

“Salvation” by Pat Conover

27 November 2011



The First Sunday of Advent

My sermon for today is responsive to the kerygma, the Saving Truth, as found in the lectionary passages for today in the Psalms and in First Corinthians.

Hear us, Shepherd of Israel, leading Joseph like a flock.

Shine forth, as you sit enthroned on the cherubim; leading Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manassah, rouse your might and come to our rescue.

God, restore us, and make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved.

(Psalm 80: 1-3 NREB)

I am always thanking God for you.

I am thankful for the grace of God given to you in Jesus as the Christ.

You possess all you need to know and can fully express it.

What we testified about Jesus as our Savior has been fully confirmed in your experience.

(First Corinthians 1: 3-6. Rephrased based on NREB)

Most of you know that I spend the focused attention of my days writing a manuscript called Progressive Christian Theology.

Some of you know that I've spent the majority of my writing time for the last year editing and re-editing a thirty page section on metaphysics and epistemology. ...I'm not going to read that section to you.

The existential thread that guides me and readers through that section is that to understand here and now salvation we have to understand who we are here and now. Who WE are is important because my understanding is that we are saved as human beings in relationships and not as some speculated individual soul with a speculated payoff after we die.

For me, salvation is neither perfectionistic nor utopian. It starts where we all start, in the midst of life with lots of ambiguities and imperfect choices. If we are to be saved it will be as complex human creatures in a complex world, as complex human beings in complex human relationships and complex human constructions such as languages, the holiday season, and the State of Virginia. Salvation is about doing what we do better, being who we are better.

The word salvation is actively disliked by some of you because

of bad experiences with some traditional expressions of Christianity. I want to recapture the word for Seekers because it carries the image of a big change. The salvation vision of Jesus is transformative, more than an endless series of small and often conflicting reforms. Salvation is moving from illness and injury to health whatever our physiological condition, however we are being mistreated. It helps to have a transformative vision even when we live into the work we do, the choices we make, whatever the complexities we know and don't know, whatever our resources, limits, contingencies, and opportunities.

The transformative lures of God include vulnerability, repentance, accountability, responsibility, trust, hope, and commitment. Transformation requires inward looking as well as conversational honesty and a lot of times it is hard to know just where honesty will lead. Some of us have easier and happier choices to make than others. Whatever our opportunities and resources, the transformative vision of Jesus is likely to lead us into hard challenges. I've been given a lot and that means I have a lot of responsibilities.

Transformation is not just a big change in understanding or action as some liberals would have it. There is more to salvation than knowing the right thing to do and doing it. I believe Jesus pointed us to salvation before oppression is ended, before our choices are clear, before we have enough resources to do what we really want to do; salvation with the people who are part of our lives not some theoretical people we want to be with somewhere else. When we do travel to, or move, to Mali; crossing boundaries so that theoretical people become real people to us, we take our confusions and misconceptions with us, and we have a whole lot of new learning things to learn. Then we get to taste new flavors of

confusion, inadequacy, and hope.

Salvation is about aligning with the lures of God more than about understanding what to do, about being thankful for the life we have, the relationships we have, the resources we have, the opportunities we have. Salvation includes a readiness for mourning and celebration because our lives and the lives of others really matter. In addition to thinking, ideas, and understanding; salvation is also about feelings, values, and appreciation. We are saved as complex human beings in complex relationships, with complex opportunities and contingencies. We can't wait to live until we understand all we need to understand, can't wait until our motives are pure, can't wait until the hard conversations become easy. We can be better and do better. Dohedohedo.

Some of the lures of God include humility, courage, hope, caring, trust and vulnerability, responsibility and accountability, faith, love, and honesty. These are not just Christian virtues but are lures for all human beings. These lures are not merely aspirational but are rather realities we are already working with; perhaps well, perhaps badly. These lures are all lures for people-in-relationships. As individuals we can notice, explore, claim, engage, embody, and guide our choices with our understanding of such lures of God. The testimony and life of Jesus calls us to align with such lures even in the midst of our confusions, biases, errors, sins, and guilt. However well we prepare, we still have to choose and engage. Once engaged we see things differently because our standpoint has changed from what we imagined to what is. Salvation is about alignment, engagement, and mid-course corrections.

Sometimes we reevaluate our lives with attention, caring, and energy. Sometimes we reevaluate our jobs, our marriages, our participation in Seekers. Whether we stay or go, take on more ministry or put some down, turn toward or turn away from opportunities; whether we are growing or diminishing; the lures of God call us into places of danger. Jesus's mentor, John the Baptist was beheaded. Jesus knew the path he was taking was both transformational and dangerous. It was worth it for Jesus. Such realignment can be worth it for me and for you.

