

## Ich bin klein

As I ponder the question of my salvation, and my eagerness to put the words on paper, I want to start at the beginning but my salvation story, like most modern literature, lives in the present, is informed by the past and doesn't have an ending that I can write. And to discuss my salvation without touching on judgment and faith is not possible, for it's your belief about the judgment day that determines your belief about salvation and it is the faith in your belief that determines how you live, or want to live, or at least how you think others should live.

I am over 50 and assume that I am still middle-aged, at least until I start receiving seniors' discounts. I attend the same church I grew up in, I am not as vocal in my opinions as I once was and not as involved in the structure as I have been but I still try and help out where I can. My initial experience of God was born in an ethnic, religious and familial context that had no lines of distinction. I was Mennonite, as was the borscht and zwiebacks I ate, the German church I attended and for the most part, the family I was born into.

My memory cannot reach back to a time when I did not believe in God. At my core I still come back to the basic sense that God exists, the world is His (a pronoun I use out of comfort and familiarity) and in some direct way He is concerned about my particular actions. This is the rock upon which I stand. To dig below, for me, would lead to madness. Not that I won't explore and discuss and debate my assumption, but in the end I come back to the same place. And not that this is my salvation, other than to say it is a starting point, because as James (the straightforward and practical brother of Jesus) points out, *even the demons believe – and tremble*.

My understanding of salvation began with the memorization and recital of German poems and verses for my maternal grandparents. These events generally took place at Christmas and were required as a harbinger of the gifts to come. Being a quick learner, the drive from Vancouver to Abbotsford was enough time to memorize something acceptable. As I approached double digits in age and had nothing to say, if need be, I would fall back on the first verse I learned at age three. It always got me through.

These obligations were subsequently waved when the same aunts, who joyfully watched my brothers and me squirm and sweat, had children of their own and decided against this form of cruel and unusual punishment, as well as the work required on their part to make it happen.

It was during the fourth grade that I attended my first evangelistic crusade, although I didn't recognize it as such. I was lured by a stranger standing on the corner of our schoolyard offering free pencils, along with an invitation to have some fun. Being eager to go, I took my kindergarten-aged brother and off we went in search of more freebies. Those were innocent times and I shudder to think of anyone approaching my children on the schoolyard, especially with a free pencil.

We made our way down to a church I had never seen before and stood in line. I answered a number of questions, the hardest of which was what denomination I was associated with. I had no idea.

“What’s the name of your church?” the lady asked.

“ It’s the First...United...Mennonite....Church” I said, trying to remember correctly.

“Oh, United, ok we’ll put that down”.

I proudly thought, isn’t that great, now I know what denomination I am. Later when I told my mother, she was horrified and explained that we were the Mennonite part of the church name and I got a sense from her that this was important to get right. My diversion on the way home, didn’t seem to be an issue. I still haven’t figured out the United part, although it does give me a sense of optimism, sometimes false sometimes realized.

I have no idea of what was said or what happened but I know at the end I felt compelled to go forward but my little brother cried that he wanted to go home, so we did. I felt torn up inside and I explained to my mother what had happened. Like Hannah with Samuel of the Old Testament, she said if I felt compelled again, to tell my brother to wait and go forward. So the next day I did.

From the day of that commitment to the chair I sit in today, the thoughts of my salvation, and its required response, have not left me. I have struggled through childish foibles, tried to reconcile my sense of wrong and right with the sense of others and weigh that against the Scriptures and writings of the church. I have denied my affiliation because I was not living up to what I professed and then couldn’t live with that either. Graduated high school and got baptized on the same weekend.

Then I went to University but ended up at Bible College a year later wanting to examine my foundation. I came in and realized that there was more to know than I had learned in Sunday School, then left realizing that, in spite of an aggressive Shaefferian apologetic, most of the answers were still *because*. I continued on with the uncomfortable knowledge that the set of boxes to contain my beliefs didn’t stack as neatly as some of the others’. I had tried to nail down the assurance of my salvation but there don’t seem to be laws for everything. Still my core foundation did not shift, thank God.

The story goes on and is mostly boring, or perhaps I just can’t make it exciting. And here I sit, trying to define my sense of salvation, only because I saw it listed as the upcoming topic for the next issue of *Rhubarb*, a magazine I’ve taken to reading. So I did a basic brain dump before church last week and came up with this. It’s only valid for as long as it took me to type but it does come unedited (except for the addition of my favorite scripture passage which I did have to look up):

I believe in a salvation that eludes my grasp. That is beyond what I can reach. I know I have sinned and fallen short, so many times. I fall on my knees and plea for mercy. The mercy of the flame. And yet salvation is not there that I can grasp it. I wait for the grace to flow freely. And I have had those moments where I know that it has flowed. My life is blessed on so many levels. I am embarrassed about it. And yet I am so prodigal. I can’t even do the simple things – walk humbly, show mercy – fear the lord and keep his commandments. What is this salvation I seek. It is knowing that I am doing the will of the father here on earth.

Why can't I be like Merton, who feels that even with the fervor of following what we believe is the will, even if it isn't, is the right thing. I don't want to fool myself. My salvation is viewed through the parable of the sheep and goats. Those who know they should be in aren't always and the same the other way. Not that I strive to be one who doesn't think he'll be in, in order to get in. That's also nonsensical. I feel most like the man with one talent. I bury it for fear of what the master will do if I blow it. I resent those who say they have no regrets and those who challenge God to show them why they should be banished. I know that coming into the presence of God will burn us all with honesty and will leave the residue that remains as the only hope we cling to. At that moment we will know and there will be no questioning and challenging and we ourselves will know in our heart of hearts the times we followed and how long we have done so. There will be grace, not in spite but because, and we will all be surprised at where the lines are drawn, for they must be drawn and are we entertaining demons or angels around us, even if we don't know. The logical box does not exist here. There are too many signs that don't make sense. The rationalist cannot survive the size of a shrunken world. I must believe that the strong do not inherit the earth. The examples of the meek inspire me. Perhaps my only task here is to hand out one cup of cold water but I am buried by not knowing which person the cup is for. Salvation – do I know I have it, I don't. Do I trust that I have it? I do. In my heart I know that God is there. And then even if I don't make sense of things on earth, it doesn't matter. It's not a giving up; it's a coming to see your place in the grand scheme. I am not the cog that drives the wheels. I am a piece in a bigger action. This is not the indiscriminate piece of the big machine. This is that at the most minute level, every person has their purpose, every person is cared for as the sparrow and yet it doesn't seem like it at times and the evil is so rampant, that I am frozen into inaction. I am not sure where to start. Most days getting up and knowing that failure awaits me is overwhelming. It's too easy to be the rich man, throw in my two bits worth and feel I've done something. When the widow's mite is more than all I have and yet I can't walk away from things I have. Is my hand too tight on the plow, do I have too many cows to milk, did taking a wife draw me away from the path I should have chosen or will grace say to me, you have done well good and faithful servant, by following the path you chose, struggles and all you kept your self from further wickedness. My hope is that at the day of salvation, God will say you could have been much worse and my fear is He will say you could have done much better. Heaven will be reliving the good done in the world, Hell will be living once more through the bad. So often I come back to Lamentations 3:21-26 which ends with "It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord".

As I reread my output and contemplate its context, it seems as close as I can come at this time to define my concept of salvation, which I now leave in the hands of God. My focus is more closely tied to the verse I learned at age 3, which reads:

Ich bin klein,  
mein Herz ist rein,  
soll niemand drin wohnen als Jesus allein.