

HOW TO BUILD A PARADOX: MAKING THE NEW JERUSALEM

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The text the bishop suggested for my remarks today comes from Doctrine and Covenants 45:66: “And it shall be called the New Jerusalem, a land of peace, a city of refuge, a place of safety for the saints of the Most High God.” This was a delicious topic for me to think about—the idea of a city on a hill, a heavenly city called Zion, is a subject that has occupied poets as often as it has prophets, and the vision of this city has inspired many of our loveliest hymns, which have been very pleasantly running through my head for weeks now.

Zion is the word we use more often, but it’s worth thinking about the name “New Jerusalem” as well. The etymology of the name “Jerusalem” is contested, but one fairly common theory is that the word is a portmanteau of *Yerusha* (meaning “heritage”) and *saalem* or *shalom*, meaning “peace” or “wholeness.” So, a heritage of peace. Prefacing the notion of heritage with “New” makes it a bit paradoxical, and building Zion—establishing a new heritage—is surely a paradoxical project. The verse I mentioned above is prefaced by an instruction for the Saints to gather money and purchase an inheritance, so we’re alerted to the fact that this is not the usual sort of heritage, but instead one we are to be involved in creating. This is just the beginning of the paradoxical aspects of the description of the New Jerusalem; in fact, it seems to me that Zion is built on a series of paradoxes that I’d like to poke at a bit this afternoon.

First, there is the temporal paradox of Zion. Zion is, in the scriptures, always already fled; we know it only after it is gone. The New Jerusalem,

according to the Doctrine and Covenants, will be built on the site of the Garden of Eden. Always there is this yearning for something lost, some place in the past. But Zion is also always yet to come; the hope of Zion is the promise of restoration. And restoration, it seems to me, requires the knowledge of what was lost. Zion is more precious because it fulfills the longing for a lost Eden. It is Zion in part because it assuages grief and loss—without the sufferings of the past and present, the hope of future glory cannot shine as brightly. The apostle Paul makes reference to this paradoxical linkage of past and future in our yearning for Zion in his beautiful litany of the forebears of our faith in Hebrews 11:3–16:

Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.

By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh.

By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God.

But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.

By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith.

By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went.

By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise:

For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised.

Therefore sprang there even of one, and him as good as dead, so many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the sea shore innumerable.

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country.

And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned.

But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.

The descriptions of the New Jerusalem in Doctrine and Covenants sections 42 and 45 echo this language about seeing the promises afar off, desiring a country that feels like a memory but is born more of spirit and imagination than of earthly experience.

The next paradox, related to the first, is that Zion is both a physical space and an abstraction. That is, Zion is made of memory and longing and hope, which are clearly not tied to a particular place, and yet it is also a physical space. This paradox is especially poignant at the moment when section 45 is given. The Saints are divided, some in Ohio, some in Missouri, a lot of the men on missions—and *none* of the places where they're living are looking to be very hospitable. And yet it's just at this moment that precise instructions for how to share and distribute property are given, even though they don't *have* any property. They're being commanded to live the law of consecration, establish a temporal

kingdom of God, and yet, they're told that the New Jerusalem is to be established in Jackson County—from whence they will eventually be expelled (violently). And this is excruciating to Joseph Smith—one of the things that's clearest in the Doctrine and Covenants and in his writings is how desperately he longs for the physical company of the Saints. Here's a passage from a funeral sermon he preached for Lorenzo Barnes:

I would esteem it one of the greatest blessings, if I am to be afflicted in this world, to have my lot cast where I can find brothers [and sisters, I'm *sure* he meant to say] and friends all around me. . . .

When I heard of the death of our beloved Brother Barnes, it would not have affected me so much, if I had the opportunity of burying him in the land of Zion. . . .

I have said, Father, I desire to die here among the Saints. But if this is not Thy will, and I go hence and die, wilt Thou find some kind friend to bring my body back, and gather my friends who have fallen in foreign lands, and bring them up hither, that we may all lie together.

I will tell you what I want. If tomorrow I shall be called to lie in yonder tomb, in the morning of the resurrection let me strike hands with my father, and cry, "My father," and he will say, "My son, my son," as soon as the rock rends and before we come out of our graves.

