

# But Now I See

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22nd Sunday after Pentecost

## **Isaiah 42: 14-16, 18**

For a long time I have held my peace,  
I have kept still and restrained myself;  
now I will cry out like a woman in labor,  
I will gasp and pant.  
<sup>15</sup> I will lay waste mountains and hills,  
and dry up all their herbage;  
I will turn the rivers into islands,  
and dry up the pools.  
<sup>16</sup> I will lead the blind  
by a road they do not know,  
by paths they have not known  
I will guide them.  
I will turn the darkness before them into light,  
the rough places into level ground.  
These are the things I will do,  
and I will not forsake them.  
<sup>18</sup> Listen, you that are deaf;  
and you that are blind, look up and see!

## **Gospel Mark 10:46-52**

<sup>46</sup>They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. <sup>47</sup>When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" <sup>48</sup>Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" <sup>49</sup>Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." <sup>50</sup>So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. <sup>51</sup>Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." <sup>52</sup>Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

The word of God for the people of God—thanks be to God.

Please join me in prayer:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing to you, Oh God, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Today's reading brings us one of the most beloved of the miracle stories—the blind man whose sight is restored.

Go—your faith has made you well.

I don't know about you, but how I feel when I read these stories changes from day to day. I have two basic responses. The first is to be comforted by the image of a God whose grace can heal all ills. A God who loves us and cares for us and heals us.

And there are other days when I read healing miracles and I get stuck thinking about all the things that haven't been healed. All the things that feel broken. And on those days, I come to scripture *longing* for the kind of healing that is being described, and *frustrated* that it's not what seems to be happening for me... for the people I love... for our community... our world.

In this long year of covid and transition, there have been a lot of days like that.

When we imagine ourselves in this story, we are the blind man looking for healing. And if we could throw off our cloaks and ask Jesus to heal us—as individuals, as a society—we are pretty sure that we would.

“Immediately,” Mark tells us, the man regained his sight. And then he follows Jesus.

There are two parts to this story, and maybe we tend to focus on the one and forget the other. The man is healed of his blindness—he can see!—and then he follows.

As I've been thinking about the scripture this week, this is the part that has been coming back to my mind again and again: the consequences of healing: what happens next, and what do we do when God's grace helps us to remove our blinders and to see the world anew.

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When Lizzie was a baby, there would be some nights when she just would not fall asleep and I'd find myself lying in the dark with her, cycling through what seemed like every slow song I could think of, trying to lull her to sleep without falling asleep myself... and after I'd sung Tinkle Twinkle, and all the baby songs that didn't drive me nuts, and the songs I remembered my own parents singing to me when I was little—“Let Me Call You Sweetheart” and Tu Ra Lu Ra Lu Ra—if it was a long night and she still wasn't asleep, I'd sing Amazing Grace.

I don't think it's meant to be a lullaby, for sure, but it soothed *me*—and that soothed her, and often enough, she'd fall asleep as I sat with her in the dark, thinking about the words. I once was blind, but now I see.

The words to Amazing Grace were written by British abolitionist John Newton, and the metaphor of blindness and sight was a powerful one for Newton's own story.

Newton, you see, had not always been an abolitionist. He had begun his career as a captain of slave ships in the late eighteenth century. Let us imagine him in that role—think about the illustrations you may have seen of the transatlantic slave ships—bodies packed together so tightly in a desperate attempt to turn human beings into profitable commodities. Think about the sounds—the weeping, perhaps, as the newly enslaved mourned being torn from homes and family—the din of multiple languages as people tried to understand what was happening and where they were going. Think about the smells.

Think about how blind you would have to be to not know—immediately—that all of this was wrong.

Newton, like so many others—like us, perhaps—did not immediately know how blind he was.

It would take some time for him to be able to *see*—to recognize that he had been wrong, and to try and atone for the horrible atrocities he had earlier participated in.

I spend a lot of my time studying and teaching about men and women like Newton in my work as a historian of religion. And in recent years, I've come to realize that part of what I find so compelling about the very imperfect—to put it mildly—Christian reformers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is the ways that they open a window for us to our own imperfections—our own blindness—precisely because with the gift of time, we can identify theirs so much more easily.

