

Genesis 12:1–4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1–5, 13–17; John 3:1–17 (NIV)<sup>1</sup>

## Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, lead us by your Spirit into truth without condemnation. Re-aim our lives toward the Father. Form us into a steady, holy people whose love holds under pressure. Amen.

## Opener: The Bouquet on the Table

Picture a bouquet of flowers on a table. For a while, it's beautiful. It brightens the room. It smells like life.

But the truth is: cut flowers are living on borrowed time. You can trim the stems, change the water, keep them out of the sun, add the little packet of plant food, do everything we do to preserve the beauty, and still, day by day, they wilt. Not because they're "bad flowers." Not because they **failed**. They wilt because they're **severed from their roots**.

D. Elton Trueblood used that exact image to describe the moral and spiritual condition of modern society. He called ours a "**cut-flower civilization**." We're trying to keep the *appearance* of moral seriousness, human dignity, and shared ideals, while slowly, we are cutting loose from the living-root that makes those things more than preference or fashion.<sup>2</sup>

And here's why this matters for Lent: Lent is not mainly about God shaming us into being better people. Lent is God telling the truth about what withers, and then giving us what we need to live. Lent is the mercy of God saying, "You can't arrange your way into life. You must be **rooted** into it."

That's exactly what today's readings press on us.

- God calls Abram *by grace*, before Abram has anything to prove.
- Psalm 121 steadies us with the God who keeps watch when we cannot.
- Paul insists righteousness is received, not manufactured.
- And Jesus looks at a sincere, serious religious man and says: you don't need a tune-up—you need a **new birth**.

So, let's walk the riverbed of these texts today and let the Lord reconnect us back to our roots.

## Introduction: God Calls Before We Can Prove Ourselves

**In Genesis 12:1–4**, Abram's story begins with initiative; that God's initiative not his. God speaks first. God calls first. God promises first.

*"The LORD had said to Abram, 'Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you' (Genesis 12:1, NIV)."*

---

<sup>1</sup> "March 01, 2026: Second Sunday in Lent," *Revised Common Lectionary*, Vanderbilt Divinity Library, accessed February 28, 2026.

<sup>2</sup> D. Elton Trueblood, *The Predicament of Modern Man* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944), 59–60.

Notice what's missing: God does not begin with Abram's résumé. God does not begin with Abram's track record. God does not begin with Abram's performance. God begins with a **call**—and the call is a relationship: “I will...”

This is upstream grace, before Abram could do anything... Like us today: before we can form the right habits, the right clarity, the right stability... God is already moving toward us, just like he did with Abram, God's Prevenient Grace is always busy...

We must understand that this matters because many of us try to build our spiritual life backward. We try to earn the call through performance. We try to secure belonging through output. We try to become holy through pressure (on ourself and on others).

But the Lord starts here: **I call you. I will be with you. I will bless you. Then you learn to walk.**

Check this out: Abram responds... imperfectly, but truly. “*So Abram went, as the LORD had told him* (Genesis 12:4, NIV).” This line is so simple it's almost easy to miss. “**So, Abram went...**” (אָבְרָם ‘yah-lak,’ **begin to walk**). The beginning of faith is not a theory. It's a step. It's obedience that trusts the One who speaks.

This is already a rebuke to cut-flower religion: you can't keep faith alive by arranging appearances. You keep faith alive by responding to the living God who calls.

## Main Point:

Now, if Genesis 12 is the call, Psalm 121 is the presence that steadies us.

“*I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from. My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth* (Psalm 121:2, NIV).”

That's not sentimental. That's a **confession** of reality: help comes from *somewhere*. The question is whether we tell the truth about where it comes from.

Here's the temptation of a cut-flower civilization, and of a cut-flower spirituality: we want the *fruit of faith* without the dependence of faith. We want confidence without surrender; we want moral clarity without God; we want strength without prayer; we want holiness without communion.

But Psalm 121 keeps bringing us back to the root system: the Lord is the keeper.

