

ES 65 | Cuppa Joe | First Vision
Project Zion Podcast

Katie Langston 0:17

You're listening to an extra shot episode on the Project Zion podcast, a shorter episode that lets you get your project Zion fix in between our full length episodes. It might be shorter timewise but hopefully not in content. So regardless of the temperature at which you prefer your caffeine, sit back and enjoy this extra shot.

Karin Peter 1:00

Welcome to project Zion podcast. I'm Karin Peter, and this is Cuppa Joe, where we discuss matters related to restoration history, or as I sometimes say, all things church history. Our guest today is the always informative Lach Mackay, who serves as both a member of the Council of 12 and as the Director of Historic Sites in Community of Christ. So, welcome back, Lach.

Lach Mackay 1:28

Joy to be with you.

Karin Peter 1:30

Looking forward to our conversation today, Lach, because we are talking about what's called the First Vision, capitalized. And it's what restoration traditions would call the experience Joseph Smith Jr. had when as a young boy, he went into the grove of trees to pray. So first Lach, why is this vision to experience important in the life of the church? In other words, who is it cares about a young boys experience going into the woods and encountering the divine? I mean, why is this important?

Lach Mackay 2:08

Well, they're probably some longtime heritage members of Community of Christ who care deeply. But in my experience, it comes up most often at historic sites in response to our orientation videos that kind of lay out the story of the church. And, and our visitors very often have questions or concerns about the way we present. The First Vision as it is often known.

Karin Peter 2:35

Okay, so I know how I learned the story as a kid growing up in the RLDS Church. In fact, it was the story that we all learn when I was a kid, Joseph Smith Jr. was a boy and he didn't know what church to join. So he went out into the woods and he prayed and God told him to all the other churches are wrong and he was supposed to start his own church and so that's what he did. That's why we are the one and only true church. No commas, no breaths. That is the story. So I'm assuming that's not the story in your orientation videos that concerns people. So how do the materials and the Community of Christ Historic Sites tell the story?

Lach Mackay 3:17

You're correct. That's not the version we tell. But I also think it's fascinating. But that was the version you learned, I keep running into depending on when and where, how very different

experiences have been in Christ. My experience growing up in eastern Jackson County, Missouri, the 1970s 80s not my experience. Fascinating, but this the versions of historic sites, the Nauvoo video, which is the older of the two, I'll be talking about, talks about Joseph having an experience with the Divine, and people really do not like that language, but they also really want to see two percentages, and we just don't specify we just experienced.

Karin Peter 4:07

Okay, we're gonna cover both of those things here. I'm trying to decide which to tackle first in this. So you mentioned an experience with the Divine, the people are uncomfortable with that language. Some people will be surprised by that. But I remember the phrase listen to the voice in inspired council in the 90s, early 2000s. And that freaks people out at World Conference. So I understand that people get uncomfortable with nomenclature that isn't traditional. I'm assuming that's the problem.

Lach Mackay 4:45

I think that's the problem. That's part of the problem. But the other part of the problem is there's not two percentages identified. How come you're not showing me two people who look just like each other?

Karin Peter 4:59

Mm hmm. Yeah, absolutely. Okay. So why? Why are they not two percentages? How is the story presented that causes these concerns?

Lach Mackay 5:14

So there are not two percentages because there are multiple accounts left by Joseph. And some feature one percentage in some feature to percentages. And so trying to make room for multiple accounts, we went with experience with Divine. But more recently, we were working on a Kirtland video for the new Kirtland Temple Visitor Center. So I say more recently, but it was 2005 and six when we were working on it, kind of a new opportunity to think about how to present First Vision. And we decided because typically historians think the earlier the telling of the story, the more likely it is to be accurate. So we decided to go with the earliest account. So 1832 it's the only one in Joseph's hand. And it's one percentage and from the verbiage it is either it seems to be Jesus, although Joseph is still Trinitarian at that point in time, so but I still think it's Jesus that that he experiences in the growth and we get less negative feedback about that version, but still probably some questions Why not? What not two persons?

Karin Peter 6:40

So how did the the version of the two percentages become the and I'm making the air quotes in my in my zoom camera here? How did that become the true version? The authorized.

