

A 4 Lent 2026
Saint Barnabas's Church, Falmouth MA
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John 9:1-41

Light, spittle, and dirt—if our Anglican tradition of preaching embraced sermon titles, that would be it

The tension between light and darkness serves as a fugal theme throughout John's entire Gospel, landing once again today

Recall the beloved crescendo from John's Christmas prologue: the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it

In John's Gospel today, we hear Jesus's clarion self-definition: "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

In his mix of literal and symbolic, Jesus proclaims the light, redefines sin and gets his hands dirty to heal a blind man while invoking the ire of the Pharisees that contributes to his arrest in Jerusalem

So why did Jesus heal the blind man, and why does it matter?

Here, a cynic might say that it's great for one suffering man to catch a break, but others continue to suffer miserable lives in a gut-wrenching world

Yet, you might say that Jesus goes eye to eye with this man, who, like last week's woman at the well, has no name linked to his story

Neither does the man throw himself at Jesus's feet with an impassioned plea for help

Jesus takes the initiative and does far more than a friendly blessing

Across the four gospels, there are several stories of Jesus healing the blind: sometimes, healing comes from a simple touch by Jesus; in MK 10:52, healing comes because of the vulnerable man's faith; in a different MK story, Jesus puts spit on his eyes, but today, Jesus mixes spittle, dirt and a direction to wash in a pool of water for healing to run its course

Today's version provides the most graphic, detailed version of healing as Jesus kneads together spittle and dirt to make healing mud that must then be washed in the pool of Siloam

What's going on?

We rejoice for one man who gains sight, and certainly we can embrace a metaphor to dwell on our existential blindness and occasionally found in-sight, but this gospel reading is even more complicated than that, and its twist lands us into the latter part of Lent

The act of kneading—mixing spittle and dirt to create mud—was one of the Law's 39 forbidden tasks by faithful Jews on the sabbath

Is Jesus deliberately evoking the ire and blindness of the Pharisees, is he poking them in the eye?

The man, after all, had been blind his entire life, so could Jesus not wait just one more day to get past the sabbath?

What sounds like a beautiful story precipitates the subwoofer of turmoil that will end with Jesus's arrest in Jerusalem

While arguably precipitating a cosmic crisis, Jesus also redefines sin, a topic that also catches our attention in Lent

Jesus invokes the word 'sin' a half-dozen times either in today's text or surrounding it as he challenges the common perception of sin

He refutes the prevailing notion of his day that medical suffering comes as God's wrath for our sins or those of our forebears

And thankfully so—no spiritually centered person would argue that a child born blind has been punished by God for someone else's misdeed

Jesus also challenges the prevailing notion that ties sin to breaking sabbath laws by doing what is expressly forbidden—today, by kneading on the sabbath

Sin no longer is the presence of illness or messing with the sabbath law, but, rather, sin stems from resisting Jesus

Jesus, the light of the world, encounters the man born blind, and he opens the man's eyes to see what he has never before seen

Not only does the man see the world around him but he sees Jesus both as the one who healed him, and with the eyes of faith as the Son of Man, the Messiah

Yet at the same time, the Pharisees, see only scandal and conflict in what Jesus has done

By working on the Sabbath – that is by kneading mud with his saliva and rubbing it in the blind man’s eyes – Jesus has profaned the Sabbath

Not seeing the forest for the trees, the Pharisees declare, “This man is not from God for he does not observe the Sabbath.”

They take refuge in Moses: “We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.”

And with that they drive the man who was born blind from their presence, rather than celebrating his transformation

Imagine how this story is being heard this weekend by the U.S. military who are deployed in the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz

There are some [3000 interfaith chaplains](#) deployed throughout the world, and an undisclosed number—including Episcopal chaplains—are serving those in harm’s way, along with their families back home

Military chaplains complete basic training and, like their fellow service members, sometimes deploy to active war zones, though their duties are [noncombatant](#), meaning they’re unarmed and are not permitted to fight.

And, just like their fellow active-duty service members, they must follow the Department of Defense’s code of ethics and remain [nonpartisan](#) while on duty, in uniform or acting in an official capacity. This means they cannot publicly comment on the war.

“Right now, [the chaplains] are continuing to do their work whether or not they agree with this incursion into Iran. They’re still faithfully

taking care of their soldiers and their airmen and their Marines and their sailors, as they've been called to do," Bishop Ann Ritonja said. "Obviously, they're concerned. They are worried about families. There's a lot of fear, because there doesn't seem to be an endgame in place."

If you were one of the chaplains, how would you preach this text about regaining sight to a fighter-jet pilot or young marine?

I'm not sure what they would say about blindness and sight, but I am confident they would understand what it means to get your hands dirty, even with a bit of spittle, to care for another person's dire needs

We hear this story in Lent both as a premonition of Holy Week and as an invitation to see life anew

Like last Sunday's invitation to taste the living water, Jesus today invites us to open our eyes to the joy and tragedy of this mortal life

Walking with Jesus, we care for one another whether as strangers or intimate companions

We take risks, get our hands dirty, and proclaim God's love in our daily lives

Lent seeks to free us from our self-absorbed neuroses so that we can see beyond our own noses to the needs and blessing of our neighbors

God calls us to love not because God needs our love, but because we cannot be what we were created to be without loving God, whether we are getting through a routine day on the Upper Cape or navigating our way through the Strait of Hormuz

To love God is not to fly off into spiritual abstraction but to face into the flesh and blood reality of those whose lives touch our own or call us forth from ourselves into relationships of care and mutual support

Lent provides a season of repentance, and repentance is not about declaring ourselves wretched sinners, but rather, repentance enables us to see God's point of view in place of your own

In other words, our turning around in Lent, our repentance, frees us from self-righteousness bromides toward more radical self-acceptance and self-transformation

Lent invites us to let go of our self-image in favor of God's view of who we are: fragile, sometimes broken, yet always dwelling amid God's inexhaustible love

This Lent and throughout the year, I pray that God may give us the gift of clear and undistorted sight, not for our own selfish ends but for the sake of our serving a blind and broken world in God's holy name