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## The Coming of Christ

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## The Coming of Christ

Linda Hoffman Kimball

When I began my navigation through the Book of Mormon, I felt like Lehi on his ocean voyage: these were uncharted waters for me. I was a college-aged Christian learning about Mormonism for the first time. After months of study, struggle and prayer, I had an encounter with the Holy Spirit which convinced me that the power behind this church was the “truest” thing I would ever know. There was no getting around this emphatic and absolute call to the Mormons. This persuasive experience with the Spirit, however, gave me no answers to the theological and intellectual questions that had seemed so important to me. Confident that God would guide my journey despite my questions, I entered the waters.

I made my way through the Book of Mormon for the first time (although I admit I skipped over the battle scenes that went on and on through the last chapters of Alma). I was aware of the promise in Moroni 10:4 and applied my prayers, faith, and real intent to the challenge. While I never experienced as unequivocal a confirmation as the one I’d had in my college dorm room, I persevered.

Years later when I found myself in a period of fog and doubt following the death of two friends, I wanted reassurance, certainty, something I could count on when all the things I “knew” had been wrenched from every joint. I

prayed again nightly for an answer to the question, “Is the Book of Mormon true?” One night as I offered that familiar prayer, I felt words form in my head and heart: “You are asking the wrong question. You should be asking ‘Where does God want you?’” When that question was formed, the answer came flooding in to reaffirm that God wanted me in the Mormon Church.

I have faith that the Book of Mormon is God’s word. Faith is mighty. Faith emphasizes trust, not doubt. In a church where the words “truth” and “knowledge” are shibboleths, “faith” is often undervalued.

I should note that this “answer” to my prayer was a communication particularly suited for me. It allowed me to rest assured of the possibility of God’s existence. It gave me the assurance that this incredible Being knew and loved me enough to guide my questions as well as my answers. Often I want to stammer, “but, but ... what about? ... and what about?” but when I do, I imagine God rising up and growling like Aslan, the lion in the *Chronicles of Narnia*. I have become satisfied with minimalist answers.

This reminds me of God’s conversation with Moses at the burning bush. When Moses asks who he should say sent him to free the Children of Israel from bondage, God merely says “I AM THAT I AM ... Tell them I AM hath sent me unto you” (Exod. 3:14). Here God does not seem preoccupied with parsed definitions and particulars. God IS; accept that prime reality and move on—with freedom.

This also reminds me of when I was in a community theater production of James Baldwin’s *Blues for Mr. Charlie*. The director gathered us after rehearsal, as he always did, to give

us his “notes”—his critique and suggestions for a stronger performance. That night he had a lot of comments for one actor in particular, who countered everything with justifications, apologies, and further questions. Finally, his nerves on edge, the director said in a commanding voice that shook us all, “Shut up and take the note!” His meaning was clear. “I am the director. I’m in charge here. I know what I’m doing. Listen up; shape up and let’s get on with it!”

“Take the note!” is what God seems to be saying to me repeatedly. He wants attention to His direction even if I never understand all the “hows” and “whys.”

With that background, I turn to the text at hand to offer my personal musings, for whatever value they may have.

As the narrative opens in the fifth chapter of Helaman, we find the turmoil and violence of the Nephite city of Zarahemla, into which “one Samuel, a Lamanite,” enters and calls the sinners to repentance. I wonder, as I read this, whether this Lamanite expected to do well among the Nephites, who were his historical enemies. Predictably, he is soon forced out of their city. Seemingly indifferent to this chilly reception, he is ready to head back to his peaceful and God-fearing Lamanite homeland when “the voice of the Lord” orders him to return and deliver a message of impending destruction.

This is a singularly unpleasant assignment for Samuel, but he dutifully goes to it. I wonder if he harbored any subconscious satisfaction in returning to “tell off” the Nephites, who had lorded it over his people for centuries. Was there satisfaction in knowing that his people, the underdogs of the story, had become God’s favored people? The record does

not indicate any pettiness on Samuel's part, only the most pure and generous intentions. He says, possibly of his first attempt to preach to the Nephites, that "an angel of the Lord ... did bring glad tidings to my soul. And behold, I was sent unto you to declare it unto you also, that ye might have glad tidings; but behold ye would not receive me." He follows this up with predictions of dire consequences, saying the "sword of justice" is about to fall upon the Nephites to their "utter destruction," then adds further gloom by saying the Lamanites would live to see their foe's annihilation.

