

“Jesus, My Christ” by Pat Conover

January 12, 2014

The First Sunday after the Epiphany

I wrote the core of this sermon sitting on the patio of a Juan Valdez Coffee House in Quito Ecuador, a lovely space serving Colombian coffee. Samantha was sitting a couple of tables away coloring in a comic strip she had drawn for her husband for a Christmas present.

Going to Quito did not improve my feelings about Christmas. In a nearby upscale Mall the unifying slogan for the Christmas season was “Christmas, The Perfect Excuse.” On the patio I reflected, “What the heck, why not kill off Christmas with commercialism? Then I made a list of some things I don’t like about the biblical stories of the birth of Jesus.

1. The virgin birth stories aim at making Jesus a specially selected or created human being sent by God, a sort of divine man, whatever that means.
2. The homage, not merely gifts, paid by the Three Wise Men makes Jesus into a king in the line of David, a theme linked to a political and military understanding of Jesus as Messiah.
3. The aggrandizing of Jesus to make him more important than John the Baptist. John was born of an old woman and Jesus was born of a virgin.
4. The enemy picture of Herod slaughtering babies, a Zealot like inflaming of hatred and revolution, the spirit of

rebellion that later led to the destruction of the temple, the genocide of Jerusalem, and the persecution of Jews and Christians.

5. The idea that Joseph having sex with Mary would make her impure as if sexual intercourse destroys the potential for revealing God.

My gripe list led me into a far more fundamental problem I have with traditional Christian theologies: Roman Catholic, Calvinist, Lutheran, Anglican, Fundamentalist, and Pentecostal versions. I'm talking about the distracting usages of the word Christ.

I'm fine with the word Christ as a synonym for Savior. With that understanding, I'm happy to testify that Jesus is my Christ. With that understanding I'm happy to describe Seekers as a Christian community, in the tradition of the Church of the Saviour. In ritual language, when we name ourselves as part of the "Body of Christ" I think of our shared reality as being shaped by the guidance of Jesus.

The Matthew passage concerning the baptism of Jesus is an important window on the spiritual formation of Jesus that shaped what kind of Jew Jesus was. All four canonical gospels wrestle with the relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist. All four gospel authors are intent on telling us why Jesus was more important than John. Their exaggeration distracts us from understanding that Jesus learned from John and later transformed John's precious spiritual innovation.

John the Baptist challenged the magical conception and economic base of the temple priests in Jerusalem. We cannot propitiate God by animal sacrifice, or personal sacrifice. Trying to propitiate God is a distraction from the realization that forgiveness is a free gift of God. Our spiritual challenge comes with accepting the free gift and then living into, and out of, its implications. Baptism ritualizes living

into the reality of forgiveness as a good gift of God. Mark's gospel is dominated by the concept of forgiveness and it is Mark's gospel that provides our primary window on the narrative of Jesus as an adult. Jesus learned about forgiveness from John and was empowered for his ministry with the low status Jews who responded to his message.

The facts that Jesus was baptized by John, began his public ministry after John was imprisoned, presented his spiritual resume to John for his approval, suggest to me that Jesus was a follower of John. Matthew's third chapter image of John and Jesus emphasizes Jesus as an apostle of forgiveness rather than as a Triumphant Messiah who will provide revenge against the enemies of Israel and reestablish the Kingdom of David to rule the world. Making Jesus into a Triumphant Messiah for Christians before there were any Christians is the opposite image of Jesus as as an apostle of forgiveness and a servant to all. I cringe every time I listen to Handel's Hallelujah Chorus at Christmas.

Jesus was also a follower of John in terms of taking up the prophetic task of criticizing Pharisees and the Temple establishment. Part of what makes Jesus so precious to me is that he valued both forgiveness and justice and presents us the challenge of doing the same. We cannot get to personal or interactive salvation without both themes as prominent guides.

Recognizing Jesus as a person who underwent spiritual formation on a path to his own salvation is a powerful corrective to the Cosmic Christ image of Jesus as dropping down from heaven as God in human disguise to play out a script between two persons of the Trinity. This recognition leads to rejection of atonement and triumphal messianic theologies of the gospel authors and early church on three grounds: inadequate and misleading paradigms, narrative distortions, and failure to appreciate the importance of Saving Truth for shaping the relationships of Jesus with his close followers, of Jesus with the crowds, for understanding and appreciating

the spiritual empowerment of his close followers.

