Fourth Sunday of Lent 1 Sam 16:1-13 Eph 5:8-14
Year A, 2026 Ps 23 Jn 9:1-41

Born blind; made blind

For the blind man in the gospel, from the moment of his birth, darkness had been his only world. He sat by the road, begging, a figure so familiar that people walked past him without a second glance – until Jesus, *"the light of the world,"* stopped. The blind man's darkness was soon to end, for Christ would give him light.

What follows the blind man's healing is astonishing, but not in a good way. What should have been a moment of pure joy – a man healed, a community celebrating, neighbors and religious leaders marveling at the power of God – instead becomes an agonizing exercise in doubt, suspicion, and frustration. The man born blind found himself hauled before the Pharisees not once, but twice. His parents were summoned. Everyone was questioned. What slowly comes into focus – what the gospel quietly shows us beneath the surface of the narrative – is this: the man born blind begins to see in every sense, while the men who claimed to see reveal themselves to be blind – utterly, willfully, morally blind.

The story sets before us two kinds of blindness, and only one of them is innocent. The first is the blindness of the man blind from birth. He was born without sight. He did not choose it. He did not deserve it. It simply was the condition of his life, and all the

suffering that attended it was not the fruit of moral failure, neither his nor his parents'. His blindness was a wound, not a sin.

The second kind of blindness is that of the Pharisees. And this blindness is something altogether different. These are educated, intelligent men, religious men, men who have devoted their lives to the study of God's law. They are not ignorant. They are not uninformed. They know the Scriptures and the tradition. And it is precisely because they know so much that their refusal to see becomes so damning, so sinful

What they did when confronted with an undeniable fact – a man who was born blind and now sees – is inexcusable. They do not rejoice. They do not wonder. They do not ask what God might be doing here. Instead, they begin to put up obstacles. They dispute the day of the healing – it was the Sabbath, so it cannot be from God. They question the man's identity – perhaps this is not the same person. They summon the parents – perhaps there is some deception or conspiracy at work. They interrogate the man again, and when he refuses to recant, when he answers them with unassuming self-possession and gives a simple recitation of the facts, they throw him out.

On the part of the Pharisees, this is neither intellectual honesty nor sincere searching. This is something uglier: it is the intentional and deliberate refusal to see what stands directly before them. It is the choice to remain blind, a choice not to see.

Centuries earlier the prophet Isaiah had encountered this same spirit of blindness among the people and leaders of Israel. He called them out for it: *"Stupefy yourselves and stay stupid; blind yourselves and stay blind! You who are drunk, but not from wine, who stagger, but not from strong drink! For the Lord [now pours] out on you a spirit of deep sleep [and shuts] your eyes and [covers] your heads"* (29:9-10).

The *stupefaction* that Isaiah describes is not something that God does to people from the outside, as though they were recipients of divine punishment. It is what happens to those who persistently refuse to see – who, over and over and over again, close their eyes to what is right and true and decent. At a certain point, the refusal to see hardens into an inability to see. God does not so much impose this blindness as ratify it (Mt 13:14-15): "You want to be blind? Then fine, as you wish, be blind!" *"A spirit of deep sleep"* then descends on those who chose sleep over wakefulness, the darkness of night over the light of day, culpable ignorance over knowledge, falsehood over truth.

We need to reckon with what this means and be honest about it. There are people who are "blind" because they have made themselves blind, who have cultivated and protected their blindness because seeing would cost them something: their comfort, their status, their power, their carefully constructed sense of who they are and who others are not, their sense of belonging to some side or team or party or group to the exclusion of others.

Such carefully crafted ignorance, sometimes violently defended and propagated, is befitting of fanatics and the factious, partisans and ideologues. It does not befit the children of God, who are called to the knowledge of truth, to be in the light and to be the light. This kind of ignorance is improper, unfitting. It is indecent.

Anyone who has ever tried to reason with someone who has chosen not to see will quickly recognize the once-blind man's frustration before his interrogators. He is patient, and precise, and answers their questions honestly. When they push back, he responds with a simple recital of facts. He is forthright and forthcoming. He is not aggressive, not inflammatory. He simply describes reality as plainly as he can. But it makes no difference. He can explain it to them, but he cannot understand it for them. They cannot hear him. Or rather: they will not hear him.

