

Look and Live

A sermon for Trinity Sunday 2026

St. John Chrysostom Anglican Church, Mission, TX

Revelation 4 · John 3:1–15

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Say "Garden of Eden," and you can probably see the snake. The tree. The fruit. But there's also a hand — and we never think about the hand, though it's the root of the whole problem. A hand, reaching for the one thing in the garden it was told to leave alone.

And the serpent doesn't say *rebel*. He says something that sounds almost holy: *you will be like God*.

The first sin in history was not a craving for something evil. It was a craving for something good — a hunger for God himself, gone after the one way that never gets you there. By grabbing. By snatching.

The Eastern Church reminds us we were made to receive — to take this world, our own lives, God himself, as gifts, and hand it all back with thanks. We didn't. We reach. We grab. We'd rather seize a thing than admit we didn't make it, earn it, or control it.

But today's reading from Revelation shows us a room. John — the last of the apostles, an old man now, exiled to a prison island — sees a door open in heaven. And the first thing he hears through it is not *explain me*, or *figure me out*. It's an invitation: *come up here*.

So he goes up. In the Spirit, he goes up, and sees the throne of God.

I can't describe it, because John could barely describe it himself. He grabs at jewels — a stone like fire, a stone like ice. Fire around the throne. The color of blood. A rainbow. Lightning and thunder rolling off it. And then, right in

front, the strangest thing of all: a sea. A sea like glass. Perfectly, impossibly still.

I was in the Navy, before the collar — on a submarine. And there's a kind of quiet you only get down deep. We rode out a hurricane down there that was tearing the surface apart. But where we were, a few hundred feet down, it was dead calm. We were down far enough, held in the right place, and all that violence on the surface couldn't reach us.

That's the sea in front of the throne. Not the calm of a life with no storms — nobody gets that. The calm of being found under the authority of the Christ.

And around that sea, four living creatures, covered every inch in eyes. You'd think a creature that was nothing but eyeballs would finally have God figured out. Right? And what does all that seeing get them? *Holy, holy, holy* — that's what perfect sight gets you. One thing, day and night, forever. Worship, not comprehension.

And there are elders — twenty-four of them — with crowns on their heads. Nobody agrees who they are. Some say angels. Some say the old priests of Israel. Some say the twelve sons of Jacob plus the twelve apostles. Two thousand years, and the Church has never nailed it down. And that's a feature, not a bug. God didn't ship us a product we could reverse-engineer. Holy mystery is not a glitch. You don't debug a throne. You get down on the floor in front of it.

Which is what these elders do. They have crowns — the one thing in that room that's theirs, the one thing they earned — and what do they do with them? Take them off and throw them down at his feet. Every time.

Think how rare that is. Think of George Washington. People were ready to make him king, and he handed the power back — gave up the sword, walked home to his farm — and the world, especially Europe, couldn't believe a man

would do it. We put him on the dollar partly because of it. The elders do that all day long like it's nothing — take the one thing that's theirs and give it away, gladly, at his feet.

The Ethiopian Christians have told a story for fifteen hundred years about a man named Yared. They say he was caught up — the way John was, through that same open door — and learned to sing from the twenty-four elders themselves, then came back down and gave his whole nation the song. He didn't study heaven's worship and take notes. He got pulled up into it and sang back what he heard. And the song has three melodies in it — one for the Father, one for the Son, one for the Spirit — because in that tradition you don't explain the Trinity. You sing it. Three tunes, one song. Worship in spirit and in truth — truth that is beautiful.

A lot of people today want to meet God in the loud way, or to hear a warm, encouraging sermon. Hear me: you are not wrong to want Christ near. But Jesus doesn't say here that life comes by a feeling. He says, *look on the Son of Man lifted up like the serpent, and live*. Chase the feeling, and it's gone by Tuesday. The liturgy is built to keep your eyes on Christ — your unworthiness, his worthiness. We pray. We kneel. We listen. The lectionary won't let the priest dodge the hard parts of the Bible. God knows we need more than a pep talk. We need to be challenged — deeply, sometimes.

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The man who came to master it.

That was Nicodemus. Late at night, in the dark, he comes to see Jesus. A teacher, a scholar, a respected man — and he comes loaded with evidence. Listen how he opens: *Rabbi, we know you're a teacher come from God, because no one could do what you do unless God were with him*. I did my homework. I'm ready for the conversation I came to have.

And Jesus won't give him that conversation. He could have met the argument with a better argument; instead he says something you cannot study your way into: *unless you are born again, you cannot even see the kingdom of God.*

That's a puzzle. So Nicodemus does the most human thing there is — what you and I do every time. He tries to turn it back into a problem he can solve. *How? Am I supposed to climb back inside my mother?* Give me the steps. Give me the program and I'll run it. And again Jesus won't have it. He answers him with the wind. *The wind blows where it wants. You hear it, but you can't tell where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.*

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The cross as antidote.

