

“A Healing Encounter”
March 15, 2026

Isaiah 35:3-6a
John 9:1-12, 25b

John Newton was an eighteenth-century Anglican priest who in 1779 published his well-known hymn, “Amazing Grace.” The final words of the first verse echo those of the blind man in this morning’s Gospel lesson: “I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

For quite some time, Congregationalists didn’t have much to do with “Amazing Grace.” If you grew up in a Congregational Church, you probably didn’t grow up singing this hymn. It wasn’t in the editions of the *Pilgrim Hymnal* from either the 1930’s or the 1950’s. Nor was it in the *Evangelical and Reformed Hymnal* from the 1940’s. It surfaced in the *Hymnal of the United Church of Christ* that was published in 1974, in part, I think, because folksingers like Judy Collins and Arlo Guthrie popularized the much-ignored hymn in the late sixties and early seventies.

Oh, Arlo...

On the old *Precious Friend* album there’s a live version of Arlo Guthrie singing “Amazing Grace” and telling his short version of the story of John Newton’s life. “He was the captain of a slave ship,” Guthrie recalls. “In the middle of the ocean one night with a boat full of people he changed his mind and turned the boat around. He sailed everybody back home. Then he sailed back to his home in England and started writing these songs....”

Arlo tells a marvelous story, but more the way it *should have* happened rather than the way that it *actually* happened.

John Newton was born in 1725. His father was a sea captain and when Newton turned eleven, he joined his father at sea, learning his father’s trade. He eventually found work on slave ships. One account says that “far from objecting to this commerce in human misery, John Newton actually took to it—and got rich in the process.”

Newton would later say that his conversion took place in 1748 on a return voyage to England. In the midst of a storm that nearly sank the ship, Newton cried out, “Lord, have mercy upon us.” The ship and Newton were saved. The effects of this event did not come to fruition right away, however. For some time after this, Newton continued in the slave trade.

Seven year later, in 1755 he left sailing and, after some difficulties, was ordained as an Anglican priest in 1764. Only several years after *that* was he able to look back and write: “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.”¹

You might agree with me that the facts of Newton’s biography are far less inspiring than Guthrie’s version. But they probably more closely resemble the experience of most people. No flash of light. No scales suddenly falling from his eyes. Indeed, over a quarter of century passed between Newton’s good fortune at sea and the writing of this famous hymn.

It takes time. It takes time to change. It takes time to see clearly.

Old habits of thinking, old ways of looking at the world get in the way.

We're listening to stories of encounters this Lent. Today we hear of Jesus encountering a man blind from birth.

Watch.

Listen.

New sight comes to all sorts of people—but it comes slowly.

Seeing this man, the disciples, still not really getting it, ask Jesus: "Who sinned?"

It's a question that seeks to assign blame, a question that seeks to make sure we're pointing the finger in the right direction.

Who sinned?

We usually ask it in different ways.

What did he do to get so sick?

Who caused that car wreck?

Why did she get fired?

Who's to blame that the party got out of control?

This is the mindset of followers of Jesus through the ages.

Maybe it's a matter of "compassion fatigue." You know, feeling worn out from caring about people. After a while, we don't want to see hungry people, or homeless people, or school children begin bombed. After a while, we look away when victims of disaster or warfare appear on our screens. Over time it gets harder and harder to be concerned. We start asking if someone is "worthy" of our love, "deserving" of our compassion—or did they bring this problem upon themselves?

Was the collision caused by a mechanical failure—or by drunk driving?

Was the job lost because of AI—or personal incompetence?

Who sinned?

Tell us, Jesus, who's to blame? Did this man's parents upset God, or did he do something *even before he was born* to cause God to punish him with blindness? Why did this happen?

Listen.

Jesus says, "The 'why' question is not the question to be asking under these circumstances; it isn't worth asking here *why* this man has to keep suffering on and on with his blindness."

We ask: “Why did this happen?” and turn the realm of God into a discussion group. We get so caught up in trying to analyze the details of a troubling situation that we have no inclination left to try to heal the hurt; we have no energy left to put toward responding to the suffering around us.

Jesus goes on to explain: “What you look for when you see an afflicted individual like this is how peace, comfort, and healing might be able to come to this person for the glory of God who made each one of us. We should be about the business of trying to bring such wholeness to this person and to others.”²

In case the disciples missed it—and they probably did—or in case we missed it—and yes, *we* probably did—Jesus takes the opportunity to make a theological point: “As long as I am in the world,” he says, “I am the light of the world.”