And this, I think, can help us to recognize where grace—amazing grace—is working in our own lives to open our eyes, if we only know the right way to look. It may not look as dramatic—as *immediate*—as it sounds in Mark's gospel. But perhaps we might hear Isaiah's words differently: you that are blind, look up and see!

So let me tell you more about what I mean—and to do this, I'm going to talk about three nineteenth-century American women, and I'll apologize to all of you in advance for this—but I really can't help myself.

The first of these is a woman named Abigail Hyde. She's not someone you would have heard of—she lived a relatively quiet life in the early 1800s as a minister's wife in Massachusetts, and she was a hymnist and occasional essay writer. I first came across her when I was trying to decide what to write my second book about, when I was visiting one of my favorite libraries at Harvard and just exploring the archives, no sure what I was looking for.

And as I was poking about, I came across a file of her essays—and one of them just about knocked me out of my chair.

It was called “Prayer for the Oppressed,” and it opened with a discussion of what was then the great question dividing the country—how to end what she called “the great national evil of slavery.” The essay was undated, but it was probably written in the mid-1830s. The time had come for action, Hyde wrote, and among other things, she said that American Christians ought to be *praying*

for the end of all oppression. In fact, she argued, Christians already were praying for the end of all oppression—but they just might not realize it yet. If they prayed the Lord’s Prayer, then that is precisely what they were doing.

Line by line, Hyde went through the Lord’s Prayer, explaining how when we prayed “our Father” we recognized that all of humanity is one family—we all have the same right to call upon God as our divine parent. When we say “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” she writes, we are praying “that here as there love may be all pervading and supreme; that the great statute of God’s kingdom, ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,’ may rule in our own hearts and in the hearts of all men. It is to pray against all wrong and injustice, against whatever occasions sin, or inflicts misery.”

The Lord’s Prayer, in short, was an *abolitionist* prayer.

Well!

Now, there’s a lot that I can say about this as a primary source for 19<sup>th</sup> century religious women’s history—and if you want to hear me opine about that, please find me in coffee hour and I promise I will talk your ear off and you will regret ever asking me about it—but I’ll admit that I read it first and foremost as a Christian woman of today, thinking about how often I have prayed those words and not thought nearly as much about *what* I was praying *for*.

What does it mean to say “thy will be done”? What does it mean to pray to “our” Father? What I am committing myself to when I pray those words—what does the Lord’s Prayer ask of me?

For Hyde, it seemed clear. To pray the Lord’s Prayer meant to pray for the end of slavery. Wow. What does it mean for us? Every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer, are we praying for the end of white supremacy? Are we praying for an end to gender discrimination? When we say “OUR Father,” are we telling God that we recognize refugees and the oppressed as our family?

Wow.

I once was blind, but now I see.

But wait—I told you there would be three women. Because this story didn’t end the way I expected it to—the way I wanted it to.

Having read the essay on the Lord’s Prayer, I very excitedly began to look into Hyde’s life and work. I wanted to find an example of a righteous Christian woman who had lived out her faith and acted in a way that was wholly consistent with the ideas that she had expressed on paper.

You might be able to guess where this is going—it turned out, that’s not what she was.

How often is that the case.

Abigail Hyde was not an abolitionist after all. She opposed slavery, but she just could not see a way out of it. She was, in fact, like the vast majority of Americans at the time—and really, like the vast majority of us today. She could identify the problem. She wasn't ready to live the solution. It was too hard, too complicated. It would cause too much division, and too much strife. Her later writings reveal a lot of anxiety around this—a lot of hand-wringing. A lot of worrying about what to do.

She came so close—reading over her writing, a good century and a half later, I want to reach through the papers and shake her, to *make* her take action, to *make* her follow her thoughts to their logical conclusion. It is so clear to me what she should have done. But she could not see it.

She knew what was wrong. She didn't know how to fix it.

I don't know about you, but I know what that feels like.

It feels like I have blinders on. Like the answer is just right there—just out of my vision. I just can't get to it. Or at least, not on my own.

So let's think, then, about two other women—two women who lived around the same time, who confronted the same sorts of problems, but who faced the challenges Hyde identified in a totally different way—Sarah and Angelina Grimké.

