Let us pray by singing the first verse of a familiar hymn: Amazing Grace:

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound
that saved a wretch like me.*
*I once was lost, but now am found,*
t’*was blind but now I see.*

These words are from what is perhaps the most well-known and beloved English-language hymn, written by an Episcopal priest named John Newton in 1773 as an illustration for a sermon. Some twenty-five years earlier, Newton was involved in the slave trade and renowned for his abrasive and stubborn character. One biography states, “he (Newton) used the worst words the captain of the ship ever heard, creating new ones to exceed the limit of verbal debauchery.” In 1748 during a violent storm off the coast of Ireland, the ship Newton was on was pounded by swells and crashing waves. At a point of desperation, he cried out, “God have mercy on me!” When the storm subsided, and his life intact, Newton did immediately turn his life over to God and run
off to seminary. He continued in the slave trade another seven years.

In 1755 he quit to study theology, and then it wasn’t for another nine years that he was ordained in 1764.

All four Gospels include stories about Jesus restoring sight to people who are blind. Each has different settings and details. In Mark’s Gospel, people bring a blind man to him when he comes to town called Bethsaida. He leads him out of the village, puts saliva on his eyes and lays hands on him. It works only partially, and the man can see people but they look like trees walking. Jesus lays hands on him a second time, and now he was able to see everything clearly. Then when Jesus goes through Jerico, a man named Bartimaeus calls out to Jesus, “Have mercy on me!” Jesus calls him to come to him and asks him what he wants him to do for him. “Let me see” says the man. Without saliva or touch, only the words, “Go; your faith has made you well” his sight is restored. In Matthew’s Gospel, instead of one blind man at each place, there are two, and for both he simply touches their eyes. In Luke, there
is only one instance of sight being restored – almost identical to Mark’s account of Bartimaeus, but in Luke, he doesn’t have a name. In John’s Gospel, the one we have just heard this morning, we have the most detailed and dynamic account of a man born blind receiving his site. We don’t know for sure which Gospel story inspired John Newton to write the words for Amazing Grace; perhaps all of them, and none so much as John’s.

It is significant that the writer of John’s Gospel describes the person who is healed as a “man born blind” and also as a “man who received his sight” – and not a blind man. His identity is a man first, not his condition. Another important detail, easily missed, is that Jesus says to man after his site is restored, “You have seen him (him being the Son of Man), and the one speaking with you is he.” He does not say, “You are seeing him” but “You have seen him.” This is the first time that the man is in fact literally seeing Jesus. Remember, Jesus told him to go wash in the pool of Siloam, and this was before his sight was restored.
Jesus speaks of “seeing” metaphorically and not literally. And indeed, the man born blind could see things either spiritually or through his other senses that the others could not. And still another key part of this story is that the healing miracle is acted up on the man born blind. He does not ask to be healed. He is healed because it is God’s choice to reveal his works through this sign, this miracle.

The setting for the writing of John’s Gospel was a community of Jews around the year 90 CE, 60 years after Jesus had been crucified. They were Jews who were not yet called Christians but seeing Jesus as the Messiah, as the Son of God who had been raised from the dead. These Jews were becoming ostracized by other Jews and being excluded, forced out of the community of the synagogue. Therefore, the man born blind was a stand-in for the nascent Christian community. They could identify with the abuse, questioning and being as the text says, “driven out.” When the man born blind receives his sight, no one seems able to rejoice in the cure, except the man himself. Not his
parents, nor the religious leaders. There was little rejoicing among outsiders for the early Christians. But, like the man born blind, Jesus finds them, does not abandon them; and like the man who received his sight, they believe in and worship Jesus.

Here at St. Mark’s in 2017, we are not being driven out of our church or community for worshipping and believing in Jesus, a Jesus who is the Son of God, God himself. Today’s Gospel does not need to do the work for us that it did for the early Christians. But like all Gospel and Scripture texts, there are other lessons, just as urgent and powerful for us today. The Gospel story is one a progression from darkness to light that happens in a setting of pain, difficulty and loss, where established norms and expectations are turned upside down. The progression is one can be applied to the individual experience and to that of an entire community. It is particularly suited to the season of Lent, where individually and as a community, we are a mid-point, half way through our forty day journey, a journey that moves from darkness to light,
from the ashes of Ash Wednesday to the new fire and light of Christ at the Easter Vigil.

