

SERMON- Lent 4 (A) 10 am

Charles R. Cowherd

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Ephesians 5:8-14

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

March 15, 2026

John 9:1-41

Psalms 23

OPENING:

Joke in Narthex was how long these lessons are.

If you think it is long in English, imagine it in Spanish!

Always thought it was funny, or ironic, that we get all dressed up to come to church, we get here, we take our seats, Cross comes in, we stand, the organ plays. THEN we have the kids leave, and go somewhere else!

This is a LIVE issue at Seminary and in Christian formation circles.

1) Kids should stay in church just like they have for generations (BUT, 1976 bulletin!)

2) Make church more accessible (music, sermon, seating)

3) Or have a parallel experience that is age-appropriate, better.

That's what I think we have at St. Tim's. Our children are taught the faith.

BUT we are in good company, because not only in 1976 but in the early Church, people would leave. Would not know what was happening. They were blind to it, had never seen it.

So if you were wondering what all that has to do with it, it's the concept of spiritual blindness, of sight and enlightenment, it's important to John's gospel, to Jesus, and to us.

Early church used these 3 Scrutinies to ritualize that and make this lesson into the ritual procedure for joining the Body of Christ.

That's what I want to talk about today, how we encounter the Risen Christ, how we are converted, how we are baptized.

BLIND MAN:

Usually, in the Gospels, it's *Jesus* who is on the witness stand, facing the Cross-Examination, and our Lenten Journey is indeed a long march to that very setting, where Christ stands and sits and hangs in judgement for us all.

Today, though, we have another LONG reading where this *blind man* is the one on the hot seat, not Jesus. The Blind man faces this battering ram of questioning.

In courtroom speak, the interaction seems almost like ‘badgering the witness’, like improper interrogation techniques, like his social betters are trying to coerce him into a confession, into denying the one thing of which he was certain.¹

They keep on asking him: “how were your eyes opened?”

And the blind man keeps on answering: “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, told me to go to this place, and now I see.”

Under the bright lights, the Pharisees and his friends and even his own family, continue the pressure, and he sticks to his answer:

“I was blind, now I see.”

The questions keeps getting repeated, and, at some point, it changes from “WHY?” to “HOW?”

Verse 10, 15, 16, 19, 21, 26.

Like good interrogators, they hammer away.

The blind man’s response reminds me of a type of good old boy, a kind of the country bumpkin, who keeps getting hounded but can only reply:

“I don’t know what else to say to you. I was blind, now I see.”

It’s the Popeye response: “I am what I am.”

It’s the Forrest Gump response: “I may not be a smart man... but now I can see.”

It’s the language of Amazing Grace:

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.

BAPTISM:

For all its power, the scene also has comic undertones and I tried to deliver it that way as I read it.

In hearing it like that, we can maybe then see ourselves as the Pharisees or the Disciples.

They/ we want to know about the Weeds, about Sin.

Who gets in and who is left out? And whose job is it to declare it?

¹ Dodd, C. H. 1953. *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*. Cambridge, UK: University Press, 357.

The comic nature of this scene is repeated, in all places, in our Baptismal Liturgy.²
It's not on purpose.

But, in our usual service of Infant Baptism, we get the beautiful, cherubic child, and they are here on the front row, and they are presented, they are the defendant.

What follows next is a dramatic court room scene.

I am the prosecutor and I turn to the baby and I grill him/her with questions.

“Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?”

“Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?”

“Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?”

It's comic because the child is sitting there oblivious and the family, speaking on their behalf, are usually too overwhelmed as well to know what's happening.

It keeps going, the family are called as expert witness on their child's behalf.

“Will you by your prayers and witness help this child to grow into the full stature of Christ?”

And they swear, under oath, “I will with God's help.”

You, the congregation, likewise our dragged into the proceeding and asked: “Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support these persons in their life in Christ?”

This courtroom parallel is not by mistake, mind you.

The forensic quality of the Gospel of John has a long tradition and the early church adopted it, during Lent specifically

And they were dead serious about it.

Let me explain:

Those first three questions of the baptismal service were called “renunciations” and, when asked, those to be baptized were supposed to face West for them and say:

“No.”

Then they were supposed to turn and face East for the “adhesions” (affirmations)—the three next questions (“Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior? Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love? Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?—and you were supposed to say “Yes.”

In that way, you were supposed to be ritually enacting exchanging one Master for another.

² BCP, 302.

We still have those 2 sets of 3 questions

But, in the early church, let me tell you:

It gets more intense!

Back then, all through Lent, the people that were preparing to be baptized (and they were all adults) went through this dogged training called the catechumenate, where they would learn Scripture, and be subjected to these LONG lessons from John, called the Three Scrutinies

(Last week: The Samaritan Woman the Well.

This week, the Man Born Blind.

And next week, Lazarus coming back from the Dead.)³

And this is before movies and videos and even before literacy so the catechumenates were sheltered not knowing what would happen in their Baptism. They would be enlightened, converted, shown the way, by this series of instructions that would culminate on... Easter with the mystery being revealed.

Imagine, for a moment, and I am not suggesting that we do it this way.

But if our children were to head down like they do every week, and we taught and taught and taught them just like they are learning downstairs.

But then we brought them back up AFTER communion, as we were cleaning up the table and wiping the crumbs away and hiding the dishes.

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN?

THEY WOULD RIOT.

And they should.

But what we would be communicating was that the way of joining this community, this thing called Baptism, occurs through a process of enlightenment and growth and change and recognition and seeing that is so powerful, that it could not be mistaken for anything else other than an experience with Risen Christ.⁴

And we would be communicating that the way we do Fellowship, this thing called Eucharist, likewise is so life-changing and nourishing and strange and all-encompassing that you barely recognize yourself afterwards.

CONCLUSION

In our Prayers of the People, we have this Visceral image

*Merciful God, join our eyes, our hearts and our hands to yours, that together
we may provide them a way out and give them strength to endure.*

By virtue of our baptism

By virtue of our participation in the Eucharist

By virtue of the life-changing healing and conversion moments that we have had
with Risen Lord.

I pray that, like the Blind Man, up against all the perils of this world.

That we can proclaim to the world the only thing that we got left, the one thing we
cannot deny

That the hungry have been fed,

That the lepers have been healed

That the naked have been clothed.

That cats and dogs behave,

That I was blind, but now I see

AMEN