

A Pioneer Christmas

1-

As we gather together tonight as friends and neighbors to welcome this joyous holiday season, many of us can recall cherished Christmas memories. Not those of expensive gifts or far away vacations, but of times when others gave something of themselves to us or when we likewise gave freely to others in need and to those we love. It may be a child's first attempt at painting, a neighbor's Christmas card with a personalized note of appreciation, a grandfather's handwritten letter of encouragement, a mother's shared rocking chair and lullabye, or a father's reading of the Savior's own birth to his children; memories of gifts that may not be held in our hands, but will forever be felt in our hearts.

Gifts like those so selflessly given to us and to all mankind by early saints and pioneers; who willingly sacrificed and gave all they had to building up the kingdom of God on earth, not only for themselves and their families, but for their posterity and for us as well, their future brothers and sisters in the gospel.

Just as we celebrate today, the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, so too did the faithful Saints that came before us, and there is much for us to learn from their stories of Christmases past and their unwavering examples of devotion to our Savior and the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ.

“Far, Far Away on Judea's Plains”

2-

A special, almost tangible spirit surrounds mankind at Christmastime. To Latter-day Saints and Christians alike the celebration of Jesus' birth takes precedence over the tinsel and the toys and within our Church there is also another story connected to Christmas--from Sharon, Vermont, to Carthage, Illinois—which draws our attention and touches our hearts during this wondrous holiday season.

With honor and appreciation we remember the birth of the Prophet Joseph Smith, born on December 23rd, 1805, in Sharon, Vermont, to Joseph and Lucy Mack Smith. What a joy this beautiful infant son must have been to his parents. He was the third son of a loving and loyal family and in spite of great hardships along with some sadness they enjoyed working and playing together, sharing many happy experiences.

Although Christmas celebrations for the Smith family and early Saints were simpler than ours today, the purpose was the same—to join with family and friends, showing gratitude for their blessings and joy for the birth of God's Only Begotten Son.

Joseph's childhood Christmases would have been simple: food served from their own harvest, home made gifts, simple decorations gathered from the woods and readings from the Bible. It was also a loved tradition among the Smith family to gather together and sing songs of the Christmas season.

“Picture a Christmas”, Primary Songbook

3-

From the Prophet's journals are recollections of how he spent some of his most memorable Christmases. These rare glimpses show us how much he enjoyed the holidays he was able to spend with those he loved and held dear.

One such day was on Christmas Day of 1835. The Prophet wrote:

“Friday, December 25, 1835—Enjoyed myself at home with my family, all day, it being Christmas, the only time I have had this privilege so satisfactorily for a long period”.

The holiday season of 1838 found Joseph, his brother, Hyrum, and other church leaders confined to a cell in the Liberty Jail, falsely charged with a list of crimes, suffering greatly from living in filthy, cramped conditions; chained together in damp cold and miserable dimness. To his dear wife, Emma, he wrote:

“Dear Emma... We are prisoners in chains for Christ's sake and for no other causes... Oh, God grant that I may have the privilege of seeing once more my lovely family, in the enjoyment of the sweets of liberty and the solace of life; to press them to my bosom and kiss their lovely cheeks would fill my heart with unspeakable gratitude.”

Five years later on Christmas Day of 1843, with the Saints in newly settled Nauvoo, he recorded another cherished and important Christmas event in his journal. Perhaps of all the Prophet's Christmases, none was more pleasant. The celebration began quite early in the morning when carolers serenaded their home. He recorded:

“This morning, about one o'clock, I was aroused by an English sister, Lettice Rushton, widow of Richard Rushton, Senior, (who ten years ago, lost her sight) accompanied by three of her sons, with their wives, and her two daughters, with their husbands and several of her neighbors singing, '*Mortals, Awake! With Angels Join*', which caused a thrill of pleasure to run through my soul. All of my family and boarders [in the house] arose to hear the serenade, and I felt to thank my Heavenly Father for their visit, and blessed them in the name of the Lord”.

The day continued with a large party; that afternoon Joseph and Emma hosted about 50 couples for dinner and spent the evening in music and dancing and in the words of the Prophet, “in a most cheerful and friendly manner” with loved ones and friends.

“Mortals Awake! With Angels Join”

4-

Joseph Smith would not have the privilege to see another Christmas; for enemies from within and without the Church deemed otherwise. Even as he contemplated the coming holiday season and prospective new year, antagonists were already planning his destruction.

