

Stones, Serpents, Swords, Seeds, And Tears

SANDRA ROGERS

As you know from the President Lee's introduction, my deep interest academically and humanly is the field of international health and development. The seeds of this passion were planted and rooted during my welfare services mission in the Philippines, and they have grown steadily with each subsequent experience. And, although totally unanticipated, my choice of nursing as a career has also brought the realization of a patriarch's revelation to me when I was fourteen years old and hardly imagined leaving northern Arizona, much less the country.

It is the fulfillment of this personal patriarchal revelation that directs my thoughts this morning. As my mission and career experiences have taken me to the latter-day growth edges of the Church, I have seen the temporal and spiritual evidence of the establishment and extension of the kingdom of God on earth.

I arrived in the Philippines soon after the creation of the country's first stake and second mission. That first stake president, Augusto Lim, is now one of the Second Quorum of the Seventy. As a missionary I attended the area conference in Manila when President Kimball announced the construction of the Tokyo Temple, the first in Asia, never imagining that just a few years later my Filipino compan-

ions would write to me of the miraculous events surrounding the Manila Temple dedication.

I left Nigeria just as the first black stake in the Church was created by Elder Neal A. Maxwell. I've had the great blessing and pleasure of long conversations with the first Relief Society president in Romania. Babies I held when I returned from my mission are now serving in Saint Petersburg and what was Yugoslavia. And just three Fridays ago, I was in Amman, Jordan, where I saw the number of Jordanian Melchizedek Priesthood holders double in one day—from three to six!

As a child I had a wonderful Sunday School teacher. Sister Fay Randall brought gold, silver, and copper foil so that we could create the image of King Nebuchadnezzar's famous dream. The prophet Daniel interpreted that dream saying,

Thou sawest till that a stone was cut out without hands, which smote the image upon his feet that were of iron and clay, and brake them to pieces.

Sandra Rogers was dean of the College of Nursing at Brigham Young University when this devotional address was given on 28 June 1994.

. . . and the stone that smote the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth. . . .

Forasmuch as thou sawest that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands, and that it brake in pieces the iron, the brass, the clay, the silver, and the gold; the great God hath made known to the king what shall come to pass hereafter: and the dream is certain, and the interpretation thereof sure. [Daniel 2:34–35, 45]

As the patriarch promised me years ago, I am a witness to the fulfillment of Daniel’s prophetic interpretation of this dream. I testify humbly, but most assuredly, that I have seen the stone rolling to fill the entire earth as the gospel is taken to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people.

This stone—the kingdom of God with its message of the Atonement and the Restoration is unique. It was formed without hands, and its advance is divinely engineered. Though this stone was not a mortal creation, we humans are invited to partake of the blessings that come from being part of the work of rolling this stone throughout the earth. We are offered the precious gift of being part of the Lord’s great plan.

As I have charted my own responses to poverty, disease, and injustice, I have gone through various stages—from “How can God allow this to happen?” to “How can we continue to allow this to happen?” I have seen and felt the pain, anguish, and bitterness of the disenfranchised, the vulnerable, and the poor—in both spirit and bank account. I have studied and observed countless suggestions on how to care with and for others, including socialism, capitalism, single-payer health insurance, trickledown economics, health-care reform, forced redistribution of wealth, human rights, democracy, benevolent dictatorships, amnesty, primary health care, cultural relativity, rehabilitation, government regulation, village banking, liberation theology, and revolving credit. Yet I have also become convinced that the best political,

social, and cultural public health and development strategies are doomed when administered without moral insight and character. This reminds us that “where there is no vision, the people perish” (Proverbs 29:18). I have seen and felt the tragic trajectory of leadership decisions influenced by greed and selfishness.

Because of the Lord’s divine economy, we construct our eternal souls as we lay the foundations of the dominion of the King of Kings. I know from my experience that changed souls change politics, prejudice, and poverty. Surely, be it in the power of individual repentance and conversion; the strengthening of faithful, healthy families; or the miracle of political and cultural doors opening to allow illumination by the Light of all the world, the building of the Lord’s kingdom is the most exciting and addictive work I know. I watched a staunch Catholic nurse in Nigeria build the Lord’s kingdom through patient, joyful service to a small leper colony. I helped her distribute food and clothing, kitchen implements, and other items that the lepers were unable to purchase in the markets because the disfigurement of the disease—though now cured—provoked great fear among the shopkeepers. As we danced, ate, and prayed with them, I felt hands of temporal concern guided by the Lord’s light.

