

I Don't Know
The Rev. Amy Spagna
March 15, 2026 – Lent 4A
John 9:1-41

When something has gone not according to plan, the phrase "I don't know" is rarely a good answer. *Who knocked over that plant and made a mess? I don't know who did that; it jumped off the table on its own. How'd that dent get into my car's bumper when you were driving it? I don't know, someone else must've hit it. What happened to the money I gave you for groceries? I don't know, someone else must've taken it.*

Even when it's an honest answer, "I don't know" doesn't inspire confidence in the person who's saying it – far from it. They can't possibly be telling the truth. Someone has to know, for certain, what happened and who's responsible.

In the middle of an honest "I don't know" is where we first meet a man who's been blind since the day he was born. The unnamed man had met Jesus, who spread some mud on his eyes, then told him to go to the pool of Siloam and wash. As a result of that action, he soon finds his eyesight is restored. He doesn't know *how* it happened – just that it DID happen. And, as you might expect, not everyone is happy about it. The Pharisees who are interrogating him over it first insist that Jesus can't be from God because he'd done this on the Sabbath. Still others insist that he cannot have done this because "he's a sinner." And none of them can accept the healed man's honest statement that, "I don't know how he did it." Even his own parents throw him under an ox cart, so to speak: "We know this is our son, and we know he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees... he is of age; ask him" (Jn 9:20-21).

In other words: they don't get it. The irony of the situation is this. While the Pharisees are the ones accusing the healed man and Jesus both of committing a sin, they're the ones who commit what the writer(s) of John consider a major offense. They collectively fail to recognize this healing for what it is. It's a sign, a miraculous thing Jesus has done to demonstrate his unique connection with God and to encourage the witnesses thereof to have faith in him. The Pharisees in this case are so concerned with trying to figure out who sinned that they can't accept the sign for what it is. Instead, they become like prosecutors going after a hostile witness. They try to get him to admit that his disability was somehow his own darn fault. And when they can't do that, they throw him out onto the street.

Just as was the case with the story of Photini, the Samaritan woman at the well that we heard, last week, there are many threads we could pull out of this episode. Blindness, sin, and healing are the most obvious ones. A fourth thread, which is the one I want to focus on is this: how do we accept what IS, without trying to explain it or to assign blame – especially when that acceptance could well turn our worlds upside down?

This is the second of three lengthy episodes from John in a row that lectionary serves us in this Lenten season. It's the first real hint we get that all is not going well where Jesus and the authorities are concerned. These authorities do not like that Jesus is popular with the crowds, or that he does things like healing a blind man on the Sabbath and calling them out on their capricious enforcement of "the rules." When they start getting into it with Jesus, this becomes a "stop and pay attention" moment. We're being set up for further conflict between Jesus and the authorities. None of them will

end so well for anyone involved. And, as we will see next week, they only strengthen the resolve of the authorities to do something about this loudmouthed prophet and rabbi from Nazareth.

Who exactly are these authority figures? In this instance, the people John names as "The Jews" and "The Pharisees" are one and the same. The Greek word used for them here, *Ioudaioi*, isn't exactly a term of endearment for these elites of the community in Jerusalem. We also need to take care to note that the term *Ioudaioi* does not refer to the Jewish people as a whole. They are the highly educated "leader" class, and, here, they are the "monitors of Jewish society, determining what is allowable in public life ... Historically, the fourth Gospel overstates their influence."¹ Among their concerns are public baptisms, a la what John the Baptist had been doing, as well as what was considered "proper" activity for the Sabbath. As John's narrative progresses, these Pharisees become increasingly frustrated with Jesus' ability to connect with, and positively impact, everyday people. "Even so, their concerns—shared with the chief priests—extend beyond jealousy: 'If we let him go on like this ... the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation'" (John 11:48).²

For this group of Pharisees, the healing of the man born blind becomes just one more "troublesome" thing in a long string of "troublesome" things that Jesus does. In this instance, they take it out on the formerly blind man. They fixate on the "HOW" behind his sudden change in status, rather than anything else. They ask the formerly

¹ Emerson Powery, "Commentary on John 9:1-41." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-john-91-41-11> [accessed March 9, 2026].

² Ibid.

blind man five times how Jesus has opened his eyes. It suggests likely that they are both fixated solely on the actual method, and that they are trying to get the healed man to say something they can use to trap him. They miss out on the deeper question: "Who is this healer?... The formerly blind man answers, in what ends up being one of those rare places in Scripture that is actually comic, whether the religious leaders want to know what Jesus did because they want to become his disciples. We know they are not interested in becoming his followers. They want to trap a threatening rabbi (teacher) and healer who confronts them with their unmerciful rules, like not being allowed to do a holy work on the Sabbath. The religious leaders even turn against the now-sighted man with disgust that he, a sinner, would deign to tell them how to think about Jesus. You can almost smell the vainglory dripping off [them]... "³

It is Jesus who gets the last word when it comes to these leaders: "Now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains" (Jn 9:41). Do you notice how he never says anything about what the Pharisees might have done that qualifies as "sin"? He doesn't have to... because within the world of John's Gospel, the only thing that could have provoked this response was the Pharisees' failure to see the healing as a sign that Jesus was from God, and believe in him.

And where does that put us, who sometimes miss signs of God's presence that should be just as obvious as a miracle healing, or ask the wrong questions of those who are describing their encounters with God? Does that make us "sinners" in the same vein as this group of leaders who can't get past the healed man's honest, "I don't know"?

³ Melinda Quivik, "Commentary on John 9:1-41." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-john-91-41-7> [accessed March 9, 2026].

For the writer(s) of John, the answer is yes. That failure to recognize what's really going on separates people from God, which is the classical definition of "sin." That said, their worldview wasn't nuanced at all – as in, you either see and believe, or you don't. There's no gray area for things like 21st-century New England kinds of skepticism, the damage done to people's faith at the hands of the institutional Church, or even the thousand more distractions we have to deal with on a daily basis. That said, we still struggle to deal with the uncertainty of an "I don't know." However, maybe having a willingness to exist in that uncertain space is where the door can get cracked open just a little bit. And maybe that crack is enough to allow us to join the healed man in saying, "If this man were not from God, he could do nothing" (Jn 9:32).