

A Minority Report of Grace
Genesis 18:16-19:26
July 23, 2023
Pastor Sarah Wiles

Sarah: One afternoon, God was with Abraham and God said...

God: The cries of injustice from Sodom and Gomorrah are countless, and their sin is very serious! I will go down now to examine the cries of injustice that have reached me. Have they really done all this? If not, I want to know.

Abraham: My God, are you serious? Will you really kill the innocent because of the guilty? What if there are fifty innocent people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not save the place for the sake of the fifty innocent people in it? It's not like you to do this, killing the innocent with the guilty as if there were no difference. It's not like you! You're the judge of all the earth. So, aren't you going to be just?

God: Okay. Fair enough. If I find fifty innocent people in the city of Sodom, I will save it because of them.

Abraham: Well, since I've already decided to open my mouth, even though I'm just made of soil and ash, what if there are five fewer innocent people than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city over just five?

God: Sure. If I find forty-five good people, I won't destroy it.

Abraham: Well, what if there are forty?

God: For the sake of forty, I will do nothing.

Abraham: Don't be mad, God, but, what if there are thirty good people?

God: I won't do it if I find thirty there.

Abraham: Since I've already gone this far, what if there are twenty good people?

God: Okay. I won't do it if there are twenty.

Abraham: Please don't be mad. But, well, I was wondering, what if there are just ten?

God: [big sigh] Fine, Abraham, I will not destroy it because of those ten.

Sarah: [Summarize chapter 19]

Two messengers from God who looked like people came to Sodom that evening. Lot, Abraham's nephew, was sitting there at the gate, and when the visitors came close, he greeted them and invited them to stay with him for the night. They didn't say yes right away, but Lot begged them until they said yes. When they came over to his house, his wife prepared a feast for them.

Later that evening, all the people of Sodom surrounded the house in an angry mob and yelled for Lot to send out the visitors. The mob was planning to sexually assault them. Lot went out

and closed the door behind him and pleaded with them not to abuse his visitors. Instead, he offered the mob his two young daughters. He said, "You can do anything you want to them, just don't do anything to these visitors who I've welcomed and eaten with."

But the mob wasn't satisfied and started to attack Lot. The visitors inside the house pulled Lot in and slammed the door and then blinded the people closest to the door.

They told Lot they were going to destroy the city because the people were so evil, and that he should take his whole family and flee at dawn. When morning broke, Lot hesitated, so the messengers grabbed Lot and his wife and his two daughters and dragged them outside of the city, saying, "Run! Don't look back! Get out of the valley and run for the hills."

But Lot still hesitated and said, "Do I have to go to the mountains? What if we die out there? Couldn't we just go to this little city over here?"

So, they said, "Fine. Just go! Now!"

As the sun was rising, just as Lot and his wife and two daughters got close to the little city, God rained down burning asphalt from the sky onto Sodom and the neighboring town Gomorrah. God destroyed the cities, all the people in the cities, and all the fertile land in the whole valley.

While Lot and his daughters were running for their lives, Lot's wife looked back. And she instantly turned into a pillar of salt.

...

It is an exceedingly weird story. Almost every beat of it is weird. And if you want an even weirder story, go home and read the end of chapter 19.

Here, for the first half, Abraham is haggling with God like he's buying a used car from him. Then in the second half there's this unaccountably violent mob, and Lot offers up his own daughters—how is that righteous—and then when they're fleeing, Lot's wife looks back and becomes a pillar of sodium chloride. Why on earth would we read this?

There are at least two reasons. First, it gets a lot of press in Christian arguments about sexuality, and it's worth knowing what the source material says. Second, Abraham's conversation with God is one of the most courageous, revolutionary, fierce things in the Bible, and it's worth knowing about.

So, for the first issue: what does this story say about homosexuality?

