

# All the Families of the Earth

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The Second Sunday of Lent, Year A  
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*The Lord said to Abram, "Leave your land, your family, and your father's household for the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and will bless you. I will make your name respected, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, those who curse you I will curse; all the families of the earth will be blessed because of you." Abram left just as the Lord told him, and Lot went with him. Genesis 12:1-4a*

*I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. God will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil and will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.*

Psalm 121

*Now 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 unless God is with that person." 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 the 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. John 3:1-17*

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, good morning again. We are in the second week of Lent now. I think the first Sunday always feels a little sharp, a little bracing. We hear about temptation in the wilderness. We talk about repentance. We set intentions. But by the second Sunday, something steadier begins to emerge. Lent is not just about resisting something. It is also about moving toward something. And our readings this morning are less about struggle and more about disruption. Holy disruption.

Our reading from Genesis drops us into a moment that changes the trajectory of Scripture. Abram is living a fairly ordinary life by ancient standards. He has land. He has extended

family. He has structure and stability, which in the ancient Near East meant everything. Your land was your identity. Your father's household was your security. Your future was bound up in those things. And into that settled existence comes a word from the Lord that asks for departure.

“Leave your land, your family, and your father's household for the land that I will show you.”

There is no map attached. No timeline. No assessment of road conditions. What Abram receives instead is a promise of a great nation. A great name. Blessing that extends beyond Abram himself and spills outward into the world. The weight of the moment is not simply that Abram leaves. It is that God has chosen to bind the future of the world to this wandering family. Covenant is born here, not as a negotiation, but as a divine initiative that pulls Abram into a story larger than anything he could have constructed on his own. And so Abram goes.

Psalm 121 is one of the Songs of Ascent, which means it was sung by pilgrims on the way up to Jerusalem. It was not written in a study. It was carried on the lips of people who were traveling together toward worship. Generations would have known it by heart. Parents would have taught it to their children. Pilgrims would have sung it when the road felt long and when the city finally came into view. “I lift up my eyes to the hills.”

That line is not fear so much as orientation. The hills are where Jerusalem sits. The hills are where the temple stands. The hills are where God has promised to meet God's people. When the psalmist looks up, they are remembering where they are headed. And they are remembering who has been faithful before.

“My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” That confession ties the daily journey to the larger story. The One who formed creation is the same One who watches over this particular road. The One who shaped the heavens is attentive to ordinary feet moving toward worship. It is covenant language again. The God who made promises to Abram is the God who keeps watch over pilgrims.

And then that beautiful line: “The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in.” This is life language. It covers departure and return. It covers leaving home and coming back home. It covers Abram stepping away from his father’s household and the generations who will eventually ascend to Jerusalem singing this very psalm. It holds the whole arc of movement inside the steadiness of God.

In our gospel, the writer of John tells us there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. This is not an anonymous bystander drifting through the story. Nicodemus belongs to the religious establishment. He has standing. He has responsibility. He has spent his life immersed in Scripture and tradition. If anyone knows how Israel’s story is supposed to unfold, it is someone like him. And he comes to Jesus by night.

Now that detail doesn’t have to mean scary or spooky. It may simply mean seriousness. Night is when conversations slow down. Night is when the crowds thin out and you can actually ask what you need to ask without an audience. For someone in his position, any public conversation could easily become spectacle. This feels more deliberate than that. More careful. He is not trying to trap Jesus. He is trying to understand him.

“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God.”

It takes a lot for him to admit that. But the signs Jesus has performed cannot be dismissed as tricks. Something real is happening. Something of God is present. Nicodemus names

that much. He is not ready to abandon everything he knows, but he is honest enough to admit that the old frameworks are straining.

And Jesus responds in a way that shifts the ground entirely. “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

For a man trained in law and tradition, that is a disorienting sentence. Kingdom language is familiar. Covenant language is familiar. Birth language in this sense is not. Nicodemus hears it at face value and asks the most reasonable question he can. How can someone be born after having grown old? His confusion is not foolish. He is trying to make sense.

