

# *Preparing to Make a Difference*

ELAINE A. CANNON

This is a wonderful week to be together with so many things going on: the temple dedication, the groundbreaking of your new stadium facility, and the victory you all have enjoyed so warmly. I noted that it was not clearly emphasized that I was a graduate of the University of Utah, probably so that there wouldn't be tears in our behalf, but I am very, very proud to be a member of the Church, and I'm proud of what goes on here on this campus, and of the things we hear about as we go out in the world and meet people who have been guests on this campus. They are impressed with how you look, how you behave, and how you handle your football games.

Following the game Saturday, two of the players were overheard talking. It's hard to be humble when spirits are still so high, but I've always felt that humility is still a God-given virtue and probably necessary for the celestial kingdom. But this particular couple of men, one a Utah man and one a BYU star, were discussing the outcome of the game. The BYU man boastfully said, "Why, of course we won. My ancestors are traced back to William the Conqueror."

The Utah man, properly put in his place but still hopeful, said scoffingly, "I hope your aren't going to tell me that your family were with Noah on the ark."

The BYU man said, "Certainly not, my people had their own boat!"

Well, I appreciate your laughing at the little jest. It was a tough thing to sit among your rooters and have to keep reminding my husband who had been a student body officer, class officer, and so on at the University of Utah back in the olden days, "Now, honey, rise and shout. Now!" And we'd get him up to shout for the right team.

I have it in my heart today to talk to you about the season that we're in, Thanksgiving, and the forthcoming season of Christmas. I want you to know the things that couldn't be said about me in the kind introduction that President Holland gave you in the beginning: my testimony of the gospel, my great love of the Lord, the witness I have through the Spirit that the work we're engaged in is the work of the Lord and is very important. One of the wonderful things about special Church service as it comes to us when a mantle falls and hands are placed upon our heads is that we're set apart from the world for a time. One of the

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wonderful things that I must say to you before I say anything else, so that you'll know from whence I come today as I try to share some things that I hope will be helpful to you—one of the wonderful things—is to bear testimony to the ever-recurring support from the Spirit and the awareness that the Lord Jesus Christ is at the head of this church and that he cares about every one of us and what we're doing to help his children.

### **Preparation an Obligation**

I want then to talk about my gratitude and what ought to be your gratitude at this season of Thanksgiving. I have an emphasis that I hope will come out of the things I say. It is that I feel that, having been given so much, we need to go forth and do great things. That's a commandment to us, but it's very important that we be prepared instruments.

President Holland mentioned that I was involved in Church publications, getting the youth magazine set up and edited over the period of some long years, actually. One of the things that we published in this little magazine was a fine essay called "Bind on Thy Sandals." It was written by a brilliant graduate student. It had to do with the benchwarmer who had just taken off his cleats, thinking that for him the game would never get underway. Suddenly the coach called him in to play. That's a terrible dilemma. The essay, in developing this situation, likened it to our own situation of being prepared to answer the call from God in behalf of his work. It happens that the author of that article is now the president of your institution. I think it ought to be required reading at Brigham Young University. It has great, great merit still. If I didn't think that the time was terribly short and perhaps you might have heard it, I would read it to you.

But we're meeting here in an academic setting, and I want to take a minute to urge you that, with all of your wisdom, with all of your preparations, with all of the marvelous

excitement that is churning within you about the new things that you're being exposed to, I would hope that you will become somewhat interested in, if not addicted to, fine literature. I really can't tell you how much it means to me in my life, and I strongly recommend it. If you could find occasion to read aloud to each other the literature of the holy books and the literature that has come to us down through the history of mankind from great thinkers and writers, you'll find your enjoyment enhanced with each other as you share these things out loud.

### **Making a Difference in the World**

I want to read something to you in keeping with my theme today of gratitude and being prepared to go forth to make a difference in the world. Some of you may be familiar with Eudora Welty's charming, charming short story "A Worn Path." Oh, it would be great Christmas reading in the family setting. Let me just read excerpts from it. I can't, of course, give it all to you. It begins this way:

*It was December—a bright frozen day in the early morning. Far out in the country there was an old Negro woman with her head tied in a red rag, coming along a path through the pinewoods. Her name was Phoenix Jackson. She was very old and small, and she walked slowly in the dark pine shadows, moving a little from side to side in her steps, with the balanced heaviness and lightness of a pendulum in an old grandfather clock. She carried a thin, small cane made from an umbrella, and with this she kept tapping the frozen earth in front of her. This made a kind of grave and persistent noise in the still air that seemed meditative like the chirping of a solitary little bird. . . .*

