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Lent 2 – John 3:14-17 – The Greatest Love Story Ever Told  
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Before too long spring will be here – we hope, anyway! – and that is a time when love is in the air. The birds sing, the bees pollinate, the flowers bloom, and to a lot of people that spells romance. For many of us, the beautiful sights and sounds and smells of the season call to mind the makings of a good love story: dedication; commitment; determined, selfless, self-sacrificing love; living happily ever after, and so on. And from *Romeo and Juliet* to *Casablanca* and *Gone with the Wind* to a couple of family favorites – *Beauty and the Beast* and *Aladdin* – storytellers all across time have repeatedly, successfully used those same themes to stir people to the core. But no matter what your personal favorite is, there is not a love story under heaven that holds a candle to the one Nicodemus was treated to this night.

It was a nagging curiosity that brought Nicodemus to Jesus. There was just something about what Jesus said and the way Jesus said it that piqued his interest. So Nicodemus showed up that evening kind of timid and not totally sure what to say, but finally he basically just asked Jesus how he could get right with God, how he could get on God's good side. Jesus answered his question with maybe the most profound and heart-rending words this world has ever known – he told Nicodemus a love story that took his breath away and left him standing speechless and in awe.

The love story Jesus told was one that's been in the making since the beginning of time, and if you think the stories I just mentioned before have dedication, selfless love, and a happy ending, this one has more, better, and greater, and it's not even close. This was the greatest love story ever told, and it can't possibly get any better, because it's happening right now to you.

This is the love story of the Most High God for the people of this lowly world, and the first thing that makes this love story so great is that God showed us the greatest commitment. To understand that, we only need to look inside ourselves and look at the Israelites that Jesus talked about with Moses and the bronze snake.

Now if you're a fan of any of the *Hallmark* romances, it seems like they all follow pretty much the same basic storyline. One of the main characters is cold, hard-hearted, self-centered, and they're too busy to give the time of day to anyone else in their life... but by patience, perseverance, and sometimes a little tough love, their love interest is able to win them over in the end. Well

the Israelites fit that first character to a T throughout their history. After everything God had done for them to bring them out of their slavery in Egypt, they acted arrogant, stubborn, and stiff-necked; day after day and year after year they were impatient with God and never stopped complaining, even though the whole time God was watching over them and taking care of them on their trip through the wilderness. So finally God gave them a glimpse of what life could be like without him and his loving care – he gave them the punishment they deserved by sending venomous snakes among them. But then God in his awesome grace didn't just leave them to die in their sins; he gave them a way to salvation when he told Moses to put a bronze snake on a pole so that anyone who was bitten could look at it, be saved, and live – because he loved even them.

Jesus used that story with Nicodemus for a reason, because honestly that's the kind of people we humans are. We're people who too often focus on the hard rather than the helpful; people who too easily get pulled toward what's bad for us in the long run rather than what's truly good for us; people who are all too quick to put our God, his Word, and his Will in the back seat to do what's more fun and enjoyable in the moment but won't matter a bit in eternity. Not much has changed in these thousands of years since those snakes came in the desert – we can still be just as cold and hard-hearted and self-centered, and still too busy to give back to God the dedicated love he deserves from us.

And that's actually a huge part of what makes this the greatest love story ever told. Despite all the ways we've been so hard to love, God didn't turn his back on us. He refused to give up on us. He stayed dedicated to loving and blessing us, rather than condemning us. He made the greatest commitment to those least deserving of it. Sinful people haven't changed after all these years, but what also hasn't changed in all these years is our God's enduring, undying, overcoming love for even sinners like us.

God *so* loved the world, even though we didn't deserve it. But that's just the point – God didn't just *like* us, didn't just have *warm feelings* toward us that we somehow think we earned. God *loved* us, with the greatest, most over-the-top incomprehensible love this world has ever seen, even though he knows the worst in us. In fact, God's love for us is so great and so strong that the Bible says God *is* love. See, real, Godly love isn't just a feeling or some always-changing emotion – that's the world's definition that's too weak and flimsy to last. No, real love is a resolve; it's a choice. It doesn't base its actions on how likable or worthy the object of love is; it always acts purposefully, faithfully, selflessly, and even sacrificially in the best interests

of its object. That's *true* love – and that's why Jesus said in v. 14 that the Son of Man *must* be lifted up. God's love and our sin made that a necessity. God's purpose was to cleanse this world of sinners and take us to himself forever. That meant someone had to die, so God acted in our best interests by sending his only-begotten Son to do it for us.