The Grimké sisters of South Carolina have their own story of transformation—of once being blind, but then being able to see. They were born into a wealthy slaveholding family in the American South. It would have been very easy for them to behave the way that their family and their neighbors expected them to—to grow up to be Southern ladies who married Southern gentlemen and oversaw plantations of their own. To be blind to what was all around them—the suffering, the cruelty, and the sin of slavery and American racism. This blindness was the norm among the white women and men they grew up with—the people they worshipped with at their mother's Episcopal Church.

But this was not their story. They left the church of their youth, choosing instead to become Quakers—a tradition that valued both their abolitionism and their sense of calling as women of faith.

The Grimké sisters were not blind—they could see—and with a clarity that few others shared. They saw slavery for the evil it was. They saw, too, the injustice of a system that valued men's voices and men's teachings above women's. And they dedicated their lives to helping others see these truths, too. They went on speaking tours, among the first American women to do so, informing audiences about the horrors of slavery with the authority of those who had seen it firsthand. They wrote essays on abolition and on women's rights. When they were accused of exaggerating for effect, they gathered the stories of slavery from Southern newspapers—publishing them to reveal in the pro-slavery South's own words what slavery was really like (this book would be one of the major

inspirations for Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*). And when they were criticized for taking on such controversial and divisive issues—particularly because they were women, and it was simply a step too far to have *women* take on this sort of issue that was at once political and moral, economic and religious—when they were told to be quiet, they said something very brave and wise:

*Whatever is morally right for a man to do, is morally right for a woman to do.*

The rules that we humans put on society—about who is allowed to talk about important issues, about who we listen to, and who we don't, about what kind of changes are too radical, too divisive—what the Grimké sisters were saying is that none of that matters. If it is right, it is right.

The rest of the world had blinders on. Their faith had revealed a different truth, and they tried to share it with all who could hear or read their words.

Over a century later, their essays still resound with moral authority and clarity.

I get to teach about the Grimké sisters every fall in my women's history class, and it is always one of my favorite lectures. It is rare—in history as in the present—to find heroes to emulate. They are the closest that I've got. And it is precisely because of the ways that they responded to the wonderful gift and challenge that God gave them by opening their eyes.

We don't know what happened to the man whom Jesus heals here. Mark tells us that he followed Jesus. For how long? We don't know. Scripture only tells us that *immediately*—his life was changed.

We want this kind of healing.

And, I think, this kind of healing can scare us.

We want to be able to see clearly and truly, but we are worried, too, about what kinds of things might appear in our vision once the blinders are off. When the scales fall away, what will we see? What choices will we have to make? What changes might we be faced with?

When we pray the prayers we have said time and time again, but now the phrases have a new meaning—*thy will be done*—what do we do next?

And the answer to this fear, as ever, is to pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Our experience might not be like that of the blind man whose vision is restored immediately. Perhaps it will be more like Sofia in the book I shared with the children—a feeling of lightness, of fullness, a sense that we know what to do, after all. That God is guiding us forward, one step at a time. Helping us to see, if only we are brave enough to look.

And though I spend so much of my time thinking about the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we do not need to go back that far to understand this. We, too, live in complicated times, with big problems and big challenges that seem to stand in the way of our fixing them, or even of our identifying what the

root of the problem is. We are living in the midst of a global pandemic, during a moment of intensifying climate change, in a country that is deeply divided by politics and race, where incredible wealth and opportunity exists alongside poverty and suffering—and this is our everyday lives, and walking with blinders on can feel so much safer than being able to see.

What bravery that man had in asking Jesus to heal him. Who knew what he might see, once his eyes were opened? Who knew what his new visions might demand of him?

But through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, his faith made him well. And the Holy Spirit is with us still today, and will be with us tomorrow, and for all the tomorrows after that. The Holy Spirit can open our eyes, and can be with us as we, too, try to discern what comes next—now that we can see.

To turn to another of my favorite hymns, we might pray:

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart.

Be thou my wisdom, and thy my true word.

I ever with thee, and thou with me, Lord.

Heart of my own heart, whatever befall

Still be my vision, O ruler of all. Amen