Nothing. It's a trick question. This story has absolutely nothing to do with sexual orientation. In fact, the actual Hebrew doesn't even say the mob was made up of just men. The Hebrew word is a word for people. It's not the specific word for men. It was the whole city that joined in the violent mob. The story clearly says sexual assault and mob violence are horrible, at least when directed at adult men, but it says nothing about loving, consensual, adult relationships between two men, or people of any gender for that matter.

That's just not what this story is about. And even more, I'm not taking this story as my model for sexual ethics, since according to this, offering up your young daughters is just fine. This is not a story about the morality of love or sex between people of any gender.

Instead, this is a story about a society that's become so deeply dysfunctional that when foreigners come to town and need help, the immediate response is to abuse and humiliate them.

We don't much like to imagine God going around smiting people, but I guess if God's going to smite anyone, this mob in Sodom seems like a fine place to start. Behavior like this warrants consequences. As horrifying as it is, chapter 19 does have a sort of logic. It says when you do bad stuff, there will be consequences. God is fair. The people in Sodom were awful. They got what they deserved. The end.

But this story still rests uneasily for me. It makes me nervous—not just because of the smiting, but because it follows chapter 18. Chapter 18 is like a minority report. It takes the conventional worldview of chapter 19 and undermines it. If chapter 19 is the teacher who says, one more peep from anyone and you all lose recess, chapter 18 is the argument saying, "that's not right."

We tend to think of good and bad as something like a point system. If you do good stuff, you get points; if you do bad stuff, you lose points; and you hope, at the end of the day, to end up in the black. If a society does a lot more damage than good, then the society is corrupt, and it's headed for destruction. We hope, at the end of the day to have done more good than bad, because then we'll be good people. If we're good enough, we'll be worthy of love.

But how good do we have to be? What if we make mistakes? Then what? How strict is this point system?

That's Abraham's question. Are we stuck with this system of keeping score and judging the guilty, or is there another way? Can't even a little bit of goodness redeem a whole heap of bad?

Abraham's arguing a bold possibility. Could the world be different? Are we stuck with this tit for tat accounting system that damns us all? Or is there another way? In fact, he isn't just asking, he's arguing for it. He's arguing with God.

And here, in this minority report in chapter 18, God says yes. We're not judged by the worst thing we've ever done. But then we have this story of destruction, and it's like the conversation in 18 never happened. Maybe there weren't 10 decent people in Sodom. Maybe. But surely, they weren't all bad, all the time. No one is. But they're still wiped off the face of the earth.

There's tension there that's not resolved. One of my favorite things about the Bible is how it argues with itself. It happens far too often to be a coincidence. I believe the storytellers and editors were inspired when they decided to keep multiple traditions alive. God is too big to be confined to just one tradition. And putting these two stories next to each other is an honest reflection of our struggle between these two ways. Part of us is drawn to the simplicity and apparent fairness of the judgement we see in chapter 19. People should get what they have coming to them.

But at the same time, we also wonder with Abraham, what about the innocent? What about mercy? Can a little bit of righteousness outweigh a whole heap of bad, even if it's not fair? What about the seeds of goodness, the wheat growing up in the weeds, the little sparks of light in the night?

Is reality ultimately about tit for tat keeping score and smiting? And if that's how God is, is that how we should be, too? Or could there be forgiveness and grace and something new? This

argument Abraham presses here is like a small crack in the whole structure of judgement and retribution.

And Lot's wife, turning to salt there at the very end. So haunting. No one really knows what to make of her. People have accused her of being dumb, or sinful, or just wanting all her pretty things she used to have, and something like that would fit with the ethics of chapter 19. But what if she turned back not out of some kind of selfishness, but out of compassion and grief and solidarity? What if her turning back is protest?

The tension isn't resolved. We're left with a choice. Do we live by the math of chapter 19? Keeping score, judging, and punishing? Or do we dare to live into the hope of a fierce old man who was so convinced of the power of even the smallest amount of love, that he was willing to talk back to God? Living that way isn't easy. Mercy is messy. But ultimately, this way—the way of forgiveness, of grace, of mercy—is the only way to life. May we dare to choose it.

~ Sarah W. Wiles, 2023