

Lent IV (RCL: A): "Amazing Grace!"

1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

March 14-15, 2026

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Any guesses about the hymn that's touted as "the most popular of all time"?

Yup, "Amazing Grace"! Deacon Ned and I have a list of "top 5" funeral hymns families are likely to choose, and I'd say "Amazing Grace" is tops of the top 5. It's uniquely comforting, and is shot through with resurrection, without ever using the word "Alleluia."

When John Newton wrote, "I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see," he was talking about his soul, not his eyes. In his autobiography he wrote, "The reason [for God's mercy] is unknown to me, but one thing I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see."<sup>1</sup> The story of Newton's life is really interesting, more like the story of the man who is gradually healed of his blindness by Jesus in Mark 8 than the healing of the man born blind in today's Gospel. I'd always heard that Newton was a slave trader who saw the light and made a total moral U-turn. I thought the turn was immediate. But the **whole** story is a bit more complicated and interesting than that.

John Newton was born in 1725 in England. His father was a ship captain, away at sea much of John's childhood, but his mother Elizabeth was loving and attentive, a woman of faith who taught him Bible stories, hymns, and Christian values of love and compassion. Unfortunately she died either when John was 7 or 11. (I found competing "facts" on that.) The upshot of her death was that John's father thought he'd be better off at sea, even at the age of 11 (not such a tender age then as now). His father got him a nice position on a ship going to Jamaica, but John got sidetracked and missed the boat, literally. He popped into a pub, a bad idea as it turned out, and he was impressed into the British Navy. He was ill-behaved, didn't accept orders, was frequently drunk, and in no time at all the captain of the ship transferred him to a slave ship headed to

Guinea. John's bad behavior didn't get any better, and he ended up in irons on the deck of that ship, along with minimal food or water as his punishment. His Dad intervened and managed to get him sent back to England on another ship, a 7,000 mile sea journey including ports in Brazil and Newfoundland. The journey across the North Atlantic was "rough" in more ways than one. A huge storm battered one side of the ship so badly they didn't know if it would stay afloat. John rose to the occasion, helped to man the pumps and steer the vessel, but apparently in the midst of the sea storm's fury he cried out to God with a "raven's prayer" as he later called it: a mere squawk of "Help!" When the storm calmed down and the ship remained afloat, John commented to the captain, "But for the grace of God we would have perished." He considered that the day of his true conversion: 10 March 1748, or 21 March on what became the Julian calendar which we use. I figure either way this weekend we're very near the 278<sup>th</sup> anniversary of John Newton's conversion! That nearly wrecked ship docked in Ireland and John headed to the nearest church to give his life over to God.

And yet – when he got back to England, he accepted a job as first mate on a slave ship bound for Charleston, SC. Then he became captain of another slave ship called *The African*. For the next seven years he made his living in the slave trade, transporting human beings in conditions that would have been cruel to animals, and delivering them to enslavement, degradation, separation from their families, torture and sometimes death. In later years he looked back and said that the inhumanity he saw sickened him. But he stuck with it, engaged in it for the next 7 years, until a seizure ended his sailing and slaving career. He cried out to God in a storm -- gave his life to God in a church – and then continued to do ungodly things. He might not have been drinking or cursing anymore but he was enabling the enslavement and servitude of children of

God. That tells us his conversion wasn't all at once, but gradual – which is usually the case with us, too. (Again, Augustine: “Lord, make me chaste, but not yet!”)

In today's healing/conversion story, it doesn't take long for the blind man to walk to the Pool of Siloam and wash, as Jesus directed. (A friend must have led him there, just as friends and family must have been leading him around his entire life.) John Newton's journey from the first conversion moment to something that truly **looked** like conversion was a lot longer. He eventually became an Anglican priest. In 1764 he published a collection of letters that told the story of his life (“An Authentic Narrative of Some Remarkable Particulars in the Life of Reverend John Newton”) and 24 years later published his even more pointed “Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade.” Wilbur Wilberforce was a mentee, a “disciple” of sorts of Newton, and 1 year after Newton's “African Slave Trade” book came out, Wilberforce spoke forcefully/preached to the British House of Commons, urging the abolition of slavery. Eighteen years later, 1807, the year of Newton's death, the Slave Trade Act passed, forbidding British ships to carry the enslaved or otherwise engage in the slave trade. Great Britain was way ahead of the United States when it came to the abolition of slavery. Only a Civil War brought about the Emancipation Declaration.

What's the take away for us? Jesus heals our spiritual blindness, too, when by the grace of God **we** are ready and willing to see. Not **necessarily** all at once. Not **usually** all at once. Maybe we find ourselves sickened by what we see in the world, and then we see the sickness in our own life. Maybe we live with the disconnect, with the guilt for awhile, like John Newton still captaining a slave ship after what he considered his “conversion.” He welcomed his medical seizure as a way out of a profession from which he couldn't manage to extricate himself. Sometimes outside circumstances open an escape hatch we hadn't chosen to open for ourselves. Sometimes we simply get so tired of carrying around guilt for doing what we shouldn't be doing, or **not** doing

what we **should** be doing, that we cry “Enough!” and **change**, by God’s grace. The excuse of “When I get around to it,” gives way to “Today is the day, now is the moment!” By God’s grace.... Self-reflection really helps in the process.

John Newton wrote “Amazing Grace” for his congregation to sing on New Year’s Day, 1773. His parishioners, by and large, were illiterate lacemakers. Music helps us understand and remember things, so he wrote a lot of hymns to help them own and celebrate the Scripture they heard and the sermons he preached. On that New Year’s Day he invited his flock to look back, to look inside, and to look forward. Where had they come from, spiritually? Where were they now, spiritually? Where were they going, spiritually? Always a good spiritual practice to ask those questions of ourselves, at New Year’s, during Lent, year ‘round.

Part of John Newton’s life review was writing his own epitaph. 220 years later it still bears witness to his deep faith and astonished gratitude for God’s mercy:

Once an infidel and libertine,  
A servant of slaves in Africa,  
Was by the rich mercy of our Lord & Savior Jesus Christ  
Preserved, reserved, pardoned  
And appointed to preach the faith  
He had long labored to destroy.

By the end of his life, John Newton had lost much of his physical **vision** but had gained amazing spiritual **insight**. Shortly before his death someone asked the famous man for any wisdom he might be willing to impart. He humbly said, “My memory is nearly gone, but I can remember two things: that I am a great sinner but Christ is a great Savior.”<sup>2</sup> Amen.

<sup>1</sup>museumofthebible.org, a-wretch-like-me.

<sup>2</sup> “Amazing Grace – The Story Behind the Music – The Life of Minister John Newton,” YouTube, “Stories of the Forgotten People.”