



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT, MARCH 15, 2026
1 SAMUEL 16:1-13; PSALM 23; EPHESIANS 5:8-14; JOHN 9:1-41

AMAZING GRACE AND THE LENTEN JOURNEY

In 1748 the *Greyhound*, a fully laden slave ship, sailed from the shores of Sierra Leone in Africa enroute to England. A young shipmate, just 23-years-old, wrote this in his diary:

"With our ships, the great object is, to be full... The cargo of a vessel...is calculated to purchase from 220 to 250 slaves. Their lodging-rooms below the deck, which are three (for the men, the boys, and the women), besides a place for the sick, are sometimes more than five feet high, and sometimes less; and this height is divided towards the middle, for the slaves lie in two rows, one above the other, on each side of the ship, close to each other, like books upon a shelf. I have known them so close that the shelf would not, easily, contain one more...

"... the poor creatures, thus cramped for want of room, are likewise in irons... which

makes it difficult for them to turn or move, to attempt either to rise or to lie down, without hurting themselves, or each other. Nor is the motion of the ship...when under sail, to be omitted; for this, as they lie athwart, or cross the ship, adds to the uncomfortableness of their lodging, especially to those who lie on the leeward or leaning side of the vessel."

During that journey to his motherland and to the profits that awaited him there, the young shipmate who wrote this was awakened one night by a violent storm which drowned several of the slaves in the hold and nearly sank the ship altogether. It was the thought of his own demise at sea that led him to pray fervently to God that night, a first for him, and to open a bible and see its truth for the first time.

It was the start of a transformative journey that unfolded over time, but in the ensuing

years this young man would leave the slave trade and study to become a priest, becoming a vocal spokesman for the Abolitionist movement in England. He brought his firsthand experience in the slave trade, his burdened heart for the harm he had been complicit in, and his gift of oratory to the cause that peacefully brought an end to slavery in England half a century before our country would attempt to settle it on the battlefield.

He also had a gift of hymn-writing, five of which are contained in our Hymnal 1982. In fact, he wrote the lyrics to the most sung hymn in the history of the Christian faith.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me

I once was lost, but now am found,

Was blind, but now I see.

In his later years, John Newton went blind from cataracts, and it was paradoxically in his blindness that he saw most clearly into the nature of God, the human condition, and our need for God's grace.¹ God's amazing grace.

The gospel today deals with contrasting images of light and darkness, blindness and new sight. It's a theme in Lent. Two weeks ago we saw Nicodemus walk away from Jesus in the darkness. Last week the woman at the well saw Jesus for who he really was—in the bright light of midday.

Today, we get a blind man who now sees, and those with sight are blind to their own sin of pride and arrogance and self-righteousness. This is the pivot in our Lenten journey—next week Lazarus will be raised from the dead as a hopeful herald of the Eastertide that awaits us on the other side of the cross, a transformative journey that unfolds over time—but today, we have the Lenten pivot—we have the choice of seeing or not.

The medical literature is replete with case reports that those who have their sight restored through modern surgical techniques such as corneal transplants find their first sight very distressing. The bright light of new sight is overstimulating, even painful, and the sensory organs instinctively trigger the eyelids to slam shut.

Is there an analogy for us there?

Lent is a time during which we are invited to focus on our own mortal imperfections, our own brokenness, our being blind to our own sin, but to see those indictments by the light of God's amazing grace that heals. It can be painful, uncomfortable, to see ourselves in such light, and many of us instinctively slam our eyelids shut and open them again only when the filters of pride and arrogance and self-righteousness are firmly in place. The view of the world is much easier on the eye when filtered through such lenses.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Newton

As part of our Affordable Housing project, the Vestry has embraced a commitment to invite the cathedral community—that is, you and me—to look seriously at St. Mark’s history and the complicity in the historic housing injustices in this neighborhood that excluded and displaced Black people from living here.

Restrictive covenants were written into many of the deeds here on Capitol Hill, beginning in the 1920s, when St. Mark’s bought this land and built a cathedral in this neighborhood that was intentionally segregated. There is a story to tell here, and we need to tell it, for ourselves at least, but perhaps also for those who may eventually call this cathedral campus their home.

It will not be easy work, and some among us may want to slam our eyes shut rather than holding the discomfort that may come as we own this part of our heritage and have conversations that seek to find ways to repent and repair the harms done, harms that continue to have impact today, generations later. Of course, the invitation is to the work of discovering how we have

our blinders of racism on even still. Lord knows I have them. Indeed, it will not be easy work.

But this journey of Lent is not designed to be easy; it is an invitation to step into the darkness, with Nicodemus and John Newton and one another, and let our eyes adjust to the dim light of our brokenness, and embrace the wisdom of Christ inviting us to put away defensive lenses that blind us to the truth.

We don’t get to Easter without going through Good Friday, friends, but God’s amazing grace will see us through, if we will open our eyes and follow the light of Christ.

This journey of Lent is an invitation to embrace the light of Christ that saves us from the wretched darkness and enables us to see the brightness of God by which, with hearts moved, we find ourselves anew...and find then that we can’t help but share the story with others.

God, give us grace to continue on the journey.

John 9:1-41 *[As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam*

and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know." They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet." The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out. Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. 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." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."]



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL