

Sermon Notes – March 15, 2026
Peace Lutheran Church
Holy Gospel of St. John 9: 1-41
“In Our Blindness ...Enlightenment”

If last week's gospel reading was notable for the longest conversation Jesus carries out in the Gospel of John, this week's text is notable for the longest absence of Jesus from John's gospel. And if last week's texts included images of the upwelling of water in unexpected places, this week's texts highlight unexpected anointing; the youngest of Jesse's children, the man born blind and of course Jesus, the highly controversial Messiah (“anointed one”).

A translation issue may help re-frame some of the potential problems with today's gospel text. Because there is no punctuation in the original Greek manuscript, translators must decide how to break up sentences. In today's text, the decision is unusually consequential. When the disciples ask, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2), Jesus' answer is meant to interrupt their false assumptions. The text clearly addresses one such assumption: Jesus answers, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned” (v. 3). This is a powerful rebuke to a theology that assumes all physical suffering is a penalty for sin. (Pastorally, we hear echoes of this every time someone asks after a difficult diagnosis, “What did I do to deserve this?” Jesus' retort to the disciples remains a useful text to recall with gratitude and love in such situations.)

However, in the NRSV text version, the translation of the next phrase introduces another problem; the implication that the man was born blind as a sort of object lesson for others. Remarkably, the Greek text does not say that; and an entire phrase (“He was born blind”) must be added to Jesus' words in verse 3 to render such a translation. By making difficult choices about punctuation, we can eliminate the problematic phrase inserted by translators and, more importantly, yield better theology: Neither this man nor his parents sinned. So that God's works might be revealed in him, we must work the works of Him who sent me while it is day.” It follows logically - and powerfully - that Jesus then goes on to do the very work He describes, anointing the man with mud, and indeed, the man becomes one who in turn reveals God's works to all those around him.

Psalm 23 contains a now-familiar, if beautifully unlikely, anointing; even through the valley of the shadow of death and in the presence of enemies, God “anoint[s] my head with oil” (Ps. 23: 5). The prayer of the day implores God, “Anoint us with Your Spirit,” even as David received an unexpected royal anointing. After Jesus' strange anointing with mud (and washing in the pool), the man seems to be commissioned as a witness, testifying to the truth: “Though I was

blind, but now I see...." (John 9: 25). Jesus' long absence from the text allows the man to find his voice even as others seek to silence him. Beautifully, Jesus seeks out the man after hearing of his ostracization - the very ministry for which Jesus himself is anointed Messiah.