

IF NOT BY CREED ...

A Service by Fritz Hudson
Presented September 11, 2005

Chalice Lighting

Come in

from the whirl, from the wind

from the roar, from the din

Come in

from the fear, from the pain

from the haunt, from the insane

Come in

Be welcome. Be here . . . with us . . . now.

Come in.

Song: "Winds Be Still"

Introduction: "After the Flood"

"Winds Be Still. Storm clouds pass." It's been awhile since we might have been moved to sing this song out of our own experience here in Lincoln. It's been more than a year for example since the storm and winds that brought pain and destruction to the southern outskirts of our city, for example.

Last Sunday, though, in a Unitarian church 1000 miles to our south, on the outskirts of the city of New Orleans, the few members who could get to church that day couldn't even sit in their usual chairs, like we do today. When they looked up, from inside their Sanctuary, they could actually see the clouds passing, through the gaping hole in their roof the winds had torn away. Their service time that morning was spent pulling a large plastic tarp over that hole and securing it. They shared their milestones and millstones as they worked – asking each other in turn who they had seen or heard from in their congregation since Hurricane Katrina passed through – figuring out whose whereabouts was still unknown and what they could do to find them. They took in the word that the two other Unitarian churches in the area, in the center of New Orleans, could not even meet that morning. One church was filled with water higher than the heads of most of their children. The other church was filled right up to the roof. They asked if somehow they could help the members of those churches, now disbursed into motels, houses, and shelters hundreds of miles from home.

That small congregation only stood still once last Sunday morning. They stopped that once to sing:

"Winds be still. Storm clouds pass --

Fly, bird of hope, and shine light of love --

Help us to see with clarity."

Our roof lies securely over our heads this morning, as usual. And all the water here is contained in pipes within our walls, as usual. We can sit, in service, as usual, or move into smaller groups to study and talk, as we all will sooner or later this morning.

Who of you are in first, second, or third grade? And who of you are in fourth or fifth grade? All of you in your classrooms this morning will hear or read the story of a flood which people have talked about for many, many years, even though no one really knows if it actually happened. You'll talk about why it flooded – what God or human beings might have had to do with it. And you'll talk about how people responded to the flood, in particular how one family responded – Noah's family. And then you'll talk about what God and Noah said they'd learned from the flood. And you'll talk about whether what they think they learned is what we want to teach and learn in our church.

And who of you are in Jr. High? Today you'll begin talking about how religious people describe who they are. You'll start today looking at a creed, which many groups use to try to say what they believe. You'll be preparing to talk next week about how creeds compare with covenants, like the one we use here to try to say what we'll do together. You'll begin to learn why our religious group has found covenants more important to who we are than creeds. Perhaps you'll remember that what Noah and God learned following the flood was described as a covenant, the first covenant in fact. Perhaps you'll ask how a creed might guide us in responding to this Gulf Coast flood, or how a covenant might guide us.

Those of us beyond junior high are welcome to stay here, of course – but it does mean that you'll have to wait a little longer to talk. I'll do most of the talking at first, trying to be your leader. And I too will be talking about the covenant God and Noah are said to have entered into following their flood. I'll be asking whether or how it can serve us as a model for our response to ours. And I too will be talking about the struggle among religious people to add creeds to their covenants, to define their approach to truth, and what it means that we continue to choose to seek the truth without their help. In this time before us together, May light shine in – to our talking and our listening. May this time help us to see with clarity."

Music: "At the River" Traditional, adapted by Aaron Copland
Dean Haist, trumpet and Larry Jones, piano

Sermon: "If Not By Creed"

"We awake each morning, if we are blessed, and the day is truly a blank page. Due to homes and jobs and routines, we used to at least have an outline in mind for what we would write that day in the book of life, but now nothing is routine or normal any more. -- For those of us who don't know where we will live, or how we will earn our money, or when we can even see what shape

our homes and businesses are in, we need time to just absorb our brave new world and get our bearings."