Lach Mackay 6:57

I'm not sure I can answer that yes. And the most secure about wind. So, because I was bored a couple of weeks ago, I began doing word searches on the Making of America website that searches over 3000 newspapers, search by date. And I think, from maybe 1820 to 1900 might

have been, I don't know, 10 hits or so not very many. And I expanded to 1960. I had somewhere over 30 hits a concentration of them in 1920, which is when some people would have been remembering it as the centennial may or may not be 1820. Some sources suggest 1824, 23 there's there's various thoughts about that, but I was kind of stunned that it didn't make it into the newspapers more often. We're talking about Joseph at the church, which either suggests that my bed Technology is really flawed which case or it became really significant to the churches in more recent years. And my guess is that part of what made it so significant is for, for our tradition and maybe the LDS church as well, we begin publishing things like Joseph Smith tells his own story, little standalone tracks. And of course, in the Church of Jesus Christ, it was canonized as part of the Pearl of Great Price as well. So slowly grows in importance, I think, in both churches, to the point where we anyway and I think that Mormons as well, we're converting people on Joseph's conversion experience. And we often get confused and think that it was the foundational event for the church. It was not was Joseph's conversion experience. We would convert others based on that and then anti Mormons would come along and pull out different versions might only be one percentage. And that can be devastating as we have with folks that that we interact with. And so in Community of Christ, we realized that was really not helpful to convert people on that. 1838 can we step back, again have gone to the 1832 account. But But even a more recent development, John Charles Duffy teaches for us in Nauvoo in the summer months, with our history interns. Kind of had a, I think, a really interesting insight. A new interpretation of an experience with the divine. I would always say in the past, it's because there's always multiple accounts and John Charles looked at it said, Well, we just want to provide room for all of the understandings related to the First Vision. We want to make it comfortable for people. I really like that.

Karin Peter 10:00

That's a perspective of hospitality.

Lach Mackay 10:04

It is probably not in the mind. Well, maybe into my people who made the first video, I don't know. But it's not the way I had seen it in recent years. And I really kind of appreciated that perspective. I think another challenge that we have related to kind of the Joseph Smith version of story, we would, as the church began to expand internationally, we were going into non Christian nations with the Joseph Smith, one true Christian Church. Here's the experience that confirms that when these people didn't know what Christians were, and it really caused us at least to kind of step back and reevaluate what was the core of the Gospel story, what's the heart of the message that you're going to share? And I think that was part of the reinterpretation as well.

Karin Peter 10:56

So as we began to re interpret it, step back as you say, Look at what is the message that we want to share? How did that affect kind of the identity and mission of the church? If we were focused on that story in that conversion experience as our story then as we step back and reframed How did that affect the church as a whole?

Lach Mackay 11:18

I think that the impact of the church was to make, make our foundations more Jesus based, and less Joseph based. Not that of course, Jesus isn't a division. But I really do think that was kind of a pretty significant shift that was occurring in the 1960s 70s 80s. As we kind of pivoted Joseph still in the story, but Jesus says the foundations that the heart story,

Karin Peter 11:51

What we would now called Christ centered story. Yeah. Okay. Well, that's helpful to kind of get our heads wrapped. around that shift. For us, it also explains why some of our longtime heritage members have a harder time letting go of some of that First Vision language and, and how they understand the church and their relationship to the church. So when, when we look at the First Vision, this happened in a period of time in the United States, that was our frontier time, if you will, happened on the frontier when the frontier was still on the eastern half of the United States. So what are some contextual points about that time that helped inform us as we look at how the telling of this story evolved and grew and began to take shape in the life of the church?