In pondering Samuel's vivid and cataclysmic vision of the Nephites' future, I notice that he says the city will be spared for now: "If it were not for the righteous which are in this great city, behold I would cause that fire should come down out of heaven, and destroy it." Does this mean that if the righteous folks continued to behave themselves, it would stay God's hand and delay the city's destruction? Would enough repentant Nephites alter the future? Would the prophecies of what was to occur some four hundred years later prove false or was Samuel, seeing into the future as prophets are wont to do, viewing the inescapable fate of people "ripe for destruction"? Admittedly these are questions for which the answers: a) probably would not make sense to me if I heard them, b) are irrelevant to how I live my daily life, and c) would be less interesting to me than musing on the questions themselves.

Samuel goes on to describe an intriguing "curse upon the land," which is attributed to the people's lust for riches and their "wickedness and abominations." The curse makes things hidden in the earth disappear. It is a selective curse in that

only the treasures hidden up by those who do not “remember the Lord [their] God in the things which he hath blessed [them]” are sucked away. It is a kind of moral quicksand, judging in some way whose treasures will be preserved and whose will disappear. It speaks to a lack of trust, which causes people to hide their treasures in the first place. Did God curse them with forgetfulness about where they had put their swords or silver or should it be read more literally to imply that the objects would actually vanish? If so, it is a fascinating soil condition with rich analogous potential.

From a contemporary public relations point of view, Samuel, like most Old Testament and Book of Mormon prophets, lacks the rhetorical techniques of persuasion. Nobody likes to hear what will happen to them because of their bad behavior. If Samuel had employed less doom and gloom and more gentleness, would he have had more success in reaching the willful? In re-examining the earlier passages, I find that Samuel did, in fact, try a somewhat softer approach at the beginning but with no effect. Of course, a twenty-first century overlay is inappropriate here. It seems that in Samuel’s day, stark contrasts were the rhetorical expectation. Things had become so polarized that Samuel feels compelled, apparently by the words which the “Lord . . . doth put into [his] heart,” to speak of polar opposites.

His conceptual descriptions are of evil/righteousness, annihilation/everlasting life, spiritual darkness/spiritual light, and he even juxtaposes God’s and the devil’s “angels”: “Behold, we are surrounded by demons, yea, we are encircled about by the angels of him who hath sought to destroy our souls.” With this ring of demons, Samuel uses a circular de-

scription instead of the teeter-totter opposition; but even this will have an opposite as we will see in due time. I find the geometry of his sermon intriguing and handsome.

He continues to prophesy clearly about the coming of Jesus Christ to the earth. He describes unusual physical phenomena (“many signs and wonders in Heaven”) which will accompany Christ’s birth and death. He also gives a specific timetable—five years hence—when “there shall be no darkness.” Radiating from the description like “shining from shook foil,” to use Gerard Manley Hopkins’s phrase, are the glad tidings that enlivened Samuel in the first place: “And it shall come to pass that whosoever shall believe on the Son of God, the same shall have everlasting life.” This is “Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Father of Heaven and of earth, the Creator of all things, from the beginning.”

He continues, explaining repentance and the theological implications of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. His explanation of what will occur at Christ’s death is as full of contrasts as his conceptual descriptions: “[T]he sun shall be darkened and refuse to give his light”; “the earth ... one solid mass, shall be broken up ... rent in twain, and ... found in seams ... broken in fragments ... both above the earth and both beneath”; “there shall be many mountains laid low, like unto a valley, and ... valleys, which shall become mountains”; cities will be desolate; and graves will yield up their dead.

Finally, he prophesies that “darkness should cover the face of the whole earth, for the space of three days.” When the Light of the World is murdered, darkness will rule. When “the Creator of all things, from the beginning” dies, all cre-

ation reacts. The proper order of things is reversed. Samuel demonstrates this already in a metaphoric sense by his presence on the wall of the Nephite city. He is a Lamanite—not of the elite bloodline. He admits that “the Lamanites hath [God] hated, because their deeds have been evil continually.” I stumble on this verse. It runs counter to “love the sinner, hate the sin.” I can understand anger at those who disregard the principles of civil behavior, but hatred? Besides, Samuel demonstrates that his Lamanite heritage has not diminished him in God’s eyes. In fact, he and his people have merely come to an awareness of God’s unwavering love. Perhaps “God hated” was a bad choice of words—editorial or prophetic hyperbole.

