

Josh Mangelson 00:17

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

Linda Booth 00:33

Welcome Project Zion listeners. My name is Linda Booth and with me in a conference room in the Council of Twelve Apostles suite is Steve Veazey, prophet-president of the Community of Christ. I thank you, Steve, for taking time before you leave to do camps and reunions. I hear you're going to your home campground, the place where you were raised.

Steve Veazey 01:00

Yes. First of all, thank you for inviting me to be part of the podcast. Yes, and I'll be leaving soon to go to reunion at Mid-South Mission Center. The reunion grounds is in Tennessee. And it just hit me—it was 40 years ago when I said goodbye to the folks there at reunion and headed out on the rest of my life as a full-time minister for the church, so it's...it'll be very interesting to be going back at this point in my life.

Linda Booth 01:39

Yes. Having served in that region and that mission center for 15 years, I know they consider you “theirs.” So they've shared you with the church.

Steve Veazey 01:53

It'll be good to be with them. Good folks.

Linda Booth 01:55

Yes. Well, we've gathered here to talk about some words that you've shared with the church—words of counsel that you presented on April 13—at the end of your conference sermon, the 2019 World Conference sermon. These words of counsel are beginning to go out into the church and people are beginning to read them and hopefully focus upon them. If you haven't, Project Zion listeners, had a chance to read the words of counsel, you can find them in the May-June Herald, or you can find them on the church's website, cofchrist.org. Check those out, if you haven't seen them.

We're going to jump right in. As is often the case with words of counsel, it starts with an introductory paragraph, and I'm going to read that paragraph. It says:

Several times during World Conference, I have offered spoken messages through which perspective and guidance for the church has been presented. Throughout the week I have experienced the promptings of the Holy Spirit, indicating it would be good to emphasize certain concepts as we embark on the next phases of our faith adventure with God. I do not have any expectation regarding the ultimate status of what I will present to you now. If these words have enduring value for the church, they will find their place in the character, responses, and living canon of our lives.

In this introductory paragraph, Steve, you refer to the promptings of the Holy Spirit that engaged you during the 2019 World Conference. Please tell us about those personal experiences, and how they led you to specific concepts for the words of counsel.

Steve Veazey 03:59

As I've shared with the church before, in terms of my ongoing encounter with God's Spirit—for me, it's not so much an event that's very concentrated. That may happen from time to time, but it's more like an unfolding process, where I am in relationship to God, always trying to be alert and aware and listening to all of the ways in which God may be guiding or influencing or prompting. Then, over time I notice that there are certain themes or concepts or ways of understanding that emerge in my mind.

In this case, many, many months before World Conference, I began preparation. I knew I had certain responsibilities to share with the church, and that those would be important times to emphasize what's important in terms of “how is God guiding and leading the church?” As I prepared those messages, like for the 25th anniversary of the Temple dedication at the opening of conference, and the Sunday afternoon priesthood sessions of the opening weekend, and Sunday night sermon and my closing message—which in my mind all begin to be connected to each other—I incorporated in those messages the themes that I had sensed were very important; the concepts, the ideas and some explanation and narrative around those themes. I thought that that was sufficient in terms of what needed to be shared with the church, with the hope that people would be alert to those, and that the good Spirit would bring the message home. It was during World Conference, especially the latter part of World Conference, that I began to have this sense of the appropriateness and even the importance of emphasizing certain ideas and concepts. It may be that part of that was freed by the wonderful conference experience we had together, and the desire of God to affirm God's presence and guidance with the church. It's not that people wouldn't understand what I had said in various sermons and talks, but I think a lot of it has to do with God's wanting to emphasize and confirm that God was very much aware of the Church—of the challenges and opportunities before the church—and so a way to do that was to highlight specifically certain themes and direction. It came down to the last few days, and I began to shape those words, and decided to think about them overnight, but by the next day, which was Saturday morning, I really felt a need to proceed. My two colleagues in the presidency had had an opportunity to view the words, which was actually fairly quick in terms of our usual processes, and brought confirmation that I should proceed, so I did.

