

I was blind and now I see

Lent demands that we use our old eyes in new ways.

By [Larry Patten](#)

March 21, 2017

So many people are crammed into John's detailed account of the "man blind from birth."

Please, study the passage for yourself, but make sure to set aside enough time to read it all! And if the entirety of this story is read during worship, be prepared to forgive some in the congregation. Long before the conclusion, they will nod off, scan websites on their phone, or jot a shopping list on an offering envelope.

There is Jesus (our hero), and the disciples (with their incessant questions), the unsuspecting blind fellow (who was the object of the disciples' first question), the grumbling bumbling Pharisees, and the parents of the blind man. Am I missing anyone? Maybe bystanders who observed the events, frowning and smirking, pointing fingers or feigning disinterest. Oops, let's not forget the blind fellow's neighbors and why not toss in "Jewish leaders" who weren't Pharisees (but were still eager to voice their opinions). Wasn't there, if only in the shadowy background, a bored Roman soldier or two? I would even think a few merchants, inspired by the circus-like events, would've quickly organized a first-century version of T-shirts to hawk before the crowd dispersed. By the next day, perhaps many of the formerly blind lad's neighbors sported shirts with, *I was blind and now I see!*

What other verses in the Gospels appear as 21st century as this scene? Just like now, there was the buzz of crowds, Twitter-like questions and answers, an innocent rube becoming the center of attention, and (though the list could expand), the incessant debating and pontificating of the "experts."

With my faith, I read. With my faith, I wonder. With my faith, I pay attention to the man who is the center of attention, but who also seemed cast aside in the frenzy.

With his parents being grilled by the Pharisees in verses 18–23, was the once blind man alone? He'd already survived a harsh interrogation. He hadn't asked to be healed, hadn't asked for special attention, hadn't been bothering anyone. Now, somewhere, he waited.

He is no longer blind. He can see. And yet, can he?

In [Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*](#) (one of the books I'd want with me if stranded on the proverbial desert island), she writes about those who first received cataract surgery in the early 20th century after a life of blindness. They'd spent years in darkness:

One girl was eager to tell her blind friend that “men do not really look like trees at all,” and astounded to discover that her every visitor had an utterly different face. Finally, a twenty-two-year-old girl was dazzled by the world's brightness and kept her eyes shut for two weeks. When at the end of that time she opened her eyes, she did not recognize any objects, but, “the more she directed her gaze upon everything about her, the more it could be seen how an expression of astonishment and gratification overspread her features; she repeatedly exclaimed: ‘Oh God, how beautiful!’”

What of the man waiting, alone in the corner of a room, perhaps able to hear the ebb and flow of the voices of the strident Pharisees and his anxious parents from a nearby location? Was he being guarded? Waiting, he listened to the familiar sounds of his parents (voices likely memorized since a child), smelled the aromatic food cooked out in the streets, felt the cool of the stone he leaned against.

And now what could he see?

Had he already noticed that everyone “had an utterly different face?” Did the brightness of the world, even in a dingy room, force him to keep his eyes more closed than open?

I don't think he had seen Jesus yet. He'd only heard the Nazarene's instructions to go the pool of Siloam and wash off the mud. His benefactor, who he'd called a prophet, still had no face. Jesus remained a voice, an unseen hope. Only someone

who'd said a few simple, kind words, smeared the blind man's eyes with mud, and had sent him on a simple task.

This Jesus had transformed his life.

Words. Love. Mud. Healing.

Voices thrummed from close or far. The soldier guarding him scratched the stubble on his pockmarked face. A spider weaved a web. A mouse scuttled across the floor. Someone who'd been in these same spot before had carved *Ruth* on the wall: a daughter, or lover, or wife, or mother? As always, he traced the name with his finger. Who had been here that wanted that name remembered? The sun glinted through a crack and sliced across the floor, splashing a prism of light in front of him.

This world was extraordinary, miracle upon miracle.

He closed his eyes and remembered.

He opened his eyes and gave thanks.

He wasn't that much different than before, was he? He still loved God. He didn't want to disappoint his parents. He'd continue to laugh and cry. He wanted to end the day with a full enough belly and to have a good night's sleep.

But now he could see.

Oh God, how beautiful!

I wonder, in this quiet, trembling season of Lent, how much we ignore. Are we so accustomed to the world around us that we don't notice the beauty? Or have the ugly and mean—the if-it-bleeds-it-leads, the hatred on social media, the bullying of politicians—seduced us into our current dim, grim sensibilities? When did our seeing become eyes wide open and yet blind? Lent, I like to think, demands that we use our old eyes in new ways.

To see the face of a stranger and give thanks.

To see the cerulean sky and give thanks.

To revel in the green of grass and the purple of the blossoms and the startling white of the clouds and to gaze upon—to be a witness for—God's ongoing creation.

By the end of these verses, for the first time, the blind man would see Jesus.

Eyes wide open, he'd say, "Lord, I believe."

Originally posted at [Patten's blog](#)