

WORLD WITHOUT MASKS

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This address was delivered in the sacrament meeting of the Stanford First Ward in June 2021. That Sunday was the first time the congregation had been allowed to meet again in their building after seven months of Zoom-only church and another eight months of meeting in a nearby park. At the time of the address, the Santa Clara County public health department had just lifted its indoor mask mandate for the first time in fifteen months, and cases in that area had ebbed—it appeared the pandemic was largely winding down. Subsequent variants have since changed the outlook significantly. The author encourages vaccination and masking in accordance with local health ordinances and believes we have an ethical obligation to protect the medically vulnerable by masking and vaccination.

Today, June 20, 2021, is the first day since March 15, 2020 that we in the Stanford First Ward have been allowed to attend service in our own building without masks and social distancing. As all of you know, because of the complexity and frankly onerous and sometimes confusing nature of the county COVID restrictions, our ward leadership decided last November that, rather than try to meet in the building, we would meet in the park next door.

As such, we've spent the last eight months lugging our rack of chairs across the parking lot and setting our rows of distanced seats up under the shade of a giant oak tree. We've all sat and strained together to hear the speakers over a faulty portable audio system while scrub jays poke fun at us from the bushes in the background.

That little plot of grass will always occupy a fond place in my heart, reminiscent for me of the Waters of Mormon for Alma's little band of

religious refugees: “All this was done in Mormon; yea, by the waters of Mormon, in the forest of that was near the waters of Mormon; yea, the place of Mormon, the waters of Mormon, the forest of Mormon, how beautiful are they to the eyes of them who there came to the knowledge of their redeemer; yea, and how blessed are they, for they shall sing to his praise forever” (Mosiah 18:30).

Still, even those lovely outdoor meetings required masks for all involved. And so today is the first morning in more than fifteen months when I can look out and see all of your full faces. Since many of you have moved here since the pandemic began, this is the first time I’ve seen many of your faces, period.

You—and your faces—are a beautiful sight.

Furthermore, this week of unmasking has reminded me how lovely it is to see faces everywhere: smiles, frowns, freckles, dimples, chins, noses. Eyes may be the window to the soul, but we’ve recognized during the pandemic how much we lose when half a face is hidden behind a mask.

All of this has brought to my mind the verse from 1 John 3:2, which reads: “Beloved, now we are the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as he is.”

This verse strikes me because of its insistence that there is more to knowing God than we at first suppose. Various translations of this verse emphasize the point by indicating that we shall see God “just” as He is, or as He “really” is, or as He “truly” is. The point in all cases is that whatever we think we know about God, our knowledge lacks detail, precision, and specificity.

We think we know God, but we see only through a glass darkly.

More than that, I wonder how often our ignorance in knowing God blinds us from seeing the divine all around us. This, it seems to me, is the vital reminder brought to us from the stirring conclusion to one our best-loved hymns. In “A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief,” we

recount together the narrative of a nameless narrator who encounters an unidentified stranger who sequentially passes through hunger, thirst, the lash of the elements, the sting of assault and robbery, and, finally, imprisonment and condemnation.

The narrator, apparently in spite of himself, decides to help the stranger in every instance only to find, in the last verse:

Then in a moment to my view
The stranger started from disguise.
The token in his hands I knew;
The Savior stood before mine eyes.
He spake, and my poor name he named,
“Of me, thou hast not been ashamed.
These deeds shall thy memorial be;
Fear not, thou didst them unto me.”¹

Here again, we have it: after six verses, the narrator finally comes to see the nameless stranger *as he really is*. This theme runs deep through restored Christian theology. We read in Jacob, after all, “for the spirit speaketh the truth and lieth not. Wherefore, it speaketh of things as they really are, and of things as they really will be; wherefore, these things are manifested unto us plainly, for the salvation of our souls” (4:13).

Likewise, our entire notion of mortality is one of forgetfulness. We may come to Earth trailing clouds of glory, but Joseph’s teaching was that a veil necessarily keeps invisible our heavenly home. And, of course, one of the temple’s most powerful motifs is just that: a veil. As the brother of Jared’s encounter with Jesus reminds us: the end of our believing will be for the veil to be rent away—for God to be unmasked—and for us to see Jesus and our Heavenly Parents as they really are.

Thus, this unmasking Sunday carries with it deep religious overtones for us as Latter-day saints. Still, my hope is that we will ensure

1. “A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief,” *Hymns*, no. 29.

that these religious overtones come not only from our imaginings of a coming day of reunion with God. No, the most important religious lessons for this day of unmasking come to us here and now.

