This Little Light of Ours: Ecologies of Revelation

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I've been asked to speak about the power of personal revelation today. But I'd like to tell you a (slightly) different story about revelation, one full of highs and lows, but in recent years perhaps more lows than highs. Or maybe more accurately, more questions than answers. And while revelation has remained deeply personal for me through these years, one of the central, ongoing questions in my life has been my connection to you, to all of you, to the Church, to everyone else, to the world itself. On the one hand, we're taught in the parable of the ten virgins that maintaining our spiritual light is a personal matter, that each of us is responsible to keep our own spiritual fires burning (Matt. 25:1-13); but paradoxically, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also teaches that spiritual light is a community affair: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). It would seem that Jesus just can't make up His mind!

I'd like to explore this tension today and suggest that, in fact, not only are there times when it's okay to live on "borrowed light" but that there are many times when choosing not to do so actually takes us farther away from God. The idea that revelation is a personal experience can be deeply empowering; but in my experience—especially in recent years—I believe that the scriptures make the same suggestion: Revelation has more often extended beyond the personal to encompass our relationships with family, friends, neighbors, and the world around us. At the risk of making things

unnecessarily complicated, which I'm prone to do, I'd like to suggest a phrase that I've found useful to highlight this distinction. Rather than "personal revelation," I like to think of "ecologies of revelation"—in other words, how revelation goes beyond us as individuals, beyond the ego, the self-absorbed "I," and moves into a broader realm where our testimonies burn brightly, not just to ensure our own salvation when the Bridegroom comes, but for the direct benefit of the entire world.

Me. And Me Now: Revelation as Personal Apocalypse

But I'm already getting ahead of myself. Imagine me, ten years younger. A crew-cut, no beard. In fact, ten years ago today I was set apart as a full-time missionary, called to serve in the Slovenia Ljubljana Mission. My mission included the entire former Yugoslavia, an area of the world that, at the time, was beset by a recent American-led bombing campaign, two civil wars in Kosovo and Macedonia, and a major war in Bosnia a few years earlier that killed tens of thousands and displaced many more. As I've mentioned before over the pulpit in this ward, it was an extremely difficult mission in many ways. But for me, it was also a time of a deep, revelatory connection with God and one that will forever be associated closely with those places I served, a peculiar aspect of revelation to which I'll return in a moment.

Only a few months earlier, however, I had felt little inclination to serve a mission. I had just moved from my home in Utah here to the Boston area for college; and while I was attending church and more than willing to do the work a mission would entail, I had a slight problem. I really didn't believe in God. I don't want to overdramatize my conversion, but this unbelief was quite the hang-up. It was a time in my life when I valued, perhaps more than anything, the quality of integrity. I felt strongly that if I didn't believe, I could hardly go preach. I should point out that I wasn't opposed to the Church, though I was aware of a number of issues that troubled me. I wasn't opposed to the notion of proselytizing; in fact, I found myself proselytizing for a variety of social justice causes at the time, tutoring inmates at a local prison, protesting for animal rights, and volunteering at a local homeless shelter. If I wasn't sure what God wanted, if indeed He or She or It existed, I was sure

that it was our moral responsibility to help those in need here and now.

Had I stayed in Utah for college, I'm not sure how things would have played out; but here in Cambridge, God moved in more mysterious ways. Instead of sending home teachers or a caring bishop, he sent me a new best friend, John, a gay, secular Jew from Chicago who could hardly stomach organized religion and who, in some of the most startlingly funny ways imaginable, would take every opportunity to let me know what he thought of the mere possibility of my spending two years on a Mormon mission. He forced the issue to a head, and I found myself determined to "experiment upon" the word, as the Prophet Alma suggests (Alma 32:26–30).

Near the end of fall term, I took a few days off from classwork and immersed myself in religious study, prayer, fasting, and, importantly for me, music that spoke to my soul. My question was simple: Does God exist, and if so, how does this whole "personal witness" stuff work? What I lacked at that moment of "faith in Christ," I made up for with "a sincere heart and real intent" (Moro. 10:4). As the weekend approached, I still had no answer, and I felt the rest of my life starting to pile up more pressingly. My parents wanted to talk, friends wanted to hang out, readings and problem sets needed to be done, and papers needed to be written. But I wanted my answer, and I pushed back hard to get it.