The New Orleans Community Church, from whose website I read these words last Sunday, is the church that was then filled with water, rather than people, up to its roof. As of yesterday, the posting had neither changed nor been added to. How long did it take for Noah and God to "get their bearings" following their flood? Most of us remember that the rain lasted for what - 40 days & 40 nights, right? But do we remember that only after three and a half more months is it recorded that "the water abated," and not until three months later still that, "the tops of the mountains were seen." Noah went into the ark at the beginning of his 600th year, it is written, but only in same month of his 601st year could it finally be written that "the earth was dry." I expect it may be quite some time yet before that kind of good news will appear on Community Church's website. And yet, even as it waits to proclaim such good news, it will continue to proclaim to all who enter its portal that its covenant, like ours, is to "form a community to practice and advance a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, - a liberal religion", as it says, that "has no creed."

When "the earth was dry" under Noah's feet, the ancient story goes, "Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your descendents after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.' (Gen.9:8ff)

The word covenant comes from the French - co-venir. It means to come together. A covenant is the creation of a bond, a relationship between two or more parties. And the tie that binds the parties is some kind of promise – some undertaking to limit or shape future behavior toward one another. As the covenantal tradition has been passed down through the Hebrew people, it was first God, the creator of our universe, which made such a promise. The omnipotent – all powerful – made a vow to Noah and all his descendents – which is to say to all humanity – me, you, all of us – and to all living creatures beyond humanity. The all-powerful creator of life bound itself that its power would never again be used to destroy its creation. "While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease," God promised us. (Gen:8:22) And most importantly, for our understanding of the religious life, God demanded nothing from us - no like promise, no limit on our behavior - in return, as part of our new and eternal relationship.

In the Hebrew tradition, and its heirs, God has never again been quite so magnanimous - you might say, so liberal. God is recorded as having made other covenants – but now with smaller subsets of Noah's descendents. And in each of those covenants God has demanded something in return for the protection and favor promised. Next week our younger children will explore the story of Abraham's relationship with God. That's the story of a second covenant, one in which God promises wealth and prosperity to all Abraham's descendents, but requires in return that all males among those descendents be circumcised. (Gen.17:9ff) A few weeks later, our classes will explore the story of Moses' relationship with God. In it a third covenant is made. God promises all of those whom

Moses led from Egypt into the wilderness a safe return to a free and prosperous life in Canaan. To seal that new relationship, however, God requires that the people follow the 10 commandments God gives to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

These are the major covenants of the Hebrew tradition. For each new promise from God, the promises required from humanity are more demanding. Almost entirely, however, the restrictions demanded are restrictions on behavior: You shall not make a graven image; you shall not work on the Sabbath; you shall not kill, or steal. Only at the very end, with the very last restriction demanded, does God cross over into the realm of restricting thought. "You shall not covet anything that is your neighbors." That's clearly over this line, but there it stops. I wonder if, just like after the flood, God wondered whether that might have been a bit much, a bit too far. Who knows the mind of God? All I know is that this is as far as the ancient tradition goes in seeing God's demands upon our relationship.

History, as it turned out, waited all the way until the Hebrew tradition was adapted into Christianity before that line was crossed again. But then it was not just crossed. It was obliterated. The establishment of Christianity fairly turned the covenantal tradition on its head – forgetting all about the behavioral nature of its restrictions. In its stead, it demanded that our relationship with God be entirely dependent upon broad limitations of thought. And here it is that came the birth of creeds.

I'll try only to give you the barest of introductions to this story this morning. As John the Baptist said of Jesus, in Matthew's gospel, one "who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry." (Mt.3:11) I've introduced her to you in this past week's newsletter: Dr. Elaine Pagels. She is professor of religion at Princeton University. Last June, she was the Sunday night Ware Lecturer at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in Fort Worth, Texas. This coming Thursday evening, at 7:00pm, she will be the E.N. Thompson lecturer at our university's Lied Center. Her talk is called "Beyond Belief: A Different View of Christianity." As with all good titles, it really begs a double question: Was there ever a Christianity whose identity was not tied to belief? And must such a Christianity remain unimaginable today?