*Now and then there as a quivering in the thicket.*

*Old Phoenix said, "Out of my way, all you foxes, owls, beetles, jack rabbits, coons, and wild animals! Keep out from under these old feet, little bobwhites. . . . Keep the big wild hogs out of my*

*path. Don't let none of those come running in my direction. I got a long way."*

The story continues, the adventures unfold, in most pleasing and picturesque language. She goes up hard hills, and her aged feet feel like they're bound in chains. Down through the oaks, past the little bushes that her old eyes think to be green, but are instead thorny and brambled and worrisome as she catches her skirt that must not be torn. And then she climbs over barbed wire past big, dead trees that look like black men with one arm, standing in the field of purple stalks of the withered corn and cotton. And through pathless cornfields then shaking the dry husks to whirl around her skirts, past snake pits, bull pens, alligator ponds, and scarecrows dancing and frightening. And then she comes to a terrible place in the path that she's following to her destination to town, loses her step, and tumbles over and down into the ditch and she can't get back up.

After a time a white man comes along, a young man, a hunter, with his dog on a chain. He sees her lying there and he says,

*"Well, Granny, what are you doing there?"*

She gives this marvelous line:

*"Lying on my back like a June bug waiting to be turned over, mister," she said, reaching up her hand.*

*He lifted her up, gave her a swing in the air, and set her down. "Anything broken, Granny?"*

*"No sir, them old dead weeds is springy enough," said Phoenix when she had got her breath. "I thank you for your trouble." . . .*

*"On your way home?"*

*"No sir, I going to town."*

*"Why, that's too far! That's as far as I walk when I come out myself. . . . Now you go on home, Granny!"*

*"I bound to go to town, mister," said Phoenix. "The time come around."*

When the man leaves, she finds a nickel on the ground that apparently fell out of his pocket when he stooped to pull her up. She takes the nickel, puts it in her pocket, and goes the rest of the way to town. Finally, arriving at her destination where she sees the stone building, she climbs the tower of the steps until her feet know where to stop. She goes in and is greeted by a nurse there, and the nurse asks her about a grandson who apparently had swallowed some lye some two or three years before.

Granny Phoenix has made that long, perilous journey that I've spared you many of the details of to get the medicine for that little boy. The nurse asks Granny if the boy is dead, and Phoenix replies:

*"No, missy, he not dead, he just the same. Every little while his throat begin to close up again, and he not able to swallow. He not get his breath, he not able to help himself. So the time come around, and I go on another trip for the soothing medicine." . . .*

*"My little grandson, he sit up there in the house all wrapped up, waiting by himself. We is the only two left in the world. He suffer and it don't seem to put him back at all. He got a sweet look. He going to last. He wear a little patch quilt and he peep out holding his mouth open like a little bird."*

She adds this important line:

*"I could tell him from all others in creation."*

"All right," the nurse says, trying to silence her. She doesn't want the story to turn into one of those old-people recitations. She gives her the medicine, marks down, "Charity," and then says:

*"It's Christmas time, Grandma, could I give you a few pennies out of my purse?"*

*"Five pennies is a nickel," said Phoenix stiffly.*

*"Here's a nickel," said the attendant.*

*Phoenix rose carefully and held out her hand. She received the nickel and then fished out the other nickel out of her pocket and laid it beside the new one. She stared at her palm closely, with her head on one side.*

*Then she gave a tap with her cane on the floor.*

*“This is what come to me to do. I going to the store and buy my child a windmill they sells made out of paper. He going to find it hard to believe there such a thing in the world. I’ll march myself back there where he waiting, holding it straight up in this hand.”*

*She lifted her free hand, and gave a little nod, turned around, and walked out of the doctor’s office. Then her slow step began on the stairs, going down. [The Green Curtain and Other Stories (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), pp. 275–289]*

I love the story of Phoenix Jackson. She was one who knew her duty, who did it in compassion, but who cared about the wants of other people. She was going to buy him a windmill. That’s when the real joy came into the whole thing.

### **Showing Gratitude by Becoming Prepared**

I think it was Thoreau who wrote about the fact that we don’t need friends to feed and clothe us; we have kind neighbors for that, but what we do need is someone who will enrich our souls when we are in need. In the Doctrine and Covenants in the 59th section we have been given clear instructions, young people. As I’ve prepared for this season, as well as for my talk this morning and for a rather large event of the young women this evening, I have been struck with a mighty fear that I’ve lived so long without expressing proper gratitude for all that I have, for all that we have—for the places we enjoy while we learn our lessons, for the comforts that come to us when we’re stricken with sadness, for the fantastic support that this system gives to us, for the guidance of God, and the direction and comfort and

sustaining influence and witness that is ours of the Holy Spirit.

