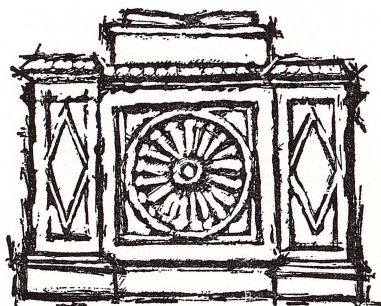


• CRESCENT HILL SERMONS •

CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

LOUISVILLE / KENTUCKY •



"Sight or Insight?"

A Sermon by

William E. Hull

Scripture Reading: John 12:26-32

A couple in quest of antiques stopped at a Pennsylvania farmhouse but their inquiries failed to turn up any worthwhile treasures. The farmer was good enough to report that a few days earlier he had found some pictures by two artists named Currier and Ives which he discarded because they were old and dirty. In horror the visitors asked if the priceless prints had been destroyed. "Yes," admitted the farmer, "but I was no fool; I saved the frames and they kept us in kindling wood for nearly two months."

The farmer saw only worthless canvas and valuable kindling wood. He had "sight" but not "insight" into the real values involved, much like the moral of a familiar nursery rhyme:

Pussy cat, pussy cat, where have you been?
I've been to London to look at the Queen!
Pussy cat, pussy cat, what did you there?
I saw a little mouse under her chair.

The eye could see only that for which it was trained, and so was blind to the encompassing grandeur.

We live in a world which has taught us to live by sight. The astonishing strides of science have led many to over-emphasize the laboratory approach to life. As a result, reality is often identified only with phenomena observable to the physical senses. This pragmatic empiricism is reflected both by the unlettered masses who insist that "seeing is believing" and by the intelligentsia who have embraced the current philosophic vogue of logical positivism.

Yet simpleton and scientist alike know that the really crucial realities of life cannot be captured in a test tube. Transcendent values are always intangible: love, freedom, courage, greatness . . . This does not mean that conflict must arise in our search for both seen and unseen truth. Surely ultimate reality is one and not at war with itself. The quest of the spirit for meaning is not *anti*-scientific but *supra*-scientific. Man may well begin as a student of the sciences, for he is an earthbound creature with a hunger to understand what he sees. But this very sharpening of *sight* by the tutoring of science will drive him to the search for *insight* as he ponders the ultimate implications of his factual knowledge.

Where shall such wisdom be found? Unlike much religious literature, the Bible approaches this problem with sober realism. It affirms that all men live in the same world. The spiritual elite may not escape from the concreteness of earthly existence. Against any form of gnosticism the Bible denies that special visions are granted to a favored few. All men confront the same bewilderments and ambiguities, all know the same confusions and distresses which perplex the mind and sear the soul.

But all do not see this common lot in the same way. God gives not only sight but insight, and this insight transforms the very understanding and interpretation of existence itself. "The hearing ear and the seeing eye, the Lord has made them both" (Proverbs 20:12). The human response to this gift of divine insight is called "faith." Among its many connotations, this word refers to a distinctive way of looking at life, a controlling perspective which determines the ultimate meaning of existence. In the stately language of Hebrews, faith is "the evidence of things not seen," or, as J. B. Phillips has rendered this phrase, faith "means being certain of things we cannot see" (Hebrews 11:1).

A suburban street in Louisville winds between a building supply company and a modern communications center. On one side, individual bricks are stacked neatly but in meaningless array; on the other side, mortar holds the bricks in place to make a useful building. Facts are like so many bricks; they need the mortar of faith to fashion them into an edifice of truth. Through the bifocals of sight and insight

we may see reality in the dimension of depth. Illustrations of this abound throughout the Bible.

The sacred story begins in earnest with Abraham, the father of faith. To some, his migration from Mesopotamia was but the journey of an insignificant Semite in response to the shifting social patterns of the ancient Near East. But this is not what the writer of Hebrews was able to discern.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God (Hebrews 11:8-10, RSV).

Faith transformed the pilgrimage of Abraham into a rendezvous with destiny; the outward journey corresponded to an inward journey of the human spirit.

