

Christmas Fireside

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As I understand it, there are some people who are joining us from a distance, and I wanted to start on time to be courteous for them. This is about the Christmas story, but we're gonna back into the Christmas story.

When Joseph Smith was in the Liberty Jail, given the frantic pace of everything that had gone on in his life up until the time of his arrest and incarceration, Liberty Jail really constituted the first time that Joseph Smith had an extended opportunity to **think**. He would lose that opportunity as soon as he got out of Liberty Jail. And by the time you get to Nauvoo and the things that occur there:

- He becomes the postmaster—because they were afraid that the prior postmaster was stealing money that was being sent in through the postal service that was intended to help fund the temple, and it was being misappropriated.
- He was the Mayor—because the Mayor of Nauvoo had proven himself to be a liar and an adulterer and, ultimately, got excommunicated.
- He was the Major General of the Nauvoo Legion—because the predecessor had been caught in a compromising position, and he had to go.

And if you read the journals and diaries of what Joseph was going on, that's just a short list.

- He was also trying to manage the affairs of the Church.
- Oversee the people (that should not have required being overseen) in handling financial affairs.
- He was corresponding.
- He was sensitive to the issues that created political conflict when the Mormons tipped the vote in a state (because of their sizable population). And one way to neutralize that animosity was to run for the Presidency. And so, if the Mormon vote got canceled out because they were voting for Joseph Smith as President, that would leave the other parties to decide the popular vote, and no one could be offended by how the Mormons voted.

He was managing a mess. And it took all his time and more.

But in Liberty Jail, he had a brief opportunity between the mess that had happened in Kirtland that resulted in people conspiring to kill him who were members of the Church... (They wanted him dead because of the failure of the bank. He was chased out of Kirtland, and he left in the middle of the night to try and get out of there with himself still alive. He was followed for about 200 miles by people that were trying to kill him.) When he arrived out in Missouri, there was a mess underway there. Ultimately, they wound up with the siege at Far West and the surrender of Joseph Smith into custody. And then there was this respite (for nearly six months), in which Joseph Smith was confined to prison. Now, on occasion, he was brought out, and paraded around, and shown off as the prisoner, and ridiculed and laughed at. But for the most part, he had peace and quiet.

What's interesting about how he used that time is that at the end of the incarceration, without knowing when he would be released, he wrote a letter. (It's a single letter, but it came out in two installments. So, it constitutes two sections of the Teachings and Commandments. In the LDS Doctrine and Covenants, it comprises Doctrine and Covenants sections 121, 122, and 123. But those are just excerpts from the letter, and they're not even continuous excerpts. They are excerpts that grab and mix together and miss the discussion that ties together what went on. In the Teachings and Commandments, the entire letter—in its two installments—is reproduced.) And this is some of what was on Joseph Smith's mind when he finally had the opportunity for reflection and thought.

*A fanciful and flowery and heated imagination be aware of, because the things of God are of deep import, and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out. Your mind, O man, if you will lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost Heavens, and search into and contemplate the lowest considerations of the darkest abyss, and expand upon the broad considerations of eternal expanse. You must commune with God. How much more dignified and noble are the thoughts of God than the vain imagination of the human heart? None but fools will trifle with the souls of men. How vain and trifling have been **our** spirits, **our** conferences, **our** councils, **our** meetings, our private as well as public conversations: too low, too mean, too vulgar, too condescending for the dignified characters of the called and chosen of God, according to the purposes of his will from before the foundation of the world... (T&C 138:18-19, emphasis added)*

This is what Joseph contemplated in the quiet opportunity of confinement in prison: We've wasted too much time because our minds have been too frantic to consider carefully and solemnly and deeply the things that **really** matter. And if that was a problem during the confinement in 1838 and '39 in Missouri, think of what the problem is with minds today (with the Internet, with social media, with hand-held opportunities to text and communicate—beginning at 10 years old). How badly have we damaged our ability to engage in “time, ...experience, ...careful...ponderous...solemn thought” that is required in order to understand the things of God? What a wreck has been made of your own minds as you've been exposed to this current environment.

