

An Ensign to the Nations

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My brothers and sisters, I very much appreciate Brother Cuthbert's prayer. It is always an awesome responsibility to speak in this historic Tabernacle. I seek the direction of the Holy Spirit.

For a moment, may I take you back 142 years when there was, of course, no tabernacle here, nor temple, nor Temple Square. On July 24, 1847, the pioneer company of our people came into this valley. An advance group had arrived a day or two earlier. Brigham Young arrived on Saturday. The next day, Sabbath services were held both in the morning and in the afternoon. There was no hall of any kind in which to meet. I suppose that in the blistering heat of that July Sunday they sat on the tongues of their wagons and leaned against the wheels while the Brethren spoke. The season was late, and they were faced with a gargantuan and immediate task if they were to grow seed for the next season. But President Young pleaded with them not to violate the Sabbath then or in the future.

The next morning they divided into groups to explore their surroundings.

Brigham Young, Wilford Woodruff, and a handful of their associates hiked from their campground a little to the south of us, on past the ground where we are, and up the hill to the north of us. They climbed a dome-shaped peak, President Young having difficulty because of his recent illness.

When the Brethren stood on the summit, they looked over this valley to the south of them. It was largely barren, except for the willows and rushes that grew along the streams that carried water from the mountains to the lake. There was no building of any kind, but Brigham Young had said the previous Saturday, "This is the place."

The summit where they stood was named Ensign Peak out of reference to these great prophetic words of Isaiah: "And he [speaking of God] will lift up an ensign to the nations from far, and will hiss unto them from the end of the earth: and, behold, they shall come with speed swiftly." ([Isa. 5:26.](#))

"And he shall set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth." ([Isa. 11:12.](#))

There is some evidence to indicate that Wilford Woodruff took from his pocket a bandanna handkerchief and waved it as an ensign or a standard to the nations, that from this place should go the word of the Lord, and to this place should come the people of the earth.

I think they may also on that occasion have spoken of the building of the temple, which today stands a few feet east of here, in fulfillment of the words of Isaiah:

"And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of

the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it.

“And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” ([Isa. 2:2–3.](#))

How foolish, someone might have said, had he heard these men that July morning of 1847. They did not look like statesmen with great dreams. They did not look like rulers poring over maps and planning an empire. They were exiles, driven from their fair city on the Mississippi into this desert region of the West. But they were possessed of a vision drawn from the scriptures and words of revelation.

I marvel at the foresight of that little group. It was both audacious and bold. It was almost unbelievable. Here they were, almost a thousand miles from the nearest settlement to the east and almost eight hundred miles from the Pacific Coast. They were in an untried climate. The soil was different from that of the black loam of Illinois and Iowa, where they had most recently lived. They had never raised a crop here. They had never experienced a winter. They had not built a structure of any kind. These prophets, dressed in old, travel-worn clothes, standing in boots they had worn for more than a thousand miles from Nauvoo to this valley, spoke of a millennial vision. They spoke out of a prophetic view of the marvelous destiny of this cause. They came down from the peak that day and went to work to bring reality to their dream.

Sometimes in our day, as we walk our narrow paths and fill our little niches of responsibility, we lose sight of the grand picture. When I was a small boy, draft horses were common. An important part of the harness was the bridle. On the bridle were blinders, one on each side. They were so placed that the horse could see only straight ahead and not to either side. They were designed to keep him from becoming frightened or distracted and to keep his attention on the road at his feet.

Some of us do our work as if we had blinders on our eyes. We see only our own little narrow track. We catch nothing of the broader vision. Ours may be a small responsibility in the Church. It is good to fulfill that responsibility with diligence. And it is also good to know how that responsibility contributes to the great overall program of the growing kingdom of God.

President Harold B. Lee once said from this pulpit, quoting an unknown writer, “Survey large fields and cultivate small ones.”