When martyred at Carthage Jail in 1844, many of his enemies thought the Church would fall apart and its members scatter, but they failed to recognize that strong individual testimonies gave members a commitment to the cause that was greater than any man.

They also misjudged the firm leadership of Brigham Young, president of the Twelve, who was determined to carry out the course established by their beloved Prophet.

At Christmastime in 1845, following the martyrdom of Joseph and his brother, Hyrum, a sense of urgency pervaded Nauvoo. Persecution for the Saints did not end with their deaths. Heightened fears of mob attacks and swirling rumors of government intervention compelled Brigham Young and his colleagues in the Quorum of the Twelve to determine that they must abandon Nauvoo, their beloved “City of Joseph” in the spring of 1846 and embark on an uncertain pilgrimage west.

After gathering to share a Christmas day meal with a small group of friends and church leaders, President Young made mention of it in his journal, also recording the prophetic counsel given to his fellow church members:

“I spent an agreeable time at Brother Coolidge’s, in company with Elders Heber C. Kimball, George A. Smith, A. M. Lyman, John Taylor and their ladies. The band was in attendance. We partook of a substantial dinner; after which I made a few remarks expressive of my good feelings and love to my brethren. I remarked that the Lord would never suffer us to overcome our enemies while we cherished feelings of revenge, when we prevailed over our enemies it must be from a sense of duty not of revenge.”

“I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day”

5-

Although it was planned that the early Saints would leave in April, threats from the mobs forced an early departure. Though winter’s chill was not yet past, Brigham Young directed the first company of pioneer families to leave Nauvoo on February 4th, 1846, a cold winter day. They drove their laden wagons and their livestock down Parley Street—a street that became known as the “Street of Tears”—to a landing where they were ferried across the Mississippi River to Iowa, forced to brave the snow and freezing temperatures as they began their wagon trek across the rolling plains.

Week after week the Saints traveled, the weather became wet and cold, the trail muddy. In mid-June, the first company reached the banks of the Missouri River.

Brigham Young had hoped to send an advance company all the way to the Rocky Mountains, but they were not sure it would be possible. The weather had been bad, members of the group were low on food and supplies, and many Saints were still back near Nauvoo. He instructed that a settlement be established where the Saints could spend the winter. Streets were laid out, gardens planted and cabins and sod houses built in what became known as ‘Winter Quarters’.

Living conditions were at best poor, but it provided a place for the Saints to stay and would also supply food and shelter for those who would come later. By December 1846, ‘Winter Quarters’ already consisted of nearly 700 cabins and sod houses and 4,000 pioneer settlers.

Christmas in 'Winter Quarters' was indeed a day for joy and a day to count many blessings. In her journal, Harriet Young wrote:

"This morning we were saluted from every quarter with 'Happy Christmas' or 'Christmas Gift'."

The weather was beautiful, sunny and relatively warm. The sun's rays had thawed the hard ground that had frozen overnight. Smoke puffed out of the chimneys situated on orderly city blocks and many more houses were in various stages of construction. More than 800 wagons and tents were also stationed throughout the city, serving as make-shift homes while cabins were being raised.

After the labors of the day were complete, time was spent in small, quiet gatherings; singing carols, and visiting with family and friends. A small party was held in the home of Elder Heber C. Kimball. His daughter Helen Mar Whitney, wrote that it was "very enjoyable and passed off in fine style".

As the night became late, the Saints quietly returned to their homes, wagons and tents, put their children to bed and with dreams and hope of a better place, where they could celebrate future Christmas Days under permanent roofs, free from persecution to worship as they choose, retired to rest for the important work of the coming day.

"O, Little Town of Bethlehem"

6-

The first of many pioneer companies to come, began their exodus to the Rocky Mountains once again in April. The evacuation of some 3,000 pioneers continued until early summer with many more yet to follow in their footsteps. From all parts of America and from many nations, on horseback or on foot, faithful converts left their homes and birthplaces, joining together with the faithful members of the Church to begin the long journey west.

Although the Saints endured many trials during their travel to the Salt Lake Valley, a spirit of unity, cooperation, and optimism prevailed. Bound together by their faith and commitment to the Lord, they found joy in the midst of their hardships and trials.

When the first pioneer company entered the Salt Lake valley, they gazed at their promised land! This valley with its salty lake gleaming in the western sun was the object of vision and prophecy, the land of which they and thousands after them dreamed. This was their land of refuge, where they would become a mighty people in the midst of the Rocky Mountains.

