

Sermon – July 24, 2022: What If..?

Scripture: Genesis 18:20-32 with Psalm 138 & Colossians 2:6-15

Our scripture today speaks of Sodom and Gomorrah. These cities were infamous as centres of sin and godlessness. Recently some scientist announced that they think they've found evidence of a huge asteroid that came down and caused the destruction of Sodom in 1897 BC. I don't think they want to admit that it was nonetheless the hand of God. Are there any cities that you think God should destroy for being cesspools of wickedness? Maybe Washington DC, Chicago, Beijing, Tehran, Moscow or even Los Angeles come to mind. But what if you had family living there?

Wouldn't that lead you to change your mind about it? [Notice that I am assuming that you love your extended family and your relatives are NOT the reason you'd like that city obliterated]

I always wondered: when Lot pitched his tent in Sodom, did he *know* how much wickedness existed there? Did the thought of wealth and fine pastures overrule his concerns about morality and safety? Did he just want to move away from Abraham?

In any case, Abraham was told by God of the plan to destroy Sodom, the wicked place. And probably because Lot and his family were there, Abraham asked God to spare the city. Was Lot so important? Did he not *choose* to live there among wicked people? Irrelevant, argued Abraham. The important point was not to destroy the innocent along with the guilty – not to destroy the righteous in the process of destroying the perverted. He cannot believe his God would do that. His immediate reaction was, “Far be it from you to do such a thing!...Will not the judge of all the earth do right?” (v25) Abraham's heart tells him that the God he loves just WOULD NOT do this. His conception of God, his understanding of God's character prevents him from believing that God would actually let a righteous man perish. He pleads with God, arguing that a god of justice would not punish the righteous just for living in the wrong neighborhood.

Tell me, what is YOUR image of God? Do you see him as a stern being who lays down the law and punishes you for breaking it? If you sin, do you expect bad things to happen to you for the next 3 days? Or do you see God as a fountain of love and grace, indulgently putting up with your imperfections and showering you with love and encouragement to raise you up every time you fall? How we see God colors our religious experience and our whole approach to life. Those who picture God as a harsh disciplinarian often become legalistic with others and set rigid standards for themselves. Those who picture God as a loving father, who readily forgives mistakes, tend to be more merciful and more compassionate in their own relations with others. Abraham, who never read the Torah or the Bible since they weren't yet written, sees God as a supreme ruler who values integrity and judges fairly. So Abraham asks, *What If?*

Amazingly, God considers Abraham's view. God makes a concession to Abraham, which shows how much he loved this man of faith. God's mercy is on full display here. God offers to spare the city if he can find 50 righteous people in it. Wow! That's great! Surely in such a large city there are fifty people still honoring God. But then Abraham considers again – Lot's family isn't so very large. And really, should even one righteous person be killed because his neighbor is an idolator?? Abraham then begins his negotiation with God. He begins a series of hypothetical arguments - WHAT IF....?

Haven't you had such a discussion with the Lord yourself? Lord, I really don't feel I can tithe in this economy. What if I give 5% for now? or Lord, I really need you to heal my mother's cancer. What if she dies? How will I convince my unbelieving friends that you are real and that you care?

Or maybe you bargain from the opposite side – Lord, if you help me quit smoking, I promise to give all my cigarette money to the church. Lord, let me win the lottery and I promise to give 25% of that \$5 million to the church~ Either way, we often play the *What if* game. It's risky. Just like Abraham we need to approach God with humility, recognizing his power, his authority and our own imperfect understanding. Job learned this lesson when God responded to him in Job 38:2 saying, "Who is this who questions my authority and wisdom by words without knowledge?" Abraham therefore questions God with full reverence, in a concerned and troubled tone; he speaks up boldly but with humility. This is a model for us. Abraham prefaces his question with an acknowledgment of his lower status: "I who am but dust and ashes" have decided to speak. Abraham's concerns are two-fold. The first is his nephew Lot- who would likely perish if Sodom were destroyed. The second is a concern for God's reputation – Abraham does not want to see God accused of being unjust. Destroying both wicked and righteous alike has bad optics. Who wants to worship a God like that? One whose attitude is, "Oh Lot? Sorry, he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. What a pity, but it couldn't be helped." That sounds like some totalitarian ruler or Babylonian king (to keep Biblical terms). Abraham knows God is just but also merciful, caring for everyone who trusts in him. So, "What if there are still 50 righteous people?"

Abraham's query is repeated with decreasing numbers... testing God's limits. What if 45? What if only 30? You'll notice he doesn't give up! He doesn't just sit back passively and say, Darn, I really liked Lot. I thought God did too. Well, I tried. This must be his punishment for selfishly taking the best grazing grounds for himself when I gave him a choice. NO! Abraham is convinced that God IS a just god. So he asks, What if only 20? And finally – what if only 10 righteous people are found in Sodom. Would you spare it for the sake of 10 good people?

