

On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand
Reflections on Our Statement of Faith
Part 1: Life and Death, Blessings and Curses
January 8, 2018 Roger Barkley

We're going to spend the next six weeks walking through the [Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ](#).

Why?

Because our Statement of Faith pulls together biblical teachings from the Old and New Testaments about what life can be and about how God is with us through the Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit and the Church.

This faith invites us to a life that has meaning and purpose.

We don't think of our Statement of Faith as Seven Pillars of Absolute Truth, or as a test of whether we will be among the few who are granted access to heaven.

Instead, it provides signposts for the Christian spiritual journey and it articulates Biblical truths that unite all Christian—liberals, evangelicals, charismatics, whatever.

As a nation, we've lost a common understanding of what unites us, of what it means to be an American.

We have replaced a uniting vision with rancor over what we *don't* believe, and whom **(we)** *don't* accept.

As a society, we've become increasingly fragmented and intense in defending our own tribe – and many churches have fueled that division.

And progressive churches haven't helped because while we've been quick to assure everyone that we are not like those Evangelicals and Fundamentalists, we've been slow to understand who we are.

So, with the beginning of a new year, this is a good time to remind ourselves of who we are: of how God has spoken to us and of the Good News we have to share.

Over Christmas, Kerstynn and Matt drove from Savannah to San Antonio to see her mother.

Somewhere deep in Alabama, Kerstynn became engulfed in a blinding fog ... the kind that is so thick you can barely see the line in the highway.

We've all heard of those massive pile-ups where hundreds of cars plow into one another.

She said that she was terrified and couldn't even see the road signs that could have led her off the highway to safety.

You become disoriented and lost in such a fog, but did you know that a dense fog covering seven city blocks to a height of 100 feet is composed of less than a single glass of water?

That small amount of water is fragmented into about 60-billion tiny droplets that can blot out everything from your sight.

Kerstynn's first reaction was to turn on her high beams hoping to just blast her way through, but of course that only made things worse.

I try to remember that when I feel overwhelmed by life ... money concerns, relationship problems, confusion about what I should be doing.

I can feel disoriented and overwhelmed as things pile-up and my first reaction is to just try to plow my way through.

But that often leads to stress and bad decisions.

But for God, my tangle of problems are just little droplets that He can guild me through.

Fundamental to our entire faith is that God is not abstract, but personal.

God is our partner – our co-creator – of life; we don't have to stumble around in the fog.

And the longer we live in this relationship and allow it to stretch, deepen and grow the more we trust that God stays with us through everything – the good, the bad and the ugly – and even to use our challenges to bring blessings.

Romans 8:28 *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

That's a promise for you to memorize so you can hang-on to it.

In the weeks leading up to Christmas we looked at the birth of Jesus, especially the scandal of the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah not being announced to the Temple priests, as everyone expected.

The scandal is that he was born to a poor family, announced to shepherds who were the lowest of the low in that culture's society, with a genealogy that included Gentiles, prostitutes and sexually-abused women.

That was not a coincidence.

Jesus came for all people, but often he is heard first by people on the fringes and by people going through tough times.

Jesus came for you no matter what your history or shame you carry inside yourself.

No matter who you are, or where you've been on your life's journey.

When the Hebrew people were about to step into the Promised Land at the end of their forty-year wilderness journey, God spoke through Moses to remind them of His promises and their obligations.

Deuteronomy 30:19-20 *This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to His voice, and hold fast to Him.*

God will be the co-creator of your life but you have choices that will either lead you to aimlessness and sin or to blessings and abundant life.

Our Statement of Faith says, "God ... sets before him the ways of life and death. He seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin...."

You may not like the hand you were dealt – maybe you came from a poor family, a family scarred by domestic violence, or maybe you inherited the addiction gene ... or maybe you just didn't get the "beautiful people" gene.

Regardless, God loves you for all that you are, and all that you are not.

God's desire is for you individually - and for us collectively – to have an abundant, blessed life.

