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Consensus at Twenty Five

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5. Carried Around the Bend: Celebration

1 Celebration is the anticipation of a world that is and is to come.

One of the most vivid memories of my childhood is of my Aunt Wanda's funeral. She died at Christmas time, 1938, at Canwood, Saskatchewan, west of Prince Albert. I was six years old. We took the train to Prince Albert and Canwood – my very first train ride. It was desperately cold, and we huddled under buffalo robes in my Uncle's bob-sleigh when he picked us up at the station. It was cold, so cold. The steam from the horses' nostrils shimmered to frost crystals in the air. The moon was brilliant in an absolutely clear night sky, but it was a cold, cold light. We huddled around the wood-fired heater in the log farmhouse, all of us cousins playing with some small Christmas toys. Aunt Wanda, in her coffin, was in an empty granary, as cold as the cold and lifeless earth. The grave in the cemetery, when we came to it, was a deep wound in the iron earth; the pile of frozen clods mocked the white, white, white snow. The men slipped harness reins under the coffin and strained to lower it into the grave, grimly wrapping the free ends around their mittened hands in the effort to lower it evenly and carefully into the pine box. Then the reins were tugged free, and someone was helped down into the grave to put the lid on the box. And when he had been helped out, the men began to shovel, and the hard clods thumped hollowly. It was so cold. The shivering pastor hurled the words defiantly: "I am the resurrection and the life, says the Lord; he who believes in me, though he die yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die!" He took a great breath. "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth...And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." His breath plumed out in glittering frost like a vision of the glorious city. "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will

dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away” (Revelation 21:1-4). And surely cold will be no more. And my little cousin Doris would have her mother again. Clutching the vision of that world to our breasts we turned the horses for home.

Celebration, even the celebration of a funeral, is the anticipation of a world that is and is to come.

2. Lest that sound like double-talk, we may recall that we are always caught somewhere between a world that is and yet is coming.

Those thousands of settlers who poured into the Saskatchewan country at the end of the 19th century were driven to leave behind a meagre world that was and to find or create a world that would be kinder to their children. Adolph Hitler was driven to cleanse the world that was and to create a world of racial purity and superiority. Political neo-conservatives are intent on putting away every vestige of a world shaped by humane values and creating an economic world that scarcely has room for people as people. Gated communities are trying to shut out a dangerous world and to create a world that keeps “us” in and “them” out. Couples look forward to the end of a life of isolation and the beginning of a life of togetherness. Students look forward to the end of study and preparation and the beginning of a life of accomplishment. We are always caught somewhere between a world that is and yet is coming.

So it was with the United Empire Loyalists.

Come with me to New Brunswick, to the St. John River. “The St. John [River] rises in the woods of northern Maine,” writes Hugh MacLennan, “it curves under the hump of the Laurentian-Atlantic watershed and...reaches New Brunswick....” Slim and graceful, it then curves southeasterly and reaches Grand Falls. “There, abruptly, you see the power of it. The flume of the falls, utterly savage, hurls itself, twisted by the contour of the rock, into a huge slide of water before it plunges roaring into a gorge with walls more than a hundred and fifty feet high.” It flows on then “in bold sweeps and curves”, widening at Fredericton to nearly half a mile and proceeding on to the Long Reach and Grand Bay

below the city of St. John, to end, with astonished surprise, at the Reversible Falls at the Bay of Fundy.¹ The broad, lower valley of the St. John River is surely one of the fairest sections of river in the land, and admirably suited to pleasure boats. "Happiness," MacLennan asserts, "is the word which always comes to my mind when I think of the River St. John. The St. John is intimate and very beautiful...The happiness associated with the St. John, especially in the older communities lower down the river, is of a kind the world is losing everywhere."²

