

March 15, 2026  
John 9:1-41

Lent 4  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## “The Unintended Consequences of Light”

“I came into the world for judgment so that those who do not see can see, and those who do see may become blind.”

A welcome sight when I come down the stairs in the morning is to be greeted by the morning sun streaming through the rear windows of our townhouse. While the change in time has meant that I usually begin my day in the dark, as the days grow longer soon it will be possible to have the bright sunshine brightening up our living room and giving me that boost of energy that a sunny day can provide. But while I always welcome the morning sun, there are some unintended consequences to this bright light illuminating our home. As it shines through the windows, it also shows all the dirt that needs to be cleaned. The sunbeams that fall upon our furniture expose every bit of dust that needs to be cleaned, and as the sunshine falls on our dining room carpet it serves as a reminder that I need to do some vacuuming soon. The sunlight is beautiful, but the light also exposes things that were blissfully hidden when it was dark.

The coming of light – be it the natural light of the sun or light from artificial sources – serves to not only enlighten our lives but expose the reality of our circumstances. Some hotels feature lights that can be used for applying makeup, but they also expose every pore and flaw in our skin. Turning on the lights in our living spaces often exposes flaws and realities that need to be addressed. While darkness can hide things that can be hazardous to our health and safety, darkness can also hide things we would rather not face or deal with at the present time.

One of the unique features of the Gospel of John is its collection of “I Am” statements in which Jesus uses common images to identify himself and his mission. These include his proclamation that “*I am the good shepherd*” (10:11), “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life*” (14:6), and “*I am the light of the world*” (8:12). This latter saying points back to the Fourth Gospel’s prologue that identifies Jesus as “*the life [that] was the light for all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*” (1:4-5). As the “light of the world,” Jesus promises that “*whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life*” (8:12), darkness being symbolic of forces of evil that seek to draw people away from the light of God’s love present in Jesus Christ:

- “As the light of the world, Jesus not only brings spiritual illumination and deliverance from darkness; he also effects judgment through people’s responses to him ... the light of the world is effecting a judgment between people who respond to him in different ways.” – Curtis Martin and William Wright.

The impact of the “light of the world” that can be both the source of blessing and exposure of the reality of one’s circumstances can be seen in the story of Jesus’ healing of the man born blind in today’s Gospel lesson. Stories of Jesus’ giving sight to a blind person are found in all four Gospels, and the Fourth Evangelist includes the formal elements found in all these miracle stories: the situation of need, the miracle itself, and the attestation of the miracle. The story is introduced by John’s account that *“as he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth”* (9:1). The man’s blindness is stated as a fact, but he is not an active character in the story until verse 7. He makes no request of Jesus, nor does Jesus engage in any conversation with him about his blindness. Instead, the blind man’s initial narrative function is as a catalyst for the conversation between Jesus and his followers, when they ask him, *“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”* (9:2). This question reflects traditional Jewish speculation on the relationship of illness and sin (*“See, you have been made well! Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you.”* – 5:14). The notion that a parent’s sins are visited on the children was common in Jewish reflections on the cause of suffering. The possibility of sin before birth was related to midrashic speculation rooted in the enmity that existed between Jacob and Esau in the womb (*“The children struggled together within her; and she said, ‘If it is to be this way, why do I live?’”* – Genesis 25:22).

Jesus’ response turns the conversation away from this conventional speculation on the relationship between illness and sin as he responds that *“Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him”* (9:3). In the Fourth Gospel, “sin” is not a moral category about behavior but a theological category about one’s response to the revelation of God in Jesus (*“I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he”* – 8:24). The man’s blindness is not an occasion for reflection on sin and causality but is an occasion with revelatory significance. The “need” that evokes the miracle is not the man’s blindness, but the need for God’s works to be made manifest. Such “works” (*erga*) describe what Jesus does as the one through whom God’s works are accomplished and God’s work as belief in Jesus (*“The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own, but the Father who dwells in me does his works.”* – 14:10). Jesus’ insistence that *we must do the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work*” (9:4) signals that Jesus’

presence in the world is the light that makes God's work possible and that the day when this work will be possible will come to an end with the coming of Jesus' hour in the darkness of his Crucifixion. They must make the most of the time they have been given with the one who is among them as "the light of the world."

