

Second Sunday in Lent

Year A
RCL

The Collect

O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Old Testament

Genesis 12:1-4a

The LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.

The Psalm

Psalm 121

- 1 I lift up my eyes to the hills; *
from where is my help to come?
- 2 My help comes from the LORD, *
the maker of heaven and earth.
- 3 He will not let your foot be moved *
and he who watches over you will not fall asleep.
- 4 Behold, he who keeps watch over Israel *
shall neither slumber nor sleep;
- 5 The LORD himself watches over you; *
the LORD is your shade at your right hand,
- 6 So that the sun shall not strike you by day, *
nor the moon by night.
- 7 The LORD shall preserve you from all evil; *
it is he who shall keep you safe.
- 8 The LORD shall watch over your going out and your coming in, *
from this time forth for evermore.

The Epistle

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”) —in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

The Gospel

John 3:1-17

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 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. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

SERMON “By Night”

When people want to hide, they hide in the cover of darkness so as not to be seen. Gambling, drinking, illicit sex, all take place in the wee hours. I remember as a young person I would be out all night, not necessarily doing the things I mentioned, but thinking no one knows what I was doing. But God did and I thank him for keeping me out of trouble!

Nicodemus comes to Jesus *by night*. That detail matters deeply in John’s Gospel. In the theology of John, night is never just about the clock — it is about the soul. Night represents uncertainty, fear, partial understanding, and spiritual searching. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews. He is educated, respected, devout. He knows the Law. He teaches others about God. And yet... he comes in the dark.

How many of us come to Jesus that way? Not publicly. Not confidently. But quietly. With questions. With doubt. With longing we cannot quite name. John tells us that Nicodemus recognizes something in Jesus:

“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God.” It is a polite confession. It is cautious. It is incomplete. And Jesus does not respond with flattery. He responds with mystery. “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Already we see the pattern of John’s Gospel — misunderstanding that opens into revelation. Nicodemus thinks biologically. Jesus speaks spiritually. To be born from above is not self-improvement. It is not religious refinement. It is not moral polishing. It is not joining a church or memorizing doctrine. It is transformation by the Spirit of God. In the Episcopal tradition, we understand this not as a one-time emotional event, but as a sacramental reality unfolding across a lifetime.

In Holy Baptism, we are marked as Christ's own forever. Water and Spirit. Death and resurrection. Identity reshaped. And yet, baptism is not magic. It is the doorway into a lifelong conversion of heart. Jesus says, "The wind blows where it chooses... You hear the sound of it but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes."

You cannot control the Spirit. You cannot contain the Spirit. You cannot predict the Spirit. You can only receive. Jesus then reminds Nicodemus of something deeply rooted in Israel's story — Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness. He is referring to the strange episode in the Book of Numbers when the Israelites, bitten by serpents, were healed by looking upon the bronze serpent lifted high. It was not the serpent that healed them. It was their turning, their trust, their willingness to look up. And Jesus says: "So must the Son of Man be lifted up."

In John's Gospel, to be "lifted up" means both crucifixion and exaltation. The cross is not merely an execution — it is revelation. It reveals the heart of God. Then comes the verse many of us memorized as children: "For God so loved the world..." Notice what it does not say.

It does not say God so loved the church. It does not say God so loved the righteous. It does not say God so loved the morally successful. It says God loved the world. The Greek word is *kosmos* — the whole creation, including its brokenness, rebellion, violence, and confusion. God's love is not reactive. It is not earned. It is not selective. It is initiating.

God does not love because the world is worthy. God loves because God is love. And that love gives. "He gave his only Son." In John, giving is not merely sending. It is self-offering. The Incarnation itself is gift. The cross is gift. The resurrection is gift. Grace is gift. And the purpose?

“Not to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” This is one of the most radical declarations in all of Scripture. Jesus does not come primarily as prosecutor. He comes as healer. He does not come to shame. He comes to restore. The tragedy, John tells us, is not that God withholds salvation. The tragedy is that we sometimes prefer darkness to light. Remember: this entire conversation began in the night. Nicodemus came in darkness. But Light was speaking to him. Later in John’s Gospel, Nicodemus will appear again — first cautiously defending Jesus and finally bringing spices to prepare his body for burial. Tradition suggests that the seed planted in the night eventually bore fruit.

Not after we figure it all out. Not once we are spiritually impressive. Not once our theology is flawless. But in the night. And the invitation is not to strive harder. It is to be born from above. To look up. To receive love. To step toward the light. In our Episcopal tradition, we hold together sacrament and mystery, intellect and wonder, reverence and questioning.

Nicodemus reminds us that questioning is not faith's enemy — it may be its doorway. It is daily dying and rising. Daily surrender. Daily awakening to love that refuses to condemn. The heart of this passage is not complexity. It is love. Love that initiates. Love that lifts up. Love that saves. Love that shines in the darkness. And the darkness has not overcome it.

E pule kākou, let us pray.

Gracious and eternal God, You who loved the world into being and loved it still when it turned away, breathe upon us with your Holy Spirit. When we dwell in night, be our light. When we cling to fear, birth us from above. When we resist your transforming grace, soften our hearts to receive your gift. Amen