

AKRON OHIO STAKE

Stake Presidency Message CHRIST-mas, 2012

On Sunday, December 9, 2012, in a Primary room geared for Christmas, a counselor held up a candy cane and asked the children what it might represent. Six-year-old Emily Parker quickly raised her hand and, when called upon, joyfully said the following (as best recalled by my wife, who was sitting right behind her): “The candy cane represents the shepherd’s staff. The red on the candy cane represents Jesus’ blood and that He died for us. The white on the candy cane represents that He washed away our sins so we are clean. And if you turn the candy cane around, it’s J for Jesus.”

The adults in the room responded with a collective “wow.” Indeed, although Emily was always smart, what she shared seemed to be not only beyond her age but her usual capacity. Perhaps it was meant to be so, that it was to be so special as to be Emily’s last public testimony of Jesus on earth. Five days later, Emily lost her life in the Sandy Hook atrocity.

Oh, the evil done to sweet, kind, intelligent, innocent Emily! Oh, how it pierced Emily’s mother and father! And the parents and family of the nineteen other first graders and six adults!

Before the instance, Emily and our ward were excitedly preparing for Christmas. After the instance, Emily became the reason why the Newtown Ward did not celebrate Christmas altogether. The senselessness and darkness of what happened seemed to forbid it.

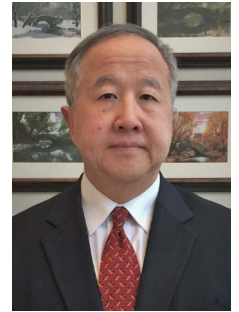
On the following Sunday, a special testimonial meeting was held. Emily’s parents were not able to attend, but perhaps someone closest to Emily there was her Primary teacher. She got up but was so overwhelmed with emotions that she didn’t seem to be able to enunciate words.

Oh, the grief and deprivation and cruelty of innocent death! And how all the more they are when juxtaposed against the promises of joy and peace and love of the sacred season!

Then—those that were able to speak—got up, and, gradually, testimonies were shared about Emily, that all those who knew her knew that she’s loved by her Heavenly Father and her beloved Savior; and about Christ, that all those who knew Him knew that He would make things right for Emily; and about the doctrines of Christ, that pure Emily would be saved in the Celestial Kingdom of God.

And there, as it were, between the contradictions and the dissonant opposites, a person other than Emily came into focus. It wasn’t Christmas’s jolly figure bringing presents. It wasn’t the investigator bringing a sort of closure. It wasn’t the grief counselor bringing tools that could comfort. They all would have been ineffectual. It was, unexpectedly, a wronged, tortured, pitiful man of grief.

But it was this Man who suffered and who suffered so much and who suffered so innocently that offered a way out of irreconcilabilities. It was He who refused to let senselessness be the eventual state of being, so He bore all senselessness. It was He who refused to let darkness cover all, so He propositioned Himself to cover



President Wen

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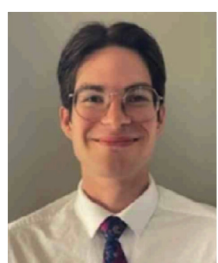
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all. And verily, He came into the world to accomplish it, reconciling even justice and mercy, as He, the Holy One and the “Wholly One,” encircled brokenness and became the mend between the pieces.

It’s been ten years since that unforgettable meeting. To me, CHRIST-mas came soundly that strange day amid all our cancellations of Christmas festivities, all our tears, all our consternations—when we noticed Emily in the embrace of the Protagonist of Christmas.

MISSIONARY UPDATES



BLAKE RENNINGER

Canton Ward

Starts 3 October 2022

**Utah Provo
Mission**



STEPHEN KREMER

New Portage Ward

Returns December 2022

**Arizona Mesa
Mission**



NATHAN WEBB

Wadsworth Ward

Returns December 2022

**California Anaheim
Mission**

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Family History Corner

by Jeanne Peugh, Stake Temple
and Family History Consultant



Family History Evaluation

As we begin the last month of the year 2022, let us ask ourselves the following questions in relation to our family history accomplishments:

- 1) What was the most valuable information I learned about my family?
- 2) Did I find this information myself while searching, or did someone assist me?
- 3) Was I able to make any connections with other relatives I didn't know about?
- 4) Was I able to share this information with other current family members?
- 5) Did I do any proxy work in the temple on the information I found?
- 6) What part of family history work am I most thankful for?

A few years ago, a CEO from RootsTech made the following statement: “Everyone deserves to be remembered.” How do you want to be remembered? In the last few months, we have had some long-time members in our ward go to the other side of the veil. As I reflect on their lives, I cherish many memories of my friendship with them. The loss has touched my heart, and even though I understand the Plan of Salvation, just knowing I will not see them or chat with them again, they have taken a piece of my heart with them. We are all one with our Heavenly Father, and he wants us to have joy in knowing we can have great joy on the side only if we connect ourselves with our ancestors.

