



## St. Luke's East Hampton

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Benjamin Shambaugh

March 22, 2026; Lent 4A:

[1 Samuel 16:1-13](#); [Ephesians 5:8-14](#); [John 9:1-41](#)

It's been so warm the past few days that it's hard to remember that just a few weeks ago low-pressure areas and weather patterns combined to produce a Nor'easter of cyclonic intensity. The ocean was filled with huge waves. There were hurricane level winds. The wind chills were down close to zero. Blizzard conditions were everywhere and we got huge amounts of snow. When the weather report said that the storm had gone safely out to sea, my first thought was that there were people out there in the middle of it all. These fears were not unfounded. At the beginning of February, the fishing vessel *Lily Jean* was caught in another storm and sank off Gloucester with seven people on board. I wasn't called to be part of the response, but a member of my team was. Floyd Grace is a decade or so older than me and decades ahead of me in wisdom and faith. Though we might differ on things like theology and politics, I have to say can say that if I was a family member of someone on that boat or if I was a 20-year-old Coastie exhausted and demoralized from a search that ended with nothing but debris, there are few people I would rather have be with me than Chaplain Grace. When I heard that Floyd was there, I knew that in the midst of that storm there would be a place and a person of peace. The story of Chaplain Grace and the *Lily Jean* reminds me of the story of another ship caught in another storm, which resulted in a much more famous experience of grace. It was March in 1748. The ship was *Greyhound*, carrying a cargo of slaves from Sierra Leone. Its captain was a man named John Newton. The storm they ran into was so intense that Newton was sure the *Greyhound* would sink and he was going to die. He prayed to God and said that if he survived, he would give up slaving and turn his life over to God. The *Greyhound* made it through the storm. Newton followed through on his promise. He gave up his career as a slave trader, became an abolitionist, and eventually became an Anglican priest. He told his story by writing those beloved words, "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."

John Newton wasn't in the business of slavery because he liked slavery. He was in slavery because it paid a handsome profit. Newton was not alone. Income the slave trade made many people rich, even some of the great seafaring families here on Long Island. Looking only at the bottom line, they were blind to the human cost and morality of what they were doing. Though we might be quick to condemn their actions, we don't need to go far to see people doing similar things today. It took a near-death experience for Newton to change his life. It took an act of amazing grace for him to open his eyes and look at what he was doing through the eyes of God.

As we heard in the story of the choosing of Daniel, "the Lord does not see as mortals see, they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." If the reading from Samuel challenges us to change how we look at fellow human beings, our Gospel reading challenges us to do the same thing with God. When confronted with the blind man, the Pharisee's first question was "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" They believed that if someone was sick - or suffering or poor - they must have done something wrong. This might sound primitive, but it is the way that many people still see God today. Jesus used the healing of the blind man to show that this isn't how God works. Jesus makes this point by intentionally healing a man on the Sabbath. The text specifically tells us that Jesus healed the man by making mud from a mix of dirt with saliva. In Greek, the word used to "make" the mud is the same as the word used for "knead" as in kneading bread, an action that was specifically prohibited by Sabbath laws. (By the way, that the word "spread" - as in spreading the mud on his eyes - is the same word as "anoint" as in the anointing of David in our Old Testament lesson.) We might have missed these details but the Pharisees would have picked them up right away. In Mark 2:27 Jesus taught that "the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." In healing the man on the Sabbath, Jesus was showing that religion was not about following the rules but about building and repairing the relationships those rules were created to maintain. For Jesus, what mattered was the love behind the law, not the law itself. The man who was healed could see what Jesus was doing. The Pharisees could not. They, not the man who was healed, were the ones who were blind.

What are the Pharisees today? If you asked people on the street this question, they - after calling out various politicians - would probably name Christians or the church. Christians have such a bad reputation that some of my friends have started to call themselves "Jesus followers" instead. It doesn't have to be that way. We are called to be children of light. Jesus didn't just heal the

blind man to heal the blind man so he could see. He healed the blind man to help the people around him see the Kingdom of God. Being children of light isn't just about who we are and what we do. It is about helping those who are blind to see something or someone far greater than themselves. It's about helping them see Jesus and experience the Kingdom of God.

One of the great tragedies of our current moment is that, imbued with bad theology and non-biblical thinking, some so-called Christians are claiming current war is necessary to bring about the second coming of Christ. This is simply wrong. It not only misleads people and misuses and abuses scripture, it also misses the point that Christ is already here. This week the world will celebrate St Patrick's Day. Do you remember the words of St Patrick's Breastplate, "Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me. Christ beside me?" Celtic theology teaches that God is in everything and everyone around us. If that's true for God, it is true for Jesus Christ. We don't need a war for Jesus to come. He is already here. If we open our eyes, we will see Jesus right in front of us in the faces of people at Stop and Shop and Citarella's and the people at the Am-O-Gansett and Montauk Parades. If we open our eyes, we will see Jesus in the faces of students at that synagogue in Michigan, the students in that Iranian school in Minab, and as Latino students right here on Long Island who are afraid to go to school because of ICE. If we open our eyes, Jesus will see him in the faces of soldiers and sailors who, even as I speak, are putting their lives on the line and are willing to pay the ultimate price. We don't need a war for Jesus to come. If we just open our eyes, we will see that he's already here.

Thanks to God's amazing grace, the eyes of John Newton and the man who Jesus healed were opened. Because of that, their lives and the lives of those around them were transformed. Today I pray that our eyes will be opened and that with God's amazing grace, the same thing will happen to others through us.

Let me end by sharing with you a song. I will sing it through once and then I invite you to join with me in singing it together. The words are simple.

*Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus, to reach out and touch him, and say that we love him*

*Open our ears, Lord, and help us to listen. Open your eyes Lord, we want to see Jesus.* (words and music by Bob Cull, Maranatha Music 1976, 1986)

Amen.