And it came. It came as I sat for a few hours out on the stone-slab benches of Cambridge Common, shivering a bit in the late-autumn air of a quiet Sunday morning, praying and meditating through the chill morning. At some point, it simply struck me with all the clarity and force I could have asked for: God knew me, and He cared for me. And He cared for many others in the world, a few of whom I might be able to reach if I were to consecrate a couple of years to His service. That was it: a manifestation of His love and some divine foresight to sense, if only for a moment, what was at stake in that decision. The decision, it seemed, was left to me. If I had to define revelation, that would be it: a clear sensation of God's love and the moral clarity to allow us to choose—to exercise agency in its fullest sense.

We often use "revelation" for such experiences, and it certainly was that. But having majored in classics in college, I'll pre-

tentiously throw it out there that "revelation" (which comes from Latin and means roughly "to unveil"), pales in comparison to its Greek counterpart, which we know as "apocalypse." While it means more or less the same thing, thanks to Hollywood and subway-station evangelists, we recognize this word as having a much more radical connotation: the end times, the cataclysmic finale of our world. In my case, to describe this experience as "cataclysmic" might be overstating things, but it definitely shook me up and reordered certain aspects of my life.

Speaking of the world, it also made me rethink certain places, certain locations in my life-geography. As Elder Boyd K. Packer and—more recently and locally—our fellow ward-member Rich, have shared, revelatory experiences typically defy words. Often the best we can do is point to where they happened, to stake out our own sacred groves (or hills where we've snowboarded, for Rich) where we have communed with God. The book of Mosiah tells us the same: "Yea, the place of Mormon, the waters of Mormon, the forest of Mormon, how beautiful are they to the eyes of them who there came to the knowledge of their Redeemer" (Mosiah 18:30). The Bible can be read as a litany of sacred sites of revelation: Eden, Beth-El, Mount Moriah, Sinai, the temple, Gethsemane, the road to Damascus. For me, Cambridge Common always will be, too.

What followed seemed to be a torrent of revelation, of apocalypses from God designed, I presume, as a crash course for me for the upcoming two years. Lest you misunderstand, I grew up in the Church and was always fairly active. I liked Mormonism, I liked its fruits, and I guess I probably knew its doctrine (at least intellectually) better than most. But I don't think I could stand and firmly say that I knew God. I had occasionally felt inklings of the Spirit in my life, but I had never really put revelation to the test. And so after that fateful Sunday morning on the Common, I found myself asking for more and more, and receiving more: confirmations of truthfulness about Joseph Smith, the temple, my relationships with my family, especially with my mother who was diagnosed with cancer only weeks later and with whom I had (gently, but regularly) butted heads for years over everything from church meetings to my nascent veganism to punk rock. God cared, and He was making it abundantly clear to me.

And He seemed to continue caring throughout my mission. I genuinely felt as if God had blessed me with the gift of prophecy, of preaching, of faith. I had a numerically bizarre—or arguably abysmal—mission, I confess. I'm guessing I taught the "first discussion," or introductory explanation of the gospel, to around five or six hundred different people; I taught the following lesson to only about ten. I never baptized anyone; and as I've shared here, the only people whose conversions I played a part in fell away from the Church in catastrophic ways—hardly the apocalypse I had foreseen. But throughout it all, I felt what is so eloquently described in the *Lectures on Faith* as one of the foundations of faith in God: an "actual knowledge that the course of life which [I was] pursuing" was in accordance with God's will.[1]

After Laughter Comes Tears

After returning home from my mission, things changed. If I've spent more time than I should retelling that particular revelatory moment, it's because it became the measuring stick I used to judge all future spiritual encounters with the divine. And over the ensuing years, while I tried to remain faithful to that personal apocalypse and to seek out new light and knowledge, I began to stumble. Some of that stumbling was definitely the result of mistakes I was making (though as my parents taught in family scripture reading, only those who are pushing forward stumble). But in some ways, it has simultaneously seemed as if God cared less during these times. At first, I felt a deep loneliness because of this apparent isolation, but I've found more recently that it's a somewhat widespread phenomenon: the apostasy of the faithful, we might say. The strange silencing of the heavens. It seems to afflict a lot of returned missionaries and others who have felt, for some period, a deep connection with God but have then been left to fend for themselves spiritually.

