



by Mary M. McGlone

[View Author Profile](#)

## **[Join the Conversation](#)**

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

March 26, 2017

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Doesn't it seem strange that the man who was transformed in today's Gospel passage said nary a word until after he was healed? He didn't ask Jesus for a cure nor did he tell his tale of being relegated to begging as the odd-one-out in a world he had never seen. In the beginning, he was just there, the object of other people's judgment. He was just there for Jesus to see.

Jesus saw in him the potential of carrying God's works forward. Thus, continuing the work of the Creator he molded clay and touched the man. Using the mud as if it were the oil of anointing he smeared it on the man's useless eyes. This scriptural account bursts with images of creation, reminding the reader that everything begins with God's loving initiative. God always takes the first step.

The second step, acceptance, depends on humanity. The man who could not see was receptive to Jesus' word. He accepted Jesus' command although he could have had no clue as to the outcome of his obedience. He came back transformed.

That was when his troubles began. It's not easy for people to learn to see someone in a new way. The neighbors had adjusted quite well to the man's physical incapacity. When they encountered him with his faculties intact they doubted their own eyes and wondered about justice, about sin and just punishment. In the light of

their confusion the man did the unthinkable: He identified himself not only as the one they had known but also as someone recreated in the image of the man who had brought about his transformation. He said, "I am."

They asked the question that solidified the controversy: "How were your eyes opened?" Although he repeated the six-part formula of his astonishing healing (Jesus made clay, anointed my eyes, told me go and wash, I went, I washed, and now I see), the short answer was "The man called Jesus." Because they couldn't understand that, they took him to the Pharisees.

The man called Jesus, the source of transformation, became the center of confusion and discord. The religious leaders, self-assured arbiters of true faith, found a quick and easy answer: "This work can't be from God because it was done on the Sabbath. Everyone knows that neither God nor man are allowed to work on that day."

Even some of the religious leaders choked on that answer. If the man called Jesus had brought about a great good, how could he be a sinner? So the authorities again questioned the man. Insisting that he tell the truth, they prefaced their question with their own certainty: "We know that he is a sinner." The man-who-saw refused to go along with that description. He simply repeated what had happened to him: "I was blind, and now I see." He then took the liberty of offering his own theological commentary: "Never, ever, has anyone healed someone born blind! How could he do it without God's help?" His challenge to their rigid, dogmatic logic proved intolerable. To back up their unassailable orthodoxy they reminded the healed man that his condition was obvious — he was born blind, he was immersed in sin. How dare *he* instruct *them*? They then did the only thing that made sense to them: They excommunicated him, presumably for having been healed and for saying that the person who did it must be on God's side. The first time that Jesus approached this man it had been to offer him sight. Now, having heard that he was suffering for his sake, Jesus came to offer him solidarity and insight. As in their first encounter, Jesus took the initiative. He now asked if the seeing man believed in "the Son of Man," the one who was to come. In a scene that parallels the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, the man asks who that might be and Jesus identifies himself. Jesus' self-identification ratified what the man had told the leaders: Jesus had come from God. He could now whole-heartedly say "I do believe," a statement that could be translated as a profound and joyful shout, "I see!"

The man-who-saw was never named. The word used to describe him was “anthropos” the Greek word designating a human being without specifying gender, ethnicity or historical context. The man born blind is everyone. When we hear this Gospel we are challenged to figure out which part we are playing in the drama and which we wish to play. We may be people definitively bound by our unshakeable convictions. We may be people who wonder what God might be up to. We may choose to allow authorities to give us the answers. Regardless, we are invited to be anthropos, people who realize we are somehow blind and are willing to be given sight.

### **1 SAMUEL 16:1b, 6-7, 10-13a**

The story of Samuel’s search for God’s chosen king offers an interesting companion piece to John’s account of Jesus and the man born blind. While the blind man didn’t know Jesus or what it meant to see, the Lord gave Samuel half the instructions he needed for his task. He was to go to Bethlehem and find God’s chosen one among the sons of Jesse. Little did he know that there would be eight candidates. Of course, only seven were important enough to worry about. Seven was the perfect number, and each of Jesse’s older sons presented himself well leaving no need to even consider the “spare,” that is, son number eight. David was so young and insignificant that his father didn’t even call him home from the field to participate in the sacrificial meal. But the prophet wouldn’t let anybody even sit down for the feast until the shepherd kid arrived.