Linda Booth 08:47

Yes, the church is thankful that you did, Steve, thank you very much. You conclude the introductory paragraph with the following line: “If these words have enduring value for the church, they will find their place in the character, responses, and living canon of our lives.” As the words, in particular, “living canon of our lives” took shape in your mind, what images came with them?

Steve Veazey 09:19

I've been thinking a lot lately about incarnation...embodiment...and how the gospel is so much more than a list of beliefs or a description of a way of life. In fact, it's very important that whatever words we have in scripture, in other places, that point to the gospel and God's revelation in Christ and how that

continues to inform our lives—that it's all really nothing unless it finds place in our minds, in our hearts, in our relationships, in our families, in our congregations, and in the world-wide church. I don't mean to belittle the written word at all—that serves to describe what we've come to understand about God—but many times we have the experience, like at World Conference, and then that becomes a memory rather than something that we live. I wanted to emphasize that the most important response in our lives is to actually embrace the concepts, embody the concepts, and then words become the “living word” in us, and in our communities of faith.

Linda Booth 11:20

I really like that image of being a living canon of our lives, I mean, that that really hit me, because our lives are called to be holy. That incarnation and...it's almost like a living modern-day scripture that adds into God's grand narrative of where God's leading us as a people. So I really appreciate those words.

Steve Veazey 11:46

You've heard the saying, perhaps, that “you may be the only scripture that many people read,” and I think it's trying to get to the same point in a more succinct way. But it seemed it was very important to emphasize that.

Linda Booth 12:03

Yes, I'm really thankful for that image that has been placed now in my life, and in my ministry, and in my discipleship. I'm going to read the first paragraph of the words of counsel and it begins

To the church,

Beloved in Christ, for many years you longed for a temple to fulfill the hopes of generations. Now there is a Temple seeking fulfillment through a worldwide community that embodies divine light, generosity, and peace. Being a people of the Temple is a constant calling that finds creative expression through each generation.

This paragraph seems to move the church from being a people who **have** a temple in Independence, to being a people **of** the temple. So how will this transition of **having** a temple to **being** a temple, change how we each live our discipleship? How will it impact congregations and their mission?

Steve Veazey 13:12

I think it's a process that's ongoing. As I tried to share it at World Conference, there are significant steps that we have taken toward becoming a people of the Temple. But that journey will continue, and it'll involve multiple generations. The reason that's important is, I think for many years in the church the temple was a goal; to build the physical temple and experience what we expected to be activities and ministries associated with the temple. Then that was some final achievement, a culminating achievement, an endpoint so to speak, after which certain things would just happen because we had achieved that point. And that's not the case. The Temple is a part of our journey, it's an important resource on our journey, but its purpose is to continue our transformation as a community of faith and witness, and its purposes are the purposes that we are to focus on in terms of our discipleship and our congregational ministries, like healing, reconciliation, the pursuit of peace, wholeness. The purposes of

the Temple are really the purposes of the church. If we'll pay attention to those as priority ministries—again, in our lives, in our families, in our congregations, and in the worldwide church—then we will become a people who (and here's the word again) incarnate or embody the essential ministries of Jesus Christ that are highlighted by the Temple. It's that expression of “We haven't reached an end point,” we can't sit back and say, “Well, we finally achieved that.” The phrase in that passage, “constant calling” was the one that just continued to reverberate in my mind.

Linda Booth 15:59

Yes, and that constant calling as the symbolic nature of the Temple itself, is that inward journey and then the outward journey into the world. It really does point us to that spiritual formation, deepening of our relationship with God and others, and then being sent in Christ's mission into the world, which is that living—continuing living—that...

Steve Veazey 16:26

The inward and outward journey is in the very symbolism of the Temple. It's the journey of the disciple.

