

Stake Conference
Saturday Evening Session
April 9, 2016

President: President Kimo Esplin
Conducting: President Joe Staples

Organist: Merlyn Leetham
Chorister: Mary Beth Clark

Opening Hymn: #26 "Joseph Smith's First Prayer"
Opening Prayer: Kathleen Vargo

Speaker: President Staples

We are all familiar with the scripture near the close of the Book of Mormon – Moroni 10:3-5

"And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true...And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things"

I'd like to share my Moroni 10 story with you. I do it with a slight bit of caution... for two reasons:

1. It involves a very personal experience to me, that while I've shared it readily, I've also been cautious of when I share it.
2. You each have personal stories of how you came to your testimony of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Each story is unique. Each story is special. I wouldn't want you to ever think that I'm boasting or that I think my conversion story is any more special than any of yours. I don't believe it is.

I grew up Catholic – attending catechism, taking first communion, but had very little Catholic influence on a regular basis. I didn't go to church on Sundays – except during the summers.

I spent my summers from the time I was five years old on my grandparents' farm in western Pennsylvania. Very unique experience – small 40 acre farm. Two houses – my grandparents in one house. In the second house was my great-grandmother who didn't speak a word of English; only spoke Italian and my two great uncles who were totally blind. Yet they worked the farm – the blind uncles milked cows, hauled hay, picked corn. It made for a fascinating childhood for me.

And early each Sunday morning (at what seemed like the middle of the night to me), my grandmother would take me to the Catholic church for mass. I got very little out of going, except for one thing – it created in me a basic belief in God.

Fast forward and I'm 17 years old. I grew up in Las Vegas. It was a different Las Vegas than it is today. For those of us who lived on the Northwest side of town, for a high-schooler, there was one place everyone wanted to work – the Red Rock 11 theaters. This is 1977. Theaters were single or twin screens. 11 was unheard of. But this was the place to work – and it was near impossible to get a job there given the quantity of applicants. But thru a friend (and something today I recognize as divine intervention) I got a job as an usher.

The Red Rock ended up being a very important place in my life. It's where the two most important events in my life started – it is where I was introduced to the Gospel and a few months after being baptized it's where I met a cute candy girl who I would later marry. In 2002 they torn down the theater and this is the only physical memory I still have of the place – but it still hold significant meaning to me.

At the Red Rock I made a new set of friends – Mormon friends! They were different. They seemed to be much happier than other teenagers. They supported each other. They seemed to be so much more grounded in knowing what they wanted to do with their lives.

Over time these friends started sharing small parts of their beliefs. I remember one of them, in an English class with an assignment to write a paper and present it to the class on someone he admired, was bold enough to use Spencer W. Kimball as his subject.

Taking you on a slight detour...I later, as a non-member, applied and got accepted to BYU to room with one of these friends. I actually joined the church shortly before going to BYU, but my church records hadn't caught up with me yet, so everyone thought I was a non-member. I will tell you... if you ever want to be popular... go to BYU as a non-member! I've always thought that that acceptance to BYU as a non-member was the Lord's insurance policy on me – if I wasn't smart enough to join the church in Las Vegas, He'd definitely get me at BYU!

Back to the high-school friendships in Las Vegas...At various times these friends would invite me to church and later to hear the missionary discussion. My answer was always... "uh, no thanks."

Then one night after going to a church musical play, one that celebrated the American bi-centennial called Threads of Glory – in a moment of weakness ... I said I'd listen to the missionaries.

The discussions took place at my house. 2-3 of these friends would attend with me. My parents decided they didn't want to participate.

For those of you who served missions in the mid-late 70s you'll remember the discussions were a set of 6-7 lessons that missionaries memorized WORD FOR WORD.

Armed with a flip chart of pictures, the missionaries would teach. I admit, I thought it was kind of strange. The missionaries would show up at my house be super friendly. Talk with me. Then when it was time to start the discussion, they would get out their flip chart of pictures and launch in to this memorized script – "There was in the place where we lived and unusual excitement on the subject of religion..." I thought poor Elder Carpenter was going into a trans.

At the end of each discussion the missionaries would give me a pamphlet and mark some verses in the Book of Mormon and ask me to read and pray about them. And I was a bad investigator. Each time they

would come back, look at me and ask, “Did you read and pray about what we talked about last time?” I’d look down at my shoes and admittedly mumble... “uh... no.”

Then one night... the night before my next meeting with the missionaries, I thought... “Are these things that they are teaching me true?” I didn’t know the answer, but I knew the question was important enough that it needed to be answered for me.