Today’s readings reflect on how one sees, whether with a vision bound to culture, to self-aggrandizement, or one susceptible to the disruptive force of revelation. This is not simply a question of consulting the sacred sources but of discernment and obedience to inspiration that goes beyond our preconceptions. As the encounter between Jesus and the tempter in the desert made clear, Scripture can be interpreted to justify any point we want to prove, but God’s will has its own surprising trajectory. Therefore, after he’d seen seven fine specimens of manhood, all with leadership qualities, the Lord told Samuel to keep looking. Why? Because as Isaiah pointed out, God’s ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8).

Another subtle aspect between the stories of David and the blind man is the connection to creation. The blind man, “anthropos,” represented humanity. People who heard the story in a biblical language would have noted that the name, David

(which means “ruddy”), refers to the dust of the earth, recalling Adam, the original man made of clay.

Of course, most important in the story of David was that the spirit of the Lord “rushed” upon him enabling him to be open to God’s will. Wounded hero that he would turn out to be, God had chosen him. Like his ancestor Adam, he would turn back to God after his momentary, sinful desires caused him to stray from following the will of the one who called him. Finally, neither the shepherd boy nor the man born blind fit the bill for being special characters — except in the mind of God. David, the youngest, was the one through whom God chose to work and the outcast blind man was the one to whom Jesus reached out in order to manifest God’s works on earth.

### **EPHESIANS 5:8-14**

The Letter to the Ephesians is understood as a “circular letter,” written to multiple churches but originally presumed to be written by Paul and directed to the citizens of Ephesus. We can approach it as if addressed to us today and call the unknown author Paul.

What ties this reading to the first is the question of discernment. Samuel had to discern which man God had chosen. David, under the life-long influence of God’s Spirit, was called to discern how to be the sort of king God had chosen him to be. In this reading, Paul calls us to discern how to walk in the light, how to be pleasing to God. Comparing these passages, we will note that God spoke rather directly to Samuel — even telling him, “This is the one!” We, like David, have a harder time deciphering the will of God in our everyday lives.

Obviously, the theme of light versus darkness connects this reading with today’s Gospel. What we may not immediately grasp is that for Paul there was an immense difference between people’s state before and after knowing Christ. Although they may have thought of themselves as ethical people, Paul claimed that they had truly lived in darkness — they had been as good as dead. As in the symbolic situation of the man born blind, they did not know what life was all about until Christ gave them light. Now, like that man who learned to see Jesus for who he was, their task was to learn to live as children of the light. This idea is meant to challenge us to reflect on how profoundly different our lives are because of Christ.

This question leads us to the apostolic and prophetic dimension of the vocation to discern and live in the light. Not only does Paul call us to perceive and do what is pleasing to the Lord, but also to actively denounce the works of darkness. Christians must face and discern both facets as they respond to a vocational call. First, we must determine what works reflect God's light and carry them out. Secondly, we must pay attention to the culture around us and evangelize it by avoiding participation in the works of darkness and by the dangerous work of exposing them for what they are. Paul insists that because we have been brought out of darkness into light, we are now inevitably involved in the struggle between light and dark.

The last line of today's reading is both a call and a promise: We are to wake up to our vocation assured that Christ will give us the necessary light.

### **JOHN 9:1-41**

Although his contemporaries were probably little impressed with the unnamed blind beggar of this story, John presents him as the archetypical human being: "anthropos." In typical Johannine fashion, he represents *blind anthropos*, a designation that implies a statement about humankind in general. John makes it clear that many of Jesus' listeners considered themselves special, people with unique insight into God's ways. It's little wonder that Jesus chose the blind beggar to help him reveal the works of God, everyone else knew too much.

Just as God didn't consult Eve and Adam about the potential benefits of creating them, Jesus approached the blind man with the earth-ointment of healing without asking him if he wanted to see. But once Jesus offered him the possibility of sight, mysterious as it must have sounded, the man did what Jesus told him to do and that led to transformation.

All might have been well if it hadn't been for the onlookers. They represent a special brand of anthropos, people whose world goes out of whack when things go too well for others. Their cosmos had been settled and stable and they knew the necessary number of poor, blind and lame people around to assure them that they themselves were God's blessed, whole-bodied favorites. But when the unchosen one was transformed everything went up for grabs. There's a particular type of anthropos that need underdogs to prop up their identity: when there's nobody under them, how can they feel important? Who could remain sure of being chosen when conditions could change with just a little mud and water? So they took the man-who-

saw to the authorities, the Pharisee guardians of law and order.

After two interviews with the once-blind man the Pharisees lost their composure. The man-who-saw was incorrigible. He refused to appreciate their logic: that what had happened to him could not come from God because it was accomplished by someone who did not abide by the law. The man-who-saw had become identified with Jesus; he would have to be judged as the same kind of sinner as the healer.