In the 59th section, in the 88th section, in the 82nd section—all of those references that we might give—we have been commanded to give thanks. We have been told that in nothing does man really offend God except in not being grateful for all the good things of the earth and for all the blessings from heaven. I toss this out as a very important point in my presentation: we must be grateful.

And grateful though we feel at this season, my suggestion this day is that we go forth in gratitude and share some of what we have. One of the things we’re conscious of is the fact that in a rapidly growing church—one of our problems is the fact that we’re growing so rapidly across the face of the earth, and this kind of growth introduces many kinds of challenges and concerns for all of us—but in a rapidly growing church and in a world with the forces of the adversary lining up for the great battle that is underway—a checkered flat has been dropped, I believe—we need a prepared army of Saints to make a difference with all that we have, with all that we can take advantage of yet to enrich us—particularly you who are in this academic situation. How important it is that we have a prepared army, that we are prepared to make a difference, that we are effective in how we give, that we are successful in our service.

### **Meeting People’s Wants**

Let me give you a quick story to tell you why I’m locked into this attitude. I think it’s great to lift up the hands that hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees, and succor and enrich people’s souls, and feed their bodies and cover their bodies, and so on. Oh, my goodness, how important it is to come into the company of someone who knows how to do things beautifully, who can meet people’s wants! You might want to look up that reference in Mosiah, 4th chapter. I think King Benjamin

talks about that we should do all of these things, but the very last line is that we should deal with people spiritually and temporally according to their wants.

This brief story teaches a lesson that I learned when I was very young. We were fairly newly married, living in a subdivision with echoes of ourselves all around us: people in the same boat. It was that kind of community.

There moved into our place a young couple from a small Utah town. They had big dreams: he was going to go to school; she would teach piano lessons and make the money. They'd move ahead and not be stuck down in some little place where they couldn't progress.

But things seldom work out exactly as we plan. She was always pregnant or always playing at funerals or always diapering. He was always doing little odd jobs to get a little more money because she was always having babies and taking care of them. So his schooling didn't go very fast, and life got away from them. The house got out of control. The children were left pretty much to themselves, and chaos soon took over.

She was taken to the hospital desperately ill in a season like this we're coming into—struggling for her life. No piano lessons now, no money coming in. He had to be gone at least sixteen or seventeen hours a day trying to get money to keep food on the table.

When the word got around into our neighborhood, the sisters moved on it. We were good do-gooders, we were going to help, and I will never forget going into the house and suddenly becoming aware of what people do in a house that is unattended by the owners. Judgment and criticism, unhappy partners, complaints over the refrigerator, over the organizational structure, over the décor, and it was finally agreed—you see, hearts were opened then in the season of the celebration—"Let's change all this. We'll paint it, we'll clean it up, we'll make it wonderful, and when she comes back it will be pleasing."

This family liked every room brightly colored. What happened in this well-meaningness was the rooms were scraped and scrubbed and painted clinical white. The kitchen cupboards were rearranged according to a stranger's kitchen habits. Pictures were hung at the eye level of the person who now had the hammer. Worst of all, the children's progress marks of growth were painted off the wall.

The family came back intact. We were surprised when a few weeks later they moved from our neighborhood. It was the day of a terrible snowstorm, so thick it felt that everything was whitened like the clinical rooms. As the family left, they preceded the moving van, and they had crepe paper streamers tied to the handles and the antennae and the décor on the front of the grillwork of the car, and they proved they liked color, and they honked all the way through the neighborhood, down the hill, out of our lives.

You see, like a deciduous tree at this season, like our Christ upon the cross, they had been exposed to the neighborhood and found wanting. Help was necessary, but not complete change from what they had established as their life style.

I have thought of that often. As a young person I was enamored of the book *How to Win Friends and Influence People* written by Dale Carnegie. I give him full credit for an idea I've used a lot of times over a lot of years of talking with people about how to get along with each other a little better. He tells about going fishing. If you're going fishing and you want to catch fish, you take what the fish like to eat, not what you like to eat. A lot of men take six-packs of you-know-what and go fishing. But if you want to catch fish, you take worms. You don't take your favorite food—strawberries and cream or whatever. You learn how to reach people effectively. You do not paint the rooms white if you find that they are a family who wants their rooms colored. You do unto others as you would like to be done unto, say the



scriptures. I just add a little addendum (and hope I won't be struck by lightning!): Treat people the way they want to be treated, the way it will bring them the most joy.

