

Proclaiming salvation

A pastor's perspective

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The potter's wheel in my workroom has often stood idle in recent years. I now spend more time shaping words into sermons than moulding clay into aesthetic and useful objects. But as a pastor, I often have the privilege of bearing witness to lives as they are shaped in encounters with the master potter.

The process of throwing a pot includes three related motions: the potter's hands move skilfully, the wheel rotates under the clay, and the clay responds to these movements. So it is with the proclamation of salvation.

The potter's activity

The first movement in forming and transforming lives is that of the master potter. The potter takes that lump of clay and skilfully

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guides and supports it as it is shaped into something beautiful. God recognizes the potential in the raw material, sees the utility in the unformed parts, and anticipates the reality in the re-formed life. God continually seeks to be our companion as we struggle with, delight in, and perform the tasks of each day. The grace to accept God's creative activity is our salvation.

To understand salvation, we must first understand the nature of sin. For much of my early life, I saw sin as breaking the rules, acting in ways that are offensive to God. Sin so understood makes necessary Jesus' death on the cross to cover the punishment we deserve for these violations.

When I was a student at a Lutheran seminary, I began to understand sin more as a tendency to make choices against God, as idolatry or pride. The sinful self, seeking without limits, tends

to “draw the whole of reality into oneself”;¹ it is curved in on itself. Sin is not so much a moral category, a set of actions opposed to the will of God. Sin is fundamentally about our relationship—or lack of relationship—with God. Sin is refusal to develop a relationship with the divine. When we are curved in on ourselves, thinking only about our own needs, doing things only to please ourselves, our attitudes and actions are sin-full.

Salvation is God’s answer to humanity’s preoccupation with self. Salvation is turning toward God. Menno Simons writes about salvation as *Gelassenheit*, yielding to God.² God continually seeks to be in relationship with us: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). Jesus is the person in whom we experience God present with us. And Jesus’ Spirit continues to guide us into all truth. Jesus takes away the world’s sin, because he makes it possible for the world to redefine its relationship with God. Jesus’ death on the cross reveals the depth and breadth of God’s desire for relationship with us (Rom. 5:6-10).

Resurrection demonstrates God’s unstoppable intention to keep death from having the final word, and to establish and maintain relationship with an otherwise alienated humanity (Rom. 6:10-11). Jesus offers the world salvation by opening a new way to be in communion with God. We do not yet know this communion in its fullness, but we are given clear indicators of what life will be like in eternity.

Signs of God’s activity are all around us. God is not stingy, and God will not overpower or coerce us. What we need are eyes to see God at work, ears to hear the still small voice of the divine, courage to respond to interior promptings, and grace to accept the gift of God’s forgiving presence.

The rotation of the wheel

The second movement is the preacher’s perception and sensitivity as she exegetes the biblical stories and the lives of those in the congregation. As the wheel moves under the clay, so the proclaimer seeks to understand the biblical text, the lives of the people, and the current context. The primary task of the one who speaks is to listen. All around us, God is communicating with us

in scripture, through prayer, in the lives of people, and in nature. A contemplative attitude, in prayer and in all of life, enables us to understand more clearly what God is doing.

And so the fashioning of the sermon begins. It begins by listening and thus providing a means through which God can communicate with God's people. Every congregation includes a variety of personality styles and ways of perceiving spiritual experiences. Given these differences, the preacher needs to provide a variety of ways to encounter God. Sermons will address a variety of topics and use a variety of preaching styles. But one constant in preaching is the communication of both grace and

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judgment. We do our best to present both, but in the end it is God and the hearer who determine which is which. Each person has a unique experience of salvation, of knowing God's presence.

When we speak, we speak in the present tense, because God's saving presence is always in the present moment. The goal of any sermon, any counselling session, any meeting for spiritual direction, is to experience God; we seek not just to know about God but to know God. The saving presence of the divine is more than holding to the right doctrine

about salvation or the correct theory of atonement; it is an experience of God that is transformative. Given my own spiritual sensitivities, my sermons seek to engage the imagination, and I season them with storytelling.

A young girl who lives with a foster family is in a state of distress. Her biological parents came to her foster home a few weeks ago and threatened to take her home with them. Now her foster parents are going on a holiday and leaving her with another family. She is fearful about what will happen to her. Then at school she has a run-in with another student. Reduced to tears, she spends the first period after break with the teacher's aid who talks to her about God's love and care for her. By the time school is finished, she can laugh and smile again. She tells her teacher that she has asked Jesus to come live in her heart. "God's angels are playing there right now."

The task and challenge of inviting another to experience salvation requires that our speech be capable of engaging the imagination, so that God's grace and freedom can enter our lives and surprise us. Imaginative speech enables us to entertain the possibility that reality includes a world beyond that of soap operas and the evening news. Imaginative speech recognizes that God's activity includes moral instruction and problem solving and doctrinal clarification, not in a wooden or rigid manner, but with energy and creativity. This speech creates an understanding that the real world is the world of loving relationships made possible by the God who seeks to be in loving relationship with us. This speech confronts evil, challenges established habits of behaviour, and encourages trust in and faithfulness to God. Just as the biblical text is able to summon out new life, so our speaking is to invite new possibilities, realities beyond our daily routines and relentless expectations.

