

Fourth Sunday in Lent - March 15, 2026

1 Samuel 16:1-13 - Psalm 23 - Ephesians 5:8-14 - John 9:1-41

“Jesus opened my eyes”

1. Seeing a person wearing the stripped uniform of an inmate does something to your head, whether you want it or not, especially if you’re visiting inside the jail within feet of their cells.
 - a. You may want to repress the thought, you may wish to think you’re above it, but it creeps up undaunted: what did they DO?
 - b. As some of you know, I am a new volunteer for Indiana AID (Assistance to Immigrants in Detention), and a couple of weeks ago I joined 11 other people in the bi-monthly in-person visit of ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) detainees in Brazil Indiana, at the Clay County jail.
 - c. We were there for about two hours.
 - d. It’s just the volunteers and the detainees, as the guards close the doors and leave us inside the inmate area. Closed Circuit cameras watch us.
 - e. My team of two others and I visited block M and block O, in what I understand is a recently-built addition to the jail.
 - i. Picture a wedge of a Trivial Pursuit game piece.
 - ii. Each wedge-shaped jail block has an open common area with stainless steel tables and stools bolted to the ground, a flat screen TV high on one wall playing children’s cartoons,
 - iii. and on the curved side of the block wedge there are 12 or so cells with bunk beds a toilet and sink, two levels of cells, each cell with a metal and glass door,
 - iv. all behind what you picture as prison bars segregating and potentially locking down the cells from the common area. All enclosed.
 - v. No windows that I could see. Only a large skylight three stories above us, letting in light, but on a cloudy, rainy Saturday morning I couldn’t know if the far away glass was transparent and could ever show a blue sky at all.
 - f. ICE detainees are segregated from all other regular prisoners in the building.
 - i. The first block had 4 detainees, the second block about 18 detainees,
 - ii. all in the orange and dingy gray stripped uniforms and wearing ill-fitting orange crocs.

- iii. We sat around a couple of tables, we shared a bible passage and a reflection, and we told them about the support they can get from IndianaAID
 - 1. (\$20 for the commissary or the communications account, a paper list of phone numbers and websites for lawyers).
 - 2. IndianaAID is a volunteer group to support people with visits, they're not lawyers.
- iv. One of the team members had himself been a detainee in this very facility, and his presence and story gave the men a sense of connection and hope.
- g. And of course we heard the stories the detainees eagerly shared.
 - i. Stories of otherwise inconsequential traffic stops that turned into an ICE detention because they didn't have a driver's license.
 - ii. Stories of showing up for their regular ICE check-in only to be hauled off to jail.
 - iii. Stories of people who had ongoing asylum cases, or valid visas, and yet they were still detained.
 - iv. Stories of having a court hearing on video from jail and already agreeing to voluntary removal from the US, only to continue to find themselves still held in jail.
 - v. Stories of detainees who didn't have their family member's cell phone number memorized and being prevented by the jail staff from looking for it in their wallet locked away with all their belongings.
 - vi. Stories of trying to connect with lawyers, worrying about how to pay for them, having a few minutes on video calls with family members on jail-owned tablets or audio calls on phones attached to the wall in the common area (expensive calls, all ran by a for-profit business contracting with the jail).
 - vii. And stories of not wanting to make the calls because they can't stand watching a young daughter crying for her dad.
- h. We also heard stories by prison guards who are happy we visit, because they said that detainees are "calm" after we leave.
 - i. My heart is rent in two: I'm not there to make them compliant to the system!
 - ii. But also, maybe a visit by people from the outside gives detainees a moment to catch their breath in this stifling place.