There is a saying – attributed to the thirteenth-century Sufi poet Rumi – that captures the situation precisely: "you can defeat forty scholars with a single fact; you cannot convince one single fool with forty facts." There is a related proverb that runs the same way: "debate with scholars and may defeat them, but debate with an ignoramus and you will always lose."

These proverbs are not about a lack of intelligence. They are about a failure of good will. The true "scholar," whatever his starting position, is open to being moved by evidence. A searcher of truth, he is invested in following the evidence wherever it leads. The

ignoramus – in the moral sense, the willfully ignorant person – has decided in advance what the conclusion must be, and no fact, however clear, will be allowed to disturb it. Every fact will be reinterpreted or dismissed, every witness reexamined or discredited, every loophole, no matter how implausible, exploited, all to maintain the predetermined conclusion. And if it cannot be maintained, expect an outburst of anger, contempt, disgust, dismissal.

This is exactly the Pharisees before the man born blind. He is a fact. His healed eyes are a fact. The mud and the pool and the name of the one who healed him are all facts. But facts mean nothing to those who are determined and resolved not to be disturbed by the truth of things. They become indignant, aggrieved, and aggressive: *"Then they threw him out."*

At the end of this passage, Jesus delivers a judgment that should make every one of us stop and examine ourselves very carefully. He says: *"I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see might see, and those who do see might become blind."* The Pharisees, hearing this, ask: *"Surely we are not blind, are we?"* And Jesus answers: *"If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you are saying, 'We see,' so your sin remains."*

Hear those words again and feel their weight. If we were blind – truly blind, involuntarily blind, blind because life had not given us the capacity to see – we would bear no guilt. Our blindness would

be a wound, not a sin. But when we say, "we see," we have claimed sight and so have taken upon ourselves the responsibility that comes with the claim of clear vision. But if, defiant and stubborn in our resistance to truly seeing, we see *wrong*, if in our unseeing we mistake light for darkness and darkness for light, then we are lost, and our sin remains.

This is a paradox: those who are most certain they see are often most in danger of not seeing at all. Not always, but whenever false certainty calcifies into closure, whenever erroneous conviction hardens into a refusal to receive new light, then the very thing we thought was our greatest strength becomes our greatest vulnerability.

We come to Mass, most of us, as people who believe that we see. We know who Jesus is. We know the creed. We know the commandments. We know the stories. We are not sitting in darkness. But the Gospel today does not warn us against ignorance, which is a lack of knowing. It warns us against the comfortable certitude that we already see enough. It warns us against the slow, quiet self-deception of choosing not to see what is plainly before us – perhaps because what is right before us would require us to change, to repent, to give something up, to reconsider someone we have written off, to acknowledge a wrong we have done or a truth we have been avoiding, to change allegiances, to switch sides, to change our minds, to admit that we were wrong, or that we have been deceived, misled, misused,

abused, by people or institutions or ideologies that we, unwisely as it turns out, trusted.

The man born blind, sitting in the dust by the road, had nothing to protect. When Jesus came to him, he had no reputation to defend, no position to maintain, no theological system to preserve. He simply obeyed. He went to the pool. He washed. And he came back seeing. The Pharisees had everything to protect: their standing, their position, their pride, their heritage, their nation. And so they protected it all, but at the cost of their sight, and their integrity, and perhaps even their salvation.

The question the Gospel puts to each of us today is not: are you blind? We are all blind in some ways – about ourselves, about others, about the world, about God. The question is: when light comes, when a fact stands before us that disturbs our comfortable version of reality, will we open our eyes, will we see? Or will we, like those ancient religious authorities, begin deconstructing the scene, ramping up the propaganda, denying what is real?

In another gospel was another blind man in another city. When Jesus asked him what he wanted him to do for him, he said, simply, pleadingly, "Master, I want to see" (Mk 10:46ff). With that same sincerity and humility, we should make blind Bartimaeus' prayer our own: Master, let me see, not just with the eyes of my body, but with the eyes of faith, not just what is easy and comfortable to see, but what is real, what I need to see, even if it means that I have to

change, walk away, embrace something new, follow you where I may fear to go. Give me the humility of the man in the dust, who had nothing to protect and everything to receive. And deliver me from the foolish blindness of those who, having said “we see,” cannot be reached by any light at all. Master, I want to see. Amen.