Jesus was not a superhero with special powers who performed supernatural miracles. My objections to this image of Jesus begin with noticing that it doesn't make sense. More importantly, the image of Jesus as superhero turns Jesus into an idol rather than a person. Idolizing Jesus obscures Jesus as a revelation of what God looks like in human form because it makes Jesus not human like everyone else is human. By making Jesus a special case, a Divine Man, a Cosmic Christ, we are lured toward escaping accountability by assessing that we can't do what Jesus did.

Jesus as the incarnation of God is best understood as guidance to each of us to also embody God by entering into an intimate relationship with the Divine Presence so that God can shine through us as well. Jesus guides us to focus on our own experience of the Divine Presence and the gospels tell us that Jesus commissioned his followers to do even greater works than he had done. It is because Jesus is not metaphysically special that he is able to reveal what God looks like in human form.

Jesus was not a Triumphant Messiah superhero in his lifetime and that steered Christians into an end of history apocalypticism that has several huge spiritual faults. Images of apocalypticism rather than here and now transformation directs attention away from thankfulness for the lives we have been given, for the companions who walk the Christian Way with us, for what has been achieved in our better human constructions, and for the wider world as it is. Apocalypticism accuses God of screwing up and needing to hit the restart button.

Jesus is my Savior because he guides me and other people to here and now salvation before everything has been made right. Salvation is not to be confused with good times, success, privilege, and abundance. We can celebrate all that is good and fulfilling in our lives without losing sight of all that

is abusive, depressing, exploitive, alienating, confusing, and destructive. The life we have been given is a wonderful gift even when times are hard. That is a core salvation message imaged by the Cross.

The image of Jesus as the Lamb of God sacrificed for the sins of the world is about as opposite of Triumphant Jesus as you can get, and equally distracting from what matters about claiming Jesus as Savior. Atonement theology is a distraction from the transformative revelation of forgiveness as a free gift of God symbolized by baptism. Imaging Jesus as the Lamb of God fits Jesus into a different speculated heavenly script of God sacrificing God's self to save us from being human. The atonement script is based on the story of the Fall in a speculated Garden of Eden that qualifies the message of the first creation story that all God made is good.

The priestly story of the Fall aims at patching up a fault in the priestly narrative about the Jews being a special chosen people. As a chosen people Jews were supposed to be triumphant as celebrated in the kingship of David, and particularly the kingship of Solomon which presents Solomon as a wise priest. This is a narrative of priests trying to reserve the concept of the divine right of kings for themselves.

The narrative failed when things fell apart. The kingdoms split and then were defeated in battle. The temple was destroyed and the Jews began their diaspora in a history of exiles. The spiritual challenge was abandonment. To rescue their narrative, the priests told stories of the unfaithfulness of the Jewish people who turned away from the laws of Moses and from priestly guidance by choosing a history of bad kings and chasing after foreign idols. The doctrine of the Fall aims at giving God a "Get out of Jail Free" card because God is imaged as not breaking covenant with his chosen people. Instead the idea of covenant as an unconditional choice of God was turned into a contingent covenant that the Jews broke by being bad. When Matthew and other gospel writers

swooped in to claim the deal of being the chosen people instead of the Jews they stole a curse rather than a blessing from the Jews.

The claim of a special deal has led, and still leads, to a justification for superiority, to the idolization of military and political domination. Special deal thinking leads to divisions, conflicts, alienation, persecutions, and sometimes wars over who holds the special trump card: Jews or Christians, Catholics or Protestants, Lutherans or Calvinists, Pentecostals or Mainstream, etc. It is the fundamental spiritual fault of American Exceptionalism and Israeli Zionism. I get reminded of the alienation of special deal thinking every Christmas when I get cards from my brother and his family that include pamphlets aimed at saving my soul from eternal damnation because I do not "believe in" Jesus the way they do.

I don't "believe in" Jesus. I believe Jesus who followed John the Baptist into recognizing that forgiveness of God is free to everyone. The sins of the world are not "taken away" by "believing in" Jesus but we can live into confessing our own sins, seeking and accepting forgiveness, making mid-course corrections in response to the guidance of Jesus, and living into the spiritual transformation of embodying and living out of our experience of the spiritual gifts of God, beginning with loving our neighbors and ourselves. Salvation may lead us to risk into death, illness, injury, confusion, and rejection but it is still salvation.