And so I return to the idea I began with: that revelation is less an individual experience and more something nested within a web of places and people who stand to benefit from God's encounters with humankind. Even my epiphany-on-the-Common was marked by the fact that it was on *that* common, in a particular (and fittingly communal) place. And maybe more importantly, it gave me insight into what my relationships with others might

be—whether with friends at school, my family (all devout Mormons), or the people I would meet as a missionary, some of whom remain my closest friends. God gave me light; and while you may criticize me for not filling up my spiritual lamp with more oil, as the parable goes, I hope when I meet Him at the day of judgment, I can say that I let the light of that experience shine for others. It may not be a major revelation for anyone, but I hope and trust that somewhere along the line, that experience offered or will offer a "lower light . . . burning" for someone in need.[2]

But additionally, the reverse must be true: God wants me, and all of us, to draw spiritual strength from our own ecologies, from our spiritual communities, even when He is not extending his hand through the veil, so to speak. In fact, the great revelation of the past eight years since my mission has been my wife, Eunice. At the risk of devolving into awkward sentimentality or patronizing statements of affection, I'd like to pay her the highest compliment I can: in the seven and a half years we've known each other, she has pushed me to understand (or at least try to understand) God in ways that I never would have thought to do. In particular, she's challenged the way I understand revelation and, I think, fine-tuned it—or more accurately, blown it wide open.

And this ward has done the same. You've brought me closer to a notion of Zion than any place before: Zion is "the pure in heart" (D&C 97:21), a place with no inequality—we surely still fall short there—but it must also be a place where God matters, where in our day-to-day interactions we discuss spiritual things, we attempt to wrestle with our struggles of faith, and we share spiritual light with one another. I point to Zion because I believe that, by sharing our individual "candles of the Lord" (Prov. 20:27), we build community beyond ourselves, we make our ecologies of revelation. Not only do we see better as a group, we are able to sustain those who may be stumbling, or at least gain empathy for the rugged terrain over which others are called to pass.

A Community of Prophets

Let me share a few examples that you've shared with me:

In April 2010, after the general priesthood session, a few guys from the ward got together to rap over Slurpees about what we'd just seen. I'd been deeply touched by President Dieter Uchtdorf's

talk on patience—for precisely the reasons I've described here, the silencing of my heavens—and I said that I really liked it. I think I may have even had the audacity to pronounce it "an instant classic." Stuart, my home-teachee and a neuroscience graduate student, pointed out that it left him uncomfortable, not only for its pseudo-science but because of some of the assumptions it made about what spiritual normalcy might look like, how someone with a different personal disposition or ADD, for example, might feel, and so on. Having grown up with several friends who struggled seriously with such issues, I felt enlightened. I hope the exchange helped us both "understand one another, and both [be] edified and rejoice together" (D&C 50:22). That night, both 7–11 and the seating area at the nearby Au Bon Pain were also sanctified in some small way. (At this rate, pretty soon, Harvard Square will be taken up with the City of Enoch—just watch—maybe minus the dozen-or-so banks.)

In 2008, Church leaders broke the hearts of many gay members and supporters when they called on members in California to give money and time to pass Proposition 8. The conflict spilled over into our ward, culminating in a fireside/question-and-answer session with our stake president that I did not find especially revelatory in the sense that he uncovered new truth about the nature of the family, or sexuality, or even California politics. But on that night, the revelation was community itself. When I was a missionary, I might have agreed with some of the perspectives expressed by certain members of the ward, but I don't now and probably won't ever again. And they probably don't agree with mine. But the fact is that we sat there and struggled for two hours to express the bits of insight and revelation we've collectively accrued on this question. We did not come to a unified perspective, but I believe we took one step closer to understanding each other; and at that moment, being of one heart seemed more critical to the project of Zion than being of one mind anyway.

For the past couple of years, a small group of people—mostly from our ward, but with a few outliers—have gathered weekly to read and discuss Church history, literature, and other Mormon issues. No question is off the table, which perhaps speaks more to foolhardiness than anything else, but I have to say that sitting around on Friday evenings discussing the early Relief Society, late

polygamy, the priesthood ban for African American men, and other difficult issues has been enlightening. Some would call this process a recipe for apostasy; but as I said before, these are some of the most faithful people I know—women and men who believe deeply enough and have enough integrity to ask the questions that make the rest of us blanch at our own spiritual temerity. These are valiant spiritual explorers. While our lights may burn dimmer than those of missionaries, there is something affirming about linking arms (so to speak) and facing our theological demons together. We will probably not find all the answers we seek; but as we learn from the brother of Jared's experience, having the faith to seek for the transcendent, no matter how difficult the issue, does not offend God (Ether 2:25–3:6). If anything, it seems we offend him by not daring to ask, or disbelieving when He then chooses to reach His finger through the veil to enlighten our lives.