- iii. Guards have a job, and families to feed. Maybe they distance themselves emotionally from the whole situation and think: I'm just here to enact the consequences of the law.
 - iv. Or maybe they see this as righteous and honorable work done on behalf of a community to keep "people like them" away from "people like us."
 - i. I try to concentrate on all their stories. I look into their eyes.
 - i. I speak in English and Spanish with detainees from Mexico and Nepal, from Venezuela and Algeria, Hoosier guards from Clay County.
 - ii. I try not to think about the politics or the law or the stigma but it is all swirling around in my head.
 - iii. I try to focus on the human being across the table from me.
- 2. The disciples, in today's story, couldn't focus on the human being begging by the side of the road. They engaged not in an exercise of compassion and human connection, but rather in a dangerous theological game of judgement.
 - a. If blindness (and illness in general) were considered in the ancient world as a result of one's own sinfulness, how does it work with this guy who was born blind?
 - i. Did he sin inside his mother's womb?
 - ii. Did mom's or dad's sin somehow travel genetically to him to punish him for their actions? Who sinned?
 - b. There on the side of the road wasn't a human being for them,
 - i. but a case study in their religious training,
 - ii. a theological punching bag which reminded them of how different they were from him (after all, they could SEE and he couldn't!).
 - iii. They saw someone clearly guilty by his own sin or by association.
 - c. But that's not who Jesus saw.
 - i. Jesus saw a person who needed healing.
 - ii. And he goes up to him and perhaps to echo the moment of creation when God made humans from muddy clay, Jesus spits on the dirt by the side of the road and makes some mud, puts it on the man's eyes, and tells him to go wash at the pool of Siloam.
 - iii. And when the man did, he could see!
 - d. Trouble was, no one else could see.
 - i. That is, they couldn't see HIM, because they were so used to disregarding him as a blind beggar.
 - ii. That can't be the same guy, can it?
 - iii. They could not SEE HIM for the healed human he now was.

- e. And, like the disciples, the religious authorities were focused on guilt and sin when evaluating the healing.
 - i. So, either someone is sinning by lying (was he really blind?)
 - ii. sinned by breaking the sabbath (Jesus healed him on the day of rest)
 - iii. or sinned by attaching themselves to a sinner (following Jesus).
 - f. Here is a miracle like never before (healing a man born blind) and afterwards a different kind of blindness is highlighted,
 - i. a spiritual blindness to the image of God in that person,
 - ii. or to the work of the Spirit among them,
 - iii. or the new perspective on what God's realm really means.
 - g. Here is a group of people whose beliefs were threatened by this anonymous formerly blind beggar.
 - i. His story of healing didn't fit their narrative, their understanding of the law, their theology.
 - ii. So, that's a pretty easy solution: he must be wrong somehow.
 - iii. They protected their entire moral context of society, a fragile house of cards it appears, because they couldn't bear questioning their assumptions, or consider that the world was truly different than what they imagined.
 - h. If that person continues to be wrong, or better yet, is not really a person because of what he did (or didn't do), I can go on living my life unbothered by gray areas.
 - i. He is a sinner.
 - ii. Or the guy who healed him is a sinner.
 - iii. As long as I can judge them as sinners, I don't have to worry about them.
 - iv. They will get what they deserve (blindness/prison).
 - v. Out of my hands. Just doing my job.
3. I want to be like Jesus in this story, in that jail, so why is it so incredibly hard!?
- a. Why do I keep parroting in my head the lines of judgement by the disciples and the religious leaders instead!?
 - b. Why do we fall into the trap of defending a fragile faith by blaming others and isolating ourselves from scrutiny?
 - i. It's unbearable to consider that the justice system may not be just.
 - ii. It's scary to consider that legal authority is being used to serve a biased or racist agenda

- iii. It's confusing to consider that breaking laws has different consequences for those who have money for lawyers, or carry a certain passport, or have a whiter color of skin.
- iv. It's challenging to consider that the guards could be doing their best to treat the detainees with compassion and respect.
- v. In fact, it is terrifying to consider what we would finally see clearly if we let Jesus put mud on our eyes and we go and wash away all that was preventing us from perceiving as Jesus did.
- vi. And maybe that's it.
 - 1. Maybe the key to this story is to consider ourselves the person born blind.
 - 2. And Jesus is offering us the chance to change, but with the caveat that there will be no turning back.
 - 3. To see as God sees, in a world that doesn't wish to do so.
- 4. I'll go back to Clay County jail the first Saturday of next month.
 - a. It will be Holy Saturday, the day Jesus was in the tomb, the day before Easter.
 - b. I'll momentarily be in a societal tomb with people trying to remain alive in a place where people are quite simply thrown away to be out of sight.
 - c. I take you with me in there, in my heart.
 - d. I go there for myself and in your name to let them know we see them.
 - e. We see them.
 - f. If Jesus opens our eyes to see them, I wonder who else you and I can finally see when we wash the mud from our eyes and walk out of this building.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-john-91-41-11>

Reflection questions

1. Share a story when God changed how you saw someone you had dismissed or disregarded.
2. In John 9 there is talk of sin, of blindness, of being able to see. What is the message that Jesus was trying to share and how was it received by the different characters in the story?
3. Where would you ask God to help you see more like God sees things?