Linda Booth 16:35

Yes, it is. I'm thankful for that paragraph too. I'm going to now read paragraph number two, and it says:

Your continuing response to the call to be a people of the Temple is commendable and of eternal importance. When humans esteem themselves, each other, all interactions, and the entire creation as temple, peace prevails. This restoring vision and witness is entrusted to you.

One of the words that really stood out for me in that paragraph was the word “esteem.” It's not really a word that I hear that often in common conversation. As I thought about the word “esteem,” it reminded me of having a really high regard for someone, to honor and respect, and to value, and even in some cases to have a reverence for someone or something. Is this what you intended when you wrote that “Peace will prevail, if we esteem ourselves, each other, all interactions, and the entire creation as temple?” What do these words and concepts mean to you?

Steve Veazey 18:02

That's a very interesting question, and it causes me even to reflect more on what it means. That's often my experience with words of counsel: I continue to journey with them, and as I discover meaning or people ask questions, then I gain even more insight myself that I'm able to affirm or confirm. The word “esteem” is not one that I think I use a lot either. I remember reflecting on it, and the concept was one of very high regard. You used the term “reverence,” and I would certainly be comfortable with that, because the sense was: when we view ourselves, and our interactions with others, and our interaction with creation and all the living systems of creation and the natural resources with a sense of “This is all sacred.”

Sacredness is the awareness that Temple draws us to—we're in the presence of the Divine. Well, when we look at all things as being in the presence of divine creation, then we begin to see ourselves, others, and the whole creation with additional understanding of the spiritual nature of it all. If I highly esteem

another, then that's going to impact how I relate to them. And hopefully bring a different spiritual quality to my relationships with those closest to me, but also people that I may encounter on a daily basis, or people who are in great difficulty—instead of judging them, I first see them as a person of great worth. That's a different perspective, and it's going to lead me to ministries of blessing and uplift rather than judgment and separation. Same thing's true with creation, with all the concerns we have for the earth and its environment. A lot of that is driven by the human attitude that it's all here for us to consume, to meet our—not just our needs—to meet our wants, and then beyond that, to enrich us. That attitude is proving to be very destructive. If we view the creation around us with a sense of reverence, then it's going to change how we interact with the environment. If we view creation as also temple, it will really impact how we relate to the environment. All of that is contained in those few words, but “esteem” would be high regard, highly value, yes even a sense of reverence in the sacredness of all.

Linda Booth 22:16

I also, in that ending part of the paragraph, I sense a great commissioning—commissioning by God—in that line, “This restoring vision and witness is entrusted to you.” To you. It's not just us individually, but us collectively. Would you like to comment on that sense of commission, or call?

Steve Veazey 22:43

In that portion of the words of counsel, there was a strong sense of affirmation of Community of Christ at this point in its journey, coming out of our sacred story where Temple has been a theme. In Community of Christ, our concept of temple has evolved, so that it's not something that's secretive, but it's something that's transformative in terms of our discipleship and the church's mission in the world. Part of my preparation for World Conference, was to read quite an extensive work on the concept of Temple in scripture and its relationship to the life of the church. That helped me understand that at the heart of the concept of temple is always a people who are responding to God's call in the world, and that the concept of temple is constantly expanding. Any type of temple that we have now, such as the Temple here in Independence, is pointing to something much larger and much bigger and outward-focused. It's that message that I think is entrusted to Community of Christ, because of our journey with the concept of Temple, and now to help the world understand what that really means, in terms of how we relate to God and each other.

Linda Booth 24:58

Yes, that's a wonderful way for us to embody what it means, and be commissioned by God to do and be for the world's sake.

Steve Veazey 25:09

It speaks to our identity.

Linda Booth 25:11

It does. It does and even reflects our name—Community of Christ. I'm going to read paragraphs three and four, they seem to go together, and these two paragraphs remind us of what we've been hearing from the First Presidency and the presiding bishopric for the last few years. These are paragraphs three and four:

Financial constraints are hindering the church from moving into the future at a pivotal and opportune time in history. These obstacles can be overcome through generosity, cooperation, and discernment about how the assets of the church can be directed to serve budget necessities and mission priorities.