In whatever way one chooses to explain that verse, the contrast is clear. The Lamanites now “believe the Holy Scriptures, yea, the prophecies of the holy prophets, which are written, which leadeth them to faith on the Lord.” To the audience Samuel addresses, the idea of the Lord favoring the Lamanites would be as outrageous as turning valleys into mountains.

Soon Samuel leaps down from the wall, miraculously untouched by the stones and arrows directed at him. Among his last recorded words is a promise to his Lamanite descendants that “the Lord shall prolong their days” and “be merciful unto them . . . that they shall again be brought to the true knowledge, which is the knowledge of their Redeemer,” to “return again unto [him].”

After Samuel escapes and returns home, he “was never heard of more among the Nephites.” The next several pages paint the events of five years with a broad brush, highlight-

ing strains of faith and decline, wonders and doubt. The book of 3 Nephi begins with a remarkable detail. Nephi, the son of Helaman, had baptized those whom Samuel had converted, then “departed out of the land of Zarahemla, giving charge unto his son Nephi . . . concerning the plates of brass, and all the records which had been kept, and all those things which had been kept sacred, from the departure of Lehi out of Jerusalem: then he departed out of the land, and whither he went, no man knoweth.”

I find enormous poignancy in those verses—the passing of the sacred records from father to son and then the father’s departure into the unknown. There is no explanation. No indication of the son’s reaction other than that he started keeping the records himself. Was there heartache? Encouragement? Grief? What explains a father’s abandonment of his son at a such a troubled time? God only knows. My imagination yearns for more detail.

The Nephi who is now in charge of the plates is a man of patience and faith. As the five years pass toward the predicted birth of the Messiah, rancor and uproar swell even more than previously among the Nephites. Finally the unbelievers decree that if the heavenly sign has not appeared by a certain day, the faithful will be put to death. Nephi prays “mightily” on behalf of his people. The tension level, not to mention the decibel level, rises when the unbelievers celebrate with a “great uproar” when it looks like the prophesy may not come true. I can almost hear them snarling.

Nephi is so concerned that he “cried mightily unto the Lord, all the day.” Finally, the answer comes. “Lift up your head and be of good cheer: for behold, the time is at hand,

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and on this night shall the sign be given, and on the morrow come I into the world.” This is a staggering declaration. The day before he is born, Christ speaks. God the Son is about to descend to the earth to become that most powerless creature, a human baby, descending from on high to be born in a manger! On the other side of the planet, Mary and Joseph are arriving in Bethlehem. Mary is groaning with the discomfort of pregnancy’s last stages. The baby was shown to another Nephi six hundred years earlier in a visionary dream. “Knowest thou the condescension of God?” an angel guide asked Nephi in the dream. “And [Nephi] looked and beheld the virgin ... bearing a child in her arms. And the angel said unto [Nephi], behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Eternal Father!”

The arrival of the awaited day, night, and day of perpetual light persuades “the more part” of the people to believe. Even some of those who were rejoicing at the prospect of the faithful’s demise fall to the ground in belief and fear since they expect God to destroy them. Just a few lines after acknowledging the “new star,” the editor telescopes time again, taking us at a speedy clip through the next several years with minimal detail. Interspersed among the “came to passes,” the editor weaves threads of coming conflicts. In this period—between the sign indicating the Messiah’s birth and the predicted sign of his death—a secretive mafia-like organization called the Gadianton robbers develops again in the mountains surrounding the Nephite cities, doing “much slaughter among the people.” A telling detail is that the Gadiantons begin to “infest” the land—like vermin or a plague of locusts.

As noted earlier, another haunting detail is that the elder

Nephi “did not return to the land of Zarahemla, and could no where be found in all the land.” Did the younger Nephi hope that his father would come back after the sign of Christ’s birth? Had the son sent out a hunting party to locate him? Had he been searching for him all these years? Was there something so disturbing about the return of the Gadianton robbers that Nephi sought his father for his wisdom and assistance? Again, the record does not say.

