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## *Now We See It, Now We Don't*

**A Sermon by the Rev. Thee Smith**

*In the name of God: Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend. Amen*

*Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." "John 9.39*

Imagine you are me on my wedding day last year. But it's not your parents' standard wedding. Because your bride is from Ghana, West Africa. And that means that you are about to have a traditional West African wedding ceremony.

"Do you want to have a traditional West African wedding ceremony?" your charming fiancé asks you a good three to four months before the wedding date.

And you know the right answer, don't you? You also know the longer you take to say the right answer, the less correct the answer will sound. So you respond right away:

"Of course, dear!" you say in your most positive tone of voice. "Of course I want us to have a traditional West African wedding ceremony."

Now that's what I'm talking about: Good for you!

Now your future in-laws, and/or their representatives, have already prepared you for certain features of the ceremony. I mean for example the transfer of a dowry, where you or your representative hand over a check for so many hundreds of dollars to the parents of the bride or their representative.

Then there's also the transfer of a "hope chest," where you or your representative hand over a suitcase stuffed with fine clothing, expensive jewelry and perfume, and other articles to be treasured by the bride in the following months as a token of your esteem for her.

But by far the most unusual part of the ceremony is the "decoy test." Yes, they were careful to advise you about the decoy test. But no explanation can properly prepare you for the experience.

For hours preceding the ceremony, all that day, you have not seen your bride. And after the transfer of the dowry and handing over the hope chest, you are still waiting for her to enter the room. And then the moment arrives.

Bridesmaids come into the room escorting a woman who is covered from head to shoulders. In fact, her head is bowed down and her back is bent so that the thick, heavy shawl acts like a blanket completely hiding her face. The bridesmaids are careful to prevent any possibility of glimpsing her face until the right moment.

And then they slowly raise the covering just enough for you to see her chin, her cheek, and part of her mouth. And that's when the bride's family representative asks you the test question.

"Is this the woman you are asking to marry?"

"But, but," you begin to sputter, "I can't tell! I can't see enough to tell!"

So they raise the covering just a bit more, while the woman keeps her posture bent and her head bowed. And suddenly, the magic of ritual begins to happen to you. Before that moment, you were certain that you were capable of seeing everything clearly in front of you.

But now you could swear that something like a fog has descended in front of your eyes. The woman looks like she could be your fiancée, and yet something is not quite the same. And that's when you remember the story they told you.

It happened years ago, they said, back in Ghana. A groom was faced with the same test, and he actually thought that the decoy was his real fiancée. But when it was revealed that he had made a mistake, and that he had chosen the wrong woman, he decided that he liked the decoy better than the fiancée.

So he chose to marry her instead, and scandalized the entire wedding gathering, not to mention the brokenhearted bride and her family. And ever since that day this story has been told to bridegrooms like you as an example of what not to do!

So there you are, at the moment of truth, not quite sure about what you're seeing but bound and determined not to make a regrettable mistake. Oh yes, when they first told you about this test it all sounded like great fun—a little drama—'suitable for all the family.' But now it feels like everything depends on your making the right choice and saying the right thing.

Thank God you make the right choice and say the right thing.

"No, uh, she's not the one," you manage to say.

Whew! They all laugh as the veil is completely removed and the decoy is revealed. Sure enough, she looks a little like your fiancée but not really; just enough to be a little confusing when there's not enough light—but not really.

Whew, again! What if you had said it was her and it wasn't—wow! What would that mean about how well you know her? And what if you had said it wasn't her and it was—same judgment, right?

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And now for the scripture versions of this decoy story.

Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind" (John 9.39)

Just like in the West African decoy test, Jesus tells the Pharisees in today's gospel that they are being tested by their reaction to him. They refuse to acknowledge him as a prophet, and so Jesus says they have become blind—while the man who was born blind is in fact the one who can really see him as a prophet.

Yes, and did you notice that in today's Old Testament story we also have a—decoy test? That's right: the brothers of the young boy David are paraded before the prophet Samuel as decoys for—the real thing.'

Again and again the decoys look like the real thing, so that Samuel exclaims,

"—Surely the Lord's anointed is now standing before us!"