Now here's where this really goes from a love poem to a love story. God didn't just tell us how much he loves us; he showed us. The greatest act of love anyone can do is to freely give, and God freely gave us the greatest gift of love when he gave up his Son Jesus to death as a sacrifice to save us.

God *so* loved the world that he gave his one and only Son... Don't miss that title: God's *one and only* Son, whom he loved. This was God's only-begotten Son, with whom he had perfect unity and fellowship and the closest intimacy possible – closer and more special than any relationship this world can match.

All you parents who marveled that first time you held a child of your own and wondered how you could ever love something more than that... know that your God loves *you* more. He was even willing to trade his one and only Son to save you, to save this sinful and rebellious world. The best and greatest gift that God had to give, he gave for you – it was the gift of himself. See how much your God loves you, that he was even willing to give his beloved, only-begotten Son for your salvation! That's a gift of self-sacrificing love unlike anything you'll find at the movies or in the bookstore.

And when our Savior Jesus wanted to show us the full extent of God's love for this world, he told us, "*Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends*" (John 15:13), and then he went to Calvary for us to prove it. It took every ounce of the eternal glory of the only-begotten Son of God to atone for the sinfulness of this world and redeem mankind. Our salvation required no less than that God's one and only Son must be given up to death for us. What a price it was, and what love it was to pay it! Nowhere else does God's love for us shine out more brilliantly or in greater display than at the cross of Christ.

And again, the only reason Christ was willing to do all that for us is because he loves us too much to lose us. 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. That's God's greatest invitation, and it's our greatest opportunity.

See, Jesus died on the cross for us so that our salvation depends completely on him; we don't have to worry about losing it or messing it up, because it's in his sure hands. It's completed, it's finished, it's a done deal, so that promise he makes us has the greatest simplicity – *whoever believes in him* shall not perish but have eternal life. We do nothing, because Jesus did everything. We simply trust in him and put all of our hope in him, because he is the greatest, most worthy object of our faith, and he's done it all for us. That means that the burden is totally off of us. We are free from sin, free from guilt, free from fear of condemnation, because our Savior took it all away. Jesus did everything for us, because he loves us *that much* and that's how much he wanted us for himself.

And because everything depends on Jesus, we can be absolutely sure that there is also a happy ending to look forward to. A good love story usually ends with a couple riding off into the sunset, so to speak, and living happily ever after – at least as long as they both shall live – but the ending to this love story is even better. It could hardly be the greatest love story ever told if it weren't! No, this love story also has the greatest outcome.

Whoever believes that Jesus is their Savior from sin will not perish, but will have *eternal life*. This is God's greatest and most merciful promise to us – we will never have to face condemnation, because Jesus faced it for us. Jesus assures us and reassures us that he is our loving Savior, not our condemning judge. That's what he tells us every time there's a baptism or holy communion or when we do confession and absolution at the beginning of our services. The reason Jesus came was to take upon himself the punishment from God that we deserved and to give us instead the gift of heaven that he earned.

By God's grace, we have the greatest certainty that the greatest possession is ours, even now. The sole purpose of Jesus' coming was to bring his love to fulfillment and save the world – to deliver us from sin, death, and hell. So now we have eternal life and we have heaven to look forward to, where we will be with Jesus forever to share in his peace, his joy, and his love.

Now I'm no master storyteller, but Jesus was, and I think we all can see that the story Nicodemus heard that night was so much greater than the likes of *Titanic* or the latest and greatest from Nicholas Sparks. And the reason for that is very simple: the very best of us and the very best we humans can dream up in our minds and hearts is nothing but a shadow of the love that our Savior has and has shown for us. What Nicodemus heard then and what you have heard just now truly is the greatest love story ever told, because it's the story of your God's love for you. Amen.