“As long as I am in the world...” Maybe it hasn't dawned on anybody but Jesus yet, but even he had only a limited amount of time.

All of us only get so much time; some opportunities may come once and only once. Are we using our time to bring at least a little more peace, comfort, and healing into the world?

Clearly, it is proper to stop speculating, to stop asking, “Who sinned?” and to act.

Hasn't the man been blind long enough?

Hasn't the child been hungry long enough?

Haven't enough bombs fallen?

Hasn't the refugee suffered enough?

Aren't the people poor enough?

Jesus thinks so and acts decisively. He spits on the ground and spreads mud on the man's eyes. But look! There is no quick and simple healing touch here. Something more is going on. Jesus tells this man to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. Only after doing this, is this man able to see.

As John's Gospel tells the story, new sight comes slowly. Healing occurs—and we are active participants in it. Transformation of any kind takes time. It doesn't happen as quickly as we would like. But we move forward, gaining sight as we go.

We must do the works of God while we can. And our eyes are always being opened to new ways of seeing. No doubt you can recall times when you were blind—but *now* you see.

It takes time.

At other places in the gospels, Jesus heals people instantaneously. But now he asks this man to do something: “Go. Wash in the pool of Siloam.”

The blind man does what he is asked to do and comes back seeing.

This is, after all, an account of a healing, an account of a miracle. And many think that if they could experience a miracle, it would strengthen their faith. It would bring them closer to God, right?

When acquaintances ask the formerly blind man how he has gained his sight, he can only reply that the successful remedy was concocted by a man named Jesus, of whose present whereabouts he knows nothing. It was not faith that brought him sight. It was not sight that brought him faith.

Throughout John's Gospel—and in our own lives—miracles do not necessarily result in faith. These *signs*, as John refers to miracles, are not what really matter.

What really matters is seen at the very end of this story.

This man who was blind from birth is now seeing and is also now all alone. Once more he is found by Jesus. Talking with Jesus, the man is finally able to confess, "Lord, I believe."

John wants us to understand that what is important, what really matters is found in the man's encounter with Jesus, in the reality of Jesus' being present with him, addressing him.

Miracles are amazing, but they do not sustain.

This story tells us that what really matters is that God has found us. God has come to us in Christ that we might know light in our darkness,

that we might know God's care in our insecurity,

God's love in our uncertainty,

God's hope when we don't see the miracles.

God found you. Give thanks for that. Then, with your whole mind, with your whole soul, with your whole heart, listen to find where God wants to take you next.

Most likely it is back into a world that is filled with insecurity, that longs for assurance, that hopes for the miracle that you might bring.

As we follow in the way of Christ we will find healing and new sight. With new sight we will see things differently—others, ourselves, even God will appear different from first appearances.

There is much about stories of healing that puzzles and confounds us.

What we might begin to understand in any case is that healing comes with a calling, and opportunity. We are restored and brought back into community so that we might live even more fully with one another.

Healing breaks forth into ministry and ministry breaks forth into healing.

When Arlo Guthrie tells audiences the story of John Newton, he concludes by saying: "That man might have lived a long time ago but he's a friend of mine tonight. Because anybody who's not afraid to turn around is a friend of mine. And that's not just individual people, but cities and

states and countries. We can't let anything make us afraid to turn around and do what's right. That's because there's a whole lot of stuff that needs to be turned around."

Those sound like "Lent words" to me. This season calls us to repent, to turn around.

And Arlo's right, isn't he? There's a whole lot of stuff that needs to be turned around. That's another way of saying, "We must do the work of the One who sent us while it is day."

The work of healing and feeding and sheltering.

The work of strengthening human compassion and decency.

The work of bringing peace to a world that will always favor war.

The work that only you can do—the work the world awaits.

These are the tasks that God sets before us in the time that we have—because as long as we are in the world, Jesus told us, *we* are the light of the world.

Healed and with sight restored, let us do the work of the One who sent us while it is day.

¹ See discussion in James Kugel, *In the Valley of the Shadow*, 2011, Free Press, pg. 89-92.

² David Farmer, "John 9," *Interpretation*, January 1996, pg. 59-63.