So he rhapsodized in 1961, and in so doing gives us an idea of the land the Loyalists came to. The United Empire Loyalists, as they came to be called, were Americans who, for a variety of reasons, sided with England in the War of Independence, and so were harried out of or left the new USA. "In 1783 and 1784 vast numbers of troops and civilian refugees who had taken the British side in the American Revolution left the newly independent states for British North America. Approximately 35,000 of these 'Loyalists' went to Nova Scotia", doubling the population there, while 14,000 or 15,000 of them completely overwhelmed the 1,750 people of European descent in New Brunswick.³

The Loyalists who settled in the St. John River valley (and elsewhere, of course) came there not only because of loyalty to the British crown. "Certainly, according to Governor John Parr of Nova Scotia, 'the generality of those' who came to Shelburne, a major disembarkation point, were 'not much burthened with Loyalty, a spacious name which they made use of'."⁴ They had been caught up in a struggle that divided communities and families, and had opted for, or had been pressured into, a move that forced them once more into the tension between a world that is and yet is to come.

We are, willy nilly, always caught somewhere between a world that is and is yet to come.

3. God seems to have anticipated this while creating the world!

In Marc Gellman's whimsical retelling of the Genesis story of creation the angels complain about the untidy mess of rocks and water, urging God to clean it up. A laid-back Creator proceeds slowly to build a world and whenever the impatient angels ask, "Is the world finished now?" God answers laconically, "NOPE!" Having created a man and a woman, God

tiredly turns the whole thing over to them to finish. When they protest that they are too little for so huge a job, God proposes they become partners. "A partner," explains God, "is someone you work with on a big thing that neither of you can do alone." Furthermore, partnership means neither can give up because they are mutually dependent. Agreement is reached. And now when the angels pester God whether the world is finished yet, God responds, "I don't know. Go ask my partners."⁵

God, in the very process of creation, created a world that is and is yet anticipated. And we are partners in both the world that is and the world that is anticipated.

4. The Iroquois peoples understood this to an astonishing degree.

Come with me to an Iroquois longhouse for a graphic demonstration. Traditionally, any important Iroquoian assembly was begun with a thanksgiving ritual, but this was especially important at the Midwinter Ceremony, at the time when the maple sap runs, at the time of planting, at the time of green corn, and at harvest time.⁶ Ruth Underhill calls the rite the "Drum Dance of Thanksgiving"⁷ and describes it in this way. It begins with the selection, by the Faith Keepers, of a speaker who has the ceremony committed to memory. He addresses the assembly, urging them, first, to be thankful for each other: "And this is what our Creator did: he decided, 'The people moving about on the earth will simply come to express their gratitude.'⁸ Then the speaker urges thanks for the Earth, "our mother, who supports our feet". Now the speaker "thanks upward", expressing gratitude and respect for "grasses, plants, water, trees, birds, animals, the three sister-spirits, corn, beans, and squash; then the winds, the thunderers, the sun, the moon, and stars; then Handsome Lake the prophet⁹ and, finally, the Creator himself."¹⁰ A refrain, "And our minds will continue to do so", concludes each section, whereupon men and women dance slowly to the beat of the water drum. The smoke from an offering of sacred tobacco makes a path for prayer to the Creator.

Note carefully that in this ritual the Iroquoian world is being meticulously re-constructed, literally from the ground up. Thanks are given for the Earth; then for all the inhabitants of the Earth – people, animals, plants, birds; then for the Sky Dwellers – wind, thunder, sun, moon, stars; then for the Creator. Not only is the world re-constructed, but it is

harmoniously integrated into one dynamic organism. This integration is done through what is essentially a “covenant renewal” pledge in which reciprocity is acknowledged and reaffirmed. For example, in giving thanks for the Earth the speaker acknowledges that the Creator established the Earth for people to move about on – not indifferently or haughtily, but in an interdependent relationship with the Earth: she is to “support our feet” while we give proper thanks to her as to “our mother”. This “covenant renewal” is even more evident with respect to the animals. Again the speaker acknowledges that the Creator has put animals on the Earth both for the “amusement” of the people and as a source of food. True gratitude is to “use them as Our Creator intended”.¹¹

For the Iroquois, the cycle of seasons meant that the world was constantly renewed, and all life participated in that renewal. The Thanksgiving ceremony was a “covenant renewal” ceremony with all life. Life was always lived in between the old and the new. The world was, and yet was always coming into being afresh. In this the Iroquois were not unlike the Prairie farmers with their at once skeptical and hopeful consciousness of “next year”: this year’s crop may be a bumper crop...but next year, who knows? People who live close to the earth live in the tension between the world that is and that is yet to come.