Surprisingly, God agrees. In his grace he will spare Sodom if just 10 righteous people are found there. This negotiation process, this bargaining, demonstrates to me the immense love and mercy of the god we worship. For the sake of just 10 good people he will spare a city of hundreds of ingrates, idolaters, and murderers. Doesn't that give a new meaning to the proverb that "Love covers a multitude of sins?" Ten (10) righteous people can change the fate of an entire city! So couldn't we agree that ten righteous people on a school board can save hundreds if not thousands of students from being taught that the color of their skin is more important than their ability to add subtract and multiply? Could not 10 righteous people on the town council save a city from government that contradicts the will of the people? And so forth?

Oh Susan, you say, please don't link this to politics. This is church. And I ask you, is our righteousness to be confined to these four walls? Does it not influence every decision we make every day of our lives? God promises to shower tremendous blessings on the righteous. Through the Holy Spirit His power flows to us and through us to enable us to achieve amazing things. If, as the Bible tells us in Philippians 3:11 we are the 'righteousness of God in Christ', then don't we, like Christ, try to glorify God the father in everything we do and say? Don't we like Christ confront leaders who are propagating their own views rather than what God said to be true? When Lot moved to Sodom, his family was in danger, not just from God's plan for destruction of the city, but from the poisonous ideas that flowed through that culture. If we hang out with sinners, it's so WE can bring THEM to God's truth, not so they can convince us God is irrelevant to daily life.

Sadly, there were not even TEN righteous people in Sodom. For however long Lot had lived there, his presence had not attracted or converted ten believers in the town. His failure to bring at least 10 people to the faith had tragic consequences for the whole city. What if this were OUR city? Would God find 50 righteous people? 40? 30? 10? This is a challenge to us. (Don't start counting the people around you

who you think are righteous!) How many people have we brought to Christ? How many people have changed lives because we introduced them to Jesus? In the days after Pentecost, converting 10 people was just one day's work for the apostles. Only 10 people were required to form a synagogue.

In his letter to the Colossians Paul encourages the church members to live in union with Jesus, to build their lives on him. He warns them to 'see to it..that no one enslaves you by means of the worthless deceit of human wisdom, which comes from the teachings handed down by human beings.' (2:8). Our society has become worshippers of self and man-made science. Ideology replaces theology: we put aside God's instructions and replace them with man's theorizing and computer models. Instead of teaching our children from the wisdom in the book of Proverbs, as our forefathers recommended, we encourage them to study humanism, socialism, racism, feminism, and moral relativism. Opinions are being presented as fact and facts are being derided as opinion. This is misdirection from Satan, the father of lies. Don't get sucked into this; investigate what your kids are being taught. If it contradicts the Bible, take action! God does not make mistakes! One schoolchild said, God couldn't have known the real story because he was born so long ago, before scientists had discovered all these things! I fear many adults think the 'experts' know more than God as well! They believe the Bible's views are outdated. That's the road to Sodom. God is truth, and his truth has not changed and it will not change. His truth is knowable, and eternal. It was embodied in His son Jesus, who proclaimed, "I am the way and the truth and the life."

Jesus wants his church to have the same level of familiarity with God as Abraham did. He wants us to trust in Him and to live out our righteousness. WHAT IF God is willing to work a miracle for you? You won't have it if you don't speak up, humbly but boldly. Jesus said, You have not because you ask not. The apostle Paul tells the Colossians, and us, that "[God] cancelled the unfavorable record of our debts ...and did away with it by nailing it to the cross." In our natural selves, we'd fit right in there with the citizens of Sodom, worthy of destruction, but Christ, through his sacrifice, took on our sin and it went to the cross with Him. With Christ God went a step further than he did in the scenario with Abraham & Sodom. He destroyed the ONE perfect, righteous person, and spared the millions of sinners. It's like you've been consigned to death row and suddenly your sentence has been commuted! Wow~ what a relief. Praise the Lord!! We are no longer condemned to die due to sin, we only condemn ourselves if we reject believing in Jesus. God could not have given us a greater demonstration of his love and mercy. He sent his son to die in our place, to satisfy the need for justice and to restore us to a relationship with Him through the mediation of Jesus. Jesus took our sin upon himself and gave us his righteousness. When God looks at us, he now sees the image of Christ. That's good, because when I look in the mirror the image I see could use some improvement. That's why I need to look to Jesus. When God asks me invite my neighbor to church, my vanity asks, *What if* they refuse? What if they think I'm a Jesus freak? So? If I keep my eyes on Jesus, my heart will reject those thoughts and ask, *What if* God is trying to use me to plant a seed, what if God is planning to bless me with supernatural favor so he can reach these people? In Ephesians 2:7 Paul tells us, "Together with Jesus God raised us up and seated us in the heavens so that in the coming ages He might display the immeasurable riches of His grace through His kindness to us in Christ Jesus." Jesus has already given you everything you need to access the riches of God's grace. Speak up. *What if you* are the one who could tip the balance between someone's destruction and their salvation?