After this conversation with his disciples, Jesus turns his attention to the man born blind. The healing power of clay made with spittle was a popular element in healing stories in the Greco-Roman world, which explains why Jesus "*spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent).*" (9:6-7a). Siloam was a source of water used in the Tabernacles feast ("*On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink.'*" – 7:37-38). Jesus is not present when the healing takes place; the man follows his instructions as "*he went and washed and came back able to see*" (9:7b). There is no further contact between Jesus and this man until later in the story; instead, we have the attestation to the miracle as "*the neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, 'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?'*" (9:8). While the neighbours attest to the reality of the man's healing, their questions about his healing anticipate and set the stage for the interrogation that will follow by the Pharisees. The neighbours' disagreement about the man's identity and healing positions the man to serve as his own witness and to provide his own attestation to the miracle: "*The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.'* Then I went and washed and received my sight." (8:11). He knows the identity of the man who healed him, but his ignorance of Jesus' whereabouts draws the reader's attention to Jesus' absence from the narrative at this point. Instead, the focus shifts to the power of the ability of Jesus as "the light of the world" to expose the reality of the way people respond to him and his works. The first group that is exposed is the Pharisees, the religious authorities whose focus is not on the healing of the man but the fact that "*it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes*" (9:14). For these authorities, to violate the sabbath law was to challenge the laws that bound the Jewish covenant community together and the Pharisees' authority as interpreters of the Law. Jesus' violation of the sabbath prohibition when he made the mud that brought sight to the man is thus seen by some of these authorities as evidence of Jesus' distance from God; although there is some disagreement among them about this since some asked "*how can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?*" (9:16). The Pharisees' subsequent interrogation of the man provides him with another opportunity to bear witness to his healing: "*So they said again to the blind man, 'What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.'* He said, '*He is a prophet.*" (9:17); his understanding of the identity of Jesus deepens as he now

recognizes the revelation of the works of God in Jesus, perhaps comparing him to prophets like Elijah who performed healing miracles through God's power (*"The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came back to him again, and he was revived."* – 1 Kings 17:22).

The manner in which Jesus as "the light of the world" effects judgment through people's responses to him continues as the authorities turn their attention to the man's parents, asking them *"is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he see?"* (9:19). If the authorities can show that the man was never blind, then the whole question of Jesus' miracle would be dismissed. The parents confirm that their son was born blind and that they know nothing of the manner in which he received his sight, suggesting that the Pharisees *"ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself."* (9:21). But the Evangelist offers another reason for their response: the parents are afraid to say anything because they do not want to lose their religious and social ties within the synagogue community, because *"anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue"* (9:22), which would later become known as the "Benediction Against Heretics." By explaining the parents' motivation, *"John sets up a contrast between the parents' fearfulness and the son's courage"* (Martin and Wright). Jesus would later speak of this when he warned his followers that *"they will put you out of the synagogues"* (16:2).

The authorities summon the man, holding their knowledge up to him and expecting him to accept their position: *"Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner"* (9:24). "Give glory to God" is a traditional oath formula through which a person is enjoined to tell the truth or confess one's sins:

- "Then Joshua said to Achan, 'My son, give glory to the LORD God of Israel and make confession to him. Tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me.'" – Joshua 7:19.
- "So you must make images of your tumours and images of your mice that ravage the land, and give glory to the God of Israel; perhaps he will lighten his hand on you and your gods and your land." – 1 Samuel 6:5.
- "Give glory to the LORD your God before he brings darkness, and before your feet stumble on the mountains at twilight; while you look for light, he turns it into gloom and makes it deep darkness." – Jeremiah 13:16.

Ironically, this is exactly what the man will do when he acknowledges God's glory in the healing work of Jesus, while the authorities will turn their backs on the manifestation of God's glory. But at the moment the authorities believe they have the upper hand, because they base their case on their belief that Jesus is a "sinner"