5. Jesus put it all together when he proclaimed the Kingdom or Reign of God.

St. Mark states it like this, “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news’” (1:14-15). The Reign of God is, from our perspective, an astonishingly upside down world. For in this world the beggars are filled with good things, and the rich are turned away empty; the widow, the orphan, and the poor are lifted up and the mighty are tumbled down; the prisoners and the sick and the children are greeted with good news and the movers and shakers are thrown into outer darkness. The world of the Reign of God is a world of righteousness in the most radical sense. And, Jesus says, it is breaking in. The one who has eyes to see can see it; the one who has ears to hear, can hear it. He called everyone to come into it.

Yet Jesus knows very well that the full Reign of God lies still in the

future, when the Son of Man will come on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. Keep awake, he admonishes, "for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming" (Matthew 24).

Of course, Jesus did not make up the world of the Reign of God. God made it up there at the Beginning in the garden; God affirmed it with the Rainbow Covenant and gave it substance with the promise of a Promised Land; God reinforced it by freeing slaves and humiliating proud Pharaoh; kept it alive through one of the least of the peoples of the earth; finally incarnated it and acted it out and demonstrated it personally in the wandering Teacher from Nazareth. God initiates us into this world in Baptism.

The Reign of God is now, and is yet to come.

6. Celebration is anticipating the Reign of God.

How do we do that? By imagining ourselves forward into it.

The Micmac First Nation of Nova Scotia cherishes the traditions about Glooscap, their "Culture Hero" as we say in ethnology. After Glooscap had arranged and rearranged the world to make it habitable, and had set the characteristics of animals and humans, and had taught the people their culture, he decided it was time for him to leave. So he called up a huge whale who carried him to a far off land in the west. In delivering him to shore, the whale beached itself. Glooscap leapt onto the land, and then gently pushed the whale back into deep water.

"My little grandson," said the whale, "haven't you some piece of a broken pipe to give me?" "I have," said Glooscap; and forthwith he filled one with tobacco, lighted it, and placed it in the whale's mouth. From a high hill, Glooscap watched the whale swimming home, ever and again puffing out a cloud of smoke. They would meet no more. However, the Micmacs expect Glooscap to return someday, and when he does all their oppressions and troubles will be ended.¹²

The Micmacs are thus enabled to imagine themselves forward into the time of Glooscap's return. On occasions of oppression or distress or trouble, they can imagine themselves forward to Glooscap's return, and so be comforted and fortified with hope. And the story, together with the pipe and the sacred tobacco, and indeed the whales still puffing out plumes of smoke, are a sign and a promise of that anticipated time.

How do we imagine ourselves forward into the Reign of God? Primarily by story and sacraments and discipleship. We tell the stories of the Reign of God, parable stories, miracle stories, witness stories, and principally the story of Jesus who incarnates the Reign of God. We do the sacraments: the cleansing, initiating sacrament of Baptism and the Feast which is a foretaste of the world to come. In discipleship we live out the new reality of the Reign of God.

7. Baptism quite literally births us into the Reign of God.

St. Paul assures the Colossians: "So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not the things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory" (Colossians 3:1-4).

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals..." (Revelation 21:1-3).

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb (Revelation 21:22-23).

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations (Revelation 22:1-2).

And being birthed into the Reign of God, we imagine our way forward into it. Even as the seer of Patmos breathlessly exclaimed, "And then I saw...and then I saw..." we too see ahead, and imagine ourselves in a timeless time:

When God will be all in all and false illusions and deceptive gods will be no more.