Jesus lived with courage and humility and invites us to embody the spiritual gifts of God, to do what is ours to do. I testify to Jesus as Savior because I am thankful for my imperfect life of following his guidance into the embrace of the Divine Presence. I testify to Jesus as Savior because I am thankful for the way his guidance and the Divine Presence has led us into becoming Seekers, to the lessons of humility and courage that come from sharing life with you, for the guidance

we have received for mapping our paths as we walk the Christian Way.

The concepts of Creator, Savior, and Divine Presence refer to three ways of knowing one God. Thinking about the trinity in this way escapes all the confusion of God as three persons, or as three parts of God. Focusing on the image of Cosmic Christ not only distracts us from the revelation of God in human form, but also leads us into confusion about the Divine Presence. Our direct experience of God is our experience, not our memory of Jesus. Reflecting on the guidance of Jesus can help us understand and appreciate our direct experience of God. Jesus died and we can be thankful for the recorded memories of Jesus. Despite numerous interpretive problems in relating to the gospel narratives of Jesus, we have enough guidance for salvation. A crucial part of the guidance of Jesus is to notice, explore, embrace, embody, and act in response to the Divine Presence. Jesus is our Savior because he lived his life in harmony with the Divine Presence.

The Matthew narrative of the baptism of Jesus images the Divine Presence as a descending dove and as a voice. These are epiphany images, transformation images, images of Jesus discovering his spiritual voice, his capacity for spiritual healing, his charismatic power to draw together and transform a band of close followers. The confirmation of Jesus as Savior came for his close followers when they claimed their empowerment grounded in their own experience of the Divine Presence after the death of Jesus. That same confirmation is available to us when we follow the guidance of Jesus to live into the experience of harmony with the Divine Presence in our prayers, in the shaping of ourselves, in the mutuality of interaction in this Christian community, in our personal callings, and in our share of our gathered callings.

The concept of the Divine Presence is about the potential for direct experience of God by anyone in any moment or situation. Jesus is not metaphysically special but he does offer a

particular invitation to walk the Christian Way of salvation. Jesus offers particular guidance for noticing, exploring, embracing, embodying, and living into and out of harmony with the spiritual gifts of God that influence everyone. How we conceptualize, image, and appreciate our experience of God matters for shaping ourselves, our relationships with companions, our relationships with the wider world.

Part of the guidance of Jesus concerns recognizing how God has been embodied, imaged, and conceptualized by others, including Samaritans. This includes recognizing what is good and bad in idolatries and ideologies. This includes recognizing how God is shaping the experiences of atheists who deny having any relationship with God, who deny the existence of God. God is not made less real by denial just as nitrogen is made no less real by the fact we cannot directly perceive it as we breathe it in and out. Jesus is our Savior because he guides us to recognize the gift of potential salvation for everyone, revealed in other great religious figures, revealed in each other gathered in this room this morning.

In physiological terms we are not saved from injury, illness, and death. We are saved for the life we have, however limited. We can claim opportunities for healing without idolizing our bodies with reference to sex, fashionable image, or mere longevity as a living creature.

In psychological terms we are saved from depression, hostility, loneliness, and self-centeredness. We are saved for engagement, forgiveness, caring, and hope.

In social-psychological terms we are saved from anonymity, confusion, and alienation. We are saved in relationship with companions who know and appreciate who we are, who help us figure out what life is all about, who help us come home.

Recognizing that we are saved as human beings in relationships means we must care about each other at least as much as we

care about ourselves. Jesus summarized the path to salvation by adding love of neighbor to the Great Commandment. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10:27 NRSV)

In interactional terms we are saved from disempowerment, marginalization, and neglect. We are saved for community, calling, and cooperation.

In social terms we are saved from oppression, enemy pictures, and injustice. We are saved for freedom, responsibility, and participation.

In existential terms we are saved from guilt, meaninglessness, and death. We are saved for forgiveness, meaningful engagement, and life.

In spiritual terms we are saved from idolatry, pride, and escape. We are saved for thankfulness, humility, seeking, and commitment.

We claim the tradition of the Church of the Savior, not the Church of the Lamb, not the Church of the Boss, not the Church of the Hero.