And may we contemplate these things so? Yes, if we learn how to live and how to die. When we lie down we contemplate how we may rise in the morning; and it is pleasing for friends to lie down together, locked in the arms of love, to sleep and wake in each other's embrace and renew their conversation.¹

So, Joseph conceives of Zion as the place where earthly longing for heaven finds its fulfillment, where the love we enjoy on earth, partly because we live together and eat together and play games and talk together as earthly beings, is finally made eternal. (This is, of course, why we feel our souls at rest in the temple—it is a place where

1. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, edited by Joseph Fielding Smith (1938; repr., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977), 294–95.

the eternal and heavenly can be located in earthly, physical space.) We will recognize heaven because we have missed it here on earth. What I mean to say is that I think this sort of homesickness, what in German is called *Sehnsucht*, is a crucial part of establishing the New Jerusalem—homelessness, in this view, is a prerequisite for arriving at home. In Isaiah, the description of Zion makes this explicit:

To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he might be glorified.

And they shall build the old wastes, they shall raise up the former desolations, and they shall repair the waste cities, the desolations of many generations.

And strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, and the sons of the alien shall be your plowmen and your vinedressers.

. . . . For your shame ye shall have double; and for confusion they shall rejoice in their portion: therefore in their land they shall possess the double: everlasting joy shall be unto them. (Isaiah 61:3–5, 7)

Another apparent contradiction is in the law of consecration as we understand it in relation to the New Jerusalem—this law is wholly bound up in material goods and property, and yet it is not materialist in most of the ways we understand that word. It's all about stuff, and it's not about stuff at all, but about the hearts that beat above the bellies that need filling, inside the bodies that need to be clothed and housed. The New Jerusalem is fully in the world, engaged with the commerce and physicality of every human day, and yet it is utterly otherworldly, concerned with souls. This conflation of the physical with the spiritual is beautifully expressed by Isaiah in several places: “but thou shalt call thy walls Salvation, and thy gates Praise” (Isaiah 60:18). It is beautiful, but not costly.

O thou afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted, behold, I will lay thy stones with fair colours, and lay thy foundations with sapphires.

And I will make thy windows of agates, and thy gates of carbuncles, and all thy borders of pleasant stones. (Isaiah 54:11–12)

The glory of Lebanon shall come unto thee, the fir tree, the pine tree, and the box together, to beautify the place of my sanctuary; and I will make the place of my feet glorious.

. . . For brass I will bring gold, and for iron I will bring silver, and for wood brass, and for stones iron. (Isaiah 60:13, 17)

But also: “Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price” (Isaiah 55:1).

And this invitation brings us to the final paradox I want to consider: that Zion is both a refuge for the Saints and a beacon to the world—her walls are Salvation, not stone; the gates of Praise are open as wide as the Lord’s arms. Returning to Doctrine and Covenants section 45:

And [your inheritance] shall be called the New Jerusalem, a land of peace, a city of refuge, a place of safety for the saints of the Most High God;

And the glory of the Lord shall be there, and the terror of the Lord also shall be there, insomuch that the wicked will not come unto it, and it shall be called Zion.

. . . And it shall come to pass that the righteous shall be gathered out from among all nations, and shall come to Zion, singing with songs of everlasting joy. (D&C 45:66–67, 71)

In thinking about this paradox, I realized that we have a perfect model for a refuge that is also inviting, in our homes and families. The Reverend Canon Susan Harriss describes this beautifully in my favorite Mother’s Day sermon of all time:

As mothers, as fathers, we have at our disposal a wonderful time of rehearsal. We may set aside our interests time and again; we may practice watching the interests of others. But if that sacrificial love starts

with our children, and stops there, we will have lost our opportunity to fulfill Christ's commandment, and so have everything that He has promised. Christ's commandment is that we love, not just our children, but one another!

. . . Jesus said, "whosoever loses his life for my sake, will keep it for eternity." If my sacrifice, and yours, is not so much pointed at personal fulfillment, and not even toward the health and education of my children, but beyond that, to the love of the world and God's creation, then I have resurrection. Whatever I have lost, I will have gained—not in the shining faces and adulation of my own children but in the living fabric of the world they inhabit.

This is the best news of all, because, mothers and fathers, when our time has come, when, having fulfilled the duties of our state of life we are free to address ourselves to the needs of the world, when it comes time to love one another as Jesus loved us, we already know how! We have already learned! How to teach, how to feed, how to tend, how to heal, how to care, how to love. But it is different with us this time, because we act not out of duty. This time, in addition to knowing how to love, we also know why.