The contribution of Dr. Pagels now quarter-century career has been to open our understanding of the early development of Christianity as revealed by the suppressed records unearthed at Nag Hamadi, Egypt in 1949. Her first book, *The Gnostic Gospels* won her a National Book Award and a McArthur, so-called "genius," fellowship. *Beyond Belief*, her latest book, is subtitled *The Secret Gospel of Thomas*.

Scholars first thought that the Nag Hamadi texts, placed in their careful tomb in the mid 300's A.D., were written by Christians of that era, that they were created considerably later than the works gathered into the New Testament. The earliest canonical works, Paul's letters, clearly date from within 20 years of Jesus' death. The gospels were all named to claim authorship by one of Jesus' twelve disciples, but in fact the earliest of them, Mark, evidences compilation about 40 years following Jesus' death. Matthew and Luke post-date Mark by another 15 or 20 years; John bears birthmarks of 20 years later still, about 110 A.D. Furthermore, just as Matthew and Luke clearly draw on Mark as a source for some of their narration of Jesus' actions and experiences, all the gospels seem to draw on shared and separate earlier compilations of Jesus' sayings. Nag Hamadi's *The Gospel*

of Thomas is only a collection of Jesus' sayings, 114 of them. It tells no story. What Dr. Pagels' careful study now argues is that this gospel represents a tradition with roots at least contemporaneous with the earliest canonical gospels. More importantly, she says, the Thomas interpretation of Jesus' identity and gospel is one that the last canonical Gospel, John's, is clearly written to discredit and disempower.

I'll let Dr. Pagels have the fun of showing you how John's gospel creates its caricature of the disciple Thomas, how it makes him out to be the stupid one whom Jesus must beat over the head to get the good news: that Jesus is God. This condemnation is complete when, unlike in any prior gospel, John finds Thomas conspicuously absent when Jesus returns from the dead to give the rest of the disciples the holy spirit. What's important is to recognize that John's "Good News" has also a "Bad News" side. John's good news is "Jesus is God"; John's bad news is "We are not like Jesus." It is to Thomas directly that John has Jesus say "I am the way – no one comes to the Father but by me." (Jn.14:6)

So what is Thomas' gospel that John finds it so threatening? Thomas, in Aramaic, means "the Twin." Some scholars, over the centuries, have wondered aloud if he were literally Jesus' twin brother. The most widely accepted understanding is that he simply bore some significant resemblance to Jesus. The school of Jesus' followers who took on Thomas' name in the years following the crucifixion were those who saw Jesus as an exemplar, someone they could be like. They understood the path which would lead to the kingdom of god to be behaving like Jesus, not in believing something about him. This is the Jesus Luke shows us when he tells the Pharisees "the kingdom of god is in the midst of you," (Lk.17:21). Thomas' gospel, in saying number 70, makes this good news even more clear: Jesus says "If you bring forth what is within you what you have will save you." Connected to this understanding Christianity, Thomas' gospel also argued that bringing forth what is within us would take time, and might even change forms over time. In Thomas, saying 2, "Jesus said, "Let one who seeks not stop seeking until he finds. When he finds he will be troubled. When he is troubled, he will be astonished and will rule over all." This is John's greatest fear – that the seekers, not the believers, will rule.

