

## *The Lively Experiment*

Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson

January 6, 2008

Iowa. Good ol' Iowa. I went to graduate school in Iowa and attended a democratic caucus in Iowa City in 1972. I supported George McGovern and the Viet Nam war was the issue. There were a bunch of other candidates – Hubert Humphrey and Ed Muskie, Scoop Jackson and Ramsey Clark, even Sam Yorty, mayor of Los Angeles. Shirley Chisholm ran, the first time an African American woman ran for president and won delegates to the National Convention.

We went to the caucuses, many of us were young and there for the first time, believing that we could change the country in a profound way. I remember arguing with a Scoop Jackson supporter about the war. It was exciting. Ed Muskie won the Iowa caucus; I think McGovern did in my local caucus. So much for change and hope. Nixon ran away with the election.

But times are different, now, aren't they? Aren't they? But isn't this the ground of hope, and courage, that times are different and that they can be better. Isn't that what started this whole experiment in liberty off – this hope that things can be better. The title of this sermon come from a little book called 'The Lively Experiment' by Sidney Mead. He was a teacher of mine at Iowa, and was a Unitarian, and was one of the first scholars to study religion in America. His book, 'The Lively Experiment' referred to the sense among the founding fathers that this was an experiment in liberty.

I want to talk more next week about religion and politics, and Huckabee's win in Iowa makes that more interesting than ever, but I think the Iowa results are profound. From the Republican side, the nice guy won. Whatever you might think about Huckabee, he seems like a nice, and even genuine guy. Two buck Huck as they say.

Still, Obama's, and Huckabee's win suggest something is afoot, and that some change is in the air. Obama has stressed hope, and there is something very essential about hope in our country. I'm game again, and ready to take back our country, ready to focus on liberty, ready to believe in government. It is easy to read too much or too little into single events, and we shall see more in the weeks ahead. But this feels very good .....

It has to do with promises ...

Some years ago, we told our daughters that we would probably be leaving California and moving to Virginia. We were at the UU camp, deBenneville Pines, at almost 7000 feet in the San Bernardinios, with the Costa Mesa congregation I then served for a weekend retreat. There was lots of snow on the ground.

Our girls - 8 and 6 at the time - loved deBenneville. A great camp, they had fun in the woods in the summer and fun in the snow in the winter. They were very unhappy we were going to move and leave deBenneville. [They think it was a very smart move that we have come back to California after almost ten years in the wilderness of Virginia.] So on the way down the mountain towards home, I told them - indeed I promised them - that we would have snow in our very own back yard in Virginia. They were skeptical, but willing to trust their Dad - or at least pretend they did.

We got home late in the afternoon, and drove into our driveway, the Los Angeles Times at the end of the drive. We unloaded the car; the girls greeted our cats, and I finally went out and got the paper. And there, on the front page, in color, was a picture of a man cross-country skiing on the national mall in the District of Columbia.

We did move there that fall, went through Thanksgiving and Christmas Eve without a trace of snow. On Christmas night we were watching a movie on TV - 'It's a Wonderful Life' as a matter of fact - and, there, out our window, we saw the snow falling. Big flakes, a perfect winter snow fall. So we went out walked and played in the snow.

My girls were impressed, and I was thrilled - I had kept my promise.

We all make promises. In weddings couples say vows - they make promises to each other. Parents make promises to their children; children to their parents; friends to each other. Politicians make promises all the time. This congregation makes promises to its members and members to each other and to the church.

People make promises to their Gods and Gods make promises to their people. The Hebrew Bible is focused on the promises Yahweh and the Israelites make to each other; Jesus made promises to his disciples; Allah to Mohammed. These promises matter and they may indeed be at the very heart of our being human - we are creatures who make promises to each other and try and keep them - without this, we will never be fully human.

Our mission statement is a promise we all make to each other - to serve the spirit, and care for each other, to promote love and justice in the world. Promises. Promises, promises.

In religious terms, this means we are people of a covenant. Covenant is an old word and its origin is often traced back to the 3rd millennium BCE and Syria and the Code of Hammurabi - one of the oldest law codes known. In it, the King - who was thought to be a God - had responsibilities to his people as well as did the people to the King. It was mutual - both were responsible for the whole.

John Buehrens writes: '...while we are all called upon, individually, to face the question, 'What do I believe?' the question we should face together isn't the creedal one, 'What do we believe in common?' Rather it is the covenantal question, 'What are we willing to promise one another? In what hope? And with what sources of support, inspiration, and judgment as to our faithfulness?' So ask yourself these religious questions: what can we promise and what can we give? Think of that in your lives.