As we go forth as a prepared army with all of those people out there waiting for the truth that is ours to share, how wonderful it will be if we have learned how to communicate, learned how to discern what someone is feeling, learned to care enough to want to deal with their wants as well as what we think they need.

### **Learning the Fundamentals**

I have in mind a great spiritual and emotional high in my life. I really enjoyed going through the British Gallery of Art. I will never forget how I felt coming around the corner and seeing that familiar painting of Van Gogh's called "Sunflowers." I'd seen it on postcards that had been given me and stamped on stationery. It has been copied in many, many forms, prints to hang on people's walls. But to see it in the original, the colors so dazzling, the details so breathtaking, was thrilling to me. I became immediately a fan of anyone who could make the common things of the earth lovely.

Van Gogh's life story tells of an incident that applies to what we're talking about today—about being prepared to make a difference in the world as we take all that we have and make it useful to other people. Vincent Van Gogh had not been a very good student. He had been lacking in direction. He had been a big disappointment to his brother Theo, who was financing the education, and in a confrontation Vincent said, "But I want to paint. I have something inside of me that says I must paint. Don't pin me down. Don't pen me in. I must paint."

His brother replied, "All right, all right, but learn how to hold the brush."

I think that's great. "I want to be a writer, a great writer," some cry. And we answer, "All

right, but learn how to spell." Some want to be great doctors. All right, but they must learn what makes the body tick. If we want to do good we must be sure it's good, and that we don't go painting people's rooms white when they want them colored.

### **Adding the Spiritual Dimension**

Do you see what I'm trying to say? In the study of the life of our Savior, our model, our master Miracle Worker in the life of people, I have been conscious of something that to me is very significant. It is a great strength to me; I hope it may be of worth to you as you look for ideas to help you in your life. As you follow through in the Gospels and the Book of Mormon in 3 Nephi where Christ was teaching here on earth, you learn one significant thing. You have to watch for it as you're reading, though, because the recitation of miracles and the marvelous comforts and the skill with which Christ taught and with which he handled people might hide the point I want to make.

Every single time in his life that a great good was accomplished—when the apostles were chosen, when whole series of miracles happened, when the scribes and the Pharisees and the scoffers and the sinners were taken on by Christ—each of these was preceded by such phrases as "he withdrew himself," he went into "a certain place," "he went out into a mountain," he held himself "apart." (We are set apart, too.) Even when the scriptures tell about his being baptized, it is there. We come away thinking that God spoke from the heavens about this being his beloved Son, about the Holy Ghost descending like a dove at the baptism, but there's a little word in there that says, and Jesus, "praying," was filled with the Spirit, and "was led by the Spirit into the wilderness" (Luke 3:21; 4:1). Sometimes, the word says,

*He . . . continued all night in prayer to God.*  
[Luke 6:12]

The five thousand were fed, he walked on water, the storm was quieted. This is the way our Lord Jesus Christ prepared. He came forth from the wilderness with the power of the spirit. I suggest it's the way it ought to work with us—that we retreat, that we pray, that we follow the guidance of the Spirit, that we go prepared with power to make a difference.

Many of you have filled missions. Many of you are thinking about it. One of our nephews wrote a letter home from the mission field. He and his companion were in one of these situations where two young Mormon elders had come up against a very professional scholar of the Bible, one who really knew how to spell *Haggai*, for example, or who knew where to find Lamentations sandwiched in there in the Old Testament.

They finally had the man convinced that he ought to read the Book of Mormon. He read the Book of Mormon, and they came back to talk to him about it. He didn't know what to do. He really understood the Bible, but there was this other book that he didn't know what to do with. As he began to give way to that feeling, confusion took over; darkness and depression enveloped him. The missionaries decided to give him a blessing, and the feeling lifted.

As they were marveling about this, there came a knock at the door, and two other missionaries from another church (that some of you may have tangled with) were there. They were invited in, and the man excitedly told them what happened to him. Immediately there was rancor. The two other missionaries began to protest: "There is no revelation and there is no other word but the Bible." Well, the whole tone of the gathering had changed. The missionaries kept very quiet. They knew when they were being intimidated. Then, as this nephew wrote home, he said, "Suddenly, as I sat there, I found myself praying to Heavenly Father. We had a golden prospect, someone

that we really had in the palm of our hand for the kingdom. Why should I be sitting there intimidated?"

