

I have been thinking about the visions and Lehi and Nephi concerning the iron rod and the tree of life (I Ne. 8). I want to liken their vision unto us by telling a story about why we sometimes wander off the gospel path and lose sight of our best goals.

Several years ago I took a small group of Priest age young men from our Ward (Jason Lewis, Adam Lewis, Geoff Card, Adam Arellano) on a Spring Break trip to west Texas and Big Bend National Park. You may know that the name Big Bend refers to a great arc in the Rio Grande as it flows across the Chihuahuan desert forming a border with Mexico. It is primarily a backcountry park and if you want to really see it you need to be willing to get off the pavement in either a four wheel drive, on horseback, or on foot.

We chose to see what we could on foot, and one day made a hike out to a landmark called the Mule Ears. The Mule Ears are volcanic dikes formed from an erosion resistant vertical wall of basalt rock. The dike has been breached in the center by weathering, with a resulting gap leaving two large dark ears emerging from lighter colored rock that surrounds them. Besides having geologic interest, the Mule Ears are historically interesting because Army Air Corps fighter pilots prior to World War II on training missions practiced flying their planes low to the ground and between the ears.

We parked the car at a dry wash and followed a well marked trail that climbed steeply for a short distance to the middle slopes of a mountain and then ran along at a gradual side hill grade to a low saddle in a ridge. Leaving the marked trail at the saddle we picked our way cross-country along the rocky ridge for above a mile to the Mule Ears. We made it there

with no trouble and spent an hour or two scrambling on the boulders at the base of the dikes, wondering what it might be like to climb them with climbing gear, or what it was like to fly an airplane between them. About noon we ate the lunches we had packed and had a drink of water before heading back.

When we reached the saddle again, we stopped to rest. It was getting hot and I wondered if there might be a better way to the trailhead than following the trail we came in on. I fancy myself as being pretty good at reading a map and interpreting the lay of the land. (After all, I am an Eagle Scout and have three degrees in Geography). My USGS topographic map of the area suggested a much shorter way back that would help us avoid the heat. I could see that by following a compass heading to the southeast we would drop off through some rough badlands for just a short distance, but beyond that was a wide gently sloping pediment that led to the sandy arroyo where the car was parked. I told the boys to wait at the saddle while I went to scout my short cut.

I walk out to the upper edge of the badlands and stopped and looked out across the wide desert pediment. What I saw was worse than a mist of darkness. Most people know that dangerous creatures live in the Chihuahuan desert: at least three kinds of rattlesnakes, several types of scorpions, and some very big spiders, for example. But the truth is such things are relatively scarce in the day time and easy to avoid by wearing thick boots and long pants and not sticking your fingers or toes into dark places without a good look first. The thing that is most likely to harm you in the desert is the vegetation. In Big Bend the vegetation all has Spanish

names, but the friendly Texans have translated the names into English to forewarn Americans who refuse to learn Spanish. From where I stood on top of the badlands, I could see a wide thicket of drab green brush at the bottom of the slope. It was a solid cover of “cat claw” acacia that we would most likely have to crawl through. Beyond that was a maze of dense mats of a spikey succulent called lechuguilla, or “the dagger” in English. At first it looked like we might be able to wind our way between the mats of daggers, but skulking in those narrow openings were squat round cacti with rigid spikes in a ring around their centers. At the center of the ring is a thicker, longer spike. These are the “horse crippler” cacti, which can also puncture not only horse’s hooves, but thick boot leather. If that wasn’t enough, among the daggers and the horse cripplers were clusters of long stemmed nearly leafless shrubs, with ribs all around the woody stems that were lined with thorns long enough for birds to perch on. These are the “coach whips,” or ocotillo in Spanish. Finally, there was a small, uncommon, yet deadly plant that is among the most feared of all. Its leaves have razor sharp edges and their tips form a long stinging barb. When broken, the leaves ooze a poisonous, sticky red liquid. The appropriate English name for this?: “mother in law’s tongue”.

Besides the hazards posed by the vegetation, our water supply was another issue to consider. Desert pediments are eroded into bedrock and are notoriously lacking in water sources. I pulled out my water bottle and found it about $\frac{3}{4}$ empty. For 360 degrees around I had an open view, and I looked for any signs of water in the dancing heat waves. Far off in the distance was a single tall green cottonwood tree. It was the only tall green tree anywhere in sight, and it was tucked up in a ravine coming down the bare mountain

slope we had walked in on that morning. I checked my map again and noticed something I hadn't seen before. It was a small blue circle with a short blue tail, the universal map symbol for a spring. What's more, the spring was on a short side trail that joined the trail we had hiked in on earlier. In the cool of the morning, with plenty of water to carry, I wasn't thirsty and hadn't looked up that ravine or seen that tree. Now it was hot and my water was running low. I began to appreciate the wisdom of whoever laid out that trail, and why it followed a longer, circuitous route along the mountain slope. He knew that wicked vegetation grew on the invitingly easy slope and shorter route across the pediment. He also knew that the pediment had no water accessible to people.