What shall we make of Moses as he stands on the back side of the desert before a burning bush? To some, here is primitive superstition combined with naive gullibility, the animism of the desert, the passion for a tribal god. Edith Sitwell spoke a gentle corrective to such whittled-down perspectives: "It is a part of the poet's work to show each man what he sees but does not know he sees. . . . Like Moses, he sees God in the burning bush when the half-opened or myopic physical eye sees only the gardener burning leaves." For this reason, the poetic commentary of Elizabeth Barrett Browning on this incident far surpasses the prosaic rationalizations of the skeptic:

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it, and pluck blackberries,
And daub their natural faces unaware . . .

From that encounter at the bush, Moses led the Hebrew people out of Egypt. But this was more than a border incident, the fleeing of an incorrigible fugitive element, the wandering of unassimilated nomadic tribes. This was the Exodus of God, the birth of history's most significant nation, the trysting of a gathered people before a holy mountain to make a covenant with the one true God. Pharaoh also saw what happened, but it prompted no revival in his courts, for he had not seen with eyes of faith. How different was Moses who "by faith" left Egypt and "enduring as *seeing* him who is invisible" (Hebrews 11:27).

Perhaps the most striking Old Testament illustration of such faith is found in the story of Elisha and his servant. When surrounded by the hosts of the Syrians, the servant despaired and cried, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?"

But Elisha prayed, "Lord, open his eyes that he may see." Then the Lord enabled him to see his spiritual resources, the "mountain full of horses and chariots of fire," and to discover the truth that "they that be with us are more than they that be with them" (II Kings 6:15-17).

No one ever looked at the world with eyes of faith like Jesus. His contemporaries lived with blinders on: "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" "Is not this the carpenter?" Thus did they betray their poverty of insight into spiritual realities. But, to Jesus, earth *was* "crammed with heaven," it was like a "dome of many-colored glass" which refracted the "white radiance of Eternity." Thus, under his touch, a worn-out world came to life again. Men had seen sparrows and lilies, sowers and Samaritans, all of their lives—but not as a vast acted parable of the reality of God. So he pleaded with them, having eyes, to *see*, having ears, to *hear*, and be not blind to the immensities of heaven that crowded in upon them. Jesus found God in the most unlikely places! To him, the hairs on a man's head were enough to remind him of God.

An intriguing incident recorded in the Gospel of John points up the vast difference between surface sight and the spiritual insight by which Jesus lived. As he entered Jerusalem for the last time, the shadows fell heavily over his ministry. "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say, 'Father, save me from this hour'?" (John 12:27ab, RSV). In a supreme act of obedience Jesus saw beyond suffering to the triumphant purposes of God. "No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify thy name" (John 12:27c-28a, RSV). His commitment was authenticated by a direct revelation of divine approval. "Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again'" (John 12:28b, RSV).

But how did the crowd react in this memorable moment? To some it was nothing more than a stray peal of thunder, while to others it was the voice of an angel. "The crowd standing by heard it and said that it had thundered. Others said, 'An angel has spoken to him'" (John 12:29, RSV). The voice had come for their sakes (v. 30), yet how differently they appropriated it! All heard the outward sound, yet only some really heard the meaning of the message. Edith Lovejoy Pierce has commented:

Some said it thundered. "Nay, an angel spoke,"

Said others who had supersonic ears,
And caught the tones a ready spirit hears.

On such a watershed the promise broke:
To some a song, to others cloudy smoke.

The light shines in the dark. Who comprehends?

Some see the light and others cannot tell
Brightness from black, or noonday from the well
of night. Unless the great Creator sends
Vision with eyesight, blindness never ends.

Because Jesus was forever pointing men to the angel's voice behind the thunder, his own life became the supreme challenge to insight. He was made of humble stuff, a king incognito, a man on a cross. To some his life was nothing more than a stray peal of thunder, a frenzied burst of fanaticism that ran its course to unfortunate but inevitable martyrdom. Many who saw him die dismissed him as a criminal, a fraud, a pious pretender. But others saw that cross as the supreme manifestation of God's glory.

Sight looked down and saw him die the death of a criminal; insight looked up and beheld him highly exalted. As Oscar Cullman has pointed out, this was the difficult adjustment to make, this was the scandal of the cross. It was relatively easy to believe with Judaism that the decisive victory lay in the future; it was infinitely harder to live by the incredible conviction that the decisive victory had already been won—and on a cross at that! Men who could make sense of Calvary suddenly found themselves with the clue to the riddle of human existence. These men lived in the astonishing paradox that God was victorious precisely in that event which appeared to be his bitterest defeat.