The account of the battles with the Gadianton robbers is colorful and epic. In the nineteenth year since the sign of the Messiah’s birth, “the battle commenced ... [and] great and terrible was the slaughter thereof, insomuch that there never was known so great a slaughter among all the people of Lehi since he left Jerusalem.” Given how many slaughters we have read about so far, that puts this gory scene into perspective.

I will leave the reader to discover the specific intrigues and strategies of the battle. I imagine Mormon, the military hero, enjoyed including these accounts. I have never been able to appreciate their value, but I admit there is much in our scriptures which eludes me. Take, for example, the following about the Gadianton leader named Zemnah:

Zemnah was taken, and hanged upon a tree, yea, even upon the top thereof until he was dead. And when they had hanged him until he was dead, they did f[ell] the tree to the earth, and did cry with a loud voice, saying, May the Lord preserve his people in righteousness and in holiness of heart, that they may cause to be fell[ed] to the earth all who shall seek to slay them because of power and secret combinations, even as this man hath been fell[ed] to the earth. ... And it came to pass that they did break forth, all as one, in singing and praising

their God, for the great thing which he had done for them, in preserving them from falling into the hands of their enemies.

This singing is reminiscent of the jubilation of the freed Hebrew slaves in Exodus:

Then sang Moses and the children of Israel this song unto the Lord, and spake, saying, I will sing unto the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and song, and he is become my salvation ... The Lord is a man of war: the Lord is his name (15:1-4).

As I say, I do not get this. I understand the gratitude and exultation for being freed from captivity and death. But singing songs about the enemy's awful deaths? Scholars have found a lot of ancient and intriguing symbolism in this singing ritual, but it is clearly not the kind of singing I want to do.

After the conquest over the Gadianton robbers, the Nephites live in peace for a few years until pride, riches, lawyers, merchants, and officious functionaries start causing trouble. Soon the church is "broken up in all the land, save it were among a few of the Lamanites, which were converted unto the true faith." How is it that people go from evil to good and back to evil again so quickly? How, after such tremendous and recent fulfillment of prophecy, can they begin to be "less astonished at a sign"? I understand that there are "lyings sent forth among the people by satan," but the speed is dizzying.

While the people are getting more and more corrupt, "there began to be men inspired from heaven, and sent forth, standing among the people in all the land, preaching and testifying boldly of the sins and iniquities of the people, and

testifying unto them concerning the redemption which the Lord would make for his people.” As usual, the people do not want to hear what the prophets have to say, so they kill them. This time the murder is the undercover work of corrupt judges who are in league with the devil and plot to destroy the Lord’s people. A part of their plan is to dispense with the governor, enthrone a king, and abolish liberty. They never get far enough along to set up a king, but they do dismantle the government. A tribal system holds forth, and although they have “some degree” of peace in the land, “their hearts [are] turned from the Lord their God, and they ... stone the prophets and ... cast them out from among them.”

Nephi, his father long gone and his people corrupt once again, knows what fate befalls the prophets. Grieved for his people, he goes about preaching among them “with power and great authority.” Angels minister to him daily; he casts out devils and unclean spirits; after his brother has been murdered for preaching, he raises him from the dead. Mormon, the editor, says that Nephi does so much among his people that recording just a part of it will not do him justice, “therefore they are not written in this book.” Despite Nephi’s miraculous power and attendant miracles, only a stalwart few convert and demonstrate faith in Jesus Christ, repentance, and baptism for the remission of sins.

Chapter IV begins with urgency. This time, calculating from Samuel’s predictions, the people wonder if or when a sign of Christ’s death with its three days of darkness will occur. They do not have to wait long. Samuel’s every prediction comes to pass, borrowing a phrase here. Specific cities sink into the sea, catch fire, or are caught in the upheaval of

mountains. The writing is to the point. “The whole face of the land changed”; “highways were broken up, and the level roads were spoiled, and many smooth places became rough”; “rocks were rent in twain; yea, they were broken up upon the face of the whole earth, insomuch that they were found in broken fragments, and in seams, and in cracks upon all the face of the land.” After the tempest and earthquakes, “there was thick darkness upon the face of all the land.” The destruction and catastrophe Samuel prophesied had come to pass in every feature and phrase.

