

Date: Wednesday, December 17, 1997 6:44:46 PM
From: HTHALLJR
Subj: the Christmas Tree: deja vu all over again?

Dear family and friends,

I recently shared with you the feeling that we might all have been witnesses of the birth of Christ and joined with the Heavenly Host in singing praises to God.

I'm sure that those feelings arose from the repetition, seemingly every Christmas of my life, of the account in Luke of the angels, the shepherds, and the heavenly host, and by my participation in church choirs at Christmas-time over all those years. I think it just kind of grew on me.

Even though a veil of forgetting was drawn over the memory of our spirit at birth, so that we could learn to live by faith during our mortal life, I believe that there is often a sense of "deja vu" when we encounter some truth that jogs our spiritual memory. When the thought came to me about being in the Heavenly Choir, I felt somehow that I had always known it. Of course, a sense of "deja vu", prompted by the Holy Ghost, is one of the most powerful tools our missionaries have -- many who embrace the gospel do so because it seems so familiar to them.

I can clearly remember the first time I ever had the notion that the tradition of the Christmas tree might arise from a similar spiritual memory. It was on Sunday morning, Christmas Day, 1994. As a member of our stake high council, I was called upon to speak in a particular ward in the stake on one Sunday that month. Because several missionary "farewell" meetings had been held in that ward during the month, the only Sunday left on which I could speak would be Christmas Day. We usually have a three-hour block of meetings on Sundays, but with Christmas day falling on a Sunday we decided to hold only one of the three usual meetings -- the sacrament meeting.

Often the high council is jokingly referred to as the "dry council" because they have a reputation of being rather boring speakers. I called Bishop Ahlander, bishop of the ward I was assigned to and told him I was available. However, in light of the circumstances, I would understand if he wanted to choose a special speaker for the occasion. Well, he didn't take the hint -- he said he wanted me to speak!

I was new on the high council -- this was only my second speaking assignment -- and I was really nervous about it. I was to speak for 20 minutes. I spent a lot of time reading in the scriptures in preparation for the assignment, but I just couldn't get my thoughts down on paper the way I wanted. Finally I just bookmarked a few of the scriptures I had been reading and decided to take the Lord up on his promise in D&C 84:85: "Neither take ye thought beforehand what ye shall say; but treasure up in your minds continually the words of life, and it shall be given you in the very hour that portion that shall be meted unto every man."

I spoke after the ordinance of the sacrament and after a particular beautiful number by the ward choir. I believe it was a chorus from Handel's Messiah. When I stood, the words just flowed. The first thing I said was that the singing of the choir in praise of our Savior's birth seemed to confirm to me a belief, long held, and perhaps arising from a distant memory, that perhaps we had all been witnesses of the Savior's birth and had been among the Heavenly Host who sang praises to the Father on that sacred occasion.

I still remember much of the message of that sermon, though not the exact words. Most of my text was taken from the vision Nephi had of the Tree of Live -- a vision he received as he prayerfully contemplated the teachings of his father, Lehi, on the subject, some 600 years before the birth of the Savior. Here's the passage, from 1 Nephi 11:

13 And it came to pass that I looked and beheld the great city of Jerusalem, and also other cities. And I beheld the city of Nazareth; and in the city of Nazareth I beheld a virgin, and she was exceedingly fair and white.

14 And it came to pass that I saw the heavens open; and an angel came down and stood before me; and he said unto me: Nephi, what beholdest thou?

15 And I said unto him: A virgin, most beautiful and fair above all other virgins.

16 And he said unto me: Knowest thou the condescension of God?

17 And I said unto him: I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things.

18 And he said unto me: Behold, the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh.

19 And it came to pass that I beheld that she was carried away in the Spirit; and after she had been carried away in the Spirit for the space of a time the angel spake unto me, saying: Look!

20 And I looked and beheld the virgin again, bearing a child in her arms.

21 And the angel said unto me: Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father! Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw?

22 And I answered him, saying: Yea, it is the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men; wherefore, it is the most desirable above all things.

23 And he spake unto me, saying: Yea, and the most joyous to the soul.

24 And after he had said these words, he said unto me: Look! And I looked, and I beheld the Son of God going forth among the children of men; and I saw many fall down at his feet and worship him.

25 And it came to pass that I beheld that the rod of iron, which my father had seen, was the word of God, which led to the fountain of living waters, or to the tree of life; which waters are a representation of the love of God; and I also beheld that the tree of life was a representation of the love of God.