You do not think your way to God. You do not behave your way to God.

Jesus says it flat out, a little later: *when I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself.*

Watch what he does. Sitting in the dark with Nicodemus, he reaches back and grabs one of the strangest stories in the Old Testament. Israel is in the desert. There are snakes in the camp; people are bitten, dropping, crying out to God. And God's cure is strange. He doesn't say *fight the snakes*. He doesn't say *earn it*, or *try harder*, or *clean up your act*. He tells Moses to make a snake out of bronze — a statue of the very thing killing them — and lift it up on a pole. And the cure, the whole cure, is to look. Anyone bitten can look up at it and live. That's it. No work. Just turn and look.

Sit in how strange that is before we make it about Jesus. You're dying of snakebite, and you're saved by staring up at a bronze snake — healed by looking, over your head, at an image of the very thing poisoning you.

And then Jesus says it: *just as Moses lifted up that snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up.*

There's the whole story in one move. In the garden, a hand reached up and grabbed, and we died. In the desert, dying people looked up, and they lived. And on a hill outside Jerusalem, God himself is lifted up on a pole — made to look like the very thing killing us: sin, a curse, hung up in the shape of our own death — so that we, dying of it, can look up and live. And the very thing we tried to steal in the garden — to be like God — is the thing he turns and *gives* us. Athanasius said it without flinching seventeen hundred years ago: he became what we are, so that we could become what he is.

And this only works because the One on the pole is God. If the man on that cross is only a man — only a fine example — then looking at him just shames you into trying harder, and you're right back in the desert with the poison in your blood. But he is not only a man. You do not copy your way to heaven. You look — and he carries you.

Three things a soul does in the pull.

The cross has a kind of gravity. It pulls. And faced with it, every one of us does one of three things. One is dangerous. One is just sad. The third is the only one that saves you.

The Grabber. The first thing a soul can do is grab. And notice — this isn't a rejection of the cross; it's still a reach for it. But to grab God, the hand has to shrink him down to something it can hold and the mind can fully manage. That's the oldest mistake in the Church, and it has a name: heresy. Since it's Trinity Sunday, I have to mention Arius, seventeen hundred years ago — not a stupid man, a brilliant one, sure of himself, who reasoned his way right up to God and, in the process, shrank him. He decided Jesus wasn't fully God — just the highest thing God ever made. A creature.

You've probably had a version of it knock on your door on a Saturday morning. The Mormons come smiling — they've invited people to their own church right out of our parking lot. The Jehovah's Witnesses come by the minivan-load and fan out across the block like a swarm, pounding on doors. There's a real spiritual battle for this little corner of Mission — and that's before the Santa Muerte shrine across the street. They're sincere, every one of them. But the pitch is always the same: Jesus was the Son of God, sure — a great teacher, a beautiful man — just, you know, not actually God. Made, they'll tell you. A creature. The oldest heresy in the book, dressed up in suits and long dresses. And I'm telling you: the second you go along with it, you've lost the only thing that could ever have saved you. Because — stay with me, this matters more than anything else I'll say this morning — if Jesus is only a really good man, then all he can ever be to you is an example. And an example can only be copied. You can't be rescued by an example; you can only be told, *here's how it's done, now go do it yourself*. That's the snake in the garden again. That's climb the ladder under your own power. That's be good enough. A Jesus who is only a man stands you against the wall, hands you the impossible job of saving yourself, and calls it good news. It is not good news. It is the worst news there is.

This is why, in a few minutes, we'll stand and confess that without this faith no one is saved. I know how that sounds. A man who used to come here refused to say that line. People hear it and think we're being snobs — or saying something untrue about God, that he isn't merciful. Let me tell you what's unmerciful: heresy, because it binds you and poisons you and kills you. We are not bouncers at the door of heaven checking IDs. The Athanasian Creed is not a velvet rope. It's a man at the edge of a cliff, where only one of the bridges will hold, waving his arms to tell you which one carries your weight and which ones drop you in the river. That's not gatekeeping. That's about the most

loving thing a person can do. And the truth, once you see it, is beautiful — and beauty won't wound you the way a lie does.

The Orbiter. Here's the second, and a lot of religious people live their whole lives here. The second soul is too smart to grab, so it circles. It stays in orbit. It can talk about God all day and never once kneel. Sometimes it's the person with every answer exactly right — creed memorized, theology airtight — and no worship anywhere, just correctness. And sometimes it's the opposite: the one who loves the questions so much they never want an answer, because an answer would mean stopping, and bowing, and admitting they weren't the smartest one in the room. C. S. Lewis told a story about a man like that in *The Great Divorce* — an Anglican bishop, in hell, but offered heaven — the real thing! And he turns it down, because he has a paper to deliver back in hell, a little discussion group waiting on him, and he'd flat-out rather talk about God forever than meet him. He even bows at the name of Jesus — but only in body, not in spirit, clinging to his dignity and his open mind. The circling soul never closes on anything. It just orbits, at a safe, respectful, intelligent distance — false humility of the mind — and never falls into the gravity that is Christ crucified, risen, and coming again.