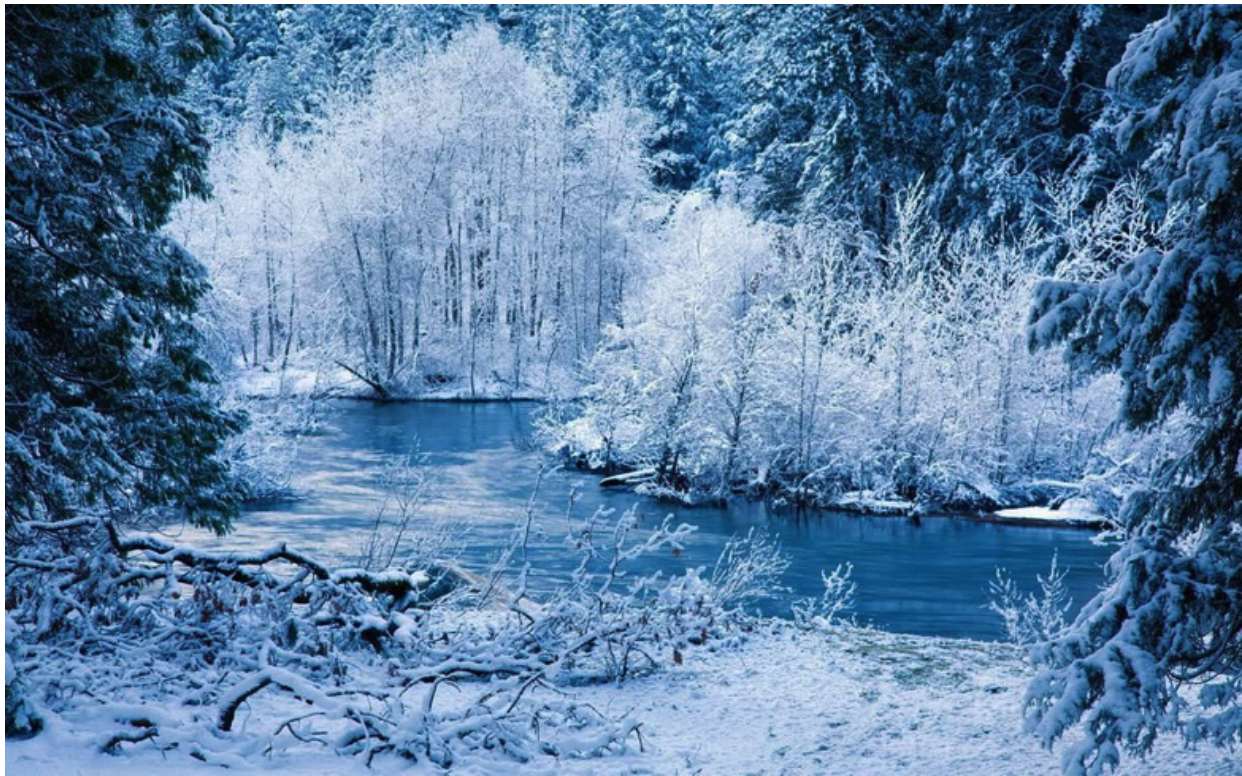
As January approaches, take the time to ponder how you might more closely connect with your ancestors. Here are some suggestions that might help you:

- When you do your weekly schedule, make sure you block some time to work on your own family.
- If you need help, never hesitate to ask – whether it be a friend, a family member, or a family history consultant in your ward or stake.
- Never give up; some of those ancestors seem not to be there, but they're there, and yes, they want you to find them. You are the key to unlock their eternal joy.
- Don't hesitate to ask for the Lord's help; this is His work and His glory, and if we are sincere, we will get promptings; maybe not today, but there is also tomorrow.
- Keep a journal of your research so you can see what you have accomplished throughout the year and where more effort might be needed.
- Always be grateful the Lord has given you another day to try again.

I testify that if we put forth the effort to find our ancestors, our joy will be more than anything we can ever hope for.

A Snow-Covered World

by David Foutz, Wadsworth Ward



It is so wonderful when snow first comes each winter, especially when it covers the trees and clings to each branch: transforming the landscape overnight from dreary brown and grey to bright and pure and white.

It happens most years in Ohio. The first real snowstorm will roll in – dumping 6-16 inches of snow from Wooster to Cleveland over about a day or two. When the wind stops and the sun rises, it is a wondrous, sacred sight. Hiking outside among the trees, you don't want to break the silence of the space. The sound of distant cars offends you. You catch yourself walking carefully to minimize the crunch of boots on snow, and you hear the sound of your own exhaled breath as you see it rise, cloudy and clean on the air around you.