If Dr. Pagels' presentation this Thursday follows its form last June, she may not draw this story all the way to her book's conclusion. In the book she traces how the second century church father Ireneaus became highly concerned about the diversity of interpretations the disciple named schools brought of Jesus' identity and message. He began a campaign to freeze this ferment. Seizing upon John's interpretation of what made a Christian, he campaigned relentlessly for belief in Jesus as God to be affirmed the condition of salvation. A century and a half later, when the Emperor Constantine ended Christianity's persecution and became its sponsor, he put muscle into Ireneaus' words. Constantine convened the church's bishops at Nicea in Asia Minor to settle what God required of humanity in this new covenant through Christ. What they fixed on, as Ireneaus had urged, was a creed, a statement of required thoughts, beliefs. They completely ignored the Hebrew tradition of covenanting for behavior only, while leaving thought free to seek an ever deeper understanding of truth. Using John's very words, they fixed Jesus' identity as "the only begotten son of God." They pronounced his mission here to be "crucified for us." In so doing, they made it a condition of our covenant with God that we have a closed mind on these questions. Then, immediately following the Council, the Bishops ordered all writings in conflict with this creed to be destroyed, however long-

standing or revered. Were it not for the quiet but oh-so-careful insubordination of those monks in the monastery at Nag Hamadi, we would perhaps not yet appreciate how deeply ran the root which the bishops so severed and stunted.

Two Sundays from now I will pick up the story of the revival, more than 1000 years later, of the Hebrew understanding of covenant among the most radical expressions of the Protestant Reformation. On Sundays beyond, I will track that spirit into its manifestations among those churches on our soil which first took on the name Universalist and soon thereafter among those who took on the name Unitarian. Finally I will follow it into the form we now express in our covenant, joining these two roots. Over time, my hope would be that Dr. Pagels' work will help us graft our identity back into connection with its proper and lively expression in early Christianity as well.

Today, though, I want to be sure that this looking back does not leave us wrongly turned. A creed surely can lock us facing backwards to dead thoughts; a covenant, in its promises however, calls us always to face toward their future fulfillment. As Lewis Smedes has written, "When a person makes a promise, he stretches himself out into circumstances that no one can control and controls at least one thing: he will be there no matter what the circumstances turn out to be." (The Power of Promises p.33) When we look back, let it be always and only to start over, to tap the deeper springs whose power propels our small improvements.

I'm looking forward to the allocation meeting of our U.U. Association's Gulf Coast Relief Panel in Baton Rouge next weekend. Early "Thomas Christians" looked back to Jesus' model to guide their acts. In their spirit, I would have our decision-makers today look back to the Dominican cleric Georges Pire, who founded the organization Aid to Displaced Persons in Europe following World War II. Abbe Pire marshaled his funds - to create 18,000 sponsor-relations between western and eastern Europeans to transmit parcels of aid and letters of encouragement - to build and operate four homes for the aged - to create 7 villages to give 150 displaced persons a new place to put down roots, to gain economic independence, to achieve psychological wholeness. Long after it was completed, in 1958, Abbe Pire's work was recognized with the Nobel Prize for Peace. What I want to draw on now is the spirit which that work was started: "What matters today" Abbe Pire said then "what matters today is not the difference between those who believe and those who do not believe, but the difference between those who care and those who don't."

In our covenant - to affirm and promote - compassion in human relations, may we understand fully "The distinction between goodness and compassion: Goodness feels for and may help. Compassion feels with and does help. Compassion means "what is mine is yours and I will share it," but also "what is yours - your wounds, your suffering, your powerlessness - is mine and I will share that!" (Browning Ware, Baptist minister)

May we fulfill our covenant for compassion as God entered into his covenant with Noah, insuring life to all, liberally, asking nothing in return.

Songs: "We Would Be One"

"Sound Over All Waters"

Candle Extinguishing

*This church is not a place of right convictions, a fortress of truth
or even a bastion of philosophy.*

*The church is a community of those who have suffered loss,
lived through it, and learned true compassion.*

*Our church is where we hear music and sing it ourselves,
where we serve one another, and where the strands of our beliefs,
our lives and hopes are in a cable strong enough
to bear us across the valleys of pain, despair, grief, doubt and disillusionment.*

Each has experienced these, or will.

*We learn from each other, and for these reasons this is a special place
infused with our hope.*

Edward Harris