As I have contemplated how best to participate in the fulfillment of Daniel’s prophecy, how best to be a loyal Lord’s kingdom builder, I would like to share four distinct lessons I have learned about how this stone cut out of the mountain without hands gathers momentum from the faithful women and men of the Church. I am not foolish enough to believe that our lack of participation in kingdom building stops the stone’s progress, for the same power that could raise children to Abraham out of the stones of Judea could certainly fill the earth with one stone. After all, the elements heed the voice of the Master much better than his children do (see Helaman 12:7–17). This simple truth makes the phrase “stone deaf”

a little ironic, doesn't it? I am, however, wise enough to discern the pure joy of those who seek the will of God and do it.

The first lesson and the key to other lessons I will share with you today comes from the deserts of Arabia, where the children of Israel wandered for forty years trying to shake off their Egyptian perspectives. During a particularly whiny period, the children of Israel complained against God and Moses and the only food available for miles around. Consequently, "the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died" (Numbers 21:6).

When some of the humbled came to Moses begging for mercy, the Lord commanded him to craft a brazen serpent and mount it on a pole so that whoever might look on it would be healed. But, as Alma explains,

Behold, [the Son of God] was spoken of by Moses; yea, and behold a type was raised up in the wilderness, that whosoever would look upon it might live. And many did look and live.

But few understood the meaning of those things, and this because of the hardness of their hearts. But there were many who were so hardened that they would not look, therefore they perished. Now the reason they would not look is because they did not believe that it would heal them. [Alma 33:19–20]

This is the tragedy of subjugating faith to knowledge or understanding. They did not understand, so they did not believe, and so they perished. By requiring an intellectual understanding as a prerequisite to belief or faith, we remain vulnerable to the world's precepts and proofs. Will we be like the Jews in the meridian of time, who expected a warrior and could not recognize the Healer; who believed in a king and could not recognize the Savior; who understood the Messiah as a ruler but would not listen to the Teacher; who hoped for freedom from the yoke of Rome but were unwilling to free their souls from more

eternal chains? Like the wandering tribes of Israel, do we expect our spiritual and temporal illnesses to be cured by a vengeful destruction of serpents, not by faithful gazing upon a brass snake on a raised pole symbolizing the bruised and beaten Savior?

I can just see the campus discussions around the reports of the miracle of the brass serpent. A few faculty and students, just coming down with a strange flu, discuss the situation, saying, "Did you see that people are actually being healed from this dreadful disease by looking at a brass serpent on a pole? I don't understand how it works. The faculty in nursing, biology, and psychology say there is no scientific reason for it. My cousin in premed doesn't think it really healed anyone; it's just a plot by the administration. My colleague and several other eminent, internationally renowned scientists have been studying these phenomena for years, and our data indicate that this type of healing is impossible. None of the prestigious, peer-reviewed, advancement-in-rank-oriented journals have published anything on this yet. Let's not do anything precipitous like cast a glance in the serpent's direction when we aren't sure of the healing mechanism." I find it quite ironic that this divine, desert type of the Infinite Healer of All Things is today's emblem of a struggling, scientific medical system.

Deep, abiding faith in the Savior brings a peace that surpasses understanding, but it also creates the environment and the need for the deepest and least-fettered curiosity and inquiry. Because I am so sure of a few eternal things, I am free to explore completely the world before me. I am not advocating spiritual or intellectual complacency; there have been and still are many times when I give vent to numerous "whys"—especially when I pray. And if not a "why," then at least a few "hows" and "whens." But, when framed with faith, those questions seem to bring me closer to God, rather than farther away from him.

The second lesson I have learned about kingdom building came when I was attending a small branch in Nigeria. A small group of members espoused the philosophy that if you were poor there was no sin in theft, dishonesty, or deception. Your poverty absolved you of any infraction because you were only trying to survive. In other words, behavior is determined by some desperation index, not a set of moral principles. During one of our discussions of the Book of Mormon, the answer came very clearly. That answer was, “Survival is never more important than righteousness.”