Then, rising above the “great mourning, and howling, and weeping among all the people,” comes a voice heard by all the inhabitants. In his own voice, Jesus Christ grieves for the loss of so many souls. Calling the Nephite cities by name, He mourns the devastation wrought “that the blood of the prophets and the saints shall not come up any more unto me against them”—a refrain He repeats four times in chapter IV. Then, turning to those spared and grieving—and I would imagine awestruck and not a little fearful since they had not fully repented—He continues:

O all ye that are spared, because ye were more righteous than they! will ye not now return unto me, and repent of your sins, and be converted, that I may heal you? . . . If ye will come unto me, ye shall have eternal life. Behold, mine arm of mercy is extended towards you, and whosoever will come, him will I receive; and blessed are they which cometh unto me.

Then He announces, as if any within the sound of his voice could be doubtful: “Behold I am Jesus Christ, the Son of God. I created the Heavens and the earth, and all things

that in them is. I was with the Father from the beginning. I am in the Father, and the Father in me; and in me hath the Father glorified his name.” To the people enveloped in utter darkness and death, He declares that He is “the light and the life of the world.” Imagine how those words would sound to those who are stumbling around in total blackness—no sunlight, no candles, no firelight. Who would not be drawn to this Light after such darkness?

The people bear witness to the destruction of their government, the end of their society, and the end of the landscape as they knew it. Surely all is lost, broken, irreparable, irredeemable. But the assuring voice tells them that He is “Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end,” and has not come into the world to destroy it but to “bring redemption” to its people, “to save the world from sin.” What conditions does He demand? “Ye shall offer for a sacrifice unto me a broken heart and a contrite spirit ... therefore whoso repenteth and cometh unto me as a little child, him will I receive; for of such is the kingdom of God. ... For such I have laid down my life, and have taken it up again; therefore repent, and come unto me ye ends of the earth, and be saved.”

After this potent message, the record continues with this interesting observation:

[A]ll the people of the land did hear these sayings, and did witness of it. And after these sayings there was a silence in the land for the space of many hours; for so great was the astonishment of the people that they did cease lamenting and howling for the loss of their kindred which had been slain; therefore there was silence in all the land for the space of many hours.

In other words, they shut up and took the note.

The voice from heaven cries out again, this time in the imagery of a mother hen gathering her chicks. Mourning over the house of Israel—both for the Lehites and the people of Jerusalem—Jesus wails, “How oft have I gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens”; “how oft would I have gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens and ye would not”; “O ye house of Israel, whom I have spared, how oft will I gather you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, if ye will repent and return unto me with full purpose of heart.” If I were a spared Lehite on *terra incognita*—this strange new land still shifting, groaning, and heaving—I would want to take refuge under the Messiah’s wing! I want that shelter now.

When the days of darkness and mourning pass, “the earth cleave[s] together again,” we are told. The people turn their tears and sorrow into “praise and thanksgiving unto the Lord Jesus Christ, their Redeemer.” At this point in the narrative, the editor breaks in. Whether it is Nephi, the record keeper, or Mormon, the compiler, is not clear. In any case, I will break in with a few comments here as well.

I have a strong connection to the account of Christ’s appearance in the Americas. Back in the early 1980s, as a convert of just a decade or so, I happened on a sermon by a prominent LDS speaker that troubled me to my core. His thesis was that church members were pursuing an “unwise” course in establishing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. To him it seemed too familiar, not sufficiently reverential. He articulated his views about the specific and precise functions of each member of the Godhead and what emotions we should attach to each.

His remarks ran counter to everything I knew about my spiritual life before and after joining the church. Give up my personal relationship with Christ? That was heretical to me. If being a Mormon required giving that up, I could not possibly stay Mormon. What had I gotten myself into? Just what did Mormons believe about Jesus anyway? I was troubled and confused until I decided to read through the Book of Mormon, more thoroughly this time and with full attention. I underlined every reference to Christ, searching for understanding. What if that speaker had accurately depicted Mormon theology?

As I read on past the first two books of Nephi and into Alma, it became clear that the focal point of the book was going to be the appearance of the Savior in the Americas. Everything before it looked forward to that event; everything after it referred back to it. What would Christ say at this long awaited event? What would His first words be? How would He distill His message? It was critically important to know. Was there going to be room for me to stay within the church or not?

I read through the account of His speaking from heaven to the chaotic, suffering survivors and felt buoyed by the spirit of it. But when I got to 3 Nephi (chapter V), the text spoke to me more directly than any passage ever had in the volume. I thrilled at the personal, intimate invitation for each person to come, one by one, to touch the Savior's wounds. Afterward, the people fall at the feet of Jesus and worship Him. He intervenes to clear up details about the ordinance of baptism, pleading that "there shall be no disputations among you."

