

Our Place in Zion

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Good morning, Sister and President Worthen, Sister and incoming President Reese, Mrs. and Reverend Dr. Teal, Sister and Elder Christofferson, and other distinguished guests and faculty. And to my fellow graduates, congratulations! Look at us. Who would have thought?

A few weeks ago, I went to the library here on campus to pick up a book I had reserved. They brought me a stack of books that definitely were not mine, but the little reservation slip had my name on it. I was confused, and the library employee was confused, and near simultaneously we looked at each other and realized that there must be another Samuel Benson on campus. We laughed, I took my book, and then I promptly forgot about it.

But then this happened again and again. On the third time, I thought, “Okay, this has got to end.” So I did the only logical thing, which was to grab a little Post-it note from the counter and scribble, “Dear Samuel Benson: If you’re reading this, I want to meet you. Signed, Samuel Benson.” I added my phone number to the bottom of the note and put it in the book. He has never called me. Samuel Benson, if you’re out there, please call me.

Why do I share this? Because I was reminded of it just now when President Worthen announced that the next speaker would be Samuel Benson, and I had this sinking feeling: What if I am the wrong Samuel Benson?

I joke about this, but I am sure many of us, if not all of us, have felt something similar. Maybe this morning when we put on our gowns and our hats and looked in the mirror, we thought, “There’s no way that I am really a college graduate.”

I know that for me, when I took Stats 121 for the second time my freshman year, I felt like I would *never* graduate (apologies to President Reese). Behavioral scientists call this the “imposter syndrome”—this fear of being exposed as a fraud, of doubting whether we are enough or whether we are ready for this next chapter of our lives.

My message today is that we have made it this far for a reason. We have earned a place in this body of graduates. All that we have done over the past several years has earned us membership and earned us belonging in the BYU class of 2023.

But I want to mention one other form of membership that is even more important: membership

Samuel B. Benson spoke as the representative of his graduating class at BYU commencement on April 27, 2023.

in Zion. This form of membership is indifferent to our GPA, our major, our minor, or any of the other things on which we tend to hyperfixate during our college years.

At this university, in addition to the academic intricacies of our disciplines, we have learned the importance of building Zion—both as a concept and as a literal community. Zion is the “beloved community.”¹ Zion is “the pure in heart.”² Its mission, as described by Reverend Dr. Andrew Teal, is this: “We need to show that whoever somebody is—whatever their color, creed, background, gender, sexual orientation, you name it—the Lord loves them.”³

I remember the first sociology course I took here, before I had declared sociology as my major. It was a course on race and ethnicity taught by Dr. Jacob S. Rugh. We spent the semester on a huge project—a racial equity inventory—in which we surveyed the university in just about every way we could think of. We studied demographics, we pored over syllabi, we interviewed students of color, and we even took note of artwork hanging in public areas around campus. I came away from this project with two major impressions: first, this campus is full of remarkable individuals whose experiences and stories should be heard, and, second, if we are serious about this whole idea of building Zion, we need to make room for everyone, because Zion is not Zion without *all* of us. That is essential if we are to create the community that BYU’s Statement on Belonging describes: a community “whose hearts are knit together in love.”⁴

Among us today are disciples who have spent their time at BYU in this exact pursuit. I will name just a few. I think of Gideon George, who came to this university to play basketball but who will leave with both a diploma and more than fourteen thousand pairs of shoes to donate to people in his home country of Nigeria. I think of Nori Gomez de Bybee, who upon arriving at BYU found there were few on-campus resources for undocumented students, so she worked with BYU International Student and Scholar Services to create them. She sits in this crowd today as the first in her family to graduate from a university. And I think of Quincy Taylor, the founder of BYU’s on-campus

Cybersecurity Student Association, who has spent her time on campus empowering women to enter a field in which nine in ten workers are male.

