

“God is Blue” by Pat Conover

November 14, 2010



Salvation is about experiencing God and experiencing ourselves in relationship to God. It is the experience itself that grounds salvation. Understanding and appreciating the experience of God, understanding and appreciating our relationship with God, builds on the direct experience of God and guides us into thankfulness for our lives, for our human relationships, and for the world we live in. We build with constructions of *concepts* and language to help us *understand* and communicate with each other about our experiences of God. We construct *images* to help us *appreciate* and communicate about our experiences of God.

Our construction of concepts and images are only human constructions and they are limited and inadequate. They point to God and away from God. I had a wonderful and brief experience of a particular shade of blue while looking at the ocean in the Madaleine Islands. On reflection I conceive of that moment as an immediate and unmediated appreciation of the marvelousness of the world God created for you and me to live within. Thinking about the experience and talking about the experience calls back my memory of the experience. I can tell

you about my memory of the experience but that is unlikely to matter to you unless you have had a similar experience for yourself. If I tell you, "God is Blue," that is both true and misleading.

This sermon arises out of my eagerness to share with you the kerygma, the Living Truth of salvation, that matters so much to me. I would love to be able to just give you the experience of salvation. Since that is impossible, since you have to have your own experiences, since your God may be orange or striped, I'll settle for pointing you to the potentials for your own direct experience of God and encourage you to open yourself to such experiences.

Concepts are good for understanding and guidance. Images are good for appreciation and alignment.

This sermon is about the humility to recognize the limitations of even our most cherished concepts and images, the courage to engage and transform concepts, to shatter and create images to help us deepen our worship of God, to transform our relationships with each other, to engage the world around us more creatively and more generously in our ministries and stewardship.

One of the most troublesome concepts for Christianity is the concept of dualism, of a separate body and spirit. Dualism is present in Hebrew Scripture. Dualism is more pronounced in the New Testament where the impact of Greek and Roman philosophy entered Christianity during the transition from the religion of Jesus to the religion of Paul. This transition included a

recentering from the context of Jewish culture to the context of Gentile culture. This transition to dualism in the context of Greek and Roman culture was established more firmly in the third century after Jesus as orthodox theology defeated alternative understandings of Christianity over a series of ecclesiastical confrontations. Challenging dualism is not a new idea in Seekers but it is very hard to do. Concepts like "Holy Spirit" for communicating about the direct experience of the Presence of God suggest the dualism of body and spirit. Concepts like "Christ is Risen" draw attention away from the person, the teaching, the leading, the healing, of Jesus as incarnate among us. God is red.

We Seekers continue to emphasize the importance of the Bible despite our conceptual difficulties in reading and understanding the Bible. This distinguishes us a bit from other progressive Christians who sometimes seem to regard the Bible as an anachronistic distraction. Sure, biblical concepts are also human constructions and deserve no special authoritative status. On the other hand, the Bible is a source of revelation, of guidance for salvation, because it is a record of struggle to understand and appreciate God in changing circumstances, a thousand year struggle in multiple languages and situations, the unfolding understanding of concepts like covenant and forgiveness. Once we get past the selective literalism of fundamentalists, the doctrinal structuring of Protestants, the hierarchic pretensions of Roman Catholics, we can appreciate the gifts of contemporary biblical scholarship at the points where the Saving Truth, the kerygma of scriptural passages, is unpacked and made available. When some of us studied the gospel of Mark, the author's emphasis on the importance of forgiveness drew us toward an understanding of our own felt need for forgiveness. When David led us through a study of Paul's epistles my appreciation of Paul was brightened at the same time as my

awareness of the differences between Paul and Jesus were brightened. I like Paul better now, but I love Jesus the more as my Savior.

Turning to our lectionary scriptures I begin by noting that Haggai wrote from a priestly point of view even though the writing is in a section of the Bible commonly called the Minor Prophets. Haggai wrote at a hopeful moment for Jews after Darius of Persia allowed Judah to gain a limited independence after the military defeat of the Babylonians. As a priest Haggai was interested in rebuilding the temple and recentering the worship life of Jews around temple worship rather than worship in the diaspora. I mean recentering in both a geographic and spiritual sense. He promoted his vision of a Jewish empire, like the empire of David and Solomon, but an empire run by priests rather than kings. For example, he wrote, "Silver and Gold are mine, says God," meaning that silver and gold should be used to make the temple more attractive.

Psalm 145 can appropriately be read as congruent with Haggai which is probable why they are are grouped together in the lectionary we use. However, Psalm 145 can also be read as not merely reinforcing the concept of a special relationship between God and Judah, but also as having a more general appreciation of the importance of justice as an independent and prophetic guideline that holds the specialness of Judah up to a universal standard. Without much fantastic imagery, both Haggai and Psalm 145 reinforce themes of revenge and hope for a future intervention of God that aligns with Jewish apocalyptic thinking.