Jesus keeps going. “Born of water and Spirit.” Flesh gives birth to flesh. Spirit gives birth to spirit. The Spirit moves like wind, present and powerful, but never contained.

To me, that sounds less like a spiritual technique and more like Genesis all over again. Life that begins because God wills it. A future opened because God speaks it. Not something manufactured from below, but given from above.

Nicodemus is not being scolded in this interaction either. He is being invited. Invited to imagine that Israel’s story is not ending, but expanding. That the covenant is not being replaced, but fulfilled. That the God who once called Abram into a future he could not see is still calling people into life that can seem uncertain. And Nicodemus listens.

As the conversation continues, Jesus reaches back into Israel’s memory and pulls out one of those wilderness stories. All children of Israel would know it. The Israelites are traveling, they grow impatient, and they speak against God and Moses. The text says poisonous snakes come among them, people are bitten, and people die. Then the people come to Moses and name what has happened. They confess. They ask for prayer. Moses prays, and

the Lord gives an instruction that is not what anyone expects. The serpents are not simply taken away. Moses is told to make a bronze serpent and lift it on a pole. When someone is bitten, if they look at it, they live.

It is a story born out of Israel's real struggle in the wilderness. Impatience. Fear. Complaint. Consequence. Confession. Intercession. And then a response from God that requires trust. The serpents are not erased from the landscape. The danger is still present. But a sign is lifted up, and those who turn their eyes toward what God has provided, live.

Life is not secured through strategy or self-correction. It comes through trust directed toward what God has set before them. The people are not invited to fix the situation. They are invited to look. To trust. To receive life as gift in the middle of vulnerability.

So when Jesus says that the Son of Man must be lifted up in the same way, he is not introducing a new pattern. He is placing himself inside Israel's story. As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up. The language is deliberate. Salvation, in both moments, is tied to turning one's gaze toward what God has raised up for the sake of life.

*For God so loved the world.* I think, like much about our faith, we hear that sentence so often that it can lose its edge. But for Nicodemus, it would not have sounded sentimental. It would have sounded expansive. God so loved the **world**. Not only the Jewish people. Not only those who sit in the council chamber. Not only those who have mastered the law. The whole world.

In John's Gospel, "world" includes everything broken, everything estranged, everything resistant. And still, God loves it. Not abstractly and not from a distance. But enough to give God's son up for it.

If you hold that beside Genesis, it starts to make sense. “All the families of the earth will be blessed because of you.” The promise to Abram was never small. It was never tribal, in the narrow sense. From the beginning, the covenant had the whole world in view. What Jesus talks about here is not a departure from Israel’s story. It is the continued unveiling of its scope.

God does not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through him. This is a statement about the character of God. The same God who called Abram into an uncertain future, the same God who keeps watch over pilgrims on the road, is still moving toward humanity with intent to save, not to shame. And Nicodemus is standing in the middle of that realization.

Nicodemus leaves that conversation still in the dark. The writer of John doesn’t tell us he suddenly understands everything. Nicodemus doesn’t make a dramatic confession and “convert” (not that there was anything to convert to just yet). Just a man who has heard that God’s love is larger than he thought and that life begins from above.

And Nicodemus doesn’t just appear here. Later in this Gospel, when others want to dismiss Jesus outright, Nicodemus urges patience. A just fairness. Something in him was changing. And finally, after the crucifixion, he is there again, bringing spices for the body. The man who first came under cover of night ends up standing near the cross in broad daylight.

Abram journeyed without seeing the end of the road. Pilgrims sang without knowing what waited beyond the hills. Israel looked up to the serpent staff and lived. Nicodemus listened, and over time, he drew closer to the One who had been lifted up.

And here we are. I think the covenant is still wider than we are comfortable with. The love of God is still directed toward the world. The Spirit still refuses to be contained.

We do not have to manufacture new life. We do not have to shrink God's promise down to manageable size. We are invited to stand inside a story that keeps expanding. And sometimes that expansion begins quietly, in the dark of night with questions for God.  
Amen.