Joseph is talking in a rural, agrarian, quiet society, where you couldn't even hear a train in the distance. Shortly after I was baptized, a friend of mine (Steve Klaproth) came to Mountain Home, Idaho where I happened to be at my parents' house. And he and I were out in the backyard late at night, and he commented, “It's so quiet here.” The only sound you could hear were the crickets that were nearby and a train, miles away on a railroad track, giving out its hum and its churn as it moved across in the distance. Today, people spend money to get white noise to allow them to flee from the racket, from the cacophony inside of which we live! So, one of the challenges that I face in coming here is: What can be done in these circumstances to get us to focus, carefully and solemnly, for just a moment on things that really matter?

When Christ came to visit with the Nephites, after He had done the Sermon at Bountiful (which is a mirror of the Sermon on the Mount) and after He had spent the day with them, He makes this observation to them:

I perceive that ye are weak, that ye cannot understand all my words which [I'm] commanded of the Father to speak unto you at this time; therefore, go ye unto your homes, and ponder upon the things which I have said, and ask the Father, in my name, that ye may understand and prepare your minds for the morrow, and I come unto you again. (3 Nephi 8:1 RE)

He would come unto them again. And the next day, He would pick up, and He would teach them further. Same people, same audience, same Lord minister, but their minds were unprepared to take in what it was He had been commanded to tell them. And so, He had to take a hiatus, interrupt what He was going to do, and tell them, “Go and ponder what you've heard so far, and come back tomorrow. Maybe we can get somewhere because...” careful and solemn and ponderous thought can only lead to the understanding that's required in order to focus the attention of the mind so that they can grasp what the Lord is trying to convey to them.

My wife told me that she saw where chess champions in a chess match (sitting down and studying a board and focused on the chessboard) will burn six thousand calories in the course of a game because of the mental exertion that's required to look at the board and to see when this piece is in this spot and all of the options that are available, how that interacts with the other pieces and the other squares, and how they multiply—until the study requires you to take a risk and guess what your opponent may do, to try and force the advantage by the choice that you make. Six thousand calories! There are professional football players that don't burn that many calories in a football game, and they're out pushing and shoving and running and jumping and hitting and tackling. And all the chess player's doing is sitting at the table and focusing his mind.

As the prophet Joseph was called upon to render a new translation of the Bible, in the course of looking at the Gospel of John, it became apparent that there had to be more than one condition in the afterlife. And so, they prayed to try and understand what the afterlife included, and (it's Doctrine and Covenants section 76, but it's in the Teachings and Commandments as section 69) something comes out by revelation to help explain some of what goes on in the afterlife. And as that vision is wrapping up, the conclusion of that has these words:

But great and marvelous are the works of the Lord, and the mysteries of his kingdom which he shewed unto us, which surpasseth all understanding, in glory, and in might, and in dominion, which he commanded us that we should not write while we were yet in the spirit, and are not lawful for men to utter, neither is man capable to make them known, for they are only to be seen and understood by the power of the holy ghost, which God bestows on those who love him and purifieth themselves before him, to whom he grants [this] privilege of seeing and knowing for themselves, that through the power and manifestation of the spirit, while in the flesh, they may be able to bear his presence in the world of glory. (T&C 69:29)

...understood by the power of the spirit, which surpasseth the ability of the tongue of man to communicate it so that what you take in can be far greater than what the tongue of man is capable of conveying to you, far greater than what you are able on your own to either

articulate or to hand to another. But what you can do by your presence is to invite a shared experience, through the spirit, to gain light and truth—which is why the same Lord, talking to the same audience that He would see the next day, tells them, “I perceive that you're weak, and you cannot understand the words I'm commanded to tell you.”

So, let me see if I can put out a picture that, if you'll take it in and entertain the picture, may help you grasp that there is something **immensely** bigger standing as a barrier between “us” and “understanding” that **can** be overcome, that **can** be lifted, if you will. I'm not gonna use a “pillar of light,” because the pillar of light descending is something you've probably seen portrayed in First Vision video stuff, and that'll wreck it for you (just like Peter Jackson's “Lord of the Rings” trilogy wrecks the excitement of what you would get right now by reading Tolkien's book for the first time)—it's now been packaged, and you can't see it without that interfering. So, not a pillar of light.

I want you to instead imagine a **wall** of light so bright that it hurts you to look at it. It's like snow-blindness. And the wall of light then moves and encompasses you, and you are now inside it.

