



First United

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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MARCH 15, 2026

THE SERVICE FOR THE LORD'S DAY

GATHERING MUSIC

WELCOME & INTENTIONS

In today's gospel reading, Jesus heals a man who was born blind, but the miracle is quickly overshadowed by conflict that spirals outward through different factions of his community. For the blind man, however, theological questions and entrapments are of little use: he life was transformed when Jesus healed him. He was blind, and now he sees. How often do we muddy miracles with questions about propriety and procedure? The blind man shows us how to embrace the miraculous. Our encounters with Jesus may not lead to the type of healing that the blindman received, but Jesus does heal us from the need to point fingers, lay blame, and treat goodness with suspicion. The prophet Isaiah declared that the anointed one would "restore sight to the blind." Today, Jesus will do just that. He has chosen his path. As we join Jesus, God prepares us to receive abundance, grace poured out, even before we know our need, even before we ask.

*GATHERING WORDS

On this fourth Lenten Sunday, we journey again toward the cross.
We feel the weight of all that lies ahead. We wrestle with coming sorrow.
We gather with our hearts guarded against the hardship of this journey.
Instead, God of Grace, you pour out blessings.
Instead, you anoint us with oil.
Instead, you fill our cups to overflowing.
We find beauty in dry places, abundance in want, and compassion in despair.
You call us to living water, and with our longings fulfilled, we respond with praise!

*OPENING HYMN

#803- *My Shepherd Will Supply My Need*

***My shepherd will supply my need; Jehovah is God's name.
In pastures fresh she makes me feed, beside the living stream.
She brings my wandering spirit back when I forsake her ways,
And leads me, for her mercy's sake, in paths of truth and grace.***

***When I walk through the shades of death your presence is my stay;
One word of your supporting breath drives all my fears away.
Yor hand, in sight of all my foes, does still my table spread;
My cup with blessings overflows; your oil anoints my head.***

***The sure provisions of my God attend me all my days;
O may your house be my abode, and all my work be praise.
There would I find a settled rest, while others go and come;
No more a stranger, or a guest, but like a child at home.***

CALL TO CONFESSION

In our gospel reading for today, Jesus and the disciples encounter a man who was blind, and the disciples ask Jesus, “who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” And Jesus replied, differences in ability, nor any health issues that causing suffering, nor anything in this man’s story, was EVER about sin.

Our Christian tradition, our churches, and our world are rife with stories where difference is mistaken for deficiency, inferiority, even sin, with dire consequences. These stories and histories of ableism, of racism, and so many other isms are testing us, challenging us to open toward new understanding and acknowledge with vulnerability where we have caused hurt and harm. So in this moment, let us open our hearts, minds and spirits to this call to repentance—a call to change our minds. Let us pray:

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Advocating God, you are never far from those who need your attention. You turn our faces to injustice and invite us to look again, seeing the assumptions that stand in the way of abundance. We confess that we have failed to answer your call to justice, compassion, and right relationship. We stay back even when the waters of baptism call us forward. We separate ourselves, even though the bread and cup beckon us into community. We hide our wounds, even though the oil of anointing waits at the ready when we are able to share our vulnerabilities. Forgive us, Holy one. When we are lost in our mourning, anoint us with the oil of gladness. When guilt presses hard, give us a garment of praise Amen.

KYRIE

#577- *Kyrie Eleison*

***Kyrie eleison. Kyrie eleison.
Kyrie eleison. Kyrie eleison.***

Silence is kept for Prayer and Reflection.

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

Listen to the sound of grace poured out! Let your soul receive this good news: There is no story we can’t unlearn, and no way of loving we can’t learn anew. The God who has already forgiven us and freed us will keep on inviting us to change and grow. Rejoice—for we are a new creation!