As we have studied the Doctrine and Covenants this year, I have been haunted again and again by the mini-parable that is contained in a single verse in the Doctrine and Covenants, section 38 verse 26, where we read: “For what man among you having twelve sons, and is no respecter of them, and they serve him obediently, and he saith unto the one: Be thou clothed in robes and sit thou here; and to the other: Be thou clothed in rags and sit thou there—and looketh upon his sons and saith I am just?”

And then, in case we’ve missed the point, the next verse concludes: “Behold, this I have given unto you as a parable, and it is even as I am. I say unto you, be one; and if you are not one ye are not mine.”

This parable haunts me because the pandemic has been an era of great unmasking. It has fixed our collective cultural gaze on the many ways in which we are the children at that table and reminds us how great the responsibility we have for better ensuring the equitable distribution of opportunity and resources between us.

Because of our belief in agency, no matter how fairly our Heavenly Parents wish the Earth’s bounty was shared between their children, too often those of us with the power to do so keep too much for ourselves.

The pandemic has reminded us, as one example, that those who work the hardest at some of society’s most difficult and thankless jobs too often receive a pittance for their efforts. Likewise, those whose skin is darker than that of their peers too often find themselves deprived of just access to basic rights such as life and liberty without unjust incursions, including from the very people who are supposed to keep all of us safe.

This all brings me back to King Benjamin, that nearly inexhaustible source of wisdom and truth. I have often been struck by his insistence on talking not about “the poor” but about “the beggar.” This point seems

crucial because it does not allow us to blur our gaze, thinking only of nameless, faceless masses.

No, a beggar is an individual, a single person who confronts us with a mouth, a nose, and eyes.

I met a beggar on my way to work three days ago. I could not pass by unmoved precisely because he was one person, a man of average height and build with chocolate brown skin, decaying teeth, a stooped carriage, soft eyes, and a stuttering vocal inflection. Helping him was not a matter of an electronic deposit. Instead, it required me to go myself to the store and think about what to buy—*which types of food would he be able to chew without good teeth?*, for example—for this particular man.

A beggar unmask the plight of the poor—if we pay enough attention to notice.

In my mind, then, King Benjamin would use this shared cultural unmasking moment to ask, “What have you learned during the year you’ve been masked? What has your time without seeing each other’s faces taught you about my gospel? How will you behave differently because of this time away from those around you? During this time when you’ve all been masked, have you finally learned to really see each other for the first time?”

As I think on these imagined questions, I’m reminded of these impassioned words, ringing down the decades to us from Dickens’s immortal *A Christmas Carol*, as Ebenezer Scrooge encounters Marley’s ghost:

“Oh! captive, bound, and double-ironed,” cried the phantom, “not to know, that ages of incessant labour by immortal creatures, for this earth must pass into eternity before the good of which it is susceptible is all developed. Not to know that any Christian spirit working kindly in its little sphere, whatever it may be, will find its mortal life too short for its vast means of usefulness. Not to know that no space of regret can make amends for one life’s opportunity! Yet such was I! Oh! such was I!”

“But you were always a good man of business, Jacob,” faltered Scrooge, who now began to apply this to himself.

“Business!” cried the Ghost, wringing its hands again. “Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence were, all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!”²

Here we sit in Silicon Valley, surrounded by riches—of education, of wealth, of opportunity, of comfort—that likely exceed those of any nation in any period of history. We risk becoming fat with the glut of our abundance.

I worry frequently about my family’s share of this abundance. Though our house is, by most standards, very small, does it nonetheless represent keeping too much for ourselves? What about our (old and unremarkable) cars? The trips we take? The clothes we buy?

How much is too much? At what point do I keep too much for myself?

Am I seated at the feast, too absorbed with myself to notice how richly I eat while those around me sit down to a place with nothing to eat and no clothes to wear?

Have I learned to really see?

As we remove our masks today, let this be the moment when we listen together to the combined prophetic calls of Alma, Jacob, John, Benjamin, and Jacob Marley. Let us begin to see the world as it really is, our position as it really is, and, most importantly, to see those around as they really are.

In doing so, we will find God all around us. Christ lurks everywhere, waiting to see how we will respond while he is still hiding in disguise.

2. Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (London, 1843; Project Gutenberg, 1992), Stave I, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/46/46-h/46-h.htm#link1/>.

As Latter-day Saints we are bound by commandment and covenant to treat each godly countenance that surrounds us with the compassion, dignity, and kindness owed to deity. Let our collective unmasking remind us of those divine disguises and let our actions transform as a result.

This is my prayer as one who is too often forgetful and blind himself.
In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

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