Salvation won't necessarily make life easier, won't change our reality as human creatures who die, won't end oppression or confusion, won't end the pain of putting off dreams and hopes in the midst of surviving and meeting responsibilities to others. But good orientation and hope matter a lot. Knowing what we hope for in ourselves and others helps us in conversations, helps with cooperation, helps with finding companions and lovers, helps with grieving the loss of companions and lovers. Like gravity, the lures of God are relevant for all the situations and moments of our lives.

As multi-faceted human beings with many aspects and capacities, we can move our attention from hope to gravity, to raking the leaves. We move among such choices and redirections all the time. Aligning with the lures of God helps us dance with life with more appreciation and awareness as we move from situation to situation, from moment to moment. We don't get to skip anger, anguish, or frustration. We do get to experience the hard parts of life within a larger orientation that helps us bear them. We get to make the best of bad situations. Sometimes we get to party. We get to repent and offer forgiveness along paths of building transformative relationships.

Whether things get better or worse for us, individually or collectively, a Christian understanding of hope is grounded in the ever-present lures of God and the possibilities for transformation and not just progress. I have lived through decades in the United States with amazing progress in science and technology, health and education, reductions in absolute hunger and poverty, and transformations in rights for women, races and ethnic minorities, people with handicaps, and the current transformation in rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. I celebrate such transformations and notice remaining dangers.

After celebrating and noticing our empowerment, after tucking away the memory that transformation can and does happen, it is time to notice that there are still big threats to the transformations I've just mentioned. Furthermore, there is still so much that is seriously wrong: billions of people living in absolute poverty with all its consequences, environmental degradation, worker exploitation in the name of competition and profits, wars and genocide, the use of torture by the United States and others, the distortion of democracy by wealthy corporations, and more.

Focusing on the bad stuff can disempower us. Forgetting hope and transformative vision can breed alienation and reaction rather than hope and servanthood. Focusing on the negative, refusing to take time for the little victories in life, makes us shrill and judgmental. When we are grounded in transformational embodiment of the lures of God, hope is not merely about some distant future. Hope is grounded in awareness of what God is already doing among us, grounded in awareness that the lures of God are accessible to everyone,

are experienced by everyone, however confused our concepts, however distorted our images. Here and now hope grounds alertness to possibilities that we can choose into opportunities, help us with conversational bridges for crossing boundaries and for enduring limitations. Hope can help us guess better about when to wait and when to act, when to listen and when to speak, when to challenge and when to support, when to approach and when to make space.

We don't have to teach each other to make the lures of God available, but we do need to teach each other to notice them. Winning arguments is not as important as growing in understanding and appreciating what is true. Winning loyalty is not as important as offering caring, honesty, and respect. Winning elections is not as important as governing well. Getting rich is not as important as building an economy that serves the needs of everyone.

My restatement of orthodox Christianity as the Christian Way to here and now salvation, concerns salvation as the human creatures and human beings we are:

- salvation as people in relation to each other and with the Earth,
- salvation as responsiveness to the lures of God,
- salvation as following the guidance of Jesus,
- salvation as thankfulness for our lives and world,
- salvation as acceptance of our human condition as creatures who live and die,

- salvation as appreciation of the general deal God offers everyone,
- salvation from anonymity, confusion, and alienation,
- salvation from disrespect, discrimination, and oppression,
- salvation for lives filled with hope, caring responsibility, accountability, trust, vulnerability, justice, solidarity,
- salvation as knowing what we are doing and why,
- salvation as crossing boundaries to be with other people who God loves,
- Salvation as humility and courage in all our moments and situations including all that is frustrating, irritating, angering, disgusting, and just plain wrong.
- and love within Seekers as we work together with understanding and appreciating God's Presence.

Our salvation includes reforming and transforming Seekers as a community, and as a moment and location in the emerging network of transformative Christianity, of being church together and helping each other explore and enjoy the good gifts we are being given. We have been given all that we need to do all this:

- the freedom to shape our community circumstances and moments with love;
- the freedom to practice vulnerability and forgiveness with the hope that our trust and repentance can stay ahead of our shortcomings and our sins;

- the freedom to empower each other rather than seeking power over one another;
- the freedom to work with sharing so that we all have what we need;
- the freedom of singing and dancing and worshiping and playing and having fun together;
- the freedom to probe the Hebrew Scriptures, the Christian Testament, the stories of the Christian Way, and our own stories so that we can help each other move from vision, to guidance, to choices, to actions, and to just being the best embodiment of the love of God that we can be.