I went back to the saddle where the boys were waiting on the trail, and said something like "I'm not so smart after all, we need to stay on this trail and make for that big green tree." So, we did that and found a small muddy seep of water. It didn't really produce enough water to filter for a drink, but it was enough to wet down a bandana. It's hard to describe how good a wet bandana feels on a sun burned face while laying down in a small patch of wiry green grass in the shade of a green tree, while surrounded by a great expanse of hot, dry desert.

Like the numberless concourses of people Lehi saw along the straight and narrow path we sometimes walk along the well marked path when times are good without paying much attention to our surroundings, just going with the flow, maybe staring at our feet and not really noticing important landmarks, like springs and green trees in a desert. At times we may think ourselves smarter or wiser than those were marked the path and are leading us to our

goal. We think we see better ways across the deserts of the world. We may attempt to make the scriptures conform to our way of thinking, or rely on charismatic pundits to justify changing our direction of travel. Family and church leaders plead with us to check our water supply and read the map again, to reach out for the iron rod and get back on the right trail. Why is that so important? Because eternal life depends on it.

When Nephi asked to know what was meant by the rod and the tree the angel asked him:

“Behold the Lamb of God, yea even the Son of the Eternal Father! Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw?”

And I answered him saying; Yea, it is the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men; wherefore, it is the most desirable above all things.

And he spake unto me saying “Yea, and the most joyous to the soul.”

And ... I beheld that the rod of iron which my father had seen was the word of God, which led to the fountain of living waters, or to the tree of life; which waters are a representation of the love of God; and I also beheld that the tree of life was a representation of the love of God. (I Nephi 11:21-25).

We may not always have complete information or understand why things are happening to us, but we can know that the love of God is available and constant and sure. Eliza R. Snow wrote: “He marked the path, and lead the

way, and every point defines, to light, and life, and endless day, where God's full presence shines" (Hymn 195).

And as Jesus explained to Nicodemus: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him, should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

Safety comes by holding to the iron rod and moving forward guided by living prophets and apostles. I once attended a regional conference where Elder Bruce R. McConkie spoke. He candidly talked about the effects of a terminal illness on his body and that even though he was getting the best medical treatments available, his life might end at any given moment. He said that his death was not the important thing, what mattered most was the direction he was heading when he transitioned from mortality to immortality. He cited the Book of Mormon holy man Amulek: "that same spirit which doth possess your bodies at the time that ye go out of this life, that same spirit will have power to possess your body in that eternal world" (Alma 34:34). A few weeks later Elder McConkie died at his earthly home. I believe he had a firm grip on the iron rod and reached the tree of life.

Repentance, covenant keeping, and following the promptings of the Holy Ghost are principles that will help us keep our grip on the rod and follow the path to the tree of life.

As we move long, even with a sure grip on the iron rod, we may need help from time to time. When our stake completed the most recent handcart trek I saw an example of that principle. I was playing the part of trail boss with a

company of families lead by a ma and a pa. After a hot and humid first day, the second day began with a long pull up a steep grade. At the top of the grade I found Sister Debra Lindsay concerned about one of the other ma's in the company. She reported to me that the other sister was feeling considerable pain after climbing the grade. Her pain was a result of a surgery before the beginning of the trek that was not completely healed. We both talked with the sister and encouraged her to let me call for a four wheeler to take her back to base camp. But, she would not hear it and insisted that she would go on. We reasoned with her and explained that this was really just an exercise designed to challenge the young people. We wanted to give them a sense of what the pioneers faced, but we did want anyone to die before our journey was through just to add realism to the experience. As I recall, we finally did convinced her to accept a ride back to camp and see Dr. Ross. But the next morning she was back at her hand cart ready to face a third day of trekking. It was as difficult and hot as the other days, and ended with the carts being squeezed between two trees and out into an open grassy spot at the base of a very steep earthen dam. The route required that the carts and the pioneers push up that steep dam in the hot sun and then back to camp up a steep gravel road. I stationed myself at the squeeze point in the trees to make sure all my carts got through and were headed in the direction of the dam. Once the last cart passed I looked up at the dam and there was Sister Lindsay. She had her injured friend by the arm and was holding her steady as they both lunged at the steep slope in front of them. They made it back to camp alive, and mostly well.

When the Savior asked which of the characters in the story of the Good Samaritan was neighbor to the injured man the reply was: “He who had mercy on him.” Then said Jesus unto him: “Go, and do thou, likewise.”

Brothers and sisters I testify that the Savior has marked a sure path and He loves us. I believe we show our love for Him when we help one another as we struggle to hold to the rod.

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