

Genesis 18:20-32

The Lord said to Abraham, "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know."

So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the Lord. Then Abraham came near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" And the Lord said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake." Abraham answered, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?" And he said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." Again he spoke to him, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it." Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there." He answered, "I will not do it, if I find thirty there." He said, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it." Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it."

So, what did you all think of Abraham in our passage from Genesis this morning? You know, we don't get to hear about Sodom and Gomorrah often. Even when it is part of the lectionary's reading, it typically gets passed over. Just a little too politically incorrect, I guess, in today's world. But there is so much more going on than just rampant sin and the price that unfortunately gets paid. There are important things to learn about Abraham and about God.

If you start just a few verses earlier, you will find that just before our passage for this morning Abraham was walking out the three gentlemen that God had sent to him and Sarah. He was sending them on their way in the direction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Their work with Abraham was done. They had arrived out of nowhere. Abraham had treated them with great hospitality, which was the obligation of any follower of Yahweh. They

had completed their mission by telling them that the promise that God had made to Abraham was about to be realized. They told them both that, even though Sarah was way past her child bearing years, she was going to have a son.

That news made Sarah laugh. Now, I don't know if Sarah's laugh was one of doubt or one of fear, but it prompted God to ask a critical question that even Sarah seemed to have forgotten. He asked them, before they laughed off the message entirely of the upcoming birth of Isaac; he asked them to consider again whether anything was too hard for the Lord God...anything. Is anything beyond God's knowledge and wisdom? It was an important question that they needed to hear again and it is a question that will bleed over into what we heard today.

So, when our passage for this morning starts, Abraham was waving goodbye to the messengers as they headed south out of town for their next assignment. And it was at that time that God decides to share with Abraham his concerns about what was going on down in Sodom and Gomorrah, which leads to a very interesting conversation. It's been described as Abraham wrestling with God and prevailing in getting God to see things differently. You know, I don't buy that. It would be kind of like man sitting down with God for a meeting and at the end God saying, "Yeah, wow, I never thought of that. Thanks Abraham for your great wisdom."

Well, one thing that we can be reasonable sure of is that Abraham probably knew full well what was going on in those places. After all, he was an important person in the region and, on top of that, he had family there. He had good, God loving family there. And so he opened up what some call a negotiation with God. I see it more as an attempt at deeper understanding and it is from that quest for understanding that I think we can learn a great deal about what a faithful relationship with God looks like.

The first thing that we learn is that it is OK to have a conversation like the one Abraham had with God. And that is the way that it typically works. God didn't become angry with Abraham when he seems to be challenging God with what was just, or not. God didn't smite him with lightning bolts or plagues, or strike him mute for his presumptuousness. What God did do was he listened and he responded.

That is how it works. When we are in a proper relationship with God, or at least seeking one, God invites us to truly, and fully, be in that relationship. That is the only way to find the clearness we need. That means that we are given the right to seek that clarification. We are encouraged to improve our understanding and deepen our relationship. For Abraham, that sounded like, "Will you indeed Lord sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Help me to understand how that would be just."

So first and foremost we see with Abraham that our relationship with God, and God with us, is not simplistic, nor shallow, nor superficial. God wants us to know him. And knowing him takes effort.

We are even invited to push further for even greater understanding, like Abraham did. "Ok Lord, so if there are only 50 righteous people in all of Sodom, will you still destroy them along with the city?" And God said no. Good so far. To be honest, I think that is exactly what Abraham would have expected.

Abraham, however, knowing Sodom, probably believing that it was a longshot that there would be 50 righteous people, and so he tightened it up a bit. How about 45? And God promised that if 45 righteous people could be found, he would not destroy the city.

Can't you almost see Abraham now, doing a moment of math in his head. Ahhhh...how about 40, Father? How about 30? 20? How about 10, Lord? How about 10? I might be able to get to that number with Lot and his family, alone. Surely, if there are 10, you won't destroy them with the rest. How about 10, Father?

Now, I have to tell you that I think that God already knew that if there was just 10 people in righteous people in Sodom he would have not destroyed them with the city. But Abraham had to come to understand that. And each time Abraham humbly pushes further for greater understanding God teaches him, and us, a little bit more about who he is.

We come to understand that is even 99.9% of the population in the city are wicked and there is only a miniscule remnant of the faithful, God will not destroy those places for the sake of that very few. Are we getting a better understanding of God and his restraint and his love? Even for the sake of a very few, he would not destroy those cities.

And that is who Abraham was seeking to protect: the righteous few. It was not that he had a deep hatred of the 99.9. But Abraham's cause was for those who were righteous. That can be our second take away this morning.

Now, please don't take that wrongly. The message we get through the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, although important for our spiritual health, is only part of the totality of the full Gospel Message. It is about the few, as much as it is about the many. That doesn't mean that the others didn't matter. Much of the rest of our Gospel teaches us about the many, really the all, and how a relationship with God is possible.

Unfortunately, God was not, in the end, able to find even 10 faithful people in those cities and so, after bringing Lot and his immediate family out, he removed those cities from creation. This does not mean that God did not desire better things for those people. Certainly God cherishes all his children. While it is clear from our story of Sodom that God is willing to protect the righteous, it is also clear, from our vantage point from this side of the cross and resurrection, that God seeks and desires and even watches over those who have turned from him so that they too would have the opportunity to be reconciled. That is the plan.

But, here is our next lesson. Although it is an uncomfortable message to receive, at some point there will be a division between those choosing God and not looking back, and those who insist on their own way.

The story about Sodom and Gomorrah is more than just a story about two evil cities being removed from creation for the sake of creation. It is more than how we, as God's children, and God, as the all-knowing and final arbiter, are to react to such evil. And it is a story about how we are invited to draw always nearer to God so that we can better understand the extent of his love.

Amen