My interpretation of that statement is that we ought to recognize something of the breadth and depth and height—grand and wonderful, large and all-encompassing—of the program of the Lord, and then work with diligence to meet our responsibility for our assigned portion of that program.

Each of us has a small field to cultivate. While so doing, we must never lose sight of the greater picture, the large composite of the divine destiny of this work. It was given us by God our Eternal Father, and each of us has a part to play in the weaving of its magnificent tapestry. Our individual contribution may be small, but it is not unimportant. When we were children we learned a nursery rhyme:

*Little drops of water,
Little grains of sand
Make the mighty ocean,
And the pleasant land.*

So it is with us in our service in the kingdom of God. Many small efforts and little acts become the cumulative pattern of a great worldwide organization.

On March 26, 1907, the First Presidency issued a proclamation to the world in response to hateful criticism charging the Church and its leaders with selfish interests and narrow bigotry. The First Presidency responded: “Our motives are not selfish; our purposes not petty and earth-bound; we contemplate the human race—past, present, and yet to come—as immortal beings, for whose salvation it is our mission to labor; and to this work, broad as eternity and deep as the love of God, we devote ourselves, now, and forever.” (*Improvement Era*, May 1907, p. 495.)

We serve as teachers in quorums and auxiliary organizations; we serve as missionaries at home and abroad; we serve as researchers in family history and as temple workers—hopefully each with diligence in our little corner—and from all of this there emerges a remarkable and wonderful pattern, a phenomenon grand in its comprehensiveness, as broad as the earth and encompassing all of the generations of men.

If each of us does not do well that which is his or hers to do, then there is a flaw in the entire pattern. The whole tapestry is injured. But if each of us does well his or her part, then there is strength and beauty.

I need not remind you that this cause in which we are engaged is not an ordinary cause. It is the cause of Christ. It is the kingdom of God our Eternal Father. It is the building of Zion on the earth, the fulfillment of prophecy given of old and of a vision revealed in this dispensation.

Under its present organization it has been moving forward for only a little more than a century and a half. It will continue, ever growing and spreading over the earth, as part of a great millennial pattern until the time comes when He whose right it is to reign will rule as King of kings and Lord of lords.

When President Young and his brethren stood atop the peak to the north of us and spoke of an ensign to the nations, they soon put in place a program to implement it, and this notwithstanding the circumstances in which they found themselves. In August of 1852, only five years later, a special conference was held in the old tabernacle on this square. President Heber C. Kimball opened by saying:

“We have come together today, according to previous appointment, to hold a special conference to transact business, a month earlier than usual, inasmuch as there are elders to be selected to go to the missions of the earth, and they want an earlier start than formerly. ...

“The missions we will call for during this conference are, generally, not to be very long ones; probably from three to seven years will be as long as any man will be absent from his family.”

The clerk then read ninety-eight names of individuals who had been proposed for foreign missions. (*Joseph I. Earl Family History*, p. 1.)

To me it is a thing of wonder that at a time when our people were struggling to gain a foothold in these mountains, they put the spread of the gospel ahead of comfort, security, the well-being of their families, and all other considerations. Across the broad prairie between the mountains of the West and the Missouri and Mississippi rivers there were two bodies of Latter-day Saints moving in opposite directions. Missionaries traveling to the eastern states and Europe passed converts gathering from those lands to the Zion of the West. There was likewise a movement to the West Coast and across the Pacific, with elders going to Hawaii, even to Hong Kong, China, Siam, Ceylon, and India. This was all part of this grand vision of an ensign to the nations. It has gone on ever since, and it goes on today at an accelerated pace. In a hundred nations missionaries of the Church are teaching the doctrines of salvation.

They are building the kingdom across the world. They are touching for everlasting good the lives of all with whom they work, and generations who come after them will be affected by what they do today. They are fulfilling the declarations of ancient prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord concerning the “marvellous work and a wonder” that should come to pass in the dispensation of the fulness of times. ([Isa. 29:14.](#))

I think of this beautiful Temple Square, where we are meeting. I think of the travail that lies behind its creation.