When human faces will again reflect the glory of God.

When genuine partnership between Creator and creature will be held in

a bond of love.

When unity of purpose will keep in harmony the vast web of life.

When violence and abuse will give way to nurture and kindness.

When care and compassion will replace the lust for power.

When cheerful generosity will share equally the abundance of the earth.

When there will be a place for all and the needs of all will be fully met.

When there will be no longer this race and that race, no longer slave and free, no longer male and female, but all one in Jesus Christ.

And then the One who is seated on the throne will say, "See, I have made all things new."

It begins with Baptism, where we imagine our way forward into the new creation.

Notes

- ¹ Hugh MacLennan, *Seven Rivers of Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1961; Laurentian Library ed., 1977) 161-162.
- ² *Ibid.* 155-156.
- ³ *The Illustrated History of Canada*, ed. Craig Brown (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys Ltd., 1987) 219. A further 9,000 went to Quebec; about 1,000 to Prince Edward Island and Cape Breton; about 7,000 went to the head of Lake Erie, the Bay of Quinte, and the Niagara peninsula; and another 1,000 or 2,000 went to the mouth of the Richelieu River and the lower Ottawa River. Among them were some 3,000 blacks and almost 2,000 Six Nations Iroquois under the leadership of the Mohawk chief Joseph Brant (219-220).
- ⁴ *Ibid.* 220.
- ⁵ Marc Gellman. *Does God Have a Big Toe? Stories About Stories in the Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), "Partners", pp. 1-3.
- ⁶ Other occasions on the Cayuga longhouse calendar included the Strawberry, Sun, Raspberry, and Thunder Ceremonies (Frank Speck. *Midwinter Rites of the Cayuga Longhouse*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1949, chap. IV).
- ⁷ Ruth M. Underhill. *Red Man's Religion: Beliefs and Practices of the Indians North of Mexico* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1965) 180-181.
- ⁸ The text of some of the speaker's addresses is given in *American Indian Prose and Poetry: We Wait in Darkness*, ed. by Gloria Levitas, F.R. Vivelo, and J.J. Vivelo (New York: G.P. Putnam and Capricorn Books, 1974) 16-18.

Additional addresses appear in Hazel W. Hertzberg. *The Great Tree and the Longhouse: The Culture of the Iroquois* (New York: Macmillan, 1966) chap. 4. Expressing gratitude "for each other" implies the bonds of the Iroquois Confederacy. The Confederacy, or League, seems to have been created in the 14th or 15th centuries, ending debilitating warfare and strife among the Five Nations (Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, and Mohawk; the Tuscarora were admitted to the League early in the 16th century). In essence, each tribe shared the same clans (Turtle, Deer, Snipe, etc.), and thus every person had relatives in each tribe. The myth of the founding of the Confederacy became a foundational Iroquoian myth. See Hazel W. Hertzberg. *The Great Tree and the Longhouse*, chap. 7.

- ⁹ Handsome Lake (d. 1815) was a Seneca profoundly troubled by the dissolution of the Iroquois of New York state. From a series of visions, 1799-1800, he developed what came to be called the Longhouse Religion: an ethical-spiritual code to combat the great sins of drunkenness, witchcraft, abortion, and dissoluteness, as well as other social evils; and a set of rituals, including the Thanksgiving Ceremony. In this way he revived the essentials of traditional religion and opened the door to accomodation with Christianity. See Anthony F.C. Wallace, *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* (New York: Vintage Books; Toronto: Random House, 1969).
- ¹⁰ Underhill. *Red Man's Religion*, 180.
- ¹¹ Levitas, Viveló, and Viveló, eds. *American Indian Prose and Poetry*, 17-18.
- ¹² The Rev. Silas T. Rand. *Legends of the Micmacs* (New York and London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1894; reprint 1971, Johnson Reprint Corporation) 228-229.