Their commitment to and sacrifice for the gospel's sake was evident as the pioneer spent their first year establishing their new home, the valley of the Great Salt Lake. There was little food to be shared during the first winter, but there was an abundance of thanksgiving and dedication to serving the Lord.

For the early settlers, Christmas was both a time of peace and a time of challenge in the building up of Zion. The winter of 1847, their first one in the valley, demonstrated their courage and forged their commitment to the new and everlasting gospel of Jesus Christ.

It was a warm Christmas, made even warmer by the day's activities. The Mormon pioneers spent their first Christmas in the Salt Lake Valley working. Some gathered sagebrush for fires. Others plowed fields. Some hunted rabbits. Others worked on their tiny cabins.

A young sister recorded her observations of the Saint's first Christmas as follows:

“I remember our first Christmas in the valley. We all worked as usual. The men gathered sagebrush and some even plowed for though it had snowed, the ground was still soft, and the plows were used nearly the entire day. Christmas came on Saturday. We celebrated the day on the Sabbath, when we all gathered around the flag pole in the center of the fort, and there held meeting. And it was a great meeting. We sang praise to God, we all joined in the opening prayer, and the speaking that day has always been remembered. There were words of thanksgiving and cheer. Not an unkind word was uttered. The people were hopeful, and buoyant because of their faith in the great work that they were undertaking. After the meeting, we all shook hands with each other. Some wept with joy, the children played in the enclosure.

That day we had boiled rabbit and a little bread for our dinner. Father had shot some rabbits, and it was a great feast that we had. All had enough to eat.

In the sense of perfect peace and good will, I never had a happier Christmas in all my life.”

When evening came, the Saints gathered again around a sagebrush fire. As the flames leapt upward, the group sang the song that took them across the plains, "Come, Come Ye Saints." Of all the songs of Christmas, this hymn of the exodus captured the moment. It was the Mormons' own Christmas carol — a pledge of faithfulness and thanksgiving.

“Come, Come Ye Saints”

7-

As we remember the sacrifices made and hardships endured by such brave and faithful Saints on our behalf, can we be anything but grateful and humbled for the many blessings we now share? Blessings received through the commitment and dedication of our brothers and sisters in the early days of the restored gospel.

The message and the gift of Christmas are one and the same—they are the gift of eternal life and the message that one day we can have the opportunity to live with our families and loved ones in the presence of God. To be worthy of this valuable and most sought after gift, we must be willing, as the early Saints who came before us, to give the gift of self; to dedicate ourselves to the Lord, to our families and to our communities in which we live.

May we all truly appreciate the real meaning of Christmas, knowing that God lives and that he loves each of us; knowing that the faith and sacrifices experienced on that Christmas Day long ago, reaped blessings and rewards for generations to come. And, like the early Saints and pioneers, remember that the peace spoken of in the gospel comes not from material wealth but from the testimony of the mission of Him whose birth we celebrate today.

“Oh, Come, All Ye Faithful”

Closing Prayer

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32 Mortals, awake! with Angels join

Allegro moderato (♩ = 60)

1. Mor - tals, a - wake! with An - gels join *Symphony*
2. ♯ In Heav'n the rap - turous song be - gan

3. ♯ The theme, the
And chant the sol - emn lay, Love joy and

3. ♯ The theme, the
joy the song was new
grat - i - tude com - bine To hail the glo - rious

joy the song was new
hail the glo - rious day
day To hail the glo - rious day.
To hail the glo - rious day To hail the glorious day.

2.
mf ♯ In Heav'n the rapturous song began,
And sweet seraphic fire
Through all the shining legions ran,
And strung and tuned the lyre.

3.
Swift through the vast expanse it flew,
And loud the echo roll'd:
♯ The theme, the joy, the song was new:
'Twas more than Heav'n could hold.

4.
Down through the portals of the sky
The impetuous torrent ran;
♯ And Angels flew with eager joy
To bear the news to man.

5.
f Hark, the celestial armies shout,
And glory leads the song:
Goodwill and peace are heard throughout
Th' harmonious heav'nly throng.

6.
p Oh, for a taste of heav'nly love
cr Our hearts and songs to raise,
♯ To bear our ransomed souls above
To mingle with their lays!

7.
f ♯ With joy the chorus we'll repeat,
"Glory to God on high!"
Goodwill and peace are now complete,
For Christ is born to-day.