Members, congregations, and church jurisdictions are called to live the stewardship principles and practices already given to you.

How is this reminder critical for Christ's mission in a time when Christianity is facing viability challenges in the Western world?

Steve Veazey 26:21

Throughout my life, I've heard people say "It's a historic time, it's a pivotal time," and I don't want that to become just kind of a trite saying, but everything I'm reading and observing would say that the time we're in is very significant in terms of the turning of human history—and especially the history of Christianity—to new realities and to the future. We have a tendency in such times to become anxious and perhaps pull back and take a "wait and see" attitude. That's not the response that we're being called to right now. The church is actively engaged in discerning the future, and experimenting with models of ministry that are responding to the opportunities for outreach and witness and engagement of people in the life of the church today.

Our primary hindrance is having the resources to move assertively, with flexibility, into the future with those kinds of new expressions of the church. The Community of Christ has struggled often and throughout its history with financial constraints. As I look back in the Doctrine and Covenants, it's a constant theme in terms of our stewardship response. Evidently, from the divine perspective, the church has represented in its individual members, but also in its corporate assets, many of which are physical assets (property)...from the divine perspective there's ample, if we take the initiative to discern how to use that to support the ministries of the church that are meant to move the church into the future. It seemed to me that the Spirit was saying—and again, I don't mean to be trivial or trite—"Look, you've been given a lot of guidance about whole life stewardship, and balancing your generosity between local needs and the worldwide mission of the church: it's both. And also, it's not just your individual giving, but groups like congregations and mission centers have not only assets, but sometimes surplus in terms of funds invested and so forth, and that the group response to support the mission of the church is also important." But the Spirit in my experience, was saying "All of that has been shared—just implement those principles." And at this pivotal time in church history, the ministries that we're engaged in will be empowered and magnified and expanded. Actually we'll find great joy in that as we respond.

Linda Booth 30:26

Absolutely. The next paragraph really has something to do with moving the church into the future, but it's not just the future—it's the future now. So let me read paragraph five:

Technology presents opportunities for involvement in sacraments by priesthood members and participants in separate locations. The First Presidency will act in its

calling as chief interpreters of scripture, revelation, and church policies to provide procedures for offering sacraments in new situations while upholding essential meanings and symbols of the sacraments. As the church explores new opportunities for sharing sacraments, direction will come as needed through inspiration and wisdom.

We know technology is all around us, and in this paragraph the need for the church to explore and offer the sacraments through technology is addressed. Tell us why this paragraph is essential now in the life of the church, and how it supports Christ's mission now and into the future.

Steve Veazey 31:47

I think one is a practical response and it has to do with our relationship to technology. The younger generations live in the virtual world of technology: it's real time, it's real relationships, it's real community. Some other cohorts or generations of church members are migrating into that world, but that's not, or hasn't been, our primary experience. We may not be seeing all of the opportunities and potential applications, and may even feel a little hesitant based on our past experience. This is the Spirit saying, "Here's a resource that can be used to share some of the most essential ministries of the church, we can have the sacraments." We need to see it not as a threat in any way, but as resources to enhance our ministry. I think it's important that we recognize that and proceed, while at the same time thinking about "what really is the meaning of the sacrament?" What are the essential symbols that bring that meaning to light? How can we share the sacraments without diminishing the sacraments, and yet sharing the sacraments as widely as possible to people in all the diverse circumstances of their lives. What I come back to is previous counsel given to the church that we should generously share the sacraments, and generously sharing the sacraments includes looking at the opportunities to share the sacraments faithfully and meaningfully by the use of technology. We're right in the middle of identifying what that means.

Linda Booth 34:27

Because the requests have come to the First Presidency and the Council of Twelve of people who live far from the church and in other countries who have a yearning to share in sacramental experiences—one of which is the Lord's Supper. The desire is there and the people are separated by nations and miles and it does provide a connection and a new way to build community in a very deep sustaining way.