There are times when the pupils of your eyes struggle to shut out the light, and you get a sharp pain in your eye because you can't get that pupil narrow enough to exclude the light that is all around you. And you can see nothing. You can make nothing out except you're in the midst of this blinding, brilliant light. And it is incoherent. It's so bright that you're blind—because all you see is the brightness of this light.

And after a moment, you begin to make out, vaguely, a figure. And you realize that the **light** is emanating from **this figure**. As the presence of this figure becomes more stable before you, you begin to behold features: the hair of His head is as white as the snow, His eyes appear to be a flame of fire, His countenance is like lightning, and below His feet, a paved work of pure gold. And it is altogether beyond you. Frightening. Intimidating. You want, like Isaiah, to confess, “I'm unworthy. I'm a person of unclean lips. I dwell among people of unclean lips, and I'm not worthy to be here.”

But then the Personage speaks and says, calling you by name, “Your sins are forgiven you,” and your guilt is taken away, at which point, something more remarkable altogether happens. You begin to see this person has color in His eyes and color in His hair, and beneath His feet is no longer a flaming, golden surface, but there's life beneath Him, as well. And now this glorious Personage is something that you can, at last, take in because He's made Himself known to you. Your guilt was removed because of a word from Him—that God who you know cannot lie. The difference between coming into the blinding wall of light and now beholding that this Person has a normal color of hair, a normal color of eyes is the removal of your guilt by the words of this Person.

Imagine (as you're standing there, before this Personage) that there are colors you've never seen, and if you got out your 96-crayon box and you searched through

it to try and locate a color, there just isn't one. And so, if you had to identify a color you've never seen before, you would use a word like "joy" or a word like "love" or a word like "warmth," "care"—colors that animate you to the very core.

So, if you'll take that picture and ponder on it, and then consider that the stories that we've got in our Scriptures are not necessarily perfect/are not necessarily complete/are not necessarily even the best way to put something, but they have been approved by God because they are **adequate** for His purposes, at this point, to get "what needs to be done" accomplished. They are the best that anyone has, and they ought to be the anchor that we use in order to take our own minds and to ponder—carefully, solemnly—and to try and reach through to see what it is behind these words that the Lord is trying to convey into our hearts, into our minds, into our understanding.

Well, the account that we get by Paul... Luke wrote the story, undoubtedly after having come into contact with Paul, because it's clear from the text of the Book of Acts that Luke wrote it and that Luke would not encounter and join up with Paul until some time, years later, in the events that took place. And so, Paul had to report to Luke, and then Luke had to write the account, and...

Paul—on Mars Hill—goes up to preach a sermon to try and get them to understand that there was a God who came and lived among them and died and was resurrected—and his point is preaching Christ to the people of Athens on Mars Hill. And this observation is what's made about **those** people on that hill, after identifying that they were philosophers, epicureans, and stoics on the hill (who debated endlessly). This is what is said about the Athenians:

For all the Athenians and strangers who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or hear some new thing... (Acts 10:13 RE)

That's not how one gains access to the truth, to be continuously titillated with some new thing. Thinking and pondering carefully and solemnly does not involve the kind of robust voyeurism that oftentimes permeates **our** councils, **our** conferences, **our** conversations, **our** meetings. We're **like** these people, and that's too low, too mean, too vulgar, too condescending for the things of God. The things of God aren't titillating. We go about as if we've achieved some new and highly satisfactory result when we've had a **good gospel conversation** when, in fact, what we lack is more of the heart and character than it is of "hearing some new thing."

Now, as it is written, the birth of Jesus Christ happened this way (Matthew 1:5 RE). This is Matthew, okay? Matthew's gonna tell you a story, but what's the story Matthew's going to tell?

Now, as it is written, the birth of Jesus...happened [on] this way.

Where was it written, Matthew? Because I'm reading your account, and I don't have another account.

After his mother, Mary, was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the holy ghost.

So, who is this Mary character? What does it mean to be “betrothed”? Why was the betrothal to Joseph? Who was he? How do these people emerge into the story?

There's a lot of evidence to suggest that Mary was someone that worked in the temple itself, among the priestly class—that she was someone who wove the veil. I don't know if those stories are true or reliable. But think about the symbolism of what it would mean to have a young woman weaving a veil, engaged in the act of creation. See, the veil in those days was made of four colors, and the four colors symbolized the four elements looked over by the four great guardian angels of the four cardinal directions. And here is a young maiden who is managing the weaving of the veil—whether it be literally the case that she did or not, the symbolism of it all suggests something very profound about a very young lady.

