some trickle-down from the big profits of the few. While the most recent economic reports on the United States tell us about a variety of statistical improvements, we are also continually reminded of what a wonderful thing it is that the wages of everyday working people are not going up and therefore not causing inflation. These stories never tell us that the incomes of CEO's and other economic elites are going up at a crazy pace and no one ever talks about their income as a threat to inflation.

The spirit of exploiting low-paid labor is just the same whether it is in Tanzania, Turkey or the South Bronx. The World Bank is advising the United States to privatize Social Security just as they counsel or force other nations to cut back on education and health care for the poorest of the poor in the name of structural adjustment. Thankfully, the World Bank is showing signs of turning some of these policies around.

The mandate of the five-year-old World Trade Organization is to cut back on non-tariff barriers to trade. The non-tariff barriers are things like environmental protection, food safety laws and workers rights. President Clinton has been getting good press for speaking up for workers and the environment in hopes that people will forget that the Clinton Administration

joined with Republican leadership to fight for the creation of the WTO as a secretive body, which would attack such values. Now Clinton is blaming the failure of his appeals for worker's right and environmental protection on the resistance of poor countries. What isn't being said is that those who are speaking for these poor countries are their trade representatives, leaders who are commonly trained and selected by the urban elites of poor countries, those who are the beneficiaries of whatever passes for trade and development. These elites are often trained in the United States, selected and supported by international organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Do not think that Clinton is referring to the voice of the poor when he talks about resistance from poor countries.

We have been using the School of the Americas to train the armies of Central and South America in counter-insurgency warfare. Commonly these "insurgents" are the labor leaders, teachers and clergy, the kind of people who speak out against the deals cut between urban elites and multi-national corporations in the name of trade or development. First, the multi-national corporations cut deals with oppressive elites and then we train their generals to make sure that no one can object effectively.

The United States and some economists are speaking in ways that are more positive as well, but we will never get to true transformation unless we face the powers and principalities. We need the hope that charitable work generates so that we can do the hard work of fighting for justice.

Let me be clear. We are living in a time of empire, a time of monopolies and near monopolies that make a mockery of the kind of free market capitalism envisioned by Adam Smith. We are not talking about many small producers selling to many buyers. We are talking about corporations that have economies bigger than medium-sized nations. We are talking about corporations who can move their factories from Massachusetts to South Carolina

to Mexico and to China in an ever-downward spiral of lower wages and benefits. We are talking about financial managers who are moving a trillion dollars a day around the world, private buyers and sellers of currency who can overwhelm the reform efforts of small and medium countries that try to fight back against the terms imposed by the big corporations, money changers who intrinsically profit from currency instability.

We are not talking about free-market capitalism. We are talking about empire, the control of the many for the benefit of very few. We are talking about the reports of improved incomes when what is real is the averaging of rapidly upward growing income for the few in contrast to the downward growing income for the many. We're talking about the recent article in the Post that praised the Argentina economy as vital and growing and then went on to point out that many people had been forced out of good paying work into poverty.

At the beginning of this year, I thought we would surely achieve an increase in the minimum wage of a dollar an hour over two years in the United States. We had identified a majority of votes for the raise. Workers would benefit and it would have a favorable impact on the federal budget. Minimum wage laws keep employers on a level playing field and bring more income into low-income communities, which support economic growth where it is most needed. In the end, the top Republican leadership delayed the process as long as possible and managed to stop the increase by refusing to allow a clear vote and by offering an alternative that was loaded up with tax breaks for the wealthy. Part of the game was getting back at Clinton for vetoing the tax breaks that would have forced the federal government back into deficit budgets and more pressures on low-income programs. It is a very ugly scene, no different than the ugliness of Pharaoh to the Jews, no different than the ugliness of slavery and share-cropping in the United States, of company-towns in North Carolina, and of children sewing soccer balls in India when they should be

playing with those balls. If Jesus came back into the world tomorrow, which children do you think he would go to first?

This is the kind of ugliness that requires strong Christian faith to face. This is tougher than doing the good things we can do to help. This requires saying no in some places where you can get hurt.

Moreover, I have to point out here that the tradition of the Church of the Savior is not much help at this point. Adult volunteer ministry is downstream ministry. It is good ministry but it is not enough and it is not the fullness of what the good news promises.

Justice and not just charity is still a challenging word in Seekers. Luke's signpost reminds us that the coming of Jesus is not like the coming of Santa Claus. Christmas is about the breaking in of the reign of God, not with the triumphalism of Handel's Messiah, but with the concern for those who sew the soccer balls we give each other as Christmas gifts.

My office has provided one rather light way of facing into the truth I have been holding up this morning. Upstairs I will be providing a table which will let you send some Christmas Cards to some Chief Executive Officers of some corporations which need to do a lot more about ending sweat shop abuses. The cards are respectful but also challenging. I hope many of you will want to share this witness. You can complete the task in a few minutes or you can take the materials home to do later. Interpretive materials and fact sheets are available as background for this act of witness.

Such witnessing is light work and light making work. It will not transform the world by itself but it is flowers and oil in the darkness.