

December 23, 2008

Talk at Funeral Service for Wilma (Billy Plunket) Barstow,
LeGrand L. Baker

Heavenly Father's first covenant with Adam in the Garden

A much beloved and frequently repeated scripture is this one about Adam and Eve. It reads,

15 And I, the Lord God, took the man, and put him into the Garden of Eden, to dress it, and to keep it.

16 And I, the Lord God, commanded the man, saying: Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat,

17 But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it, nevertheless, thou mayest choose for thyself, for it is given unto thee; but, remember that I forbid it, for in the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. (Moses 3:15-17)

Every word in that scripture is important.

And I, the Lord God, commanded the man, saying...But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it, nevertheless, thou mayest choose for thyself, for it is given unto thee; but, remember that I forbid it.

God had to forbid it. The laws of justice and mercy insist that he do so. God could not have commanded them to eat that fruit, or even told them that it would be OK, because if he had, then he would have been responsible for their expulsion from the Garden and into this world. If he had been responsible for putting us here, he would have been equally responsible for getting us back. That would have left us without responsibility, without agency, purpose, or the freedom be our Selves. We would have come, not to act, but to be acted upon. So his instructions were:

“nevertheless, thou mayest choose for thyself, for it is given unto thee.”

What was true of Adam and Eve was equally true of ourselves. We did not leave the premortal spirit world because we were forced to come to this earth, but because we understood our Heavenly Father's plan and trusted in the Saviour's atonement. We came here because we chose to come. And now, having made that decision, we are free to make the decisions about what we will do while we are here.

In those same verses, we read the words of the very first covenant that our Father in Heaven made with his earthly children.

“for in the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.”

Because, from our this-world perspective, death is sometimes a fearful thing, those words are usually read as a curse rather than as a blessing. But they are not a curse, they are the words of the covenant that evoke one of the greatest blessings of the atonement.

They say, “If you choose to go down into that dark and dreary world, then, after you have learned what you are supposed to learn, then you may return. We are not compelled to stay there in this world because the Lord has provided a way for us to come home again— the promise is, “thou shalt surely die.”

Throughout all Christendom we sing a joyous echo of that eternal promise:

4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever. (Psalms 23:4-6.)

From our earthly perspective, death is a blackened wall through which, if one passes, one cannot return again. But it is in fact, a veil that brings us from this world of grey into a world of light.

Death is like a two way mirror. As we approach it, we can see only ourselves and the world behind us. The more closely we come to the mirror, the more clearly we see our Selves. We see who and what we are. We see our past, our fulfilled and our unfulfilled dreams, our happiness, anger and sorrow. We see who we really are—who we are just now. Sometimes what we see makes us afraid.

But death is a two way mirror. We cannot see into its future, but those who have passed through that veil can see into this world and remember their own past. They care about us, and continue to be concerned. They can observe and sometimes assist us in our efforts.

For example, when President David O. McKay dedicated the Oakland Temple he welcomed those present, then added,

I welcome, also, an unseen, but I believe a real audience, among whom are former Presidents and Apostles of the Church, headed by the Prophet Joseph, to whom was revealed the essential ordinance of baptism for those who have died without having heard the gospel, President Young, President Taylor, President Woodruff, President Snow, President Joseph F. Smith, President Grant, and President George Albert Smith. With those distinguished leaders, we welcome our departed loved ones whom we cannot see, but whose presence we keenly feel. (*Improvement Era*, Feb 1965,68:107)

Similarly, when we have a funeral service, there is nothing more natural than for us to feel that all of the family is here together — not just those whom we can see, but also those we cannot see. They are here because they want to be here; because they love us. They care about the friends and family whom they left behind in this mortal world.

They not only care about us, but about each other as well. In the spirit world, they associate with those whom they love just as they did in this world. As Latter-day Saints, we understand that.

For example, my own father died about two weeks after his 80th birthday. We had a party for him in our back yard and invited his family and lots of his friends. Once, while he and I were working on the invitation list, he paused and said, “This is a very depressing experience. Often when I think of someone I should invite, I remember that they are already dead.” Then he looked

at me and grinned and said, “Well, there is only one thing to do about that. When I get dead I’ll just have to have a whale of a party!” I’m sure he did. My mother probably had it planned and ready to go when he got there.

The spirit world they live in *preserves* and *promotes* lasting friendships. The prophet Joseph explained,

1 When the Savior shall appear we shall see him as he is. We shall see that he is a man like ourselves.

2 And that same sociality which exists among us here will exist among us there, only it will be coupled with eternal glory, which glory we do not now enjoy. (D&C 130:1-2)

Billy is here today because she wants to be with us, and she rejoices in the presence of her friends—both those we can see and those whom we cannot see.

When today’s funeral services are completed, Billy and those who are with her will return to the magnificent world from which they came. It is a beautiful world, not at all the fearful place, or the nothingness, that some people might imagine. For example, when Jedediah M. Grant died, Heber C. Kimball spoke at his funeral and reported that just before his death, he had gone to see President Grant. President Kimball said:

[When] I arose and left him, he said to me, brother Heber, I have been into the spirit world two nights in succession, and, of all the dreads that ever came across me, the worst was to have to again return to my body, though I had to do it. But O, says he, the order and government that were there! ...I looked to see whether there was any disorder there, but there was none; neither could I see any death nor any darkness, disorder or confusion. He said that the people he saw there were organized in families ... and in perfect harmony. ... I saw flowers of numerous kinds, and some with from fifty to a hundred different colored flowers growing upon one stalk." We have many kinds of flowers on the earth, and I suppose those very articles came from heaven, or they would not be here After speaking of the gardens and the beauty of every thing there, brother Grant said that he felt extremely sorrowful at having to leave so beautiful a place and come back to earth..." (December 4, 1856, *Journal of Discourses*, 4: 135-138.)

Brigham Young once explained that when we die we will be delighted to discover that we have more friends waiting to embrace us there, than the number of friends we left behind us here.

I know that is true with all my soul.

It is my prayer that we may be comforted by that knowledge, rejoice with Billy and those who are here with her, and anticipate with gladness the fulfillment of God’s first covenant with his earthly children, when he promised us:

If you choose to go down there, and learn what you can only learn in that physical environment, then I promise you that when the time is right, “thou shalt surely die.”

Testimony: The Saviour’s Atonement brought us life, death, resurrection, and eternal life.