But just as surely he hears the Lord's voice telling him,

Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart (1 Samuel 16.7).

So now, Christian family and friends, all of us here today are being challenged by these scriptures to attempt the same kind of seeing that God commanded Samuel in the Old Testament reading, when God said, "'Do not look on appearances.'

And that same kind of seeing we are called to by Jesus in the John's gospel, when he says

"I came into this world ... so that those who do not see may see" (John 9.39)

Now it just so happens that previous generations of Christians actually practiced this kind of seeing. Recently the Catholic writer, Fr. Richard Rohr, has tried to rejuvenate this tradition. He did this just last year, in his lectures here in Atlanta at the Cathedral of St. Philip, and also in his recent book with the subtitle, "Learning to See as the Mystics See" (Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now*; Crossroad, 2009).

Remember this teaching from Fr. Rohr at the Cathedral last spring:

In the early medieval period, two Christian philosophers ... wrote that humanity was given three different sets of eyes, each building on the previous one. The first eye was the eye of the flesh (thought or sight), the second was the eye of reason (meditation or reflection), and the third eye was the eye of true understanding (contemplation).<sup>2</sup>

I cannot emphasize strongly enough that the separation and loss of these three necessary eyes is the basis of much of the short-sightedness and religious crises of the Western world. Lacking such wisdom, it is very difficult for churches, governments, and leaders to move beyond ego, the desire for control, and public posturing. Everything divides into oppositions such as liberal vs. conservative, with vested interests pulling against one another. Truth is no longer possible at this level of conversation. Even theology becomes more a quest for power than a search for God and Mystery.

One wonders how far spiritual and political leaders can genuinely lead us without some degree of mystical seeing and action. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that "us-[vs]-them" seeing, and the dualistic thinking that results, is the foundation of almost all discontent and violence in the world.<sup>3</sup> It allows heads of religion and state to avoid their own founders, their own national ideals, and their own better instincts. Lacking the contemplative gaze, such leaders will remain mere functionaries and technicians, without any big picture to guide them for the long term. The world and the churches are filled with such people, often using God language as a cover for their own lack of certainty or depth.

... [Instead] we need true mystics who see with all three sets of eyes, not eccentrics, fanatics, or rebels. The true mystic is always both humble and compassionate, for she knows that she does not know.

... Now do not let the word "mystic" scare you off. It simply means one who has moved from mere belief systems or belonging systems to actual inner experience. All spiritual traditions agree that such a movement is possible, desirable, and available to everyone. In fact, Jesus seems to say that this is the whole point! (*The Naked Now*, pp. 28-30; also accessed online on 1 April 2011 at [The Huffington Post](#) and at [Sikh Philosophy Network](#) ).

Yes, in today's gospel, Jesus says that this kind of seeing is "the whole point." So let's practice that kind of seeing in the days ahead; particularly in the last days of Lent as we prepare for Easter—the Day of Resurrection. In that way, Christian friends, we may finish "a holy Lent; finish Lent by fasting from false appearances—from false God-images, or false other-people-images, or false self-images.

And oh, yes, watch out for those false decoys too, so we can recognize Jesus—wherever we find him—as the true bridegroom for all of us! Now to reinforce this grace that we are asking from God, I invite us to turn again to the hymn that we sang at the beginning of the service, and say together just two verses that relate to what you have been hearing in the past few minutes.

Please find our hymnal in your pew and turn with me to Hymn no. 143 and recite with me verses 3 and 4. And as you read please notice the reference to Daniel as a "mystic in training," and to Jesus as our "Bridegroom" and "messiah," and finally this prayer: a prayer that we will have the joy of seeing his face (not that of some decoy):

So Daniel trained his mystic sight / delivered from the lion's might;  
And John the Bridegroom's friend became / the herald of Messiah's name.  
Then grant us, Lord, like them to be / full of fast and prayer with thee;  
Our spirits strengthen with thy grace / and give us joy to see thy face.

—The Hymnal 1982 (NY: Church Publishing Inc., 1985), no. 143

*In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

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