Jesus even gave that as his mission statement: John 10:10 *I have come that they may have life and have it fully and abundantly.*

Yes, we get disoriented in the fog of daily life, distracted by our habits, derailed by our hang-ups, and damaged by our environment ... but in the end God offers us the choice of uncovering our blessings and life.

God loves you just as you are, but too much to leave that way.

For generations, people depended on a detailed rule book such as Leviticus to navigate life – but as time passed and society changed, the rules were obscured and their practices corrupted.

To correct this, rabbis made clarifying rules to cover more and more areas of life, but by the time of Jesus those layers of rules had become more of a burden than a blessing.

Jesus brought a radical message:

Matthew 11:28, 30 *Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life.... For my yoke is easy and my burden light.*

But don't think that he was leaving scripture behind:

Matthew 5:17 *Don't suppose for a minute that I have come to demolish the Scriptures—either God's Law or the Prophets. I'm not here to demolish but to complete. I am going to put it all together, pull it all together in a vast panorama.*

Think of Jesus leading an archeological dig of his faith tradition where ruins are unearthed to reveal the life that had lived there.

I love how the Message translation uses that phrase *pull it all together in a vast panorama*.

The bible is not like a sound bite you hear on Fox News.

It is a dynamic, evolving two-thousand-year account of God being with His people through a multitude of struggles and dozens of societies.

There is an arc and a direction to the story.

In 1981, the California Highway Patrol staged an intense search for a stolen vehicle and its driver, even to the point of placing announcements on local radio stations to contact the thief.

On the front seat of the stolen car sat a box of crackers that, unknown to the thief, were laced with poison.

The car owner had intended to use the crackers as rat bait.

Now the police were more interested in apprehending the thief to save his life than to recover the car.

How often do we run from God, while He is trying to rescue us from our own unknown poisons?

Running from God is the basis for sin – and we do this so naturally that it is like our default setting.

Sin is not some immoral act *per se*.

Sin is being disconnected from God ... and when we're disconnected we act-out destructive behaviors, we poison our lives.

In the broadest of strokes, there are two quite different ways of responding to the issues (of) sin and connecting with God.

First, is to double down on what you've been told are righteous laws and a cherished past.

This can bring a welcome a sense of security, especially when society is undergoing rapid changes.

But this security comes at the cost of living a brittle, sometimes judgmental faith.

You may have heard about Saint Peter giving a group of new arrivals a tour of Heaven.

It was wonderful with green pastures, clean cities and blue lakes.

But as they were walking down one of the wide avenues, they were surprised to see a high wall with signs posted every couple of feet that read, "Silence".

Someone asked Saint Peter what that was about.

"Oh," he whispered. "Behind the wall is where the Fundamentalists live. We let them think they are the only ones here."

Through Jesus, God was trying something new.

Through Jesus, God got up close and personal.

Through Jesus, God shares our human life and models what a God-led life looks like.

As Christians, we've come to understand that Jesus is the most complete and accessible self-revelation God.

Let me quickly highlight two points about what I just said: Jesus is the *self-revelation* of God.

Jesus was not just a gifted teacher or a wise sage.

Jesus didn't just make-up stuff like a New Age guru.

Jesus is God showing us about the nature of Himself.

Second, there are all sorts of ways to encounter God – through a walk in the forest, through other traditions – but Jesus is the most complete revelation of God.

Hebrews 1:1-2 Going through a long line of prophets, God has been addressing our ancestors in different ways for centuries. Recently he spoke to us directly through his Son. By his Son, God created the world in the beginning, and it will all belong to the Son at the end. This Son perfectly mirrors God, and is stamped with God's nature.

Jesus brings us the fullness of God that will never be found by just a walk with nature or having spiritual feelings.

Jesus brings the fullness of God from the heart of the Law, the passion of the Prophets and the voice of Wisdom.

In the Biblical tradition, Wisdom is the personification of an attribute of God, and one that modern Christianity doesn't speak of enough.