Lach Mackay 12:50

I think there's a number of points to remember but among them, Joseph is in what was later known as the burned over district that part of New York that was burned by the religious fervor the Holy Spirit of it is reviving. And he was not alone in having a Theophany. So he's kind of visionary experiences are happening to other people. They are recording the Rick Runder a friend who put together Mormon parallels a bibliographic source was kind enough to share maybe the most strikingly similar one that Richard Bushman had lifted up years ago as well. Norris Stern's who published an account of his visionary experience and I'll share an abridged version still long but I think it's worth it. So Norris Stearns, I was in great despair and could not pray. If I attempted to plead for mercy sin for a while clouded all hope. As a lay suddenly there came a sweet flow of the love of God to my soul, which gradually increased. The same time there appeared a small gleam of light in the room, above the brightness of the sun, which grew brighter and brighter. Is this light and love increased, my sins began to separate. At length, being in an ecstasy of joy, whether in the body or out, I cannot tell God knows, I sought to spirits, which I knew at the first sight. But if I had the tongue of an angel, I could not describe their glory, but they brought the joys of heaven with them. One was God maker, almost in bodily shape, like a man. His face was, as it were, a flame of fire to his body as it had been a pillar and the cloud below him so Jesus Christ by Redeemer in perfect shape like a man His face was not ablaze, but had the countenance of fire being bright and shining, his father's will appear to be is always content sentian peace and love was filled with sacred flame and the glory of God. It was a heaven here below for the space of half an hour, a wonderful account of his experience, again, lots of similar language in it, as well.

Karin Peter 15:30

So that might be a little disconcerting to some people to hear that there were some experience other experiences that were that similar, although it did stick to the two percentages, so they can, you know, hang on to that at least. So when I was learning, growing up and learning about

this story, one of the things that happened and I recognize it now as an adult looking back is that I learned the story of the church outside of the context of what was happening in United States history. And so I had told you earlier that when I first Read the democratization of American Christianity, which is the worst title of a book ever by Nathan O'Hatch, and he talked about other religious leaders than Joseph Smith having a growth experience as the founding experience of the church, that my head just exploded with this kind of Well, of course, because they're on the frontier and there's 27 people living in a 10 foot cabin. And if I want to pray somewhere where there's peace and quiet, I am heading to the woods. That only makes sense. And that just changed my entire way of looking at the early history of the church, I can no longer look at what happened and take it out of context and rub it and cherish it and make it all shiny and pure and clean. It has to be looked at in the muck and the mire of our difficult and confusing United States history. That changes things For people,

Lach Mackay 17:01

Context changes things.

Karin Peter 17:04

So what are some other kinds of contextual pieces that help us understand this part of our story?

Lach Mackay 17:13

So there's a couple things that I think are really important to remember, as we're talking about the First Vision. One is that if you talked about about vision in the early 1830s, in the church, it was section 76 of the Doctrine and Covenants. That's what people do have as a vision. And it was highly controversial, because it was Universalist. All are saved with just a small asterik for the sons of perdition. So, people recognized universalism, in that experience, and they were uncomfortable with it in some cases. So church members knew little or nothing about what we call them First Vision. This was again Joseph's personal conversion experience. It was not widely discussed, the miracle of the church was the Book of Mormon, not this visionary experience. There, there are some accounts again, written down and eventually published before Joseph's death, but it was not a big deal that it would later become.

Karin Peter 18:25

Well, now we're going to have to go back and do an episode on universalism to find out why, by the 1830s. universalism was a dirty word, when in fact, most of the founding fathers of the United States were Universalist, and it was a common way to understand God and and does God continue to interact in the world. So you're going to be returning I see for another episode going forward.

Lach Mackay 18:54

We'll need another guest to help me though.

Karin Peter 18:57

Well, if you're out there guests, let us know And we'll do we'll do our best to discuss this because now I find that really interesting, especially when we have as an Enduring Principle, All Are Called, Worth of All Persons, Blessings of Community. That would make a wonderful topic.

Lach Mackay 19:19

Can I throw it another point of context?

Karin Peter 19:21

Please do.

Lach Mackay 19:22

So, you know, as we've touched on Joseph's earliest accounts and the earliest accounts talk about one personage, eventually transitions to two. I believe that that simply expresses Joseph's evolving understanding of the nature of God, but also by the 1838 account, which is the one that most people know so well. It has pretty rough language talking about other Christians. You know, all are an abomination, denouncing creeds. It's it's pretty rough. Richard Bennett, formally BYU was kind enough to point out to me, though, that that language comes at a time when we were in conflict in northern Missouri, and soon would be exterminated or expelled from the state by these people who claimed to be Christian. So it only makes sense. I believe that we would not hold, quote, Christians in high regard. As they were committing atrocities against us and the times we were returning the favor. So that 1838 32 count, I think, is best understood in the context of the 1838 Mormon war.