*RESPONSE TO GRACE

#582- *Glory to God, Whose Goodness Shines on Me*

*Glory to God, whose goodness shines on me,
And to the Son, whose grace has pardoned me,
And to the Spirit, whose love has set me free.
As it was in the beginning, as now and ever shall be. Amen.*

*World without end, without end, Amen.
World without end, without end, Amen.
World without end, without end, Amen.
As it was in the beginning, as now and ever shall be. Amen.*

*PASSING OF THE PEACE

The Peace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, be with you!
And also with you!

NEWS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

God of heaven and earth, in a cloud of confusion, we seek revelation.
In the face of manipulation, we seek truth. In the gloom of regret, we seek new life.
Speak to us now; grant us intention and tenderness,
so that we may understand your Word for us this day
and witness to your work in the world and in us,
through Jesus Christ, our healer and our hope. Amen.

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 23
John 9:1-41

SERMON

“Mud Bath”

“Well, whose fault is it?” Our gospel reading this morning begins with mud-slinging when Jesus’s disciples demand of their teacher, “Who sinned—this man or his parents?” It’s the first of several false dichotomies in this passage from John. We humans like things to be black and white—straight forward, no questions. Either this one thing is completely true, or it is completely false. The problem, of course, is that our world is more nuanced than that: we cannot flatten our reality into black and white or even 500 shades of gray, we live in a technicolor full spectrum world of scarlets and magentas, fluorescent yellows and golds, turquoise and indigos, too.

We have evolved to seek out patterns in the world, striving to bring more order into what seems chaotic; but sometimes we get it wrong, yet we insist some things are cause and effect when they are not related at all. If you take away one thing from this morning’s service, let it be this: God, the one who heals us, does not and will never use our bodies to punish us. There is no connection between disability and sin nor being temporarily healthy as a sign of righteousness. In John’s gospel, Jesus speaks about light and dark to explore faith and understanding. But here, when the disciples reveal they have been taking this metaphor too literally, Jesus takes some time to course-correct.

As is often the case in John’s gospel, the miracle itself is quite brief, yet it leads to controversy and to more in-depth teaching from Jesus, though our reading today cuts off before Jesus will unpack the healing for us and declare, “I am the good shepherd.” Thankfully, that is a familiar passage, so but it helps us to understand what is happening with the blind man when Jesus

describes how sheep recognize the shepherd's voice and follow long before sight is even part of the equation.

The healing begins with Jesus seeing the man on the side of the road—not just noticing a beggar, but really seeing him. Scholar Debie Thomas declares that Jesus seeing this man fully is the first miracle here: “In the story John tells, Jesus sees the blind man — a man whom no one else really sees. In the eyes of his peers, the man is contaminated, burdensome, and expendable. In his community’s calculus of human worth, the blind man barely registers — he’s not a human being; he’s Blindness. The condition itself, with all of its accumulated meanings.”¹ As is often the case, this miracle is not just about healing the man physically, but about restoring him to community, about righting wrong relationship.

The act of healing here is messy. Jesus gets down into the mud, which really shouldn’t surprise us as we know from the story of creation that the Holy One gets their hands dirty creating humanity. Here, Jesus returns to dust and dirt to re-create this man and restore his humanity. It’s a messy process. Spit and dirt, it turns out, much like dust and breath, can become something holy. Jesus sends the man to the mikvah—the pool of Siloam—for a ritual bath of purification because he wanted there to be no doubt that the man was clean in body and spirit. Remember: the formerly blindman’s story was never about sin.

When he returns to town, the neighbors who have walked by him his entire life do not recognize him. They cannot perceive him without his disability. When he speaks to them, affirming his identity, their minds are blown, and their interrogations begin. They ask the same questions over and over: “HOW?” and “WHO?”

I can only imagine how disappointed the man was that his neighbors were more curious about the process than about his experience. No one – not even the man’s parents — expresses joy, or wonder, or gratitude, or awe. No one says, “I am so happy for you!” or asks, “What is it like to see for the first time? Does the sunlight hurt your eyes? What are you excited to look at first?” Not “What was it like to see your face for the first time, reflected back in the pool of Siloam?” Nor “What’s your favorite color?”