Last year some three and a half million visitors came here. They came from all states of the United States and all provinces of Canada. They came from other nations around the globe.

Their freely written comments remind us of the words of Isaiah, written of old, that in the latter days people from the nations will come to learn of the ways of God and to walk in His paths. Listen to a sampling of these comments:

From a Protestant from New Jersey: “I have often heard the word *Mormon* and associated it with a fanatic religious group. I couldn't have been more wrong!”

From a Congregationalist from Massachusetts: “I have always felt that religion should be a joy, and you certainly show it!”

From a Christian from Maine: “This is beautiful; it is the first time in my life I have wondered if my religion is the right one.”

From a Catholic from Pennsylvania: “I envy your way of life.”

A Presbyterian from Canada: “God is in this place; we see him everywhere.”

A Christian from Germany: “I enjoyed myself very much here. I cannot believe such a place exists that offers so much and asks for no money.”

And so they go, on and on by the thousands. Many come with doubts and bias. They leave with appreciation and curiosity. The great work that is being done here is all a part of the fabric of this tremendous cause we describe as the kingdom of God in the earth.

And then I think of the work that goes on in this temple and in the other temples of the Church.

We are sometimes looked upon as provincial. Is there any group in all the world with a vision so broad and a work so comprehensive? I know of no other people so concerned with the eternal well-being of the sons and daughters of God of all generations. Surely the work that goes on in these sacred houses is the most unselfish of all work. Those who labor here do so, for the most part, in behalf of those beyond the veil of death. They do it because of a knowledge of the importance of eternal ordinances and covenants. They do it so that even the dead may exercise agency concerning the acceptance or rejection of sacred ordinances.

It is all part of the great pattern of the God of Heaven, who is our Eternal Father, and of His Son, who is our Savior and our Redeemer, the author of our salvation, through whose sacrifice came universal resurrection from the dead and opportunity for exaltation for those who, whether in life or in death, will walk in obedience to His commandments.

My brethren and sisters, the priesthood is upon the earth, the power of God given to men to act in His name and for His purposes. It carries with it "the keys of the kingdom, for an ensign, and for the gathering" of the people of the Lord in the last days. ([D&C 113:6](#).)

My co-workers in this great cause and kingdom, you and I are weaving the grand design of that standard to the nations. It waves to all the world. It says to men and women everywhere: "Come, walk with us and learn of the ways of the Lord. Here is the priesthood given to men in these last days. Here are the great keys for the redemption of the dead. Here is the authority to carry the gospel to the nations of the earth."

We do not say it selfishly. We do not say it with egotism. We do not say it boastfully. We say it as those charged with a great and compelling responsibility. We say it with love in our hearts for the God of heaven and the risen Lord, and with love for the children of men everywhere.

To those of the Church, all within the sound of my voice, I give the challenge that while you are performing the part to which you have been called, never lose sight of the whole majestic and wonderful picture of the purpose of this, the dispensation of the fulness of times. Weave beautifully your small thread in the grand tapestry, the pattern for which was laid out for us by the God of heaven. Hold high the standard under which we walk. Be diligent, be true, be virtuous, be faithful, that there may be no flaw in that banner.

The vision of this kingdom is not a superficial dream in the night that fades with the sunrise. It is veritably the plan and work of God our Eternal Father. It has to do with all of His children.

While grubbing the sagebrush of these western valleys to lay the foundations for a commonwealth, while doing all of the many mundane things they were required to do to stay alive and grow, our forebears ever kept before them the grandeur of the great cause in which they were engaged. It is a work which we must do with the same vision they held. It is a work which will go on after we have left this scene. God help us to do our very best as servants, called under His divine will, to carry forward and build the kingdom with imperfect hands, united together to execute a perfect pattern. I so pray, as I bear witness of these things, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

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