And finally, here's something more specific and orthodox. A couple of weeks ago, I went to the temple with two close friends from our ward, Logan and Quinn. As we chatted in the celestial room, Logan recounted some of his own recent struggles to believe. I personally don't feel the need for a happy ending to every story we tell. After all, we're still living these experiences—the ending is not yet clear, happy or not. But after pointing out some aspects of why it's difficult for him to believe, Logan shared something that I think is profound. In fact, it's an idea so profound that it makes up a significant chunk of each of the three "endings" Moroni writes to the Book of Mormon (in the books of Mormon, Ether, and Moroni). In essence, he said that, upon spiritual reflection, he remembered the promises he had made to his wife and to God to build their marriage upon covenants and on a relationship with God. And even if he felt his spiritual reservoir dipping low at present, a promise is a promise.

Let me then close with Moroni's parsing of these same questions. I've mentioned his promise from Moroni 10:4 above—that if we pray sincerely, God will manifest truth to us directly by His spirit. In praying for and receiving this truth, we will be on our way to faith, hope, and charity. It's a more pleasant, even serene way of restating what he says in a very angry way at the end of Mormon: to cowboy up, get over our petty doubts, and believe—the miracles will follow (Mormon 9:1–27). Let's remember

the ecology of these revelations. Angry Moroni has just seen his father, his friends, and everyone else in his tribe killed; serene Moroni has been wandering alone for years and is just about to bury the plates and be relieved of the burden of his calling.

Allow me to split the difference between these two Moronis with a quick reading of the best chapter in the most theologically adventurous book in the Book of Mormon: Ether. We talk about Ether 12 often in the context of weakness, but we miss the point in large part when we do. Moroni is writing—again—about faith, hope, and charity. But here we find him more reflective, a bit somber or maybe even depressed—again, with good reason. His burden was a heavy one. (And as an aside, for critics who assume that Joseph Smith wrote this, I find this triple ending a remarkable piece of literature—psychology and theology that simply go beyond the raw material Joseph seems to have been working with. But that's an aside.) Moroni reflects on the good old days, formulaically recounting a catalog of the greatest hits of faith in the Book of Mormon: Alma and Amulek, missionary-brothers Nephi and Lehi, and the brother of Jared. And then it gets interesting, as we watch Moroni converse with the Lord about his particular lot in life, his fears, his hopes—the human side of this great prophet. God reassures him, and then Moroni in turn partakes of one of the most important revelatory processes in scripture, and the same process Logan articulated in the temple: Moroni remembers.

First, Moroni remembers the powerful faith of the brother of Jared, enough to move mountains. But then, his remembrance becomes more poignant and personal. He remembers the hopes he felt long ago: "And I also remember that thou hast said that thou hast prepared a house for man, yea, even among the mansions of thy Father, in which man might have a more excellent hope; wherefore man must hope, or he cannot receive an inheritance in the place which thou hast prepared" (Ether 12:32). He then continues on to charity, or love: "And again, I remember that thou hast said that thou hast loved the world, even unto the laying down of thy life for the world, that thou mightest take it again to prepare a place for the children of men. And now I know that this love which thou hast had for the children of men is charity; wherefore, except men shall have charity they cannot inherit that place

which thou hast prepared in the mansions of thy Father" (vv. 33–34).

Why does a prophet say "I remember"? Don't we bear testimony by saying "I know" or "I believe" or some other pronouncement of faith? And why, in a conversation with Jesus, does he need to remember things about Jesus? If it's so important, why doesn't Jesus do the talking? Let me offer my thoughts, as my modest contribution to our collective ecology of revelation. Revelation is a long-term, ongoing process. Though we feel an "answer" to a prayer, it's ultimately a small addition of light. We see better, but we continue to need that same light, those same answers; it's not as if we outgrow truth, even if we do (typically) outgrow our current circumstances. For some reason, remembering brought comfort and renewed commitment to Moroni as it had to my friend in the temple. And when I hear their testimonies, it sparks similar memories for me—from the past, from things I've heard at conference, in books, at school, at home, in the temple. From Friday nights conversing with friends, or sipping Slurpees in the square. And above all, from a cold Sunday morning on Cambridge Common. In the name of Jesus Christ, I testify that God lives and loves us, and pray that we may all build a Zion community and world by sharing our light and allowing ourselves to rely on the light of others to illuminate our lives.

Notes

1. *The Lectures on Faith*, 3:5.

2. Philip Paul Bliss, "Brightly Beams our Father's Mercy," *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 335.