I remarked how, just as Christmas music stirred our souls at this time of year, we all seemed to love so much the tradition of taking an evergreen tree, beautifying it, and lighting it. I wondered if perhaps this tradition might also arise from a distant, pre-mortal memory, and I referred to Lehi's observation about the fruit of the Tree of Life: (1 Nephi 8:11-12):

11 And it came to pass that I did go forth and partake of the fruit thereof; and I beheld that it

was most sweet, above all that I ever before tasted. Yea, and I beheld that the fruit thereof was white, to exceed all the whiteness that I had ever seen.

12 And as I partook of the fruit thereof it filled my soul with exceedingly great joy; wherefore, I began to be desirous that my family should partake of it also; for I knew that it was desirable above all other fruit.

Noting that the fruit of the Tree of Life was whiter than anything Lehi had ever seen, I (always the chemist) said that a "whiter than white" fabric contains dyes that convert invisible ultraviolet light to white light, thus making the shirt appear brighter than its surroundings. However, the the fruit of the Tree of Life is brighter beyond anything we can imagine. It must be itself a powerful source of light. I made the connection with Nephi's observation that the meaning of the tree was the Love of God, an active outpouring from God to us, made possible by his condescension, in sending his only Son to such humble circumstances, to die for us, so that we might be reconciled to him. I quoted John 3:16 "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. "

I then made a connection between the sacrament, with its emblems of Christ's body and blood, and the the tree of life, with the fruit symbolic of the body of Christ, and the fountain of living waters, coming forth from the tree, as symbolic of his blood. (Incidentally, this scripture also supports the LDS use of water in the sacrament in place of wine). Both are symbols of the power of God's love to redeem, cleanse, purify, and restore our souls, through our receiving his Son. And it is by holding fast to the "rod of iron" -- the word of God -- that we are able to partake of that love.

I said that I believed that just as our love of Christmas music may be reminiscent of our having sung praises at the birth of Christ, so our love for the brightly-lighted Christmas tree might be reminiscent of a dim memory of the Tree of Life, and of the joy which the love of God brings into our hearts.

I commented how the angel, rather than just explaining what was meant by the Condescension of God,

showed Nephi the vision of the Savior's birth and let him draw his own conclusions, then exclaimed his own joy at the truth they now shared. I spoke further of the condensation of Jesus in coming to earth under a "cloud" of suspicious circumstances. Mary could not possibly tell anyone the truth about her conception -- she would have been stoned to death. Joseph, just man that he was, when he learned that Mary was expecting, wanted to end the engagement privately, so as not to put Mary to shame. But when the angel told him the truth, he humbly shared in Mary's "shame", and married her. [I didn't mention this, but I am also deeply impressed with the manifestation of reverence, respect, and self-control, shown by Joseph and Mary in not consummating their marriage till after Jesus' birth.] So, in complete opposition to the truth, it appeared to all their family, friends, and community, that Joseph and Mary "had to get married." This circumstance was far more humiliating to our Savior than having been born in a stable. Such was the humility of our Savior and of the good earthly parents to whom he was sent.

I also commented on Lehi's observation that he beheld that the multitudes who finally reached the tree of life "came forth and fell down and partook of the fruit of the tree." (1 Nephi 8:30). Usually, one stands, even reaches, in order to take fruit from a tree. I believe that what Lehi saw in his vision is that one does not just go up to the tree of life and take its fruit: one kneels, and the fruit is offered to us by one having authority -- just as we must be baptized by one having authority from God, and in partaking of the sacrament, the emblems are brought to us by "lowly" deacons. Thus, in order to partake of God's love, we must humble ourselves, even as our Savior humbled himself. The Condensation of God was further manifest in Jesus' humility in being baptized by John, a man who, though by his own admission was not worthy to unlatch Jesus' shoelace, nevertheless had authority from God to perform that essential ordinance.

Well, that's not everything I said -- just a few of the thoughts that poured out so freely. It was really a humbling and thrilling experience. Many who spoke to me afterwards said that the thoughts I had expressed, which I was careful to express as personal feelings and not as Church doctrine, rang true to them.

Bishop Ahlander called me the following day to thank me, and said that on Christmas afternoon he and his family had visited his father-in-law, Elder Neil Maxwell of the Quorum of the Twelve, and that he had told him all about my talk! Had I known my talk was to have been reported to one of the Church's apostles that afternoon, I think I would have died of fright -- or certainly reeled in my speculations a bit! (Elder Maxwell, who currently suffers from cancer, is just about my favorite speaker of the Church's "General Authorities". He has a command of the scriptures and a gift for beautiful, concise, poetic expression that just amazes me). Mercifully, Bishop Ahlander did not report Elder Maxwell's reaction.

Well, thanks for the opportunity of sharing this experience. I hope that you will each experience much peace and joy during this wonderful season. And if you, like me, have been a "grinch" over the years about the Christmas tree, well, consider the possibility that maybe the tradition might not be ENTIRELY pagan in its origins!

Love,

Tracy