

Second Sunday in Lent – 2026

Genesis 12:1-9

Romans 4:1-8, 13-17

John 3:1-17

St. John is poetic. John the Evangelist, John the Divine, John the Seer – the son of Zebedee and the brother of James is known by many names. The Lord Himself called James and John the Sons of Thunder. The Lord Christ had been rejected by a Samaritan village. James and John were having none of it and they asked Jesus, “Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” (Luke 9:54). Vengeance is not our way. The Lord rebuked them (Luke 9:55). I suspect that James and John learned. The cross has a way of teaching people the deeper ways of compassion, forgiveness, and grace. That is Christ’s way ergo that is our way.

St. John is poetic. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). “And the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us” (John 1:14). That is not only theologically powerful, it is poetically beautiful. Here’s another priceless line from the prologue to John’s Gospel: “He came to that which was His own, but His own people did not receive Him. Yet to all who did receive Him, those who believed on His name, He gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision, or a husband’s will, but born of God” (John 1:13). Born of God – do you believe that you have been born of God? You *look like* a combination of your mother and your father. Each of you has been conceived in the natural way. Sinners; that’s what our fallen race procreates – little sinners. Babies are adorable, but all of us with a human father have a big, fat problem. King David announces the truth: “In sin did my mother conceive me” (Psalm 51:5).

I get the sense that John *listened*. In a radical way, did John listen. John listened with his heart, with his soul, listened to the Word made flesh, listened to the Messiah who taught him, who opened the eyes of John’s heart to see the depth of the new creation which the Son of God came to bring. Did *Nicodemus* listen? Jesus said that He, the Lord, had to be “lifted up” (υψωθηναι). “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” (John 3:14-15). It’s a curious word in Greek – it means to exalt. You want eternal life? The Son of Man must be lifted up. You want to be born of God, born *from above* (John 3:3 ανωθεν)? The Son of Man must be lifted up. You want to escape sin and death? The Son of Man must exalted, raised high and glorified. God’s love will come in this way, the Son of Man will be lifted up, and sinners will look to Him. Jesus didn’t come to condemn the world (John 3:17). God was made man to save the world, God was made man to be lifted up. Was Nicodemus listening?

The teacher of Israel had come to see Jesus by night (John 3:2). It would have been a risk to his reputation for Nicodemus to make a public show of visiting this firebrand of a rabbi by day. Are you worried about your reputation? I mean, are you worried about being connected to the Lord of the cross? Are you worried about having it be known that your allegiance is to Christ the King, Christ the crucified, the One who declared Himself to be the Way, the Truth and the Life? Who do you think is more comfortable in their own skin – the one who lives in a way that is commensurate with what they believe or the one who hides their faith from others? It’s tiring to

hide. How long did Nicodemus hide? On this night, I'm sure that Nicodemus listened. He knew well about the serpent that Moses lifted up in the wilderness. It's a powerful story from the OT (Numbers 21:4-9). The Israelites had rebelled against God. They whined about their deliverance from Egypt. They maligned the manna, the supernatural food which God gave them in the desert. They profaned God's grace with their verbal vomit. It was a faithless tantrum. It was a mockery of God's provision. It was exactly what fallen man is good at – blaming God for man's own failures, blaming God for man's own poverty of heart, blaming God for his own loveless frame of mind.

This tantrum rankled our Father. "We loathe this worthless food" (Numbers 21:5). They weren't despising a generic grace by saying how they detested the supernatural food that God had given them. They were voicing displeasure at something that pointed forward to His Son (John 6:25-69). If you want to know how to immediately get on our Father's bad side, then talk smack about His beloved Son. God sent fiery serpents into their camp. The bite of these serpents brought death. It was a confrontation with their sin. It was merciful, on God's part. Repent! Repent of this foul talk against my grace. Repent of this rebellion that profanes my Name, profanes the prophetic offering of my Son. Death had a way of reorienting the Israelites priorities. They indeed repented and asked Moses to intervene. God told Moses to make a serpent, a bronze one to mirror the real ones. God said: "Put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live" (Numbers 21:8). It was mercy. It was Christological mercy. If God doesn't turn you from your apostasy, turn you from your self-righteousness, you will die faithless and hell is your lot. He calls us to repent. It is merciful. He wants you to abandon pride and idolatry and greed and reckless self-indulgence. Confrontations with one's own sin are unpleasant. They make one uneasy, fearful. There is only one answer. You have a sin problem and there is only one antidote.

What if an Israelite, bitten by the fiery serpent, refused to look at the serpent on the pole? Let's say that you and I are in the emergency room. It's an "open bay" emergency room and we're privy to everything going on. One rather buff 24-year-old alpha male comes in and says that he's been bitten by a black mamba. It's serious. The young lad is exhibiting signs of shock, his blood pressure is exceedingly low, he's dizzy, having difficulty breathing, and has an elevated heart rate. The doctor brings the antidote. Drink this and you will live. But this alpha male is obstinate. I don't want to drink that. That stuff is for sissies. What do you think of this Alpha Male? There's only one antidote. Was Nicodemus listening? Are you listening? "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" (John 3:14-15). The Lord Jesus was lifted up, high and exalted, on the holy cross. Who lifted Him up? Who was the agent who ensured that the Savior's blood flowed to water the earth, making it bud and flourish? (Isaiah 55:10-11). Who was the architect behind the glory of Good Friday? Christ is lifted up by His Father. Jesus is lifted up precisely for you to look at Him. There is a promise attached. Look at Him and live. Look at Him and know love, know forgiveness, know truth and hope and grace and the glory of God. Look at Him and heaven is your home.

Did Nicodemus listen? Are we listening? There are two men who are credited with taking Jesus' corpse down from the cross. Can you imagine a more intimate service rendered to the Son of God than taking His holy body, pierced and whipped and bloody, the body by which He

reclaimed fallen humanity, the body in which He suffered for the sins of the world, can you imagine a more reverent and heart-breaking and solemn undertaking than removing His holy body from that Roman instrument of torture and lovingly placing it in His tomb? Nicodemus did that. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea did that. Nicodemus did that because he was listening, listening with His heart and soul. When Nicodemus took Jesus' body down from the cross, he wasn't hiding anymore.

You must be born again, born from above. Anthony is listening. You must be born of water and the Spirit, born of God. Anthony Todd is baptized. Anthony Todd Smith is part of the new creation which Jesus' death and resurrection brings to those who hear the Word of God (2 Corinthians 5:17; John 1:12-13). The food of this new creation is Christ's body and blood. We listen to Him. Take, eat, this is my body, given for you. Take, drink, this is my blood, shed for you. We listen to Him. "We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). We listen to Him. We look to Him. There is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12). With great joy, we listen to Him.