The Crown Caster. Then there's the third soul. It stops grabbing, stops circling, and does the hardest thing a proud person can do. It opens its hands. It says: *I did not figure this out. Somebody handed it to me — Jesus, the apostles, the Church, my grandmother, somebody — and I'm going to stop arguing now, and bow.* It lets itself be born in the waters of baptism. It takes off the crown. And it gets pulled into the beauty of holiness. The same pull that throws the grabbing soul out into the dark gathers the open soul home.

Let me get concrete. Here's what the grabbing looks like on a regular Tuesday. You walk through your life carrying a file, and the file is thick — full of everybody else's wrongs. What she said. What he did. How they treated you.

You've got it all in there, ready any minute to make your case. And there's exactly one name that never shows up in the file as a suspect. Your own.

A therapist named Jonathan Alpert wrote about this — not a preacher, a secular clinician. He had a patient come in furious at a friend over a canceled dinner and a late text. By the time she'd talked it through, the friend was "toxic," the slight was "trauma," the whole thing a "violation of boundaries." She had screenshots. But the one question she never asked — not once — was, *did I do anything here?* He says our therapy culture has gotten very good at handing people a polished story about why someone else is the problem — training us to find the fault everywhere but the mirror. And then this, from a secular therapist: it gives you certainty — but certainty is the enemy of insight.

Now hold on — because some of you are thinking, *wait, you spent ten minutes telling us to be certain. Without this faith, no one is saved. And now certainty is the enemy?* So let me say plainly what I mean, because there are two kinds of certainty, and they are nothing alike. There's the certainty that builds a case — certainty about everyone else's wrongs, the thick file, the closed mind. That kind hardens you. That's the one that's the enemy of insight. And then there's the certainty that surrenders — the certainty that you need Christ, and that He is enough. Right thinking about the cross was never about grasping a doctrine and holding it over someone's head. It's about letting go and looking. The Creeds are not files you build against your neighbor. They're more akin to the bronze snake you look up at and live. One certainty closes your fist. The other opens your hands.

That's the serpent's masterpiece. He doesn't have to make you a monster. He just keeps you so busy building the case against everybody else that you never once sit in the defendant's chair yourself. And then the gospel walks into the courtroom, quietly closes your file, and says: there's only one truly good person in this whole story — and he's the one on the tree. Stop reading the file.

Look at him. And God will make you, little by little, into what Jesus already is. Not by your trying — by grace, he makes you what Christ is by nature. There's your whole Trinity, on Trinity Sunday, and it was never a math problem. It's a rescue in motion: the Father on the throne, the Son gone up to it, the Spirit poured out to draw you home. Three who are one — and every bit of Him leaning toward you.

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How Nicodemus ended up.

Let me finish with how Nicodemus ended up. He shows up three times in John, and each time he's a little further out of the dark. Once, chapter three — at night, full of questions, arguing. Again, chapter seven — the council wants Jesus arrested, and Nicodemus stands up among his powerful colleagues and, like the careful lawyer he is, asks whether their own law lets them condemn a man without a hearing. Small. Nervous. It costs him something. They shut him down fast.

Then chapter nineteen. Jesus is dead — the single most dangerous moment to be caught as his friend, and that's the moment Nicodemus picks. In broad daylight, he shows up with about a hundred pounds of burial spices — an absurd amount, the kind you'd use to bury a king — and helps take the body of the lifted-up One down off the wood, and wraps it, and lays it in the tomb with his own hands.

Do you see what happened to that man? The scholar who came in the dark to figure Jesus out ended in daylight with his arms full of spices and his hands all over the body — not understanding him anymore, just loving him. He couldn't be born again by thinking harder in chapter three. By chapter nineteen he was living the new birth he could never explain. He stopped trying to crack Jesus like a case. He just looked, and loved, and got pulled all the way in.

In a few minutes I'll stand at that table and say, *Lift up your hearts*. And you'll answer, *We lift them up unto the Lord*. And the bread will be lifted up — the One lifted up, lifted up again before your eyes, like the snake on the pole. And then we'll do the most astonishing thing creatures are allowed to do: we'll say *Holy, holy, holy* — not picturing the angels doing it somewhere far away, but doing it with them. Whatever crown you walked in clutching this morning — whatever case you've been building, against others, against yourself — set it down, open your hands, and receive the One you could never get by grabbing.

It's good to study sound doctrine — Alec can catechize you in all of it when I'm gone. But never forget: you cannot out-think the cross. You might circle it, at a careful, clever, respectful distance — but that would only be sad. That's not God's best for you. The cross is the pull of heaven itself. Stop grabbing. Stop circling. Let him pull you in.

Look up at the One who was lifted up — and live.