because he violated the sabbath law. But the man is not intimidated by their claims or their position in society; instead, he contrasts their claim with the reality of his experience and hence his knowledge: *“I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see”* (9:25). The authorities’ focus on the violation of the sabbath law has blinded them to the miraculous healing that is the sign of God’s work in their presence; but they persist in their interrogation of the man, hoping to uncover potential inconsistencies in the man’s testimony and gather additional evidence against Jesus: *“What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?”* (9:26). But the man will not be fooled into believing that the authorities are interested in gathering information; so, he cleverly turns the authorities’ questions against them by asking *“do you also want to become his disciples?”* (9:27). This causes the Pharisees to drop any pretense of objective inquiry on their part as *“they reviled him, saying, ‘You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses’”* (9:28). The verb “revile” (*loidoreo*) conveys a sense of serious insult and in other places in the New Testament suggests situations of persecution and abuse (*“When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure”* – 1 Corinthians 4:12). Referring to themselves as “disciples of Moses” stresses their faithfulness to the Mosaic Law; to these authorities, one can be either a disciple of Moses or a disciple of Jesus, but not both. But while these authorities claim that Moses is superior to Jesus because *“God has spoken through Moses,”* they fail to realize that Jesus is *“the Word [that] became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth”* (1:14) and that while *“the law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ”* (1:17). But the man is not intimidated by the Pharisees’ claim to superior status, nor is he governed by the fear that shaped his parents’ response to the authorities. Instead, he goes on the offensive, once again confronting the authorities with the contradictions of their own positions. First, he turns the authorities’ assertions of their lack of knowledge of Jesus’ origins back on them by reminding them of one of the conventional theological beliefs of Judaism: that God does not listen to sinners but to the righteous (*“If I cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened”* – Psalm 66:18). The man also confronts the authorities with the scale of the miracle; his completely unprecedented healing makes sense only if God is the source of the healing: *“Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”* (9:32-33). While the Pharisees show themselves to be blind to the presence of Jesus as the “light of the world,” the formerly blind man shows that he recognizes his healing to be a sign revealing Jesus’ identity; *“consequently, he can see, although not perfectly, that it signifies something extraordinary about Jesus.”* (Martin and Wright).

The authorities are offended that the man has taken on their role as a teacher of the faith, especially because they consider him a “sinner,” again linking sin and illness: “*You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?*” (9:34); the result is that the man suffers what his parent had feared as they drove him out of the synagogue and the covenant community.

It is precisely at this moment that Jesus reappears when he “*heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’*” (9:35), fulfilling his promise that “*everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away*” (6:37). The healed man is confronted by Jesus with the possibility that the Son of Man is already present; Jesus’ words of self-identification lead to the man’s confession of faith: “*Lord, I believe*” (9:38). This marks a progression of the man’s gift of sight from physical healing to spiritual and theological sight. The result is that the man worships Jesus, acknowledges the presence of God in Christ; “*faith in the incarnation involves spiritual sight, ‘the eyes of faith,’ which discern God and his work in material realities.*” (Martin and Wright).

After the man has come to faith in Christ through his being able to see Jesus as “the light of the world,” the focus shifts to the purpose of Jesus’ ministry as revealed in this miracle: “*I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind*” (9:39). Sight and blindness are not defined by one’s physical sight, but by one’s openness to the revelation of God in Jesus. The Pharisees have been within earshot of Jesus’ statement and respond by asking our Lord “*surely we are not blind, are we?*” (9:40). Jesus’ response to them is to assert that “*if you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains*” (9:41). The authorities’ “sin” is due to their resistance to Jesus; “*in their immovable insistence on their own rectitude the Pharisees demonstrate their own blindness and hence judge themselves.*” (Gail O’Day). For those who receive him, Jesus imparts the spiritual illumination of faith and the “light of life” (8:12). Those who reject Jesus are rendered spiritually blind, because they do not perceive the light (“*Bring forth the people who are blind, yet have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears!*” – Isaiah 43:8).

When the man born blind comes into the presence of the one who is the “light of the world,” the light transforms the darkness in which he lived so that not only can his physical eyes now see but he is given spiritual sight so that he can worship Jesus as his Lord and Saviour. This light continues to shine before us as we come into the presence of the one in whom “*there is no darkness at all; the night and the day are both alike. The Lamb is the light of the city of God; shine in my heart, Lord Jesus*”

(ELW Hymn 815). But as the Light of Christ exposed the darkness of those who prefer living according to their own ways rather than according to the one who is *“the way, and the truth, and the life,”* so does the light that shines before us expose our own sinfulness, our own selfishness, and our own desires to turn from the Light of Christ to the ways of darkness that draw us away from God. In the Letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle warns those who have come into the light through their baptism into Christ to turn away from the darkness that always seeks to extinguish the light that has drawn them together into the Body of Christ:

- “Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be associated with them. For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light – for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true ... Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what some people do secretly; but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, ‘Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine in you.’” – Ephesians 5:6-14.

As we heed the call of God’s Word to *“return to the LORD your God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love”* (Joel 2:13), may we see the light that exposes our flaws and imperfections not as an unwelcome reality check but as an invitation to *“lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely”* (Hebrews 12:1) so that we might reflect our faith in the one who is the “light of the world” as we fulfill our baptismal calling to *“let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven”* (Matthew 5:16).

Amen.