His neighbors, the temple leaders, the Pharisees all demand that he retell them the story of how he was healed over and over again, questioning the process and seeming to miss miracle amid the mud. I want so desperately for this story to end differently, to imagine how we might respond differently if this miracle happened in our own community.

However, I am reminded of the story of Nurul Amin Shah Alam, a mostly-blind refugee who died recently in Buffalo. Nurul was Arakan Rohingya, part of a Muslim minority group in Myanmar, who came to the US as a refugee after genocide tore his community apart. Nurul had a supportive family, but they could not stay home from work to care for him. Without access to consistent health care and mobility aids, Nurul got around using two curtain rods as canes. A year ago, during a surprise snow squall, Nurul got lost while walking. He ended up

¹ Debie Thomas, “Now I See,” *Journey with Jesus*.

about five miles from home and was wandering through people's backyards. Instead of approaching him to ask if he was okay, they called the police. When Nurul's English was not good enough to understand the police's order to drop his canes, they tased him, beat him, and arrested him for trespassing and for felony assault with weapons—for hanging onto his curtain rod canes when police tried to take them away from him. His family was so afraid that ICE would pick Nurul up that they left him in jail until his trial. Ironically, Nurul finally had around the clock care and healthcare access.

The charges were ultimately dropped, but the jail, having an agreement with ICE, transferred his custody. ICE was not equipped to care for a disabled non-English speaking elder, and instead of contacting his family, dropped him off at a closed coffee shop, barefoot and coatless in January. Neighbors reported that they saw him pacing in the snow for hours, and at one point he laid down. In the morning, someone finally checked on him and found him dead. The community in Buffalo are slinging mud, trying to find someone to blame. Some argue Nurul was failed by ICE, others by the police, others by his family for not bringing him home sooner. The questions become about process—what should have happened—instead of addressing the person first. I worry about his community—I worry about us. Why did those neighbors not check on him sooner? Why did others call the police in the first place? Why do we criminalize disability? When did we become so afraid of the stranger that we lost our own sense of shared humanity in the mud?

We are no strangers to mud. Neither were the first communities to read John's gospel. In fact, the author of John left some muddy fingerprints on our reading today. We have no record to verify this account of Pharisees banishing and excluding anyone from the temple in the first century. But a hundred years later, after the destruction of the temple, the author's community did experience exile and division among fellow Jewish refugees resettling far from Jerusalem. The author of John is writing just as Jesus-followers were cast out of Jewish community and dealing with raw emotion. When we read John's demonizing words about "The Jews," this is the context we must remember. The author sets up this story of Sabbath conflict, of the false dichotomy between following Jesus and following Moses, to describe the blasphemy for which Jesus will be arrested and executed. We have to be cautious when we read "THE JEWS" as a whole people group, and not the villains he casts as Jewish leaders cooperating with Rome.

So where is the good news in this story? Jesus seeks out the healed man once he has been banished from his community and distanced from his parents like the good shepherd seeking out a lost sheep. Even before witnessing Jesus with his own eyes, the man obeys his instructions, following the shepherd's voice, and demonstrates for us how to be good disciples. Jesus welcomes the one who has been alienated from his community and reveals his own identity. The man, restored to sight, finds a new vision, belonging, purpose, and meaning as Christ's disciple.

*SERMON RESPONSE

#795- *Healer of Our Every Ill*

Refrain:

Healer of our every ill, light of each tomorrow,

Give us peace beyond our fear, and hope beyond our sorrow.

***You who know our fears and sadness,
grace us with your peace and gladness;
Spirit of all comfort, fill our hearts.***

***In the pain and joy beholding
How your grace is still unfolding,
Give us all your vision, God of love.***

***Give us strength to love each other,
Every sister, every brother;
Spirit of all kindness, be our guide.***

***You who know each thought and feeling,
Teach us all your way of healing;
Spirit of compassion fill each heart.***

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

ANOINTING

PASTORAL PRAYER

God, we understand that sometimes, before our eyes can see, they must get muddy.
The mud is a crucial step: Jesus working on us. We can't know sight until we've tried to see through mud. We must realize our blindness, and admit it.
The blindness itself isn't our sin.
It's pretending we can see when we can't that is harmful.
It's judging the mud of others to be worse than our own that sets us back.
It's being dishonest about our blindness that displeases You.

