

L I S A C H R I S T E N S E N

Faith, Fear, and Our Forefathers

In 1838, a band of over 200 mobsters charged into Haun's Mill, Missouri, a small community of the fledgling Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Then-Governor Lilburn W. Boggs had recently issued a kill order against any member of the church, and the mob was only too happy to comply. Over the next few hours, the mob stormed through the community, killing people who tried to flee, setting fire to buildings and fields, shooting through the chinks between cabin logs. Men, women, children—all were Mormons; all had to die.

Of the thirty to forty families living in the area, the mob managed to kill eighteen people, including one friendly non-member, and injure thirteen others. My grandfather's great-grandfather, Thomas McBride, was among them. He was old by then, 78. When the mobsters came, he had been in the field. Some reports say he had a scythe in hand for the harvest; others say it was a corn knife. But whichever it was, his purpose in wielding it was peaceful.

A pair of mobsters caught up to him in the fields. Thomas immediately surrendered his musket to them, and was promptly shot with it. One took the scythe and carved away bits and

pieces of my grandfather's great-grandfather: fingers, parts of his ears, his nose, his scalp. Slow, painful, finally leaving him for dead. He was Mormon; he had to die.

Haun's Mill is a touchpoint of terror in Mormon pioneer history, though it by no means stands alone. Nauvoo, Kirtland, the aforementioned entire state of Missouri. The violence ultimately led to the death of the church's prophet, Joseph Smith, and created schisms within the nascent church. The largest group, which continues to be the mainstream branch of the faith, set out to the untamed West in a wagon train and hand-carts, on horseback and on foot. They settled in the Salt Lake Valley, which was dotted with thistle and sagebrush. On the horizon glittered the Great Salt Lake, the second-saltiest body of water in the world.

The pioneers got to work, clearing rocks and breaking ground and building homes they hoped would not be burned by those who sought to kill them. It is this narrative that present-day members of the church choose to focus on in their frequent nods to their pioneer heritage. It is not the horror, the bloodshed—those are glossed over in favor of stories of fortitude and faith. But it is the thought of the violence that spurred them that comes to mind most often as current events nationally and worldwide have unfolded in recent years.

In January 2017, President Donald Trump issued Executive Order 13769, which paused refugee entry into the U.S. for up to 120 days, lowered the total number of refugees admitted annually to 50,000, and severely restricted admission of refugees from several predominantly Muslim countries (“Executive Order, 27 Jan.”). Many were fleeing violence. Some were trying to escape religious persecution. According to the *Washington Post*, the order affected more than 90,000 people who had already been legally granted immigration, school, travel, or work visas (Kessler). The order was immediately contested and superseded by executive order 13780 (“Executive Order, 6 Mar.”), but the

essence remains intact. In January of 2020, President Trump expanded the ban to include six more predominantly Muslim countries, an order that went into effect in late February (“Proclamation”).

At the southern border of the United States during this same time, according to Customs and Border Patrol statistics, officials have detained, apprehended, or sent away, over a million migrants seeking entry into the country as a means of escaping poverty or violence in Central America. Last year, those asylum-seekers included a migrant caravan that eventually swelled to over 10,000 people which made its way up through Mexico and to U.S. ports of entry (Miroff). Even as thousands of migrants attempted to declare asylum, the government tightened its requirements for legally declaring asylum in November 2019. The *Washington Post* reported that lists of migrants asking for an asylum hearing exceeded a thousand names at some ports of entry. Many of the migrants have come in family groups, or sent children ahead to seek safety when the parents could not escape their conditions; thousands of children were detained and kept in inadequate detention centers for far longer than the legal limit of 72 hours (Hauslohner and Sacchetti).

As members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we believe fervently in following the law of the land. But in both cases, the vast majority of the people acutely affected had already been vetted by or were attempting to follow laws already put in place to protect the country. Politicians tightening laws that jeopardized or revoked legal entry into the U.S. to people fleeing violence and persecution cited fears about terror and crime. Logic and the existing law of the land were upended by a vague but pervasive fear of crime or of violence or of people with different ways of life somehow destroying American culture. These fears are understandable. We’ve seen and experienced violence from those both within and outside our borders from people who look like those asking for

help now. It is reasonable to want to be safe and protect our homes and families. We've also seen the damage these kinds of fears and resulting legislation can do to vulnerable groups, because they're also nothing new in America's history.