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To eliminate disputes over one particular doctrine, He clarifies His relationship with other members of the Godhead in a majestic, almost musical canon. He explains that “the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost are one; and I am in the Father, and the Father in me, and the Father and I are one”; “I bear record of the Father, and the Father beareth record of me, and the Holy Ghost beareth record of the Father and me.” In a slight variation a few verses later, he says again: “And thus will the Father bear record of me; and the Holy Ghost will bear record unto him of the Father and me: for the Father, and I, and the Holy Ghost, are one.”

At this most crucial juncture in the Nephite timeline, Jesus feels this explanation is clear enough and important enough to repeat it at least three times without further elaboration. This spare, circular, energetic, free flowing “bearing of record” is important to me. Apparently God is as little interested in parsing His identity to the Nephites as He was to Moses.

Besides this witness to the unity of the Godhead, Jesus defines His core doctrine. He says, “The father commandeth all men, every where, to repent and believe in me; and whoso believeth in me, and is baptized, the same shall be saved. ... Ye must repent, and become as a little child, and be baptized in my name, or ye can in nowise receive these things.” Again, in case we missed it the first two times, He says: “Ye must repent, and be baptized in my name, and become as a little child, or ye can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God.” Then, to bring the point home to those who have just experienced tempests, winds, floods, and shifting foundations, He adds: “Whoso shall declare more or less than this, and estab-

lish it for my doctrine ... buildeth upon a sandy foundation, and the gates of hell standeth open to receive such, when the floods come, and the winds beat upon them.”

I find Jesus’ distilled declaration of doctrine a relief—His comforting wings around me. In this central story of the Book of Mormon is the heart of the gospel message. The caution about affirming “more or less than this” is satisfying. I do not understand the approach of that speaker who disturbed me so. I find the hunt for theological precision futile and in the end spiritually unproductive, if not worse, since Jesus describes it as tempting the gates of hell. I recall Joseph Smith’s response to the censure of a man for teaching “incorrect doctrine.” He said:

I do not like the old man being called up for erring in doctrine. It looks too much like the Methodists, and not like the Latter-day Saints. Methodists have creeds which a man must believe or be asked out of their Church. I want the liberty of thinking and believing as I please. It feels so good not to be trammeled” (*Documentary History of the Church*, 5:340).

In 3 Nephi we learn there is room for both me and the troubling speaker. By coming to Christ as a little child, I take Christ’s challenge to avoid “disputations ... concerning the points of my doctrine. ... [H]e that hath the spirit of contention, is not of me. ... Behold, this is not my doctrine, to stir up the hearts of men with anger, one against another; but this is my doctrine, that such things should be done away.” I learn to make room for those whose approach differs from mine, for those whose brains and hearts crave the concrete and defined where mine feasts on paradox and koan. My

reading of 3 Nephi during those anxious days tethered me to this Mormon place.

Now back to the text. Christ's sermons, delivered to the gathered repentant multitude, fill the remainder of 3 Nephi. These are the moral instructions for those with broken hearts and contrite spirits. Much of his first address is similar to his Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament. This new audience has just seen loved ones die, has endured threats and persecution, has hungered and thirsted through wars and chaos, and has wandered in spiritual and physical darkness. In the context of their experience, Christ's words shimmer with mercy and affection.

His "blesseds" are offered to "the poor in spirit, which cometh unto me," "the meek," "they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness," "the merciful," "the pure in heart," "the peace-makers," "they which are persecuted, for my namesake." He wants them "to be the light of this people," to "let your light so shine before this people, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in Heaven." He wants them to "love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you." "Old things are done away," He says, "and all things have become new." Also, "If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!"

After this sermon to the multitude, He instructs these people whose government has been dismantled and who only now emerge out of days of dying and darkness, "Behold, I am the law, and the light: Look unto me, and endure to the end, and ye shall live: for unto him that endureth to

the end, will I give eternal life.” He talks about the lost tribes and gathering all believers from the “four quarters of the earth.” He bids the overwhelmed believers to go “unto your homes, and ponder upon these things ... and prepare your minds for the morrow.” He promises that He will visit them again. The people, unwilling to leave Him even for the night, are in tears.

