

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 15, 2026

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Annie Dillard, in her 1975 Pulitzer Prize winning book *Tinker at Pilgrim Creek*, writes about the gift of seeing, of vision both natural and sublime. Seeing not as merely the outward perception of the material world but as an inner knowing. She prizes moments, she says, when *the world is unraveled from reason*.

She cites a book that she “chanced upon” by a German, Marius von Senden, written in the 1920s before World War Two. Entitled *Space and Sight: The Perception of Space and Shape in the Congenitally Blind Before and after Operation*, the book details recovery of sight in those born blind. Almost all copies of the book were lost when the publishing house was bombed during the war. It resurfaced years later in the UK and was translated into English in 1954.

When surgeons learned how to perform safe cataract procedures, they crossed Europe and the US operating on dozens of women and men of all ages who had been blind since birth. Von Senden discovered that sight recovery is not as joyful and wondrous as one might expect. He wrote, *the process of learning to see...is an enterprise fraught with innumerable difficulties, and the common idea that the patient must necessarily be delighted with the gifts of light and color bequeathed to him by the operation, is wholly remote from the facts*.

As Dillard notes, in general the newly sighted see the world as a dazzle of color-patches. They are pleased by the sensation of color but the rest of seeing may be tormentingly difficult. The color-patches are perceived as substantial; the newly sighted have the sensation of bumping into them, of having to navigate around them; they become disoriented in space. For many, the mental effort of coping with sightedness is overwhelming. It oppresses them to realize how vast the world is, previously perceived as being near at hand and thus manageable.

Of a twenty-one year old woman, von Senden notes: *Her unfortunate father, who had hoped for so much from this operation, wrote that his daughter carefully shuts her eyes whenever she wishes to go about the house, especially when she comes to a staircase, and that she is never happier or more at ease when, by closing her eyelids, she relapses into her former state of total blindness*.

And yet, says Dillard, many newly sighted people speak well of the world and teach us how dull our vision is. *A little girl visits a garden, she is greatly*

*astonished and can scarcely be persuaded to answer, stands speechless in front of a tree, which she only names on taking hold of it, and then as 'the tree with lights in it.'*

*Another girl was dazzled by the world's brightness and kept her eyes shut for two weeks...when at the end of that time she opened her eyes again, the more she directed her gaze upon everything about her, the more it could be seen how an expression of gratification and astonishment overspread her features; she repeatedly exclaimed: 'Oh God! How beautiful!'*

The story of the man born blind in John's gospel is less about a man's experience of newfound sight—we learn nothing of how he appropriated that gift, whether oppressed by it or whether, in time, he too became astonished. After his healing, he seems blasé in his comments to his neighbors.

The story is more about the community's response to the man's blindness and his subsequent healing at the hands of Jesus who, in a wonderfully earthy scene, kneels down, spits on the ground, makes a muddy paste, rubs the salve on the man's eyes, and tells him to go wash in the pool of Siloam. The religious officials—and to an extent, the man's own neighbors—are inwardly blind, unwilling or unable to open the eyes of their hearts, their vision dimmed to darkness by dogmatic correctness and smug certitude. Rather than open to a disorienting world of light they retreat into the darkness.

*In the story John tells, writes Debie Thomas, Jesus sees the blind man—a man whom no one else really sees. In the eyes of the religious officials, the man is contaminated and expendable—he's not a human being, he is Blindness...the condition itself...Which is why, when the man's sight is restored by Jesus, his own townspeople—the people with whom he has lived and worshipped for years—don't recognize him...To do so would be to recognize a common humanity, a bond, a kinship. And that would be intolerable.*

Like many of those blind-from-birth patients, the townspeople's nascent gift of seeing, and that of the religious officials, was felt to be a burden, navigating that terrain fraught with difficulties; a retreat into non-seeing infinitely more desirable, dullness of vision a relief from the unbearable suffering and exquisite beauty of the world.

So where does mere sight end and true seeing begin?

Dillard writes: *The secret of seeing is the pearl of great price...The literature of illumination reveals this above all; although it comes to those who wait for it, it is*

*always, even to the most practiced and adept, a gift and total surprise...I cannot cause light; the most I can do is try to put myself its beam. It is possible, in deep space, to sail on solar wind. Light, be it particle or wave, has force: you rig a giant sail till you yourself are a sail, whetted, translucent, broadside to the merest puff.*

Last autumn, in the final days of my work as a hospice chaplain before retiring, I felt myself similarly broadside to the merest puff of the Spirit. I was carried along, felt myself at once both invisible and wholly present, an observer and yet instrumental in harnessing whatever incoming breeze there was of grace and love. Perhaps it was the awareness of my imminent leave-taking that made those last days so luminous.

A man bedbound, a Vietnam veteran, his body broken by Agent Orange and his spirit crippled by PTSD, barely able to move or drink or feed himself without assistance from his wife and caregivers; while all around him in his makeshift bedroom downstairs, books lined the shelves, book after book about spirituality of every stripe that he had studied for years and yet, in the end, he still sought to *see*, to catch a glimpse of God.

Another man, at home with his family, seated in his recliner, watched his granddaughter out in the yard, running with joyful abandon, her puppy trailing close behind in the waning autumn light. He didn't want to die, he would tell me, not while he could still *see* and be surrounded by his beloved family.

And still another, for years given to the hard work of recovery, a crazy guy with a checkered past, he would say, who loved to watch birds in autumn migration flocking to his feeders. At the end of our last visit, knowing that we would not meet again, we stood close, facing one another, our eyes joining and gazing, and seeing there love in the still depths.

*When her doctor took her bandages off and led her into the garden, writes Annie Dillard the girl who was no longer blind saw 'the tree with lights in it.' It was for this tree, she says, I searched through the peach orchards of summer, the forests of the fall and down winter and spring for years.*

*Then one day I was walking along Tinker Creek thinking of nothing at all and I saw the tree with lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame...It was less like seeing than like being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance.*

*The flood of fire abated, but I'm still spending the power. Gradually the lights went out on the cedar, the colors died, the cells unflamed and disappeared. I was still ringing. I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck. AMEN*