As early pioneers moved into Missouri in the early 1830s, established residents distrusted the strange new settlers and became increasingly afraid that the pioneers would stir up trouble with local American Indian tribes, that they would incite opposition to slavery, that they would take over local government. Citizens published a declaration in the Fayette, Missouri-based *Western Monitor* saying, "It requires no gift of prophecy to tell that the day is not far distant when the civil government of the county will be in their hands; when the sheriff, the justices, and the county judges will be Mormons" (Simpson et al.).

Rumors and grumbling came first, followed by vandalism and groups gathering to demand pioneers leave. Violence against the pioneers began in 1833, and only grew as the decade wore on, and pioneers seemed to be in a constant state of fleeing and returning to their homes or rebuilding elsewhere. Pioneers were prevented from voting in the 1838 election in August, and when they petitioned the newly elected Governor Boggs, they were told they needed to watch over themselves (Ludlow 972).

The Haun's Mill Massacre happened that October.

Violence and anti-Mormon sentiment weren't limited to Haun's Mill, of course, or Missouri. Four days after Haun's Mill, a mob laid siege to the adjacent community of Far West. Joseph Smith, along with several others including his brother Hyrum, was arrested on false accusations and held for five months in Liberty Jail before eventually being allowed to escape and flee to Illinois with the rest of the saints. But church members eventually found that same fear and acrimony in Illinois that had driven them from Missouri, and from Ohio before that.

When we talk about this period in Church history, it's easy to color the conflict between mob members and saints in black and white. The saints were trying only to live in peace, while the mobs were driving them out unprovoked. While that dichotomy holds true for most of the cases, it is not the full truth. Church members fought back. The Mormon Militia rose up to defend settlements; to other Missourians, the move surely must have seemed like an act of aggression, of escalation. The pioneers' eager sharing of their beliefs and the gospel may have come across as bragging—David Whitmer, then a presiding elder of one church branch, speculated that this kind of talk incited jealousy among the pioneers' new neighbors (Ludlow 972). And Missouri itself, and Jackson County in particular, had an identity as a rough and tumble place—the edge of the frontier not beholden the niceties and conventions of the northern and eastern states, such as education and church worship. As one Missourian wrote at the time, these differences in background and ideology made the two groups “completely unfitted to live together in peace and friendship” (McCoy 9).

None of this excuses the behavior of the mobs or the apathy of the local government and residents, but it does humanize them somewhat. And that humanization becomes somewhat alarming when compared to the reactions I noted on social media in the throes of each of these events. In 2018, then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions commented on the border crisis in part by referencing Romans 13, which linked Paul's counsel with admonition to obey the laws of the land in addition to the commandments (@CNN). Critics of Sessions responded with scripture, too, including Matthew 19.14 (@ava), which states, “Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven,” and Luke 10.30–37, where we read about the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints issued official statements concerning both situations. A June 2018 statement

about immigration called for quick and humane legislation to end forced family separations, saying,

The forced separation of children from their parents now occurring at the U.S.-Mexico border is harmful to families, especially to young children. We are deeply troubled by the aggressive and insensitive treatment of these families. While we recognize the right of all nations to enforce their laws and secure their borders, we encourage our national leaders to take swift action to correct this situation and seek for rational, compassionate solutions. (“Church Calls”)

A day after President Trump signed the executive order limiting and blocking refugees from entering the U.S., Church leadership issued a statement calling for compassionate actions to help those affected saying,

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is concerned about the temporal and spiritual welfare of all of God’s children across the earth, with special concern for those who are fleeing physical violence, war and religious persecution. The Church urges all people and governments to cooperate fully in seeking the best solutions to meet human needs and relieve suffering. (“Church Expresses”)

The reaction I saw to these current events, though, was a different story. My own social media feeds, which are predominantly made up of posts from fellow members of the Church, were likewise filled with conflicting opinions. A disheartening number of these posts dismissed the asylum seekers and migrants

as all being criminals and blamed them for the conflict that drove them from their homes. These voices cited poor parenting and criminal behavior on the part of the migrant parents for the inhumane conditions in which children were housed, for the separation of families that occurred as part of the detention process. And those posts are difficult to read, because they come from people who I respect as members of the Church and followers of Christ. They are the thoughts of friends and family members who fervently believe so many of the things I hold dear, who share my pain about the treatment of our early brothers and sisters struggling to find a safe place to live and to worship, but have come down on a very different side of this crisis unfolding before us than I have. At the time of the pioneers' trek westward, the place that would become Utah and the American West was not a part of the United States of America, but of Mexico. Between 1846–1848, the U.S. fought to take the land in the Mexican-American War. The pioneers weren't the first non-native settlers to take their chances with the West, but they were part of a migration to territory that did not belong to their country ("1846"). By today's standards, their search for refuge in this way would make them illegal immigrants in a foreign land.

