

Lent 4  
3.15.26

Many years ago, someone had spoken with me a few days after they returned from a trip to Rome. When I asked how they enjoyed their trip, they responded with answers one would say having visited such a glorious place. “The sites were beautiful. The food incredible. The various churches were breathtaking and nourished my soul. And the people could not have been more welcoming. Everything was perfect...except the first night there.”

They went on to tell me that after they checked into their hotel in Rome, they immediately went sightseeing. They spent the entire day doing a hundred different things. Jet-lagged and weary from so much walking, they returned to their hotel and decided to take a hot bath. Exhausted by the day and wrapped in those soothing waters, they fell asleep. When they awoke, everything was dark. Their first thought was that they might have gone blind. But as their eyes adjusted, they realized what had happened. It isn't unusual for Rome to have rolling blackouts at times and one hit the area where this person was staying. They were afraid of venturing out of the tub, though, since they didn't know where anything was. They had no idea where the towels were. Where the sink was. Or how much distance there was between the tub and the floor. So they sat. And waited. After a few minutes, the lights came back on. Reoriented by the light they were able to get ready for bed and settle in for a good night's sleep.

One can only imagine how disorienting life was for the man who was born blind. Since he was blind he wouldn't be able to

work. And so he would be reduced to a lifetime of begging. People, even religious figures, would mock him because they assumed (as was the religious belief at the time) that his blindness was punishment from God for some sin he or his parents committed. Poor, ostracized, and even estranged from his parents, the blind man's life was bleak.

When he heard about Jesus, he begged him for healing. Jesus heard his plea and restored his sight. While the community and his fellow believers rejected the blind man, Jesus embraced him and literally touched him which others in the community would never do. In a symbolic but real way, the blind man in this story is every person we find abhorrent – people from nations we are at war with, immigrants who have escaped dire poverty and threats upon their lives while seeking a better life, those who differ from us because of their cultural and religious practices. Where we see a group which is bad, Jesus sees an individual who is good (despite his shortcomings) because Jesus and the Father created that very man in their own image and likeness.

As the blind man regained his ability to see, today's story focuses on how his spiritual vision improved. After being cured, the blind man came to see who Jesus was. He identifies him first as a prophet, then the "Christ", and finally as Lord. Connecting with Jesus in a very personal way enabled his faith to grow – so much so that he was able to talk to and even argue with the most religious people of the time, the Pharisees. He was able to withstand criticism and false accusations. He was even able to deal with the alienation he experienced from his parents.

All this happened to the blind man because he fearlessly and with deep faith approached Jesus, despite what those around him were saying about him. As he allowed Jesus to smear a clay paste on his eyes made from dirt and Jesus' spittle, the man believed that something good would happen because of this encounter.

This story is directed to us as well. Our sinfulness, our shortsightedness, our prejudices separate us from God. But as we repent and believe, our faith grows. When we approach Christ in humility and contrition, Christ enables us to see in a way we never have seen before.

Since Ash Wednesday, our sanctuary has been filled with sticks and dead plants reminding us that Lent is a time of turning away from what is lifeless in us and toward the new life that only Christ can give. A few days before Ash Wednesday, those who decorate our sanctuary went to a nursery and asked for some trees that appeared to be dead. The salesperson thought that was an odd request and pointed them to a couple of crepe myrtles which he thought might do the trick. I'm sure the salesperson laughed to himself when these decorators actually paid for those plants. But low and behold, as those plants were watered, given a little bit of fertilizer, and have unlimited exposure to the sun, they are beginning to sprout. After Mass you can come up and see this miracle happening in our sanctuary. What once seemed dead is now beginning to bloom.

We are offered something similar. Presenting ourselves to God, allowing him to prune away our sins, nourished by the waters of Baptism and the sacraments of Eucharist and Reconciliation, we

begin to bloom. We see things in a different light. We act differently than those around us who hold on to those things that are of the world and not of God. All this happens because we present ourselves once again to God – up close and personal. And he presents himself in personal ways through our Lenten practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. We who sometimes feel dead and at times perceive that we are far away from God now begin to sprout because Christ presents himself to us.

Most times, those moments of encounter and growth are seemingly small. But other times they are profound.

In the 1700's, there lived a man named John Newton. He was a sea captain. All things considered, he was a despicable person. Even his fellow sailors blushed at the awful things he did and said. He commanded slave ships for most of his life and had little regard for the human beings he transported.

One day a storm arose while he was out to sea. His ship was battered and nearly sank. That event changed how he saw things and began to bring about a conversion in him – albeit a slow conversion. He eventually gave up being a sea captain. He acknowledged the evils of the slave trade and took responsibility for the part he played in perpetuating that sin. He became a voice for the abolition of slavery in England. In time, he even enrolled in the seminary and was made a pastor in the Methodist Church and later joined the Church of England where he was ordained and served as pastor.

As a way of recalling and celebrating his conversion, he composed a song which is well known to all Christians. He

mentions how the grace of Christ which he opened himself up to allowed him to finally see, in the spiritual sense. He turned away from sin. And he embarked on a faith journey with Christ which led him in a direction he never imagined years before.

What God has done for John Newton, God does for us. As we present ourselves to him in humility and with contrite hearts, God recreates our hearts and shapes them in his image. In doing that he allows us to see – as God sees us and loves us, and as God sees and loves others. That grace is truly amazing. It completely changed John Newton's life. It has the power to change our lives as well. And so in faith, hope, and a new spiritual vision given to us by God, we sing together the song which countless generations before us have proclaimed....

*Amazing Grace How sweet the sound,  
That saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, But now am found;  
Was blind, but now I see.*

*'Twas grace that taught My heart to fear,  
And grace my fears relieved;  
How precious Did that grace appear  
The hour I first believed!*