Preaching about salvation is not for the faint of heart. Some may accuse us of speaking fiction, and others may brand our words with the label of heresy, but to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ is to proclaim a word that points us in a new direction, accessible through the powers of the imagination. Because with God there is always more, to follow God's lead will require more than a plodding dedication to the realm of facts. Salvation takes

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us to places beyond our knowing, pushing us beyond the norms of logic and leading us into a new and potentially dangerous territory of imaginative possibilities. The Gospels are rife with stories of God's salvific activity as Jesus and those he commissioned enact God's purposes on earth: some are healed of physical illnesses, others are freed from demons, and many are forgiven. People are invited to live a new reality.

Our first task as preachers is to listen for the stories and metaphors that communicate

God's intentions most clearly. The ones we choose need to be genuine enough to ring true, universal enough to speak to others, and deep enough to point toward God. Proclaiming is not easy work, but it is worth our investment. Through the Bible's witness

we know that God has been experienced in a burning bush, in a still small voice, in a wrestling match with a holy adversary, and in the breaking of bread; and the Holy Spirit is still at work in these stories with power to change our lives.

When people are free to listen to the story, they will make surprising and appropriate connections. As we enter the story imaginatively, new insights and unexpected responses move us to change an attitude, a behavioural pattern, a commitment. We remember visual material more accurately and longer than any other kind of material. When we do the work of picturing a story as it unfolds, we are drawn in. We become invested in the process of the sermon and open ourselves to its appeal. Narrative is the most natural form of human experience. Mystery, irony, complexity, and transcendence can all be communicated in a good story.

A preacher's wife dies. Her long life was filled with acts of kindness, service, and charity. The gospel of Jesus Christ made sense when she was around. But now she is gone, and of course there are memories, but there is also much loneliness. For those who grieve, where is God? Salvation is where God is. God is present and active right from the beginning as we are knit together in our mother's womb. As we respond to God's love, we experience forgiveness, and our lives are transformed. And not even death has the power to destroy that relationship with God. Jesus uses the beautiful word picture of his Father's house with its many rooms, and as we pass through death after him, he is getting them ready for us to inhabit. The acceptance of God's gift of endless love is also salvation.

Response of the clay

Some clay needs to absorb lots of water before it can hold a shape. Too much water reduces another kind of clay to an amorphous mass. Yet another kind of clay needs the addition of other materials before it has enough structural integrity to be thrown on a wheel.

Just as there are varieties of clay, so there are varieties of people. In our spiritual sensitivities and modes of expression, we differ. We experience God's desire to be in relationship with us in a variety of ways. These spiritual paths are not mutually exclusive. We can find ourselves on a number of them at the same time.

Some Christians open themselves to God most comfortably when their minds are engaged. They value Bible study because it lifts out truths that provide coherence and direction for their lives. For these folks, God is accessible through intellectual processes.

Other Christians experience God most powerfully in high energy praise-and-worship experiences. An intense feeling of God's presence in these spiritual mountaintop events provides fuel for Christian life. A powerful image of salvation for such people may be that of being born again, an experience of radical transformation and yielding to God.

Still other Christians seek God in inner peace. They may have dramatic encounters with God, but the many quiet moments of awareness of God's presence will predominate. Spiritual disciplines provide sustenance for the life of faith. A relationship with God cultivated in this way may move toward mystical union with the divine.

Yet another group of Christians are activists who identify with Jesus as they work for justice and peace. They experience God through their relationships with other people, perhaps especially with those who are poor, oppressed, and at the margins of society.

Just as the potter works with different types of clay, knowing how much water to add and when to mix in other ingredients, so God can work with each of us. As proclaimers of the gospel, pastors seek to provide opportunities through which people with different spiritual preferences may encounter God and grow in relationship with God.

Our proclamation of salvation may find expression in a wide variety of activities, including organizing a service project, offering spiritual retreats, conducting praise-and-worship events, and leading Bible studies. As pastors of two rural congregations in south central Saskatchewan, my husband Garth and I have engaged in community development work in addition to our official church ministries. At Mom's Time Out every month, mothers of preschoolers share from their experiences and pray together. We have provided leadership for establishment of a thrift store and a restorative justice program in our community. A men's breakfast affords a comfortable setting in which men in the community can share their lives. A book club includes those who

like to read and exchange ideas. Parenting classes give young parents a chance to learn from one another. A golf tournament and a barbeque invite interaction with some who do not regularly attend Sunday worship. A Mennonite Disaster Service assignment provides opportunity to assist those whose lives are disrupted by a natural disaster, and community life is strengthened. Spiritual direction is offered to those who want to foster an awareness of God's work in their lives.

Conclusion

God initiates salvation. God continually seeks to be in relationship with us. Our task as people of God is to respond to God's unconditional love. And our work as followers of Christ—and more specifically as pastors—is to find ways to encourage people to turn away from self-preoccupation and toward God. Just as the potter's hands work with the unformed clay, so God is working with the raw material of our lives. As the wheel of life turns, we alert people in our congregations—and those who are not found in our pews—to God's desires for them. As people open themselves to God's desire to be in relationship, the possibilities for transformation are unlimited. "O LORD, ... we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand" (Isa. 64:8).

Notes

¹ Paul R. Sponheim, "The Nature of Sin," in *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert Jenson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1983), 367–83.

² "The Human Condition: Coming to a Knowledge of the Truth," chap. 2 in C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 29–48.

About the author

Claire Ewert Fisher and her husband Garth are copastors of Fiske Mennonite Church and Herschel Mennonite Church, in rural south-central Saskatchewan. Her studies at Lutheran Theological Seminary have been augmented by classes in Anglican, United Church, and Mennonite seminaries. She is part of the core team of a spiritual director's formation program at a Catholic retreat house. As a parent of two adult children and grandparent to one granddaughter, she finds life rich and satisfying.