Maybe because Wisdom is a feminine character She was largely ignored by the church fathers as they articulated early dogma.

But She is a big part of the Old Testament, and Her relationship with Jesus and the Holy Spirit is intriguing.

In the biblical tradition, Wisdom is a feminine figure who has been with God since the moment of creation:

Proverbs 8:22 The LORD brought me (Wisdom) forth as the first of His works, before His deeds of old;

Wisdom is not a hidden, esoteric mystery.

Just the opposite: She puts herself out there in the middle of life - what she calls the town square of city gates – and calls to you.

Proverbs 8:2-4 She takes her stand beside the gate leading into the city, at the entrance, she cries aloud:

*“To you, O people, I call out;
I raise my voice to all mankind....”*

Wisdom is not about IQ or SAT scores.

Wisdom is about understanding how God's creation works; after all, She was there at the creation,

And with divine love, she then teaches about how to live successfully within God's creation.

Lady Wisdom speaks through Jesus urging us to a way of life where we know God is here, and active in whatever is happening ... so, to slow down, pray and listen for Her trusted voice.

In the United Church of Christ we say, "God is still speaking".

God didn't close the book and go home after Revelation 22.

God is still present, still guiding, still speaking.

Proverbs 8:5-11 *Listen, for I have trustworthy things to say;
I open my lips to speak what is right.
My mouth speaks what is true,
for my lips detest wickedness.
All the words of my mouth are just;
none of them is crooked or perverse.
To the discerning all of them are right;
they are upright to those who have found knowledge.
Choose my instruction instead of silver,
knowledge rather than choice gold,*

When you head into work or family or whatever this year, stuff is going to happen.

You may feel on top of the world, or you may experience times that feel like a setback, or painful or unfair.

God is already waiting there for you in that circumstance, leaving you with the choice of complaining, capitulating, collapsing... or listening for Wisdom's voice.

Wisdom says, (Proverbs 1:5) *Let the wise listen and add to their learning,
and let the discerning get guidance—*

To add to our learning requires curiosity.

Too often we don't add to our learning because we aren't curious.

We don't add to our learning because we don't take time to reflect, we don't ask questions, so we just repeat the same mistakes and flirt with despair.

Often, we prefer to live as victims of life circumstances, than to do the spiritual work of asking, "What is God up to in this moment ... and how can I get on board?"

So, this week, here are some questions to ask God when you find yourself blanketed in fog.

Maybe it will be a toxic person you keep encountering.

Why do I keep attracting this person?

It may be a new face, but the same person ... does that sound familiar?

Maybe it's a worry that keeps you up at night.

Maybe it's another wasted evening zoned out with something you really don't value.

You might ask Lady Wisdom:

How did I get here?

Is there something to learn from understanding what brought me here?

Have I seen this situation before?

What led up to me being with that person again?

Why did I make this mistake again?

What did I do in the past that was helpful, or not helpful?

Can I think of how God might use this situation to help me grow?

Again, “What is God up to here, and how can I get on board?”

For many years, the opening of ABC’s “The Wide World of Sports” opened with dramatic scenes of the “thrill of victory and the agony of defeat”.

They illustrated “the agony of defeat” with a painful ending to an attempted ski jump.

The skier appeared in good form as he headed down the jump, but then, for no apparent reason, he tumbled head over heels off the side of the jump, bouncing off the supporting structure.

It appeared like a disaster, but what viewers didn’t know was that he *chose* to fall rather than finish the jump.

Why?

He later explained, that it had been exceptionally cold, so that ice had formed on parts of the surface of the ramp.

The jump surface had become too fast, and midway down the ramp he realized if he continued, he would overshoot the snow and land on bare ground, which could have been fatal.

As it was, the skier suffered no more than a headache from the tumble.

His years of training, that had included some bad falls, had taught him how to navigate a potentially deadly situation.

His years of training had added to his knowledge and saved his life.

May you find the voice of Wisdom and the living presence of Christ to navigate you through all you do this coming week.