“He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will not slumber. Indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep (Psalm 121:4, NIV).”

Church, this is where this season becomes oxygen. Many of us are exhausted because we are trying to watch over our own lives like God. We are trying to control outcomes, manage impressions, protect ourselves from disappointment, and keep everyone else happy. We are acting **as if our vigilance** is the **one thing** holding us together.

Psalm 121 says: stop pretending. You are not the keeper. God is the keeper.

Guess what? Understanding that changes the emotional temperature of a congregation. When people believe they must keep everything from falling apart, stress happens, anxiety rises. And in a anxious system, people become reactive: we rush, we blame, we try to bring more people into our problem (triangulation), we posture, we control... But when the Lord is trusted as the keeper, we can become steadier, more truthful, more patient, less frantic.

In other words: **holiness starts looking like presence**, not nervous control, but faithful presence.

## Take Away: Righteousness Is Received, Not Manufactured

**Romans 4:1–5, 13–17**, are two verses we must bring together to understand a truth Paul is teaching us. Here he names the theological difference between a **cut-flower life** and a **rooted life**: the difference between **wages** and **gift**.

Paul takes us straight to Abraham (Abram) again, not as a moral hero but as a witness to grace.

*“What does Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness’ (Romans 4:3, NIV).”*

Then Paul draws the line clearly:

*“Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness (Romans 4:4-5, NIV).”*

That is either the best news you’ve ever heard or the most offensive thing you’ve ever heard—depending on whether you’re still trying to prove yourself.

Paul is saying: the right standing that holds you up before God does not come from your performance. It comes from God’s promise received by trust.

Now—this is where Trueblood’s claim lands in a sharp, practical way. If righteousness is merely something we construct, then “right” becomes fragile. It becomes negotiable. It becomes whatever the loudest people can enforce, or whatever the crowd rewards this week.

But if righteousness is something God **credits**, something God **gives**, something God establishes by promise. Then there is such a thing as *objective right* that does not wobble with the crowd.

Trueblood’s argument (stated simply) is that you don’t get to keep the moral flower fresh indefinitely if you’ve severed it from the root of God.<sup>2</sup> If God is removed, you may preserve moral language for a while, but eventually it becomes sentimental or coercive, either “nice feelings” or raw power.

And Paul would say: that is exactly why righteousness must be a gift. If righteousness is earned, then religion becomes anxiety and competition. But if righteousness is received, then we can tell the truth, repent honestly, and live steadily; because our standing is rooted in God’s promise, not our performance.

## Bring it together: Nicodemus and the Limits of Sincere Religion

Now we come to one of the most important meetings in the Gospels: Jesus and Nicodemus in **John 3:1–17**.

Nicodemus is not a villain. He is sincere. He is respectful. He calls Jesus “Rabbi.” He recognizes something is happening. He wants truth.

*“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him (John 3:2, NIV).”* Who is we in this sentence? Those are listening to Jesus... And Jesus does not flatter him. Jesus loves him enough to go straight to the root.

*“Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again (John 3:3, NIV).”* This line is so familiar we can miss how disruptive it is.

Nicodemus is basically saying, “Jesus, I’m open. I’m interested. I’m trying.” And Jesus replies, “You must be born from above.”

In other words: you can’t enter the kingdom by sincerity alone. You can’t enter by education alone. You can’t enter by religious seriousness alone. You can’t enter by moral arrangement. Those things can help us listen, but they will not work by “just doing.”

You need a new beginning that you cannot generate... Nicodemus protests in the most human way:

*“How can someone be born when they are old. Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born (John 3:4, NIV).”*

Jesus answers: *“Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again’ (John 3:7, NIV).”*

Friends, this is where the Gospel clarifies everything: the Christian life is not mostly moral improvement. It is **new creation**.

And you can hear how this ties back to “cut flowers.” Nicodemus has flowers: knowledge, status, tradition, effort. But Jesus is after roots: the Spirit of God giving life that cannot be faked.