Well, we have... (I mean, I don't know how to talk about these things in a way that is delicate enough so as not to offend.) But in the law of Moses, one of the reasons why a menstruating female was considered unclean was because... In those days, they did not have the same kinds of hygienic capacity that we have today. And so, when Mary (working among the priests) had her first period, the priests would have known that. It (because of various issues) would not have been concealable, and she would not have been permitted into the ceremonially-clean places, and she would have necessitated performance of sacrifices for ritual purity in order to return/in order to continue on in the service that she gave. And it also marked the moment at which she needed to be married.

Tradition has it that it was the priests who arranged for accomplishing the marriage—because she needed to be married. If she was now “of age,” then the circumstances required marriage. And there were, apparently, several people approached by the priests to marry her, and they uniformly declined. My suspicion is that there was a reason why she was declined by those first approached. My suspicion is that even though she was a child, she was intimidating. She frightened these older men. And Joseph was someone (perhaps third, fourth, maybe fifth on the list—an older man) who had already raised a family who was asked, widowed Joseph, to marry this young maid. Estimates of his age vary—I've seen, generally, someone in their 70s being the guess for how old he would have been; we don't know. I mean, those sources... Certainly, that's not the way that the story is shown in theater, in movies, and in storytelling.

[audience comment]

Yeah, so, you've got a woman at the very commencement of fertility and a man who has already raised a family, and you've got a relationship that is primarily motivated by religious concerns. And so, the bargain is reached, the commitment is made, and **now** Mary is found with child.

Then Joseph, her husband, being a just man and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away in private. But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a vision, saying, Joseph, you son of David, fear not to take unto yourself Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her

is of the holy ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins.

Jesus is the Greek version of the name Joshua, in the anglicized version of the Hebrew name, which would have been Yeshua in the Hebrew tongue, and the name itself would have had meaning.

Now this took place that all things might be fulfilled which were spoken of the Lord by the prophets, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel — which (being interpreted) is, God with us. Then Joseph, awak[en]ing out of his vision, did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took him his wife, and knew her not [un]til she had brought forth her firstborn son. And they called his name Jesus.

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is the child that is born the Messiah of the Jews? For we have seen [a] star in the east and have come to worship him. When Herod the king had heard of the child, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them, saying, Where[']s] the place that is written of the prophets in which Christ should be born? For he greatly feared, yet he believed not the prophets.

Well, isn't that just typical: The Scriptures scare the hell out of me, but I don't believe 'em. So, if there's gonna be this Messiah, I really need to rid myself of him, because the Scriptures predicted He would come, and if He comes, then that means the Scripture's been fulfilled. And if the Scripture's been fulfilled, that means the prophets knew what they were talking about. And if the prophets knew what they were talking about, that means that God spoke to them. And if God spoke to them, that means God exists, and He will judge things, and I just don't want to think about it. So, how do I go about killing this Messiah?

And they said unto him, It is written by the prophets that he should be born in Bethlehem of Judea...

So, I went through that to show you how disbelief requires a great deal more mental energy than believing. It requires a phenomenal amount of effort to summon the faith to reject the prophets. It requires constant effort to defeat the evidences that God continuously [phone dings] puts before us. (Hey, hold my calls, will ya? I'm doing something.)

...for thus have they said: The word of the Lord came unto us, saying, And you, Bethlehem which lays in the land of Judea, in you shall be born a Prince who is not the least among the princes of [Judah]; for out of you shall come the Messiah who shall save my people Israel.

Then Herod, when he had called the wise men privately, inquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child. And when you have found the child, bring me word

again, that I may come and worship him also. When they had heard the king, they departed.

And behold, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them [and] it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother and fell down and worshipped him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts: gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

And when they had departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a vision, saying, Arise and take the young child and his mother and flee into Egypt, and remain there until I bring you word, for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him. And then he arose, and took the young child and the child's mother by night, and departed into Egypt, and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt [I have] called my Son.

Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceedingly angry, and sent forth and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem and all the region thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men. Then was fulfilled that which was spoken of by Jeremiah the prophet, saying, In Ramah there was a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning; Rachel weeping for the loss of her children and would not be comforted because they were not. (Matthew 1:5-11 RE)

See, there's more than one statement in Scripture about the coming of the Messiah into the world. One of the others that would have been expounded upon as Herod continued his insecurity over the potential loss of his kingdom at the birth of this Messiah would have undoubtedly continued to plague them, and they would have continued to read from the Scriptures the things that speak of this coming Messiah. Isaiah wrote:

*The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; [and] they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them has the light shone. ...For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the **government** shall be upon his shoulder. And his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. Of the increase of government and peace there is no end, **upon the throne of David** and upon his kingdom, to order and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. (Isaiah 4:1 RE, emphasis added)*

If you're Herod and you hear those words, what you realize is: taken at face value, this child is about to displace you, take over that kingdom, and there will never come a generation after this in which a descendant of Herod's is gonna be on the throne, because this Messiah (and those that come after Him) will have the "government upon their shoulders." So, Christ is born in circumstances in which there is a local suzerain king, subordinate to a Roman

empire, ruled over by a fellow who has the authority and the ability to send out soldiers and murder children—all of the children in Judea—and yet, Christ is coming into the world to establish a government, the increase of which will never end, in the most improbable of moments, in the most improbable of circumstances, with the smallest of reasons to say that the Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty Prince, the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, the Everlasting Father accomplished exactly what the Scriptures say He was to accomplish.

From Herod's vantage point, Christ was a mere inconvenience. The slaughter of the children was another day at the office. And when that miserable, syphilis-ridden monarch would die a few years later in his madness (because that's one of the things syphilis attacks is the brain), he knew no one would mourn for his death. So, he had representatives of all the chief families in the land brought, when he was on his deathbed, to a single place, where he ordered all of them killed when he died so that there would be mourning throughout the land at the death of this great king. This is the guy that set out to slaughter the child that Joseph—being commanded in a vision, being awakened at night—took into Egypt in order to secure the Lord there.

Well, there's another story; I did not read it. It's really the opening of the New Testament. That occurs in the Holy Place. The priest Zachariah goes in to offer a **set prayer** on behalf of Israel. He's not in there offering a prayer so that Elizabeth will conceive and bear a child; the set prayer that he would have recited included words asking that the “light of God's countenance would return again to Israel.” And so, when the angel stepped out... (And the description of how the angel emerges on the right side of the altar in the Holy Place is exactly the location that you would have to emerge if you were in the Holy of Holies and you moved through the veil to emerge into the Holy Place and speak.) And so, the Angel Gabriel's presence conforms with the divinely-established pattern for the temple layout and the temple choreography, and he announces to Zachariah that his prayer had been heard, was being answered, and that God would send a son to him (Zachariah), and that son would go before the face of the One who would return the light of God's countenance to Israel; he would prepare the way.

This isn't Zachariah in the Holy Place trying to arrange family relations and secure a child. This is him, in the priestly office, asking that the nation that he represented receive a blessing to the nation from God, and it's not a personal prayer. It's an institutional prayer; it's a prayer on behalf of the people. And the answer that he is given is on behalf of the people. And so, Gabriel (who announces his name and that he stands in the presence of God) has come to say the light of God's countenance will return, and he's gonna have a son, and that son is gonna go before the presence of God to prepare the way before him.

So, the story that we get in Josephus (who's considered reasonably reliable about these things) has, at the time of the slaughter of the children in Judea, Herod's guards going to Zachariah and asking where his son was. Jesus' birth was obscure; the only people that learned about it (which Luke records) are shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over the flock by night, who have angelic ministers that tell them that the King has been born, and they go to find that out. John's birth was an extraordinary publicity stunt. Zachariah praying (as was his drawn-by-lots course to perform) comes out from his prayer,

and he can't speak. And the people perceive that he's seen an angel. This is in the temple. This is in Jerusalem. This is in the capital. Can you imagine the buzz? I mean, think about it!

An angel appearing in the temple, and it was Zachariah, and now he's struck deaf and dumb, and he has to write in order to tell them. And he goes his way. And then Elizabeth conceives. And then the son is born, and the son is brought to the temple, and he is presented for the sacrifice and the circumcision, and they're debating: None of his family has ever been named "John"; what is Elizabeth talking about? And they turn to Zachariah, and he writes "His name **is** John"—not given by Zachariah; not given by Elizabeth. Gabriel named him. And when he does that, his tongue is loosed!

