

Sunday Sermon March 15, 2026

Sermon – Lent 4A March 14, 15, 2026 Rev. Coleen Tully

The Lone Ranger and his friend Tonto go on a camping trip, enjoy a big dinner, set up their tent, crawl in and fall asleep. Some hours later, Tonto wakes his faithful friend. "Kemosabe, look up at the sky and tell me what you see." The Lone Ranger replies, "I see millions of stars." "What does that tell you?"

The Lone Ranger ponders for a minute. "Astronomically speaking, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, it tells me that Saturn is in Leo. Timewise, it appears to be approximately a quarter past three. Theologically, it's evident the Lord is all powerful and we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, it seems we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. What does it tell you?"

Tonto is silent for a moment, then speaks. "Kemosabe, you idiot, someone has stolen our tent!"

The Lone Ranger had missed the most obvious fact. He was clever enough to notice the complexities of the stars, but he missed what was obvious and right in front of his eyes. Sometimes we look straight at something and still fail to see it.

Like the Lone Ranger staring at the stars, everyone in today's Gospel story is looking in the wrong direction. They are analyzing theology, protecting their beliefs, and arguing about blame. Meanwhile, a man who has never seen the world is suddenly standing there seeing it for the first time.

It all begins when Jesus sees a blind man that others don't seem to see. In the eyes of his peers, he's not a human being; he's Blindness. He is a burdensome problem; a beggar of no worth. Which is why, when the man's sight is restored, the people he has lived with for years don't recognize him. They don't know how to see him without his disability.

When he shows up at the Temple healed, the community tries to discredit or to disown him. I think they are afraid to their core. So afraid that all compassion, empathy, tenderness, and sense of kinship escapes them. They are so frightened by the possibility that their carefully defined religious world, where bad things only happen to bad people might not be true, they cannot see God's love at work in their midst.

No one in the story rejoices when the man is healed. No one – not even the man's parents expresses joy, or gratitude, or awe. No one says, "I am so happy for you!" or asks, "What is it like to see?" Can you imagine what it would be like to see the sky for the first time? Or the face of Jesus? I have wondered what that would be like.

My Mom lost all sight when she was 32 years old and she said the thing she missed more than anything was being able to run. After she took her last breath my little brother said, "you can run like the wind now, can't you, Sally Rae?"

No one celebrates the whole world opening up for this man. Instead, the community responds with contempt and further judgement, extending now to include even Jesus. Their need to preserve "being right" has become more important than celebrating a fellow human being's restoration of sight and a full life. Sometimes we look straight at something and still fail to see it.

Some of us have excellent eyesight but do not see further than our own noses. It would be so easy for us to ridicule those Pharisees and hold them up as the very worst of bad examples. But if we're honest, the Pharisees are simply us — when fear closes our eyes. After all, blindness comes in many forms, and we are by no means immune to it. We are all born blind in one way or another.

Today, our Lenten Gospel asks us to acknowledge our own blindness and to seek Jesus' healing touch, because the journey toward the light of the world can begin only once we acknowledge our darkness. One of the most forsaken places we can occupy as Christians is a place of smugness, of certainty. The more convinced we are that we have full insight, comprehension, and knowledge, the less we will see or experience God, for we will have no need of God.

Sometimes our blindness isn't cruelty. Sometimes it's our desperate need to explain things that do not have explanations. We humans seem to believe things that happen must have a reason, an explanation because we want them to make sense. We hunger for an explanation in the face of tragedy, in the face of pain, and in the face of suffering. We ask our own versions of "Who sinned, this man or his parents?"

We want to know why there is so much pain; and why people, especially good people, and especially good people we love get hurt or are disabled or get such difficult illnesses, when it isn't their fault. We want to know why we lose so many young ones. And why families all too often do not work out. We wonder about earthquakes and tsunamis and hurricanes and random violence. We wonder about a lot of things.

The disciples wanted to understand the tragedy of the man born blind and maybe with it, other tragedies. I mean, if the man had become blind because of his own carelessness, or if someone had blinded him on purpose, it would still be a tragedy, but it would make sense. But that's not what happened.

So, the disciples ask Jesus, "Who sinned?" In Jesus' time people believed suffering had to be someone's fault. Either the man sinned, or his parents sinned.

When the disciples asked Jesus their question, they were asking for an answer to the ancient cry for meaning and understanding of WHY — is it God's will or human sin? Jesus rejects both options. He doesn't say, "No, that is not the reason, but this is." Instead, Jesus refuses to make sense of the situation by explaining it in terms of either divine will or human sin.

He rejects the explanation that bad things happen because the people are no good, or because Satan made them happen, or because the victims or their families don't have enough faith, or because they didn't pray with enough fervor, or whatever explanations folks had come up with before and have come up with since.

Neither Jesus nor the Christian faith has any clear, rational, sensible explanation of senseless suffering to offer. Instead, we're left with the hard truth that we live in a world that really isn't fair, a world that is marked by uncertainty and unpredictability, and in a world that is dangerous. We live in a world where tragedy happens for no apparent reason to folks who absolutely do not deserve it.

Jesus says two more things.

Jesus says that through the man born blind, the works of God can be made manifest. "Manifest," which was Cambridge dictionary's word of the year in 2024, simply means to be revealed, or made visible. Through the man born blind, the works of God can be made manifest.

In other words, God won't be found in any tragedy, starting things, you know, sitting in heaven, tossing out cancer cells, birth defects, bad marriages, earthquakes, strokes, car wrecks Parkinson's and blindness like some hideous black jack dealer on a dark web site gone horribly bad. The place to find God will be in the middle part of things, in the hardest parts of it, working to bring forth something new not something that fixes everything, but something that transforms it. And the God we find there is the God who has wounds on his hands and feet and side.

It's the God who remembers what suffering is like the God who is all about compassion and love. God can be found in very real ways, in transforming ways, in the very heart of undeserved, inexplicable pain.

That's the first thing Jesus says. The second thing Jesus says is "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day." Notice he says "We." We must work the works of God.

Tragedy, pain, and suffering are calls to ministry and to service. This may not be a call to fix the problem. Often, we simply cannot do that, but it is always a call to reach out and to care.

This isn't an explanation, either. Terrible things don't happen so we have an opportunity to serve. God doesn't work that way, either. What makes sense out of the world's and our suffering is the presence of a God of compassion and love, along with the opportunity to serve. What makes sense out of tragedy is not that we understand it. It is the promise that we are never alone, never forsaken. That God is indeed with us, even in the very heart of the very worst.

Lent is a season for seeing again. Because sometimes we look straight at something and still fail to see it.

Like the Lone Ranger and the Pharisees, some of us have excellent eyesight but do not see further than our own noses. This is a good time to examine the ways we have been blind to pain, to people, to the quiet presence of God among us.

The good news in this story is not that Jesus once healed a man born blind long ago. The good news is that Christ still moves through this wounded world, touching eyes, softening hearts, and calling us to join him in the work of compassion. And as our vision clears, we will see that even in the middle of suffering and hardship, God has never stopped being present, and God has never stopped working through us.

And that, finally, is enough.

Amen.