Chapter VIII is exquisitely tender. Jesus lingers, healing the sick, calling for the children, blessing them one by one, weeping his own tears of joy. In one of the most poignant images in scripture, He says:

Behold your little ones. And as they looked to behold, they cast their eyes towards Heaven, and they saw the Heavens open, and they saw angels descending out of heaven as it were, in the midst of fire; and they came down and encircled those little ones about; and they were encircled with fire; and the angels did minister unto them.

Here is the counterpart to Samuel the Lamanite’s chilling image of the “wicked and ... perverse generation” described in Helaman (chapter V), the circle of demons set to destroy souls. It is the divine triumph of God’s angels over the demons.

After this angelic ministering to the children, Jesus introduces the sacrament, gives more instruction, blesses His chosen disciples, and leaves. The people rush to tell others about Jesus. Where have these others been, I wonder. In any case, they are told that “on the morrow” they can see for themselves. The next day, the twelve chosen disciples (the word apostle is not used) meet, pray, are baptized, and

the Holy Ghost did fall upon them, and they were filled with the Holy Ghost, and with fire. And behold, they were encircled about as if it were fire ... and angels did come down out of heaven, and did minister unto them. And ... while the angels were ministering unto the disciples, behold, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and ministered unto them.

Jesus miraculously provides wine and bread for the sacramental emblems.

Jesus asks to see the Nephite scriptures. He requires adjustments to the record when He finds no account of the resurrection of “many saints” foretold by Samuel and fulfilled with Jesus’ appearance. Is this to underscore the physicality of resurrection? To demonstrate that prophecies have been fulfilled in their own time? To enhance their appreciation of the Lamanite prophet? To make sure the record is accurate? Perhaps all of the above. The New Testament makes no mention of Christ requiring anything to be written, but this scripture suggests otherwise. During his Nephite visit, writing “the things which ye have seen and heard” is a frequent command.

The record continues in chapter XII to say “that the Lord truly did teach the people, for the space of three days; and after that, he did shew himself unto them oft, and did break bread oft, and bless it, and gave it unto them.” Children’s tongues are loosed and they “utter marvellous things; and the things which they did utter were forbidden, that there should not any man write them.” Jesus establishes ecclesiastical protocol, commands the people to keep good records, and grants His twelve chosen disciples their hearts’ desires. He perceives that three of the Nephite disciples want never to die

but to “bring the souls of men unto [Christ], while the world shall stand.” Granted this gift, they are transformed in some way so that they presumably still walk the earth. Enough lore about these men exists that the 2008 *Book of Mormon Gospel Doctrine Teacher’s Manual* included this note: “Stories often circulate about the three Nephites who were translated. Members of the Church should be careful about accepting or retelling these stories. You should not discuss them in class.”

At His departure, Jesus promises the twelve that their joy will be full and leaves them with the anthem He declared when He first arrived: “I am even as the Father; and the Father and I are one; and the Holy Ghost beareth record of the Father and me; and the Father giveth the Holy Ghost unto the children of men because of me.” Then, being “caught up into heaven,” all twelve disciples have “unspeakable” holy experiences. They return with remarkable power to escape harm and to preach the gospel, uniting “as many to the church as would believe in their preaching.”

Four hundred years later, which is the time Samuel predicted for the Nephites’ destruction, the editor, Mormon, concludes the book of 3 Nephi. He calls out beyond his time to tell of the ruin of his people. He envisions the fulfillment of covenants made to every dispersed remnant of the House of Israel. He calls out to the Gentiles to be numbered among God’s people.

There is a lot of “calling out” in this section of the Book of Mormon from Helaman V through the end of 3 Nephi. Samuel the Lamanite calls out from the wall. Savages and rebels call out for murder, plunder, and war. Sinners call out woefully because they have not repented sooner. The planet

calls out with howling storms and violent upheavals. Christ calls out in various voices to mourn, beseech, bless, and command. God the Father calls out in a soul-piercing voice to introduce His beloved Son. Christ calls again, asking for the children. They, too, call out, although their words are too sacred to record. I am overwhelmed by the range of voices, images, conflicts, messages, warnings, blessings, and miracles of these pages. I want to become very still and quiet, to take shelter under those divine wings, to open my ears to hear the central gospel message ... and I want to take the note.