To all the ways we've been blind to our own true selves,
Open our eyes, Oh God.
To all the ways we've been blind to the suffering of others,
Open our eyes, Oh God.
To all the ways we've been blind to and complicit in our society's brokenness,
Open our eyes, Oh God.
To all the ways we've been blind to the sacredness of human beings,
Open our eyes, Oh God.
To all the ways we've been blind to your invitation and calling in our lives,
Open our eyes, Oh God.
To all the ways we've been blind to the way of your kingdom coming, now and not-yet,
Open our eyes, Oh God.

We want to live as children of light.
We want to learn what pleases You.
We want light shined on the deepest recesses of our beings,
So that all that is hidden may become visible.

We ask this in the name of the One who taught us to pray, saying:

THE LORD'S PRAYER

**Our Creator, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name,
thy kindom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil, for yours is the kingdom, and the power, and
the glory, forever. Amen.**

AMEN

#554- Amen

Amen, amen, amen.

INVITATION TO GENEROSITY

We began this Lenten season with a dry bowl of dirt on Ash Wednesday and the reminder, "We are dust and to dust we will return."
Sometimes we really do feel like dust: emptied out, bent over, barely making it.

Beloved, do you not know what marvelous things God can do with a pinch dust?
Even from spit and dirt, the Holy One creates new dreams and new visions.
With just a little mud, Jesus works wonders that we cannot even imagine.
So let us discover what abundance emerges
when we entrust what little we have into the hands of grace.

*An offering plate will be passed during the service,
or you may give online through Tithely: <https://tithely.com/give?c=1309305>
Please note where you would like your gift to be directed (general fund, deacons, etc.)*

OFFERTORY

*DOXOLOGY

#697- Take My Life (vs. 6)

***Take my love; my Lord, I pour
At thy feet its treasure store;
Take myself and I will be
Ever, only, all for thee— ever, only, all for thee!***

*PRAYER OF DEDICATION

**God of Grace, every good thing comes from you. We pray that you
would bless what we have offered to overflow our community with an
abundance of healing and of hope. Mold us to be vessels of your grace
and generosity that we may pour our gifts out to tend a world in need.
Amen.**

CLOSING HYMN

#450- Be Thou My Vision

***Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
naught be all else to me, save that thou art;
Thou my best thought, by day or by night,
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.
Be thou my wisdom, and thou my true Word;
I ever with thee and thou with me, Lord;
Thou my soul's shelter, and thou my high tower;***

raise thou me heavenward, O power of my power.

***Riches I heed not, nor vain, empty praise;
thou mine inheritance, now and always;
Thou and thou only, first in my heart,
High King of Heaven, my treasure thou art.***

***High King of Heaven, my victory won,
may I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's Sun!
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
still be my vision, O Ruler of all.***

*BLESSING & SENDING

SENDING MUSIC



Pastor: Rev. Marranda Major (marranda@unitedprestroy.org)

Guest Pianist: Andrew Abolafia

Onscreen Visuals: Charlotte Albertin, Martha Juenger,
and Jim Parmelee

Audiovisual Production: Jim Parmelee and Dan Rogers

Class of 2026
Dan Rogers
Peggy Smith Savchik

Session
Class of 2027
Jim Parmelee
Sue Steele
Marilynn O'Dell

Class of 2028
Alan Chandler
Kodzo Dzikunu
Bruce Reed

Class of 2026
Peg Drew
Martha Juenger
Pat Rudebush

Diaconate
Class of 2027
Debbie Brown
Miriam Parmelee
Brenda Westbrook

Class of 2028
Diane Chandler
Olga Green
Noel Hains

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