Well, he's spent nine months all quiet. Who knows what erupted on that day out of the mouth of Zachariah! The notoriety of this child would have been **immense**. William (born to Dian[a] and that funny-looking fellow with the big ears, Charles—"Charles" [said with a British accent]), William didn't have as much notoriety as would have John at his birth. So, if you're Herod, and you want to make sure that you kill the right child...

I mean, he kills every child two-years-old and younger. Based upon the account given in Scripture, the conception of John and the conception of Christ were six months apart. Christ would have been born at one season of the year; John would have been born exactly six months earlier, in the opposite season of the year. John came into the world to close down a dispensation; Christ came into the world to open up a new dispensation. The birth of Christ would have—in all likelihood—have been in the spring. All of the debates that have been made about and all the reasons that have been given, based upon the festivals, notwithstanding, Christ would have been born in the spring, and John in the fall (John having been born first and would have been six months older than his cousin).

So, when the slaughter took place, what that would mean twelve years later, at the Passover—when they would have come to be presented—is that the 12-year-old kids arriving would have been from Galatia and Athens and other communities. But locally, hailing out of the immediate vicinity of Jerusalem, there would have been two, and they would have been cousins. It makes me wonder if the conversation that they interrupted and started asking questions of Christ didn't begin as a conversation among two cousins before the doctors of the law intervened and began to question the Christ themselves.

And it came to pass in those days that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus...

Caesar Augustus is Octavius (of the recent killing of Marc Anthony and the suicide of Cleopatra—after the conspiracy to kill Julius Caesar and the triumvirate that resulted in the group turning on one another and Octavius winning in the subsequent fighting—and upon ascending to being emperor, changed his name to Caesar Augustus). That's not a pompous name at all, is it?

...all his empire should be taxed. This same taxing was when Cyrenias was governor of Syria.

Cyrenias is the Greek version of a Latin name, and turns out, we know a lot about that Latin fellow: He was actually raising the chosen heir to Caesar Augustus as the mentor-leader

(because he had been such a successful leader in battle and administrator). Caesar Augustus opened up opportunities for common people to rise up in the ranks in a way that they never had before because he was trying to displace the Roman Senate. And in the process of displacing the Roman Senate, one of the beneficiaries of that was this Cyrenias. And he was so close with Caesar that his heir was entrusted to him as mentor. They went off to battle, and the heir got killed—oh, he got wounded, and he died, subsequently, back in Syria—but Augustus didn't hold that against Cyrenias. In fact, it didn't trouble their relationship at all. He named a new heir, and that would be Tiberius (who would destroy the temple).

And all went to be taxed, everyone in his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David which is called Bethlehem — because he was of the house and lineage of David — to be taxed with Mary his betrothed wife, she being great with child. And so it was that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger because there was none to give room for them in the inns.

And there were in the same country shepherds staying out in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord appeared unto them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were sore afraid. But the angel said unto them, Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this is the way you shall find the babe: he is wrapped in swaddling clothes and is lying in a manger. And suddenly there was, with the angel, a multitude of the Heavenly host, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, goodwill to men. (Luke 2:1-2 RE)

...and the shepherd said, "Let's go see **this!**" And so, they went and found the child.

We have promises that God is up to something and intends to accomplish some things (at a time when it appears unlikely that God is going to vindicate all that He has purposed to accomplish) in a single generation at some late date in history. But the purposes of God in bringing Christ into the world occurred in far less likely circumstances for the Savior to have been born and survived, grown to adulthood, and been able to minister as he was able to minister. Now, it's true that the people misapprehended what God was doing, and they misapprehended what the first mission of the Lord would be—but people misapprehend what the Lord is doing and how the Lord is going to accomplish His purposes now, at the end of times, as well. The ability of God to accomplish a matter (while He is also concealing the matter from the understanding of the world) should never be questioned—because that is exactly how He has accomplished, over and over again, the things that He said He intended to do.