What made the crucial difference in all these situations? A simplified distinction might be that to one set of eyes "seeing is believing," whereas to another, "believing is seeing." Some men had found a faith in God that made possible new horizons of understanding and insight. This means that faith must control the angle of vision with which one looks at life. It means that for every tone there is an overtone, for every sight, an insight, for every thunder, an angel's voice. The implications of this for our contemporary approach to life must now be explored.

Despite the terrifying discoveries of science, the modern Christian can never live in an altogether alien world, he can never be deaf to the music of the heavenly spheres. One man goes stolidly on his way. "A nice night," he mutters. But to the Christian, the incalculable reaches of space are the humming workshops of the Almighty.

Some see only a vagrant weed by the wayside, but to Tennyson it was more:

Flower in the crannied wall,
I pluck you out of the crannies,
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,
Little flower—but *if* I could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is.

The Christian who lives by faith has already gotten a glimmer of the meaning of that flower in the crannied wall. "By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear" (Hebrews 11:3, RSV).

Indeed, nothing is ever quite common to him again. The

poet Keats encountered an opaqueness of mind that maddened him to write:

There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
We know her woof, her texture;
She is given in the dull catalogue of common things.

The Christian cannot be content merely to catalogue life. History is a collection of coincidences, but beyond those coincidences a vast, overarching Providence. Healing is the art and science of medicine, but beneath those techniques the miracle of life. As Walt Whitman put it:

Seeing, hearing, feeling are miracles,
And each part and tag of me is a miracle,
And the narrowest hinge in my hand
puts to scorn all machinery,
And a mouse is a miracle enough to
stagger sextillions of infidels.

Open-eyed faith in Christ consecrates the commonplace, making it possible to meet God where we least expect him. A piece of bread, a cup may be all that is needed in order to meet the God who lurks hidden in the fabric of the ordinary.

I see his blood upon the rose
And in the stars the glory of his eyes,
His body gleams amid eternal snows,
His tears fall from the skies.
All pathways by his feet are worn,
His strong heart stirs the ever-beating sea,
His crown of thorns is twined with every thorn,
His cross is every tree.

Because faith exposes the soul to the "glory of his presence," it furnishes "the *evidence* of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). This stubborn willingness to believe that the universe is a closed system with God shut out is not a form of pious fancy which finds what it is looking for whether it is there or not. Rather, faith is an openness to life based on the unshakable conviction that "God works in *all things* for good . . ." (Romans 8:28). This openness finds its finest expression in surrender to Jesus Christ, the most realistic person who ever lived.

Because faith sees beyond the surface to the God at work in this world, it provides the courage to deal with the tragic dimension of life. In Romans 8:35-39, Paul lists a formidable catalog of calamities that threaten the believer: "tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword. . . ." He does not suggest that Christians will be spared these misfortunes, but rather that in them all they will be "more than conquerors."

Where did Paul get this audacious idea that in tragedy one may see triumph? Unquestionably it came from Christ. His life reached an awful moment when defeat stared him in the face, when nature seemed to shudder and shroud the sickening scene in noonday darkness, when his friends fled and his foes remained to taunt him, when all the pain of hell began to gnaw at his vitals, when a desolating loneliness

crept over his soul, when his God seemed to be asleep—or dead. And what did he do but lift his bloody head and shout the conquerors' cry, "It is finished!" History's darkest moment had become eternity's finest hour. When man was at his sinning worst, God was at his saving best! The insight furnished by *faith* made Jesus cling to God when the undertow of tragedy threatened to carry him out beyond the depths, when there was nothing left but to "cling to an old rugged cross."

How hard it is to see! Wordsworth's confession becomes our own:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth and every common sight,
To me did seem appareled in celestial light,
The glory and freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore—
Turn whereso'er I may, By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

Shakespeare's Hamlet has been echoed by Paul Tillich and a host of others in posing the crucial question of life as, "to be or not to be?" There is validity in this search, but the issue lies deeper: "To see or not to see—" that is the question! What will you see in life?

Westcott has answered beautifully, "earth's children cling to earth, longing for some visible system which shall bring all heaven before their eyes, for some path to the divine presence along which they can walk by sight; who shrink from the ennobling responsibility of striving with untiring effort to hold communion with the unseen and the eternal; who are required to listen like Elijah on the lonely mountain, when the thunder of the earthquake is stilled and the violence of the fire is spent, for the still small voice."

"Some said it thundered; others said, an angel has spoken."