Because He first loved us. Because Christ has risen. Because in addition to being seen, spotted, glimpsed walking on earth, our beloved Christ has begun to dwell within us. . . . Having practiced our scales, played the daily exercises of love for our children, the scales of our belonging, now we come to the concerto. Now the music begins. Having loved our own, we now can love the world. Now we rise to the task for which parenting prepared us. Because he loved us; because while we lost ourselves not just in sin but in duty, not just in forgetfulness but in earnestness, in our sincere desire to do what was right for our children, because although we lost ourselves in our mothering, God remembered us, and brought us forward, and made us new.²

2. Susan Harriss, "More Life, More Life: On Parenting," in *The Book of Women's Sermons: Hearing God in Each Other's Voices*, edited by E. Lee Hancock (New York: Riverhead, 1999), 140–42.

And of course it is not only in our families that we can learn to balance this paradox. The need for self-forgetfulness, for binding one's own interest to that of another human being, arises in all kinds of situations if we approach our corner of God's creation as a potential habitus for Zion.

This, of course, brings me to the slightly embarrassing part of my talk where I quote from *O, The Oprah Magazine*. The October 2009 issue has a small, sweet essay about a magnificent radio show called *Bookworm*, in which an awkward, brilliant guy named Michael Silverblatt conducts interviews with authors that regularly achieve moments of profound human connection, even, I think, revelation. Here is what Silverblatt said about why he wants to connect with writers, not just let them promote their work, and why he thinks his work matters: "I believe in the elaborate taking care of others. And we live in a culture where 'I'm not my brother's keeper,' 'That's your responsibility,' 'Get a life,' have become bywords, code phrases, anthems for elaborate indifference, selfishness, greediness, and the failure of empathetic acceptance. In the same way that we need to repair the economy, we need to repair the effects of an economy of selfishness."³ I think "an economy of selfishness" is a brilliant description of the world we live in, much of the time. It is Babylon. The refuge that the New Jerusalem is to provide the Saints is, at least partially, available to us whenever we choose "the elaborate taking care of others." We can make Zion, in large and small ways, with the brute materials of our earthly existence: casseroles, prayers, merit badges, baby blankets, a ride, a hug, a Band-Aid, a loan, a smile, a flower, banana bread, hymns, tears shed on a friend's shirt, the shirt. Here's Michael Silverblatt again: "It's one of the secrets of the world. We all have the key to one another's locks. But until we start to talk, we don't know it."⁴ I would amend that and say that until we start to love, we don't know it. But the truth we can learn when we catch a glimpse of Zion is that starting to love is

3. Kristy Davis, "The Bookworm," *O, The Oprah Magazine*, Oct. 2009, 154–60.

4. *Ibid.*

not some mystical, otherworldly project; it is an entirely this-worldly endeavor. We build our part of Zion with wood and stone and mud and iron, and then God promises to restore our wastelands and make our feeble gifts worthy of his habitation.

There's a moment when I think I see Zion distantly, and the memories of it often sustain me when the world gets dark. It's that small pause between the end of the sacrament hymn and the moment the priest begins to say the sacrament prayers. In every congregation I've ever been in, I have felt the hush descend, heard the babies quieted, and sensed the whole ward drawing breath together. It was most poignant in a branch I lived in in Germany, where one of the priests stuttered—every time it was his turn to say the prayers, you could practically touch the love and concern of the branch members who loved that boy and willed him to be able to make it through without much trouble. But it's always there, and I think all that we do week in and week out—visiting teaching, preparing lessons, bringing food, caring for each other's children, praying, disciplining ourselves to study the gospel, serving our neighbors, baking cookies, planning youth activities and sharing time, enduring Cub Scout pack meetings and driving hordes of smelly big Scouts home from campouts—*all* of it is for that one moment of breathing together, knowing ourselves to be borne on the breath of God. When we need each other the way we need air, and when we look together toward the bread of life and the living water Christ offers, we find the promised refuge of the New Jerusalem.

It is true that Zion is an impossible paradox—it is the province of poets, insane utopians, and of prophets burdened with the weight of God's dreams. But it is here, too, in the light just behind the clouds of dailiness that both obscure our vision and save us from the light of the sun we are not yet prepared to see. It is my witness and my prayer that God will save us when we lose ourselves in lives of simple tenderness, that as we learn to love his world we will become his partners and his friends in saving his creation, and that he will, in his good time, restore us to

Zion and Zion to us. I bear witness that, with Sara, we may “[judge] him faithful who [has] promised” (Hebrews 11:11). His promise is assured through the sacrificial love of Christ:

[W]ith great mercies will I gather thee.

In a little wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the Lord thy Redeemer.

. . . For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee. (Isaiah 54:7–8, 10)

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.