Pope Francis has described the devil's kingdoms as the places where "everything comes under the laws of competition ... where the powerful feed upon the powerless" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, "The Joy of the Gospel," #53). The Pharisees about whom John wrote had become stuck in a dogmatic prison of their own making. They may or may not have understood how self-serving it was, and they surely would have denied that they had undermined the word of God, but they had assumed the authority to close revelation. Discernment was no longer necessary because all the answers had been given.

As Jesus tried to tell them, blindness is no sin, but choosing blindness, refusing to believe in God's ongoing self-revelation and activity in the world is unforgivable because those who do so close themselves off from God.

Today's readings call us to the discernment that is based upon openness to the unruliness of God's word. We must accept that we are all blind when it comes to seeing the range of God's possibilities. As we learn to do that, we may just be surprised by a brand new vision.

## **Planning: 4th Sunday of Lent**

**By;** Lawrence Mick

This Sunday has the traditional name of Laetare Sunday, a day of joy because Lent has reached the half-way point. The church has directives regarding the observance of the third Sunday within this solemn season: "During Lent the altar is not to be decorated with flowers, and the use of musical instruments is allowed only to support the singing. The Fourth Sunday of Lent, called Laetare Sunday, solemnities and feasts are exceptions to this rule. On Laetare Sunday rose vestments may be used." (Ceremonial of Bishops #252). So this is a day to foreshadow the joy and splendor of Easter.

This is also the day for the second scrutiny. The Gospel focuses on the cure of the man born blind, and the first reading invites us to see as God sees and not as human beings see. The second reading also fits this focus, stressing the importance of living in the light rather than in darkness.

We discussed last week the idea of drawing input from the assembly as well as from the elect for the intercessions during the scrutinies. Once you have all the suggestions in hand, someone should sort them into three lists, looking for ways to link these concerns with the themes of the three scrutinies: thirst, sight and new life. Then it takes a good wordsmith to compose the petitions in ways that make sense without being too wordy. You might also use a special response to these petitions, for instance, “Lord, teach us to see.” If you use this phrase, make sure the petitions are composed with this consistent theme in mind.

Today’s focus on seeing as God sees lends itself well to the call to deeper conversion that marks the Lenten season. How we see situations and other people strongly affects how we deal with them. Much of our growth in the spiritual life is a matter of learning to see things as God does, especially when in stark contrast to society’s view of things.

This theme of learning to see correctly might also provide a solid basis for a Lenten penance service this week. You could use one or more of the readings from this Sunday and perhaps reuse some of the intercessions.

So often what produces growth through the sacrament of penance is coming to see a situation or a pattern of behavior in a new way. And for many people, learning to properly appreciate this sacrament requires seeing it with new eyes — as a celebration of God’s mercy and love rather than primarily a time for self-recrimination. The scrutinies as well as this sacrament require a willingness to look at ourselves with compassion. These rituals also invite us to see God more clearly as the great lover and merciful healer. That’s a great reason to celebrate!

## **Prayers: 4th Sunday of Lent**

**By;** Joan DeMerchant

### **Introduction**

As we continue our journey through this season of Lent, we are met with the question of who is worthy in God's eyes. Based on false expectations the Israelites and the Pharisees never thought David would be chosen king or that Jesus would heal the man born blind. Worthiness may be found not in reputation or pedigree or appearance, but in one's heart.

### **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you healed the man born blind: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you confronted those who did not believe: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you came to give us eyes that truly see: Lord, have mercy.

### **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider:** My friends, let us pray now for ourselves and for all who need to be seen with God's eyes.

**Minister:** For the church and for all believers: May be open to seeing and witnessing God's light in others...as a penitent people, we pray,

- For all who make peace with others...as a penitent people, we pray,
- For those who judge others without seeing their inner goodness...as a penitent people, we pray,
- For the courage to challenge false judgement or gossip in our daily lives...as a penitent people, we pray,
- For openness to new ideas, even when it is uncomfortable...as a penitent people, we pray,
- For parents, educators, mediators, counselors and all who work to promote deeper understanding...as a penitent people, we pray,
- For those who have never felt understood or appreciated...as a penitent people, we pray,
- For the candidates preparing for full membership in the church...as a penitent people, we pray,
- For those among us who are sick; for those who gone before us and now see the eternal light of Christ...(names)...as a penitent people, we pray,

**Presider:** God of surprises, invite us to see your presence in others. Though we may be blind to the good in others, help us to see and love them as you would wish. We ask this in the name of Jesus, the ultimate healer. Amen.

## Advertisement

This story appears in the **Cycle A Sunday Resources** feature series. [View the full series.](#)