So with the faith of what was probably “half a mustard seed,” I decided to do as Moroni instructed... to ask God.

I knelt by my bed and asked a simple and very straightforward question... was the first vision true? Did you and your son really appear to this boy Joseph Smith in that grove of trees?

Now, like you, I’ve had a number of spiritual experiences in my life, but for me, none equal to the flood of the spirit that I felt that night. Just an overwhelming feeling. Nothing like I’d ever experienced in my life! Teenage boys don’t cry, but I found myself weeping. When I got off my knees, I was amazed that what I thought was 4-5 minutes was much, much longer. It was an amazing feeling. It was a witness of the spirit.

At this point, I was like Joseph... “I knew it. I knew that God knew it. And I could not deny it.”

So the missionaries returned the next day, asked me if I’d read and prayed. And this time my answer was “YES!”

I was baptized by my closest friend of the group Bill. We did go on to be roommates at BYU and remain friends today.

I’m grateful for all the little things Heavenly Father did in my life that prepared me to receive the Gospel – and I think their were preparatory points for all of my first 17 years.

Looking back I think there are four truths that my conversion to the gospel teach or reinforce.

1. In the majority of cases, the gospel is introduced to people by friends and acquaintances. Elder Quentin L. Cook of the quorum of the twelve quoted Isaiah, “How beautiful are the feet of them who preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings.” Elder Cook then added, “It has been observed that the members are going to have to move their feet and let their voices be heard if they are to achieve this blessing.” Brothers and Sisters, we need to live our lives in such a way that we can be that instrument in others learning about the restored gospel.
2. It is the spirit that converts. We don’t sell people on the gospel or talk them into believing. It is through the Holy Ghost that testimonies are created and reinforced. A very powerful statement by President Joseph Fielding Smith illustrates this point: “The Spirit of God speaking to the spirit of man has power to impart truth with greater effect and understanding than the truth can be imparted by personal contact even with heavenly beings.”

3. All of the important gospel truths hinge together. If Joseph Smith was a Prophet, then the Book of Mormon is true. If Joseph was a prophet then Thomas S. Monson is today's living prophet. If Thomas S. Monson is a prophet then this is the true church of Jesus Christ.

For point number four, let me add a footnote to my story. I joined the church in June of 1977. I went away to BYU in September of that year. In between those two dates, that summer, I took a road trip with a non-member friend from Las Vegas to Provo. As we were driving back home pulling into St. George to get gas, we saw that St. George was the seasonal home of Brigham Young. This friend of mine said to me, "You know Brigham Young had like 23 wives!"

"What?" I said. "You don't know what you're talking about! Brigham Young was a prophet!"

She wouldn't let up... "I'm telling you. He had 23 wives."

We pulled into the gas station – and you'll remember that in 1977 somebody else pumped your gas. I got out of the car and asked the gas station attendant, "Can you settle something for us? She says Brigham Young had 23 wives. Tell her that isn't true."

To which the gas station attendant said, "I don't know... 23... or 27... something like that."

Hmmm... but then and there I thought "must have been right, since I know Brigham Young was a prophet. The Lord, and his prophet, obviously had plans that I didn't understand. Okay!" And forward with faith I went!

So point four is that we won't always understand the reason the Lord does everything he does. But losing faith in the fundamental truthfulness of the Gospel, because of doubts or a lack of understanding of certain points of doctrine, is like getting invited to dine at the best restaurant in the world, but refusing to go because you don't like the color of the paint on the bathroom walls!"

Brothers and sisters, Thanks for letting me share my story with you.

Coming back to my opening statement... that all our conversion stories are unique and special. Cherish yours. Let me close with a quote from Elder David A. Bedenar:

"Sometimes the spirit of revelation will operate immediately and intensely, other times subtly and gradually, and often so delicately you may not even consciously recognize it. But regardless of the pattern whereby this blessing is received, the light it provides will illuminate and enlarge your soul, enlighten your understanding (see [Alma 5:7; 32:28](#)), and direct and protect you and your family."

I bear witness to the truthfulness of the gospel. God lives. Jesus Christ is our savior and redeemer. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

Vocal solo: Bruce Reese "I Would Exhort You," accompanied by Merlynn Leetham.

Speaker: Ron Esplin

Remarks: President Esplin

Closing Hymn: #277 – “As I Search the Holy Scriptures”

Closing Prayer: Brad Fogg