In Alma 24 we learn about the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, Lamanites converted by Ammon. They explained,

Since it has been all that we could do, . . . to repent of all our sins and the many murders which we have committed, . . . for it was all we could do to repent sufficiently before God that he would take away our stain — . . .

. . . for perhaps, if we should stain our swords again they can no more be washed bright through the blood of the Son of our great God, which shall be shed for the atonement of our sins. . . .

[So they buried their swords,] vouching and covenanting with God, that rather than shed the blood of their brethren they would give up their own lives. . . .

And thus we see that, when these Lamanites were brought to believe and to know the truth, they were firm, and would suffer even unto death rather than commit sin; and thus we see that they buried their weapons of peace, or they buried the weapons of war, for peace. [Alma 24:11, 13, 18, 19]

Consequently, when the rest of the Lamanites came down upon them, they refused to take up their swords and were slain without resistance—slain while praising “God even in the very act of perishing.” And we are told that “they are blessed, for they have gone to dwell with their God” (Alma 24:22–23).

Building the kingdom requires powerful conversion and powerful repentance. I ask myself now, if righteousness is more important than survival, what symbolic swords do I need to bury and covenant to never unearth again? What are the weapons of sin I should be putting away from me—especially things I might consider too small to count? I don’t think I have any figurative bloody swords at home in the closet, but, heaven forbid that I would be so excited about lacking a bloody sword that I would refuse to bury a few Swiss army knives I have used for years. Do the blades of deception, rationalization, greed, pride, or envy lay open on our kitchen counters within easy reach? I find I invent far fewer excuses and work much harder at making my behavior congruent with my professing if I imagine trying to explain to one of the 1005 murdered Anti-Nephi-Lehies that the stresses of survival in the nineties made it impossible for me to give up a sinful paring knife when they had given up their swords.

The father of King Lamoni pleaded with the Lord saying, “And I will give away all my sins to know thee” (Alma 22:18). Once I thought that line humorous, until I recognized that our insecurities, our poor esteem, our pride, our need to appear successful or appreciated, and our desires to accumulate goods or honors make us clutch tightly to our comfortable patterns of sin. I have learned that true conversion is hearing and doing, not just saying—even in the face of tremendous pressure. I would hope that for me, the dignity of thoughtful agency and righteousness will always be more important than the slavery of impulse and survival.

The third lesson I have learned about kingdom building comes from Church history. I think with great appreciation and fondness of the small Iowa outpost settlements of Mount Pisgah and Garden Grove. In an era where everyone was anxious to get to Zion, the Saints serving in Mount Pisgah and Garden

Grove knew they would never be the first to enter the valley, break the first plow, or see Brigham Young mark the location of the temple with his cane. Yet, in order to make the westward migration of the Saints to the Salt Lake Valley as efficient and human as possible, these hardy souls relinquished their desire to be “where the action was” and instead built cabins and planted crops for others. Imagine planting crops you would never harvest. Even worse, imagine weeding crops you would never harvest. However, the faithful Saints of Mount Pisgah and Garden Grove were willing to cultivate seeds without setting up a balance sheet for repayment.

In common academic terms, I don’t think they argued about who was going to be first author. I doubt anyone charged a speculative price to those who were desperate for shelter and food and then shrugged their shoulders, saying, “It’s just a matter of market forces.” I doubt they thought, “I’ll wait until I’m settled permanently before I begin serving.” I doubt anyone said, “No one values my service, so why should I put any effort into it? If only Brother Brigham would praise me more for my sacrifices.”

What marvelous principles those early pioneers teach us: To plant the best of seeds without concern for praise or glory; to plant for the use of someone else and not just for ourselves; to contribute something to the lives of people we may never see again; to plant seeds where we are now because it is the right thing to do, even if no one applauds.

Pioneers who passed through Mount Pisgah and Garden Grove between 1846 and 1852 also showed gratitude for the seeds planted by others. There is great humility in recognizing our dependence on the seed-planting of others. As an undergraduate student I used to imagine that the 70 percent of my tuition paid by the Church came from my faithful, widowed grandmother’s tithing. That made it seem personal, and I felt more grateful. Now I imagine

that my salary is paid by the tithing of the Saints I know in the Philippines and West Africa. They don’t know me, but they provide for me. I am grateful, and I feel a sacred obligation to pass that trusting, loving provision on to others in my work here. The willingness to plant good seeds and the gratitude for those who do are the true secrets of joy.

The fourth lesson I would like to share with you is one I learned in Nigeria. Part of my work was an analysis of the strategies indigenous nurses used in meeting village health needs. On one occasion I went with a Nigerian nurse to do an initial family-health assessment. I did not speak Igbo and was an observer on this visit.

I can see clearly the reds of the dusty clay soil, the blues of the plastic water pitchers, the greens of the trees against a late afternoon sky. I can also feel the way the wind announced the coming of the rain that caused us to move our benches inside the small one-room home. I sat mostly in the corner with eyes like vacuums, pulling in every image: the two small cots along one wall, the faded curtain separating the parents’ sleeping area from that of the five children, the small cupboard containing all the family belongings. I can see the wedding picture of the happy, young couple who hardly resembled the worried and fatigued parents talking with my Nigerian colleague. I can hear the rain on the corrugated tin roof. My nurse colleague explained that the mother had told her they had not eaten for two days because her husband was out of work and they were out of food.

As if on cue, the oldest child came in soaked to the skin (which didn’t take much, given the thinness of his clothing), holding a rusty tray graced with two bottles of warm soda—gifts for the family’s visitors. The parents insisted I take one. I was sitting on a stool so low my knees were in my ears, and directly across from me on the cots were the children, whose eyes were glued to the bottles of soda. I tried to

graciously refuse this gift because I understood the terrible sacrifice the family was making in offering it to me. However, the father insisted, telling me that though he was poor and had no work, he still had his identity as an Igbo man and that I must not take that identity away by refusing his gift. Have any of you ever tried to drink something when all you could see over the lip of the bottle were the eyes of five hungry children? Next to giving up my sins, it is probably the hardest thing I will ever have to do. I drank very little and handed the bottle to the children because I was weeping so much I could not swallow. Every part of me ached with concern for this family and thousands like them, a concern that could only be communicated through my tears because I had no other language.

As we walked away from this visit, my heart was filled with prayers and my mind was filled with possible nursing interventions for this family. My Nigerian colleague said, “Do you want to know what that woman said? She told me that she never imagined that a white woman would come to visit her in her home. Moreover, she never believed that a white woman would cry with her. She said, ‘If a white woman can cry with a black one, then maybe there is some hope for the world.’”

Shedding tears together somehow symbolized hope and understanding, the brother and sisterhood we share with all God’s children that transcends our differences. We sing about the blessed “day when the lamb and the lion Shall lie down together without any ire” (“The Spirit of God,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 2). If Isaiah lived now, his metaphors may have been more like “How blessed the day when the republicans and democrats, the positivists and the grounded theorists, those who would go to see

Schindler’s List and those who would not, the majors and the proponents of general education, those who demand more discipline for Honor Code violators and those who want more charity, and those who favor teaching and those who favor scholarship, could all lie down together without any ire.” Imagine the kingdom building, the progress, the hope, the dialogue, and the light that would exist if ire were not part of the equation.

As I said at the beginning, I know the stone cut out of the mountain without hands is rolling forth to fill the entire earth. I have felt it and I have seen it. My hope is that each of us might participate more fully in building the Lord’s kingdom.

First, we must have an immaculate faith in and a profound reverence for the one stable thing in our lives—the Savior Jesus Christ and his atonement. This steadying faith can, I testify, carry us through all manner of challenge, disagreement, difficulty, and hurt.

Second, because of that faith, let us bury the swords of sin that keep us from full commitment and valiant covenant keeping.

Third, because of our commitment and covenant, at every opportunity let us plant and nurture the seeds that nourish the bodies and spirits of those around us or who will follow us.

Fourth, through faith, covenant, and service let us shed a few tears of understanding with one another, not as “strangers and foreigners,” but as fellow citizens in “the household of God” (Ephesians 2:19). President John Taylor’s motto was, “The Kingdom of God or Nothing.” May we as students, faculty, administrators, and staff constantly seek to be about our Father’s business, I pray, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