Second Thessalonians is written in a very different context

and, among other things, translates Jewish apocalypticism into Christian apocalypticism. When Paul wrote for a Gentile audience things were not looking good for early Christians. Jesus had been killed and humiliated on the cross. Jesus was clearly not the kind of Messiah that Haggai and the author of Psalm 145 were looking for. Jesus, following John the Baptist, preached a religion of the diaspora, presented a spiritual challenge to the heart of priestly worship based on sacrificing animals and supporting a priestly caste. Revolution was brewing and soon the temple would be destroyed again. The desecration of the temple is either anticipated by Paul or this part of Second Thessalonians was written by a later writer than Paul. In any case, the role of Jesus in this version of Christian apocalypticism is to slay the wicked man. The continuity with Haggai and Psalm 145 is the theme of revenge. All will be destroyed and brought to justice who accept falseness and wickedness. This revenge theme is in sharp contrast to the theme of forgiveness which has Jesus on the cross saying, "Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do."

For the here-and-now, the writer of Second Thessalonians calls for doctrine, instead of temple worship. "Hold fast to the traditions we have taught you." However, the author also appeals for support to the experience of the Holy Spirit by the readers, the kind of ecstatic experience best carried to us today by Pentecostals and Praise worship. Doctrine and ecstasy can be read as affirmations of each pole of the dialectic of order and chaos and we progressives do our best when we work with both aspects of this dialectic tension.
(repeat sentence)

In Luke we have a story in which the Sadducees, who didn't believe in resurrection and heaven, pick at one of the many

inconsistencies and problems in heaven oriented speculation. They ask, if a woman had many husbands on Earth who all died, who would she be married to in heaven. Sounds to me like this hypothetical woman should become the lead suspect in a murder mystery, perhaps with Adan Dahlgleish as lead investigator.

Luke, who was unaware of the author P. D. James, has Jesus answer: "There will be no marrying in heaven because everyone will be like angels." Since my marriage to Trish is the most important part of my life Luke's answer doesn't sound very appealing.

One interesting twist in Luke is that the author references the naming of the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" not as naming a special relationship between God and Jews but as an assertion that everyone in God's sight is alive. The more important thing for me in this passage in Luke is that the author turns away from themes of revenge in speculating about life after death. God is Yellow.

My understanding of a progressive reading of the Bible, which includes an appreciation of contemporary biblical scholarship, is that the biblical material should be engaged and assessed with awareness that the Bible was written over many centuries. Concepts and images of God, and the relationships between people and God, grew and transformed in highly diverse circumstances, including the following:

- nomadic wandering and fighting, both good times and starvation
- slavery and oppression in Egypt

- escape from Egypt and more centuries of wandering and fighting
- the military rise to power under Saul and David
- consolidation and expansion under David
- establishment and the creation of temple worship under Solomon
- centuries of political dissension, corruption, and military losses
- several cycles of exile and return
- a brief period of independence under the Maccabees, a family of priests
- semi-independence under Rome and the Herods
- the short period of John the Baptist and Jesus which coincided with the emergence of the Pharisees, the Essenes who were a withdrawn ascetic community, and the Zealots who carried on the hopes of the Maccabees
- the first genocide of Jerusalem by the Romans in 66 bce., included the destruction of the temple, another diaspora of Jews, and the diaspora of what was left of the first generation of Jewish followers of Jesus
- the emergence, and then dominance, of Gentile Christianity, both in the tradition of Paul but also in several other traditions.
- The creation of orthodoxy which included ecclesiastical combat over which writings would be included in what became known as the Roman Catholic version of the New Testament

Should we emphasize Seekers as an exile community, a remnant community, a liberation community, a prophetic community with an emphasis on the rule of law, or some other biblical image? Other images held up in the Church of the Savior include a lighthouse or a lifeboat, the inter-related inward and outward journey. I remember Sonya holding up the image of Seekers as a circle. Now we own this beautiful space with a mix of images.

How can we honor all the good things brought to us by members with deeply different religious experiences and traditions? How much should we engage or withdraw from the dominant culture in the United States, whatever that is? How much should we engage or withdraw from the several sub-cultures some of us work within? What does it mean to say that Seekers is in the tradition of the Church of the Savior?

Here are ten suggestions.

1. Sustain our wonderful culture of transformative conversation with attention to the guidelines of honesty, vulnerability, respect and caring for each other, accountability and openness, deep listening, hope, faith, confession and forgiveness, and love.
2. Consider, appreciate, and engage the leadership, modeling, teaching, and healing of Jesus.
3. Open our hearts to each other and to the transforming power of the Divine Presence. Worship the God Jesus worshiped and embody the Holy Spirit Jesus incarnated. Open ourselves to the ecstatic confirmation of the love of God.
4. Value creativity and play, commitment and sacrifice, the inner journey and boundary crossings.
5. Gather hope, courage, and orientation by looking for the Presence of God in all life situations and circumstances before we show up on the scene.
6. Engage all that is good and life-giving, let go of all that is hurtful or distracting, in our traditions, concepts, and images.
7. Follow our callings into ministry and stewardship.
8. Live fully the life we have been given, learn from our mistakes and make mid-course corrections, have the courage and hope to engage life without worrying overly much about purity, control, efficiency, and planning.

9. Forgive ourselves and each other, value the diversity that makes our community stronger and better grounded than the vision that any one of us can offer.
10. Face into mystery with curiosity, trust, and acceptance of what we have been given as human creatures.

God is green and black and white and orange and ultra-violate and puce, whatever color that is.