Teresa of Avila, while on her way to visit a convent, fell off her donkey, injuring her leg. “Lord, you couldn’t have picked a worse time for this to happen. Why would you let this happen?” she asked. And the response in prayer which she heard was, “That is how I treat my friends,” to which Teresa replied, “And that is why you have so few of them.”

Although the blind man in today’s Gospel lesson receives his sight from Jesus, he might have felt much like St. Teresa. Instead of rejoicing with him, the man is overlooked by his friends, questioned by religious authorities, rejected by his parents, and finally kicked out of the temple.

The narrative of this healing is overflowing with details that could inform a series of sermons. However, rather than delving too deeply into those details let me call your attention to the process or form of the story. It consists of a healing action by Jesus (which takes all of 2 verses), reaction to the healing by onlookers and those concerned with maintaining religious orthodoxy, and at the very end, a reappearance by Jesus to vindicate and comfort the man who was healed. Scholars note that the form corresponds to the life of the church. Jesus comes to reveal God’s saving love through his teaching, healing, death and resurrection; leaves in the ascension, but promises to return with vindication for his church.

If we step back from the details of the story to look at its arc, we see that this is a story with great pertinence to us. We in the church are living in the time of Jesus’ absence, between his incarnation and his second coming. Fred Craddock offers this perspective on this lesson, writing, “The time of Jesus’ absence is no picnic. In fact, the man born blind could have said understandably to himself more than once, ‘I never asked to be healed. If this is what it means to be blessed of God, I think I am willing to relinquish some divine favors.’” Like Teresa of Avila this story teaches us that God’s favor more often leads into adversity rather than away from difficulty. A relationship to God does not remove one from, but often places one directly in the line of fire.

Once the man born blind washes in the pool of Siloam and receives his sight, he discovers that he can’t go home again. Rather than rejoicing with him, his neighbors who passed him every day in the street as a beggar couldn’t identify him. The religious leaders, whose myopia about Jesus healing on the Sabbath caused them to question whether he had ever been blind, treated his story as “fake news”. His parents, fearful of being ostracized by the religious authorities, wouldn’t defend him, and ultimately he was driven out of the Temple for insisting that the man who healed him must be from God.

One also can’t help but notice another significant dimension of this story, namely that as the man Jesus healed is subjected to the betrayal of neighbors and parents and the less than
veiled suspicions and refutation of his healing by those in authority, he grows in faith. The more intense the inquisition he undergoes the more clearly the blind man sees. He moves from reciting the physical facts of his healing to reflecting on the spiritual identity of the man who healed him.

Reflecting on his healing the man realizes that Jesus performed this miracle through the power of God. His assertion that Jesus must be acting in God’s name so threatens the status quo that he is excommunicated. Isn’t it ironic that in his blindness he at least had the comfort of fellowship, but in his sight he experiences isolation? However, precisely in his time of abandonment, Jesus comes searching for him. “Do you believe in the Son of Man? Who is he, sir, so that I may believe in him?”

This title, Son of Man, is Jesus’ own way of referring to himself in the gospel of John. We heard Jesus refer to himself with this title when he told Nicodemus, “No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” The term Son of Man comes from the Book of Daniel (7:1-14). There we learn that the “Ancient of Days” (God) is seated in heaven, and no one except “one like a son of man” can approach him. To this “son of man” figure all authority in heaven and on earth has been given. In other words, when Jesus identifies himself as the Son of Man, he tells the man who has been rejected by everyone, “You are not alone.” In Jesus he meets God and is welcomed as his disciple. When he acknowledges Jesus as “Lord”, the man born blind becomes a disciple with 20/20 vision.

So what might we learn from this healing story in which we hear Jesus describe himself as the light of the world? In all of our readings for today we are invited to see the world as God sees it. That sounds like a good thing, but I think claiming to see the world as God does can be risky business.

It is risky to claim that we see as God does because to do so might cause us to see things we would rather avoid. David Lyle, writing in The Christian Century, puts it this way, “We are those …who would prefer to live in the darkness we know rather than open our eyes to the binding, brilliant light of God’s presence in our midst. In the darkness, we have the luxury of having conversations about the sins and sufferings of others without acknowledging our own sin. In the darkness, we are free to pretend that we don’t see the suffering and pain of those around us…. Jesus, however, has not come to enable us to remain in the dark. He enters the muddiness of this world and gets his hands dirty for our sake, taking all the willful blindness of this world upon himself on the cross, and he does so to open our eyes.”

The truth is that we all stand in need of radical vision correctness in order to see the world as God does. In a dramatic dialogue at the end of the Gospel lesson, Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” When some of the Pharisees asked if he was accusing them of being blind, Jesus responded, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you
can see, your guilt remains.” In other words, the spiritual claim to see is dangerous if it masks our blindness to the needs around us. It is only by admitting our limited vision—what the Apostle Paul referred to “as seeing through a glass darkly”—that we can acknowledge the saving work of Jesus who longs for us to see and share in his mission.

Although we, like Teresa of Avila, may wonder at times why we have been chosen to be God’s “friends”, one of the great benefits of acknowledging our need for Jesus’ healing grace is that it opens us to the future God has prepared for us. Isn’t it interesting that in this story the man who is healed is still defined primarily by his inquisitors as a blind man? Like the man born blind, we sometimes have to fight to overcome limiting factors in our lives that have come to define us. A dear friend of mine who fought cancer for nearly a decade intentionally chose to refer to himself as a “man living with cancer” rather than a “cancer patient” so his life wouldn’t be reduced to a single dimension.

Think for a moment of your life. Are there designations that no longer serve you? Do you think of yourself in terms of some tragedy or challenge or limitation? Perhaps the healing of the man born blind is an invitation for you and me to lay hold of the open future that Jesus’ healing grace and resurrection offer us.

David Lose writes, “I think this story invites us to share…the good news that God is calling us forward. The past matters, but it is past. Jesus’ cross reminds us that the hurts, sorrows, mistakes, and regrets that have marked us may describe us, but they do not define us, for we are God’s beloved children.”

Jesus calls us to live as children of light, bearing witness to the light of Christ in all the places of this world where people are relegated to the shadows. Furthermore, he promises that even though following him will lead us into adversity, he will never abandon us. As we place our trust in Jesus, following wherever he leads us, we will see that “the Light shines in the darkness and the darkness can never overcome it.”