The Courage to See
Sermon by Lori Erickson
New Song Church, March 15, 2026

Awhile ago, I read a story in a book that has stayed with me ever since. And when I think about the Gospel reading for this morning, it comes vividly to mind.

The story is about the writer Tobias Wolff, a novelist of considerable renown. Several decades ago, he traveled to the healing shrine in Lourdes, France. He wasn't religious and he wasn't seeking a miracle, but he was curious about what went on there.

He decided to volunteer one day with the thousands of sick people who go there on pilgrimage, to better understand what happens there. When he visited it was summer, and the heat was relentless. All during that long day, he pushed people in wheelchairs and helped get people on and off tour buses.

Now Wolff wore glasses because his eyesight is poor. And in the heat, his glasses kept sliding down his nose and fogging up with sweat. So at some point, exasperated, he took them off and slipped them into his pocket, intending to put them back on later.

He worked the rest of the day without them. And that evening, as he was riding on a bus back to his hotel, he noticed something strange. The distant hills were clear and in focus.

He blinked and covered one eye, then the other. The road signs were legible. The trees were distinct. For a few stunned moments, he simply sat there. It appeared that his vision had improved, quietly and without announcement.

But his reaction was not uncomplicated joy. Instead, he felt hesitation, and even resistance. If this were real, what would it mean? What would it ask of him? How would it alter the story he told about himself and about the world?

He went to bed unsettled. And by the next morning, his vision had returned to its familiar blur. He put his glasses back on. And he was left with a question: Had something happened? And if it had, why had part of him been relieved when it faded?

Now I'm a big believer in miracles, and I remember loving my own visit to Lourdes, but I don't know what to make of that story. But I don't think we have to take it as an example of a miracle to see the deeper truth hidden within it: we often don't recognize, and don't welcome, that which can save us.

In stories like this, eyesight is never just eyesight.

That's certainly true in the Gospel reading for this morning. As Jesus walks along, he sees a man blind from birth, someone in need of healing. The disciples, in contrast, see a theological problem. "Rabbi, who sinned?" they ask. They assume suffering must be someone's fault.

Jesus refuses that explanation. In saying "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," he shifts the focus from blame to possibility. Then he does something wonderfully undignified.

He kneels in the dust and spits. He makes mud with his own saliva and smears it on the man's eyes.

I must admit that I love these details. Apparently God is not squeamish when it comes to healing, because grace is not always tidy. Sometimes it comes through the most ordinary—and frankly unappealing—materials.

Jesus then sends the man to wash in the pool of Siloam. The man goes, he washes off the mud, and he comes back healed. That alone would be enough for most of us. But in John's telling, the miracle is only the beginning of a deeper reckoning.

The neighbors are unsettled. "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Some say yes. Others insist he only resembles him. He keeps repeating, "I am the man." Restored sight requires restored identity. He must claim himself before anyone else will.

The Pharisees interrogate him. It was a Sabbath, after all. The authorities debate legalities while the man stands before them as living evidence of change. Under pressure, his understanding of Jesus grows clearer. "He is a prophet," he now says.

His parents are summoned. They are afraid and careful with their words. Finally, the man himself is questioned again. He replies with this simple testimony: "One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."

Those words are familiar to us because they are echoed in the hymn "Amazing Grace," which was written in 1772 by John Newton, an Anglican priest.

As perhaps you know, before he was a priest, Newton had been a captain in the slave trade. For years he participated in the buying and selling of human beings. The system surrounded him and sustained him. It shaped what he considered normal. His moral vision was formed by a culture that benefited him, and he did not question it.

Then one day, during a violent storm at sea when he believed he might die, Newton cried out to God for mercy.

That moment did not instantly transform him into an abolitionist. Change came slowly. But over time something shifted, and he began to see what he had refused to see before. He saw the suffering of the enslaved. He saw the brutality of the system he had served. He eventually left the sea, became a priest, and later supported the movement to abolish the slave trade.

When he wrote, “I once was blind, but now I see,” it was not a poetic flourish. It was a confession.

Years later, Newton reflected on his long and uneven journey with these words: “I am not what I ought to be. I am not what I wish to be. But by the grace of God, I am not what I was.”

In John’s Gospel, the man born blind follows a narrative arc as well. At first, he refers to the one who healed him as “the man called Jesus.” Then later in the story, he calls Jesus a prophet. And finally, after being cast out by his community, he meets Jesus again and says, “Lord, I believe,” and worships him.

Meanwhile, the religious authorities grow more certain in their rejection of the miracle. “Surely we are not blind, are we?” they ask. They are confident in their knowledge, in their pride.

So one way of looking at this story is to realize that the true handicap lies not in blindness itself, but in claiming sight we do not possess.

In these stories—the one at Lourdes and the one in the Gospel—I recognize parts of myself. Perhaps you do too.

There have been moments in my life when something came suddenly into painful focus: a prejudice I had not examined, a bad habit that was quietly shaping me while I pretended not to notice.

And there have also been moments when I have preferred blurred vision rather than clear sight, moments when I sensed that if I let Christ’s muddy fingers stay on my eyes just a little longer, something in me would have to change. And I was not entirely sure I wanted that.

Lent invites us into the uncomfortable space of considering stories like this. It is a season of honest seeing. It asks us where familiarity has dulled our awareness and where certainty has replaced humility.

And Lent reminds us that clarity can be costly. For slave trader John Newton, clarity meant confronting his participation in evil. For the man in the Gospel story today, clarity meant being expelled from his community. For all of us, clarity can mean surrendering the story that keeps us comfortable.

Notice, however, how the blind man’s story ends. After the man has been driven out of his community, Jesus seeks him out. When the restoration of his sight costs him his home, Christ finds him.

This detail matters. When grace opens our eyes to difficult truths, grace does not abandon us. When clarity unsettles us, Christ accompanies us. The light that exposes us also guides us.

Near the end of his life, John Newton said this, “My memory is nearly gone; but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior.”

These are the words of someone who has learned to live in the light.

So this Lent, perhaps our prayers need to be simple.

Lord, show us what we have not wanted to see. And when your grace gets messy—when it feels like mud and spit instead of polished answers—give us courage to let you finish the work you are doing in us and through us. Amen.