Steve Veazey 35:01

Absolutely. Just last week, the presidency finished its review of guidelines for serving the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. That includes guidelines related to online participation, and that was a continuation of the conversation we had at World Conference. As we looked at all the feedback and the questions, I think what this section of...or passage is talking about in the words of counsel is happening. There have been moments of inspiration and wisdom that will be reflected in those guidelines.

Linda Booth 35:48

Yes. The Spirit is working in using technology in a very dramatic way. The website has been the instrument through the power of the Holy Spirit to start the church in new countries. To share the sacraments in ways that are meaningful to people that are separate, it would be a great blessing.

Our next...I'm going to read the next two paragraphs together, which have to do with the Lord's Supper. I'm going to read paragraph six and seven:

Additional meaning is waiting to be discovered in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Renewing covenant with Jesus Christ includes the call to live as peaceful human beings who personify Christ's peace.

Spiritual blessing will be experienced when this call is emphasized as a vital aspect of the sacrament. Cherish opportunities to be spiritually formed by Christ's sacred meal of remembrance, reconciliation, renewal, and peace.

The sacrament of the Lord's Supper has always been important to this faith movement as well as the greater Christian community. Over recent years, it seems as if God is asking us to go deeper in our understanding of how the Lord's Supper can form us as disciples and send us in Christ's mission. What is your experience with the Lord's Supper, and why do you believe God keeps reminding us of the power of this sacrament to spiritually form seekers and faith communities?

Steve Veazey 37:40

I guess in one way the sacraments of the church are also a means of continuing revelation in the life of the church; both in terms of our individual lives—the experiences that we have with the sacraments—but also in our community life as a worldwide church as well as in our congregations. My experiences with the sacrament of the Lord's Supper certainly confirm what most people affirm, and that is it's one of the most meaningful regular worship experiences we have in the life of the church. My sense is that it can be even more meaningful. That it goes beyond just our individual sense of remembrance of the importance of Christ in our lives, forgiveness...my sense of being forgiven, moving then to reconciliation, which has been part of our understanding of the sacrament primarily focused in our families and in congregations. This is a time to reconcile and forgive each other if there's need for that.

But as I've thought about the renewal of the baptismal commitment—using the language of the church: if we are baptized into the peace of Christ, and confirmed into the community of Christ's peace, then how does that link to this regular reminder of what our covenant is all about? And out of that then [e]merged, "this is about calling." We are called to be the peaceful ones in creation, just like Christ was the messenger of peace, and as Ephesians says "He was our peace." If we are baptized into that truth, then that guides our understanding of what it means to be a human being. We take on an identity of being the peaceful ones individually and collectively, not just uttering the words or going through the motions, but now we are incarnating peace—the peace of Christ—in our lives. We go forth into the world as the peaceful ones. I'm wondering if there's some aspect to the sacramental experience itself, to send us out in that way, or with words of blessing—words of reminder and blessing—that now we are called to go live sacramentally as the peace of Jesus Christ in the world. Would it not enhance our experience together? We'll see what happens.

Linda Booth 41:09

Well, for sure it would. When I prepare to take the Lord's Supper, I read Section 164, the fourth paragraphs. The promise that's found there near the end, that there's power in the Lord's Supper to form this community into the true and living expression of Jesus Christ. I think that's related very much to what you're saying; to be formed, not as just as individuals, but as a community moving out in Christ's mission. I mean, I get goosebumps just even thinking about what might happen.

Steve Veazey 41:54

Yes, it's that and Section 164 points to the formative aspect; these words of counsel talk about what are the qualities and characteristics being formed, and once again, the identity of disciples and the church in the Community of Christ understanding and experience of the gospel.

Linda Booth 42:21

Yes, and calling us back to that understanding of the peaceful human beings that we're called to be, links us again back to the purpose of the Temple: of peace, reconciliation, ...