This is also where Friends have something important to say, not as a competing Christianity, but as a witness to Christianity’s living center. The emphasis on Truth is not mainly “winning arguments.” It is a call to live under the searching, cleansing, guiding presence of Christ, the kind of presence that forms obedience and integrity from the inside out.<sup>3</sup>

Or said more plainly: Truth is not a poster you hang on the wall. Truth is a life you submit to.

And Jesus presses that submission all the way to the gospel’s heart:

---

<sup>3</sup> Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (New York: HarperOne, 1941), esp. the theme of the “Divine Center” and inward obedience as the ground of integrity and guidance.

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. That whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world. But to save the world through him (John 3:17, NIV).”*

Don't miss the balance: no condemnation—yet real rescue. No shaming—yet real salvation. Jesus does not come to preserve your spiritual bouquet. He comes to put you back into living soil.

## The Unplugged Lamp

Let me give you one simple image to hold this together: Imagine a lamp in your living room. The shade is beautiful. The base is solid. The bulb is brand new. Everything about it looks right.

But if the plug is not connected to power, it will never shine. You can polish it. You can admire it. You can talk about how a lamp should work. But it won't give light, because the power isn't in the lamp. The power is in the source.

A cut-flower civilization tries to keep light without plugging into the Source. A cut-flower spirituality tries to keep holiness without communion with God.

John 3 is Jesus saying: *You don't need better décor. You need living power.* You need the Spirit. You need new birth.

### **Concluding: Where Are We Arranging Instead of Rooting?**

So, let's ask this gently but honestly.

#### **1) In our personal lives**

Where have we been trying to arrange a good life—manage impressions, control outcomes, stay busy—rather than staying rooted in Christ through prayer, surrender, and obedience?

This season before Easter invites a different pattern:

- to slow down enough to tell the truth,
- to repent without panic,
- to receive righteousness as gift,
- to live from the Keeper's care.

#### **2) In our church life**

Where do we reward “flowers” that look impressive—giftedness, usefulness, intensity, confidence—while ignoring whether the life is rooted in Christlike maturity?

An anxious church can reward force because force gets quick results. But the Spirit grows fruit over time. And fruit requires roots.

If you want to know how to practice this: return to silence, to waiting, to gathered listening... This is not as a withdrawal from reality, but as a refusal to substitute noise for truth. In the quiet, the Lord reorders us.

### 3) In our public witness

Trueblood's warning is not merely about private morality; it's about a society trying to keep moral language while losing the living ground of moral reality.<sup>4</sup> Church, if we want to be a holy people in a fractured age, our calling is not to become loud cut flowers. Our calling is to be **rooted**, so that our love holds under pressure.

That is how mission becomes credible: not through intensity, but through steadiness.

### A Clear Invitation

So here is the invitation, shaped by these texts:

1. **Hear the call** — like Abram: the Lord is speaking, initiating, drawing you forward.
2. **Trust the Keeper** — like Psalm 121: stop living as though everything depends on your vigilance.
3. **Receive righteousness** — like Romans 4: renounce the wages system; receive the gift.
4. **Come to Jesus honestly** — like Nicodemus: bring your questions, but don't settle for ideas; ask for life.
5. **Be born from above** — surrender to the Spirit's work, not merely self-improvement.

And remember this: bouquet can be arranged. But fruit must be grown.

So we end where Psalm 121 ends—with confidence, not in ourselves, but in the faithful God: “*The LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore* (Psalm 121:8, NIV).”

Let's pray.

### Closing Prayer

Father, we confess how often we try to keep the appearance of life while living severed from you. Forgive us. Re-root us in Jesus Christ. Birth new life in us by your Spirit. Form us into a steady, holy people—whose love holds under pressure and whose witness is credible because it is true. In Jesus' name, Amen.

---

<sup>4</sup> Trueblood, *The Predicament*, 60.