Karin Peter 20:51

That's helpful to remember while we're talking about the version that most people learn. You commented earlier that depending on when you learned it, what you learned was very different. So what I learned in the 60s, early 60s, was learned on the west coast and granted my, my parents were convert and my dad was and is what I would call a zealot for the restoration. And so I was taught a very distinct story. You said in Jackson County, Missouri in the 70s and 80s. It was very different. What did you learn?

Lach Mackay 21:32

So, I just don't remember a lot from my childhood, but I knew that Joseph had an experience, but as far as the specifics to person that just one person that I didn't know. Now, I think part of that is not so much next in county but certainly the kind of home I was raised in. My dad's Australian. There's kind of an international flavor in the house. And I don't know why that would make a difference. I think it does. I'm not really sure why.

Karin Peter 22:10

So we put it back into context. And we understand that Joseph's theology developed as he went along, which helps us understand the differences in some of the versions. But there's also the simple reality that is I retell a story from my life. It changes as I age, because I look back on that story differently. But also, it changes based on my audience. Does that get reflected in the differences and some of the versions?

Lach Mackay 22:42

I think, probably it gets reflected in some of the versions, but I need to keep spending some time thinking that through. I've always defaulted to Joseph starts basically Trinitarian, Modalist and eventually by Nauvoo, understands three separate distinct beings of the physical body. So I have just assumed that that is variations in the telling of the story. So if we reflect his evolving understanding of the nature of God, and I don't think anybody in the early church Joseph included, said, I know that God the Father and Jesus Christ, the Son are separate distinct beings, because I saw that both have vision. That's a later development to try and separate them that way. And I don't know is that have you ever heard that from a Community of Christ member, RLDS perspective? Is that an LDS thing?

Karin Peter 23:42

Rephrase the question for me, have I heard what?

Lach Mackay 23:46

To use the 1838 First Vision account to confirm some understanding of the nature of God?

Karin Peter 23:54

Yes, I have heard that. I heard it recently. And I had made an offhanded comment to my mother when she was talking about God and he she was using male language for God. And I made a comment that God does not have gender mom. And my dad piped up with Oh yes, God does. And that vision of God the Father and Jesus the son was, was lived out to correct my error. And as my mom has said, He doesn't listen to Project Zion, does the church know you say these things?

Lach Mackay 24:34

They do now.

Karin Peter 24:34

They do. Mom, thank you. I am you're tithing dollars at work. So we have I mean, again, I learned that your story from my parents who learned it when they were converted in the mid 1950s. Yeah, I have heard that expressed that way. And I would venture to say that there are a lot of heritage members around my parents age who would see it that same way.

Lach Mackay 25:03

Yeah, very much so.

Karin Peter 25:06

So what does all this have to say to us today? Where does this live?

Lach Mackay 25:14

So let me answer that by telling you a story. We have had in the past a program called the World Service Corps, where we send people from North America to other parts of the world to

be engaged in the life of the church. And we bring international members to the States, sometimes to help at the Independence Temple, often to help at Kirtland and Nauvoo. So they are learning the story, learning the history, but also developing their language skills, their English skills. Years ago, Rosemary and Esther, who were African grandmothers were participants in that program. And Andrew Bolton and I took them to Palmyra for a visit. They were in Kirtland maybe for four hours. I gotta say that I almost believe the conventional wisdom at the time with which was that are mostly white male, North American 19th century story would not speak to international members, it simply would not be relevant to them.

My experience was exactly the opposite. Because so many of our international members are living the story today of poverty and persecution, and eight hour long worship services. They connected much faster than our North American members do today. But I was a little nervous as we entered the grove. It was raining. I had this picture in my mind of those brilliantly colored dresses they were wearing from their home nations and these umbrellas up. And all that set against this just stunning green backdrop of the wet leaves. And just kind of wandering through the grove together quietly. I don't think we spent much time talking. I think maybe somebody offered a prayer or two in there. But, but as we started to exit the grove, I don't remember if it was still in the freezer in the car afterwards, we started talking about what this might mean to them. Was it relevant in any way? And one of the two made a comment, it was kind of painful, because she said that she doubted her worth in the eyes of God at times. But what she had learned that day was the If God cares for a poor, illiterate farm boy, maybe there's room for God to care about poor African grandmother. It kind of hurt that she doubted her words.