Steve Veazey 42:36

It all connects doesn't it? It all lines up in that regard.

Linda Booth 42:38

God does help us put the...God forms the dots and put them in the row and help us...try to help us.

Steve Veazey 42:44

We have powerful symbols, we have powerful sacraments, we have scriptural guidance, we have each other as we're becoming that people. It's a wonderful experience when you see it from that perspective.

Linda Booth 43:00

It is, absolutely. We're going to end now with the last two paragraphs of the words of counsel, paragraphs eight and nine:

Then go with conviction into locations of your discipleship and be the peace of Christ. As you do, you will discover a variety of ways in which spiritual community forms and flows as expressions of the gospel of peace.

Trust what is being born. Have faith in divine purposes. Persist in Hope.

Amen.

Oh, I really...I really like these two paragraphs. They speak to me of God's continuing promises to the church, in particular those last three short sentences: "Trust what is being born. Have faith in divine purposes. Persist in Hope." This gives us assurance and encouragement in this time when disciples and congregations, in the western world in particular, are facing such great challenges. How do you see God's presence with us reflected in these last two paragraphs?

Steve Veazey 44:23

It seems that God is always engaged in our future before we realize it, and it's often only in retrospect that we see it. What we may be viewing as challenging times, especially with the financial constraints; a lot of the difficult questions that we continue to wrestle with in terms of the meaning of the gospel, we may perceive that as burden. I think from a divine perspective, experiences like that tend to refine and strengthen as we move through them. So in the midst of our current challenge—challenges—there is something being born...birthed; not just that we're bearing up under it, but it's being birthed. That positions the church into the future in terms of its ministries and relevance in the world. The phrases at the very end, are like "here it is—just very succinctly." Trust. Hope. Those have always been themes of the gospel. Over the generations God's people have been guided by the words "trust" and "hope" and "faith." Then "persisting in hope" gives it a quality that's it's not just wishful thinking, it's not just pie in the sky hopefulness. It's the kind of persistent hope that comes from a people who are a people of the resurrection. Even in the midst of great difficulty, as we look at church history and Christian history, there's always been reason for great hope because it's in the very nature of who we are. It's at the very heart of Christianity and discipleship.

But the term persistence or persist...I have a funny story, if I could tell it briefly if we have time.

I was driving into the office one day, a lot of the issues of the church were just weighing so heavily, and I was almost dreading going into the office. I'm driving down the street, and I'm praying as I often do coming into the office, and I guess I got a little frustrated. I kind of in exasperation said, "Where are you God, in all of this?" About then a car pulled in front of me, and it had a big sticker in the back window that said "Persist." Persist. I kind of chuckled, but all day long and after, that word as the stance of people of faith and hope—we persist, no matter what—really came to the fore of my thinking. That may have had an impact on those words: Persist in Hope. That's the calling; that's the attitude of disciples and the church in all times, all places, in this time, and into the future.

Linda Booth 48:47

And that we're divinely called, and that God is right in the middle of the mess with us.

Steve Veazey 48:53

Yes—we have a holy mess, and adventure.

Linda Booth 48:58

And God will surprise us and bless us if we just persist. I like that a lot. Is there any other comments or reflections that you might have before we end this Project Zion Podcast?

Steve Veazey 49:14

Well, one a note of appreciation for the opportunity to share in this way. If there are any of the listeners who have questions, I'm more than happy to receive emails and try to respond to those as I can. Bottom line, I'm grateful to have the opportunity to be a part of this interesting and challenging faith movement. I hope that others find joy in the journey and growth in the adventure. I extend my best wishes to all of the listeners and invite you to continue the journey with us.

Linda Booth 50:04

Yes, please do. So now we conclude this Project Zion, and thank you each one, for joining us on this journey and we pray God's blessing to you as you persist in the wonderful discovery of resurrection. Amen.

Steve Veazey 50:24

Amen.

Josh Mangelson 50:33

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