Now it is vitally important that we ask questions of service and excellence from our faith. If we are to believe in a God, it should be a God worth believing in - not a second rate, sloppy God. We rightly want a good religious education for our children, excellent music on Sunday morning, thoughtful and inspiring sermons. Excellence is an excellent thing and we ought not to shy away from expecting it. May West was right when she declared 'Too much of a good thing is ... wonderful!'

But left at that, all we have is a product, and I am convinced that what people come here for, and ought to come here for, is relationship and mutuality. People come here to both receive and to give. This makes it covenantal. And this can become a source of hope for us. It is the promises we make that matter.

Andrew Delbanco - one of my very favorite thinkers and writers - published a little book some years ago called 'The Real American Dream' subtitled 'A Meditation on Hope.' An excellent book, I highly recommend it to all of you.'

In it, Delbanco claims that hope is at the center of the American dream - that from our beginning as a nation, as a community, we have sought to give hope to our citizens and to those hoping to join us in what Sidney Mead called 'the lively experiment. Delbanco understands, of course, that hope is not just some blind notion, but it rests in something. We hope because of, or we hope in etc.

He argues, persuasively, that originally, American hope rested in God. This was the Puritan promise - we were a new chosen people, a new Zion; we had a new covenant, and God had called us to this wilderness to raise up a great nation. The Puritans believed that without God nothing was possible but at the same time they believed that we were wholly responsible for our lives. It was our job to create this nation, to subdue the wilderness, to create cities and villages and governments yet still God ruled our fate.

Paradoxical yes [Cotton Mather both believed in witches and in vaccinating for smallpox!], but somehow it worked.

It did not last, of course. The enlightenment, the rise of science and our increased ability to understand and manipulate the world gave humans the belief that God was not wholly necessary. We could be much without God. And by the time of Emerson - more than anyone else in our history, Emerson killed God in his insistence on the power and sacredness of the individual human soul - hope no longer rested in God's hand, or in the covenant we had with God.

But hope still mattered and so what could replace God? Delbanco says that perhaps the greatest genius of our nation's history - Abraham Lincoln - argued that it was the nation, the state, the Union that could hold that transcendent power and could offer hope. His Second Inaugural Address - a great and good speech - raises the Union to both symbol and incarnation of transcendence and hope. Lincoln believed that by working together for the common good, that unparalleled growth for all was possible.

In this Lincoln preserved the faith of the Founding Fathers for they seemed, as well, to place hope in the nation, conceived in liberty, and enshrined in the declaration of independence.

But this, too, did not last. It's a rare person now who believes that the Union, and the instrument of that Union, the government, are transcendent - from the anti-national sentiments of the 60s to the hyper-patriotism of the Reagan years to the fiasco of the past seven years, the Union - as conceived of by Lincoln - no longer offers us transcendence and hope.

So, Delbanco asks, what is offered to us in this modern world? He says it is the self that has taken the place of God and the Union. And, this, he believes, has the makings of a tragedy; for the self is never transcendent and so cannot be the locus of a true and abiding hope. The self - the individual, the source of 'what's in it for me?' Our hope cannot rest in just our own self. Instead, hope demands something greater than our own self.

Where are we then and what are we left with? I believe it brings us back to the question John Buehrens asked - the covenantal question: what are we willing to promise each other? Or, what are we willing to give of our selves, what are we willing to sacrifice; what are we willing to commit our lives to or surrender our comfort for? In the answers to these questions is the hope that rests in community, in souls gathered together for a larger purpose.

I don't know of anything more important than the promises we make to each other. Taken seriously, these promises get us out of ourselves and confirm what we know so well - that we depend on each other for purpose and meaning. It is like the gift we have received for internships - it is a promise to the future, that we will do what we can to ensure competent ministry for our faith.

Covenants require togetherness. Together we can do so much. By promising to each other to serve our faith, to be a community of support, to seek spiritual growth, to transform this world through acts of love and justice - to live lives of service, integrity and joy. It is an experiment, a lively experiment. When we make a promise, we open ourselves to a future.

Remember the promises you make as a child - how we would say 'cross my heart and hope to die if our promise was broken. How you couldn't cross your fingers. Or Cross my heart and hope to spit - where did that come from. How earnest children are when they make a real promise, how careful we have to be when we make promises to our children.

Promises are based in hope. So, let's begin, here, today, to covenant one with another to find those ways of being more open and welcoming to the stranger, the visitor; let us help the new comer become a part of this caring congregation. Here, today, let us covenant together to serve our liberal faith and become leaders in that faith. Come. Let us covenant together

As our sister congregation in Concord Mass says each Sunday: this is their covenant:

Go out into the world in peace; have courage  
hold on to what is good.  
Return to no person evil for evil

strengthen the fainthearted  
support the weak; help the suffering; honor all beings.