I don't mean to make a direct comparison between their search for safety with that of the migrants—laws and conventions have certainly changed in the last two hundred years—but I do think there are enough similarities that we as members of the Church have more reason than most to understand what has driven those migrants to our borders. They might have been our ancestors, waiting at ports of entry and in detention centers for a chance to plead our case. Would those pioneers have had the right documentation to be allowed in? Would our story of persecution be sympathetic enough for entry, or would those in civic control have been distrustful of us because of beliefs they didn't understand, much like Muslim refugees have faced when trying to come to this country?

When Joseph Smith was in his extended stay in Liberty Jail, the Lord answered his prayers with words of comfort and perspective, which we can read today in Doctrine and Covenants 122 and 123. In one passage, the Lord reminds Joseph that though his trials are great—and they had the capacity to become so much worse—“know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good” (D&C 122.7). Things did get worse for Joseph, culminating with his martyrdom in June 1844. And things got worse for the saints, as they fled Nauvoo and the lives they’d rebuilt there after running from Missouri just five years before. The trek west was no easier, with pioneers struggling with—and dying from—difficult terrain, low supplies, illness, hostile American Indians, and harsh weather. But when the pioneers finally reached the Salt Lake Valley, when they found those safe places to rebuild again and to put down roots and worship in the way they so fervently believed to be true, they remembered the blessings they had received in the form of breaks in the weather, finding supplies in barren places, and the kindness of others. The troubles they had endured had indeed given them experience and had ultimately been for their good. They rejoiced in the strength they had gained from that journey and in the testimonies that had not only weathered but grown in the hardship.

Those are the things they told their descendants, and that we continue to discuss over the pulpit and in classes. I am grateful for those accounts. I am grateful for the faith of those who came before, who established a safe place for me to grow in the gospel and to draw close to Christ. But I wonder if we as a gospel people have missed a portion of the blessing, and of the commandment I believe is implied, in the Lord’s counsel to Joseph.

Christ offers the Parable of the Good Samaritan in response to the question “who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10.29), which was asked after Christ counseled that the way to gain

eternal life was in part to love “thy neighbor as thyself” (Luke 10.27). In His conclusion of the parable, Christ answers that the Samaritan—then a people despised for their perceived uncleanliness and inferiority—was the injured man’s neighbor because he showed mercy. “Go,” Christ says, “and do likewise” (Luke 10.37).

Thomas McBride died roughly a hundred and fifty years before I was born, and even his daughter, who made her way across the plains after his death, died over a century before I came to Earth. I don’t know first-hand the pain of losing my father at the hands of violent and sadistic men. I don’t know what it is to come to an untamed land and try to eke out a life there. But I do know what it is to lose someone. I know what it is to go somewhere new and try to establish yourself anew. And when I read the stories left behind by those who came before, my heart aches for the pain they felt.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ tells his followers, “Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. . . . Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy” (Matt. 5.3–4, 7). When we feel pain or go through trials, we are better able to understand the pain or hardship of our neighbor, whoever that might be. Christ showed Himself to be the perfect model of empathy, such as when He mourned with Mary and Martha over Lazarus’s death despite knowing He could—and would—resurrect him (John 11.1–46). We are taught of Adam and Eve’s great purpose to learn of all things, good and evil (Gen. 3); knowing pain helps us to appreciate the pleasure life offers, as well as allowing us to aid others when they experience hardship. This helps us help each other in our families. This helps us help each other in our ministering. This helps us help our brothers and sisters not of our faith.

I can’t do anything to help the pioneers, but the empathy I gain from my own experiences and learning from their lives

allows me to feel more deeply the pain being experienced around me. There are people hurting now to whom I can show compassion, and for whom I can work in behalf of. I can help these people find their safe places, whether those be literal or figurative. Pain exists as part of this mortal experience, yes, but can also make us more godly. What we do with these things that give us experience, whether we brush ourselves off and walk past the beaten man or whether we stop, as the Samaritan did, and give what aid we can, determines how well we love our neighbor—and how well we learn from and improve on our past.

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