And I would certainly be remiss if I did not mention our outgoing President and Sister Worthen, who have given nine years of their lives to bettering this campus community. Someday when historians write about this chapter in BYU history, I am sure they will add an exclamation point. The Worthens’ tenure will be remembered for many things, but I remember specifically the first devotional I attended my freshman year. President Worthen gave this charge: to see ourselves “not just as isolated individuals pursuing [our] own individual career goals but as part of a covenant community gathered . . . to realize [our] full potential as children of God.”⁵

On that note of career goals, Hugh W. Nibley once wrote, “In the Zion of God . . . , where there is no . . . sickness, there will be no more doctors . . . ; where there is no litigation, there will be no lawyers,”⁶ and he then continued to list about every field in which all of us will get degrees today. Though I do note that he did not mention sociologists like me—probably implying that most of us would already be unemployed.

But what are we to make of this? How do we reconcile this claim that in Zion we will not need doctors or lawyers or whatever else, and yet we have spent four years here and however many more to come training to be exactly these things? We can all reach our own conclusions, but I offer one possible interpretation. At this university we enter to learn, and then we go forth to serve. “The laborer in Zion . . . labor[s] for Zion,” not for money.⁷ In Zion we do not call each other lawyers or doctors; we call each other “sister” and “brother.”

I recently stumbled upon a quote I have come to love that was written by a British visitor to Utah in 1883: “The people [of Utah],” he wrote, “will not tolerate either a beggar or a millionaire within their borders, but . . . devote all [their] surplus to [the] ‘building up of Zion.’”⁸ That is our mission—to not get caught up in the allures of the world but to use the surplus of skills and talents and abilities we have developed at BYU to build Zion. This Zion will be one of diversity and of peace,⁹ one “of

everlasting joy.”¹⁰ And unlike many of the world’s other highly selective universities that define their prestige in part by how many students they *exclude* each year, Zion defines itself in terms of inclusion, a mission to allow *all* to find belonging “without money and without price.”¹¹

I wish to leave you all with two questions: First, how has attending BYU shaped us in ways that other universities would have not? And second, how can we, in turn, shape the world in ways that other university graduates cannot? We have all had unique experiences here, and our answers will vary. But we sit together today as graduates, seven thousand strong, with distinct skills and experiences and identities—some that we brought with us to this campus and others that were refined or developed here. We need *all* of them to build Zion. In Zion there are no imposters and no frauds. We all belong.

As we leave today, the charge this university gives us is precisely this: to use what we have learned to serve the world, to love our neighbor, to be peacemakers, and to labor for Zion. Class of 2023, thank you and congratulations!

Notes

1. The term “beloved community” is believed to have originated with twentieth-century theologian Josiah Royce, but it was popularized by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. “Creating a Beloved Community” was the theme of BYU’s

2021–22 campus-wide forum series, featuring speeches on the topic by Martin Luther King III, the Reverend Dr. Andrew Teal, William J. Barber II, and Amy Chua.

2. Doctrine and Covenants 97:21.

3. Andrew Teal, “Building a Beloved Community,” BYU forum address, 26 October 2021.

4. BYU Statement on Belonging (23 August 2021); in “BYU Announces the Formation of a New Office of Belonging,” Announcements, BYU News, 23 August 2021, news.byu.edu/announcements/byu-forms-new-office-of-belonging. See Mosiah 18:21.

5. Kevin J Worthen, “Gathering: Education in a Compact Society,” BYU devotional address, 10 September 2019.

6. Hugh W. Nibley, chapter 3, “Zeal Without Knowledge,” *Approaching Zion*, ed. Don E. Norton, vol. 9, *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book and Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1989), 79–80.

7. 2 Nephi 26:31.

8. Phil Robinson, *Sinners and Saints: A Tour Across the States, and Round Them; with Three Months Among the Mormons* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1883), 68–69.

9. See Doctrine and Covenants 45:68–69.

10. Doctrine and Covenants 45:71.

11. Isaiah 55:1; 2 Nephi 26:25.