Unknown Speaker 28:18

But, but I also was thrilled that she recognized her worth. So, here's why I think the First Vision is meaningful to contemporary members of Community of Christ, drawing on two of her Enduring Principles. All are worth in the eyes of God. And by extension, all our called. A poor farm boy, an African grandmother, a fisherman or women in French Polynesia, all our words and all our called. That is the message of the First Vision today,

Karin Peter 29:02

I want to thank you for sharing that with us, especially that meaningful story from the growth in the, in the spirit of what we've learned about these versions of Joseph Smith's vision, which was his conversion story, the moment when he could identify his encounter with God and what it means to the church with our enduring principles. I felt compelled to ask this question and maybe a little different way. And that is you live in and breathe and swim, if you will, in this language and in this historical narratives, but what has it meant to you?

Lach Mackay 30:00

So that's a pretty personal question.

Karin Peter 30:04

Yeah.

Lach Mackay 30:06

So it probably helped me frame some experiences in my life. So I have a very, I think some people are created to see the world through through spiritualize. And some people through natural eyes or science, the lens of science and on the latter. So for example, when I was an adolescent, I don't know 12, 13, 14 for a period of months, I had these amazing experiences in that space between asleep and awake in the morning, when I was just overwhelmed by these, this Brilliant, white, light, incredible warmth, so, so wonderfully good. And I believe that it was some kind of biological process. But if I saw the world differently, for months, I would have been having these amazing experiences that that would have been communing with the Lord. That's just not my lens.

But I still think that it framed an experience that I had at Kirtland temple for the first time. So, like, I was raised in the church, and I've told this story many times but raised in the church, but it never really took. And then it was the history that captured me or grabbed me and pulled me into the life of the church. As I was entering the first floor of the Kirtland temple, for the first time, though, I was almost knocked over by the power of the Holy Spirit. And, and I knew that at that moment that there was more to this story than just great history or great architecture, or even interesting science that there was more to this story that I wanted to spend significant time and now I've devoted my life to exploring and sharing. But I also have to think about how I told that story years and, and how, when it happened, I don't know that I understood it as my first vision experience, my conversion experience. but is has definitely the company And it's real. The time I think it was just a powerful presence of the Holy Spirit that I really recognized for the first time in my life. So I'm intrigued as my framing of that wonderful experience into my personal conversion experience. Is that deceitful or unethical or in some way wrong? I don't think so. I mean, it's real to me. And I make room for Joseph, to have done the same. I think it was real. And I think, does the historicity of the First Vision matter? Like it matters that Joseph had some kind of experience to me? What are the details? I don't know. I'm not gonna get stuck on that it didn't matter to me.

Karin Peter 34:08

Thank you for sharing that personal glimpse into

Lach Mackay 34:12

I'm hoping you'll edit that out.

Karin Peter 34:12

into what that what that has meant to you. And thank you again for being with us as part of Cuppa Joe, and we are part of the greater Project Zion podcast family. Are there any last comments or last thoughts you want to share with our listeners before we go?

Lach Mackay 34:36

I'm done.

Karin Peter 34:40

All right. Well, with that, we will conclude our conversation on the First Vision. We have enjoyed the I have enjoyed the conversation, a great deal. And to our listeners. Thank you so much for listening.

Josh Mangelson 35:01

Thanks for listening to Project Zion podcast, Subscribe to our podcast on Apple podcast, Stitcher, or whatever podcast streaming service you use. And while you're there give us a five star rating. Project Zion Podcast is sponsored by Latter-day Seeker Ministries of Community of Christ. The views and opinions expressed in this episode are of those speaking and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of Latter-day Seeker Ministries or Community of Christ. The music has been graciously provided by Dave Heinze.