Underneath, of course, the trees are leafless: listless, withered, and ugly things. And there's nothing special about the river that runs between the trees either. It's just another drainage path working its way aimlessly toward the lowest elevation, following the path of least resistance. What could be more common on this planet than water? The sky, of course, is also nothing special: air is everywhere. And in the back of my mind, I know that soon, come mid-January or February, all this snow and cold will be a source of displeasure: an irritant that I will want to be gone and never return.

But somehow, in December, as we approach Christmas, the descending of cold air and moisture from heaven upon this forest, this river, this earth, is transformative. It takes the dead and the common landscape and makes it beautiful. A reminder that the Great Artist can touch this earthy canvas with a pallet of common materials and create something so glorious it is beyond words to describe. We look at the hills and forests, and the beauty seems to stretch forever, as far as the eye can see.

When snow covers the trees and sticks to the branches, it reminds me of an experience I had in 1991. I was a missionary serving in the Mt. Rose Ward in Reno, NV, and my companion and I were invited to a meal one Saturday in February. This was a normal event, routine even, as missionaries were fed by members of the congregation almost every night. Women in the Relief Society would pass around a calendar on Sundays and sign up, and we would often only pay particular attention to where we were to be fed the day of the appointment. That morning when I saw what family was planning to feed us that day, however, I wish I had noticed sooner. It wasn't just that they asked us to come for breakfast rather than the normal dinner appointment, so we had to get our act together and out the door quickly, nor was it that the woman who had signed up to provide the meal was, in fact, the president of the Relief Society and a respected and revered leader in the congregation. It was the fact that her husband, and the father of their children, had recently died: a tragedy that left numberless hardships and heartache for her and her several children to try and manage.

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A Snow-Covered World

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As I looked out the window of our rented apartment kitchen, I saw that it had started snowing. Big heavy flakes that were coming down fast. I thought about calling and asking if she really wanted us to come over. Perhaps it would be better to cancel this obligation for her during this difficult time. But even as the idea began in my mind, I felt the Spirit of God whisper that it was the wrong idea, that, in fact, He wanted us to have breakfast with this family.

My companion and I drove to the home and tried to bring a sense of levity and happiness to the meal. The children, all of whom but the oldest daughter were high school-aged or younger, seemed eager to be lighthearted and readily joined in the banter. After the meal, we shared a scriptural thought, a Christmas song, and a prayer, and the kids scattered to Saturday activities. I thought it was time for us to leave as well, but the mother asked us to join her back at a small metal table in the kitchen. “Do you have a moment to talk?”

I felt some anxiety as I sat down, the metal leg of the old chair squeaking against the linoleum floor. I could see the pain behind her smiling eyes: I recognized the look of a mother with too little sleep and too many worries. I felt so sad for her and her family and felt both a deep empathy for their pain and a complete awareness of my own inadequacy. I had no idea what to say or do that could help her or her family in the slightest way. We sat in silence, and I looked out the kitchen window rather than at her, not wanting her to see in my eyes the lack of wisdom that I felt. She saw me looking at the backyard and said, “I wanted to share something with you.”

“This morning,” she said, “as I was making breakfast, I looked out at this backyard of ours too. I saw the rusty swing set that I have wanted to replace for years. I saw the trampoline with its several broken springs. I saw the weedy flower beds and the untrimmed trees and the dead grass, and I thought, ‘It’s just too much. How will I ever get everything done? My life is rusty and ugly and broken.’”

I started watching her as she spoke. She had been looking out the window at the backyard, but now she turned and looked me in the eyes. She continued, “But then it started to snow. Big flakes were floating from the sky. And I watched the snow cover my rusty playset and my scraggly trees and turn them into a beautiful, clean, and glorious winter wonderland.”

She reached across the table and briefly took my hand, and then my companions, and looked at us one after another. She seemed to search our faces, and I didn’t resist her gaze. There was a light behind her wet eyes, an intensity and a brightness I hadn’t seen earlier. “His love is like that, you know,” she said. “Christ comes quietly and covers all our sins with his perfectness. He turns our shabby lives into hope-filled journeys with eternal significance. His love transforms us, and it’s so soft and quiet that much of the time, we don’t even recognize it’s happening.”

As we left the house and drove away, I watched the snow fall around us in a new way. It wasn’t this family that needed our visit that morning. They were being cared for already. It was my companion and I who needed that breakfast. It was me who needed to learn how beautiful and powerful this simple gospel of Jesus Christ really is.

I hope you, too, will recognize Him as the snow covers the world this winter and see his love all around you.