A little warm feeling began to creep in him: "We have the truth; they don't." So then he turned his thinking around and prayed, "Heavenly Father, help me, help me, guide me." And the little warm feeling grew and became a big feeling, he said, and "I felt the Spirit grow within me until I took courage." This young elder then spoke forth with power of the Spirit, ending by saying, "Why don't we all kneel in prayer?"

They did and before he could pray one of those other missionaries prayed in a boisterous, multiplying-words manner. The Spirit didn't change much. Then this young, comparatively inexperienced Mormon elder who felt the Spirit grow within him moved forward prepared now, took his turn. It was a gentle prayer—a prayer of thanksgiving for a prophet today, for an additional witness that Christ is the Redeemer, for a gospel that gives people answers when they need them. The prayer was over, the others quickly left, and the investigator made plans to join the Church.

### **Taking Time to Seek the Lord**

A prepared army—this is what we need. We need to do what Christ did, brothers and sisters, to grow as he did in the synagogue, learning and listening and praying. We need to go to the wilderness, to go to the mount; to take ourselves to a place apart; to really find out what it is we have to work with and be filled with the Spirit as we do it.

I grew up in Salt Lake City on Capitol Hill—many of you know this. But we've been talking about how you get hold of your life and how you prepare. Our house was in the foothills at the big, bald, beehive-shaped mountain in back of the capitol. We used to watch it in winter from our kitchen table where the family ate. We'd watch the skiers make herringbone patterns down. We'd watch the

summer hikers. We'd go up there as a family and as Church groups with our lunches squashed down into our sweaters tied around our hips. The day came when—I was about your age, a little younger maybe—I felt that I needed to go to the mountain. I needed to be alone and think lofty thoughts and get my philosophy of life intact and all of that. I set out and climbed that peak by myself. Getting to the top of it and seeing the very interesting perspective of my neighborhood—the places that I walked; the paths I took to church, to school, to the Church leaders, to friends, to the little neighborhood store; and all those people who had been in my life—I realized suddenly with a new awareness that all that I was I owed to them, especially that little white stucco house, scene of my tenderest times and most important learnings, our family home. I knew I had a debt to pay. It seemed like a tremendous debt. I knew I needed to be useful. I knew I needed the help of God, and, when I turned to him, my soul was filled with an awareness that he lives, that he cares even about a little stringed-out person sitting on the top of a mountain thinking she can make a difference in the world.

This week I was given a gift, unexpected, from somebody I haven't seen since those days when I lived on the hill. It's this little ivory sacrament cup. I remember taking the sacrament from this cup in the Capitol Hill Ward. It came to me from a woman whose son was part of an elders quorum clean-up project in the old basement storage rooms of that building where I went to church and learned those sacred things that we're trying to apply in our lives. Rather than throwing away the sacrament cup, he gave it to his mother and she sent it to me. In my day, as in yours, you take the cup that you may always remember him, that you may have his Spirit to be with you. In Mark 14:23 it says,

*And he took the cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them: and they all drank of it.*

We may not be able to do exactly what Christ did; we probably won't even be like Phoenix Jackson; but like Van Gogh we can learn to hold that brush, and we can learn to use our skills. Like the Lord Jesus Christ, we can learn how to cultivate the Spirit so that it is there with us, so that we can be as skilled as Carnegie, meeting wants, but with the sensitivity of Christ dealing with the great spiritual needs of people.

### **Going Forth to Make a Difference**

This is a wonderful season. This is a great joyous time to be alive in the Church, when there are temples dedicated, two in the valley; when there are marvelous institutions like this and money enough for young people to come and have their brains awakened and enriched and skills developed and hearts and spirits strengthened. But you're not perfect—I hate to tell you this—you are not perfect, and there is much work that needs to be done one with another.

My prayer always is that I may not be found wanting in a moment of somebody's need; that my cultivation of the Spirit will be effective enough that I can help more than I hurt. I suggest to you that, in this season of thanks and giving, our preparations will be so adequate, so beautiful, so Christlike that we will, in fact, go forth and make a difference. May we prepare to do so is my earnest prayer.

I leave you with my love and my prayers for you always, my testimony that I can give you through the power of the Spirit in me that Christ lives and loves us and wants us back; and that great reward, great joy, and great blessing of success will come to us as we prepare ourselves to do the work that is ours to do in the kingdom to help Christ bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of all of us, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.