I'm getting ready to give a talk at a conference in the spring, and I've been going back and looking carefully at the revelations that have rolled out **in our day, speaking to us**. One of the things that is very apparent is that the statements, the guidance, the commandments, the instruction, the lessons that we've been given are not given to **individuals**; it's given to

the people. Right now, the biggest challenge that remains as an obstacle to the accomplishment of what God has told us that He intends to do is the rising up of a **people**—not as those who can cleverly parse Scripture or who can endlessly go on about minutia related to the gospel—that's not the challenge at all. The challenge is to have **us** regard **one another** in a way so that we can live in peace with one another, and we aren't a threat to one another.

I'm hoping he doesn't mind me mentioning this, but in a recent conversation I had with a friend, Rob Adolpho... He and his wife are living on an Indian reservation, and she's a Tribal Chieftain leader; he's Polynesian. But the two of them and their children have actually performed Indian dances in full garb, dancing at various locations, celebrating Native American culture, history, and peoples. (I think they performed at the Calgary Stampede in full garb.) And we were having a conversation, and Rob was frustrated because he'd been talking to someone who wanted to do some work in an outreach to try and approach Native Americans with the continuation of the Restoration and bringing them the Book of Mormon and bringing them to a knowledge that God is actually up to something and that the native peoples matter. And the fellow who was talking to Rob said, "It's just too bad we don't... We need someone that can bring that Native American point of view and can..." And Rob was frustrated, because he's on the phone, and he's what they're looking for. And I said, "Rob, Rob, the next time you come down, bring all your dress and your garb and do a dance, and maybe they'll figure out who they're talking to." We had a good laugh.

But the problem and the challenge is to take and bring people together—not because you have subdued me with your arguments or because I have subdued you with my arguments. There shouldn't **be** any arguments. You know, the cure for disagreement is "time and patience and careful and solemn and ponderous thoughts." We don't hear one another because we don't have the patience to allow the issue to unfold. We are in a hurry, and we want to get the result.

It's obvious to me from reading the revelations that have been given to us that the Lord is far more interested in the **process** than He is in having us present a **result**. The process of working together and learning to cooperate, respect, and deal with one another is far more valuable and meaningful than is knocking out a result in a hurry.

(And speaking of a hurry, I've been talking too long. We're more than an hour, and I didn't want to do that.)

Look, use the Scriptures as the starting point. The Book of Mormon, in particular, was given to us in our day as something from which to pry open and look into things that are real, that are beyond the veil. I was going to read (but I'll just commend to you) the account of the condescension of God given by Nephi when he's talking about the tree of life. In the new Scriptures, it's First Nephi chapter three, really beginning at paragraph six—but paragraph seven and eight and nine make it clear that the condescension of God begins with Mary. I've talked about that in "Our Divine Parents," but you should re-read that as part of the Christmas story, as part of thinking about this season—because it took an enormous effort on the part of heaven to bring to pass the coming of the Savior into the world. And although He wasn't born on the winter solstice or near it, we celebrate His birth at this time—and we

look a little nutty if we don't celebrate it at this time, so... (We're regarded as nutty enough, already.) We celebrate it now, and so now is the time to think upon, reflect upon, and to look carefully at the Scriptures. If you will allow careful and solemn and ponderous thought to inform you as you read those verses of Nephi's, you may be shocked at the things that the Lord has been willing to tell us, in plain language, if we were willing to hear it.

God lives. The prophecies are true. The Scriptures that we have are adequate for God's purposes in our day, and we really needn't go too far away from them to find our way back to what we need. And the most important material of all that He has given us, is the Book of Mormon as a covenant and the revelations and instructions that have been given as commandments to us in our day. They are a blueprint for the establishment of Zion, if we'll just give heed to them.

We don't need to be like the folks on Mars Hill, always wanting to hear some new thing, when what we have heard already from the Lord challenges us to our core to become more united as a people, to be more patient with one another, to **listen** to what each of us have to say. We're too busy coming up with our own response to hear what the other person has to say. Maybe, taking time to listen (and then waiting a day or two to figure out what the right response would be) would be the best form of a conversation, instead of how quickly and how rapidly we want to have things take place now—in an instant, suddenly!

When God says things are going to happen quickly... There are watches; there are calendars; there are glaciers; and then there's tectonic plates. God moves them all. And so, for Him, the movement of a tectonic plate may seem quick. So, don't think that you have to hurry up, because the opportunity, it's here; it's now. It's given to you. But it's the process, not the result. God will take care of the result. The only thing we can engage in is the process itself.

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

[Transcription v1.1]