As a community, what are things that we need to see that we have been blind to, intentionally and unintentionally? This past week, St. Mark’s was a partner site for Water Justice, a global conference held in New York City and webcast around the world. Speakers included religious, academic and political experts in issues of water access, droughts, pollution, rising tides and flooding. Canadian author and activist, Maude Barlow, challenged her audience to wake up to the crisis of water around the world, using stark and arresting statistics and examples. Forty percent of the rivers in China have disappeared over the last 20 years. The Aral Sea in Uzbekistan, once the fourth largest body of fresh water in the world has all but dried up. Water rights have been bought and traded, leaving millions of people vulnerable and subjected to expensive and or polluted water, or without water altogether. I recommend her book “Blue Covenant: The Global Water
“Crisis” which examines the crisis and how people are working to claim the public’s right to clean, accessible water.

https://www.amazon.com/Blue-Covenant-Global-Crisis-Coming/dp/1595584536/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1490479595&sr=1-1&keywords=blue+covenant

For Christmas, my aunt and uncle gave me a book titled, “$2.00 A Day” by sociologists Kathryn Edin and Luke Shaefer. Since we do not always see eye to eye on things political and economic, I was a bit hesitant about the book. But I decided to give it a try. In the introduction, the authors present this statistic: in 2011, 1.5 million US households, with roughly 3 million children, were surviving on cash incomes of no more than $2 per person, per day in any given month. This is about one out of every twenty-five families with children in America. The number of families in $2 a day poverty had doubled in fifteen years, since the welfare reform act of 1996. The growth of this kind of poverty has not discriminated by family type or race – half of $2 a day poor are white.
The book examines in detail specific families around the country, including two in Chicago. How can someone or a family survive on $2 a day? They do, and it is with extreme difficulty and negative consequences. There are solutions, which are political and social and have to do with examining the word “welfare” and assumptions about those who receive it. But first, the change starts with opening our eyes – our community’s eyes to this crisis in our country. This is not a partisan issue – republican or democrat. It is political and religious and something many are simply blind to.

https://www.amazon.com/2-00-Day-Living-Nothing-America/dp/054481195X/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=%242+a+day

And now, I want to show a photograph that has been circulating on media, social and traditional. It is of a scene on Westminster Bridge minutes after Wednesday’s terror attack.
We can see people gathered around a person lying on the sidewalk apparently injured. There is also a woman in a hijab waking by, looking down at her phone.

Here is that photo used in a social media post:
The tweet says, “Muslim woman pays no mind to the terror attack, casually walks by a dying man while checking phone.

Here is another social media post:
This one says, “Because the “religion of peace” forbids believers from helping non-believers.”

And here is a closer look at the photo and the woman’s own response:
“My thoughts at that moment were one of sadness, fear, and concern. What the image does not show is that I had talked to other witnesses to try and find out what was happening, to see if I could be of any help, even though enough people were at the scene tending to the victims.

The woman, horrified, says, “My thoughts at that moment were one of sadness, fear and concern. What the image does not show is that I had talked to the other witnesses to try and find out what was happening,
to see if I could be of any help, even though enough people were at the scene tending to the victims.”

How many people “saw” the first photograph, or perhaps saw the social media tweets that distorted, through blindness, ignorance and or prejudice, what was happening?

If the meaning of the Gospel is healing, the meaning of the entire Bible is a procession of blindness to site. Last week’s reading from Exodus concluded with a question: “Is the Lord among us or not?” The prophet Isaiah declares, “The blind shall see, and the eyes of the blind shall be opened.” The psalmist exclaims, “The Lord give eyes to the blind.” And today, the story of the man who was born blind continues and summarized this theme, with power and relevance to us today. We would like to identify ourselves as the one who has received his sight. If so, what will we do with it? Or will we be like those bystanders who do not rejoice in the cure but argue, question and are not willing to risk a challenge to the status quo?