

## Day in Mamre; Night in Sodom: Part 2

*What was the Sin of Sodom?*

Genesis 19: 1 – 16, 24-29

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### *Introduction to Text*

Today we travel from the Oaks of Mamre in the land of Canaan where Abraham and Sarah were living and had just received the miraculous news about Isaac's birth; down, down to the city of Sodom, in the plain of the Jordan, where Lot had chosen to settle a while back, because it was "well watered everywhere" like the Garden of Eden. Even before Lot gets there, we are warned about the people of Sodom who were, "wicked, great sinners against the Lord." (Gen. 13.13) Last week's story was filled with sunlight, lavish hospitality, the lovely aroma of yeast bread rising, the announcement of a miracle birth, and laughter.

Today, we will accompany those two angels who had dined in the heat of the day with Abraham, down into Sodom where their mission is quite different. Instead of a birth announcement, The Lord had assigned them to see whether or not the plug needed to be pulled on Sodom and Gomorrah. Before taking such drastic action, God needed first hand evidence. And so they went. I will warn you, this story is dark and scary. Instead of bread rising, the stink of sulfur infiltrates our nostrils. Instead of sunglasses, crash helmets and night goggles are in order. I invite and challenge you to keep your eyes and ears and hearts open. And I promise you there is Good News in this story, for each of us and all of us.

### *Sermon*

Who has not heard of Sodom and Gomorrah? The names of those two cities cast a dark shadow far beyond the hallowed walls of temples, churches and mosques. People who have never opened a Bible somehow know those cities were destroyed by God because they were bad, rotten to the core. They were bad cities filled with bad people that we rush to distance ourselves from. But *what was the sin* at the heart of this cautionary tale? What was the evil that warranted total annihilation? This is a question we really want to answer. More specifically, we yearn to fill in that blank with something or someone who is "not us." Then we can hate what God hates and call it a day. But this epic story resists such easy closure. Rather, it issues a bone-chilling warning of an evil so powerful and subtle that any one of us can be infected and not even know it.

Like driving by a fatal car crash, we recoil from it *and* we find it impossible to look away. Yet with all that looking on, it is easy to miss the underlying sin that is driving the evil behavior. And it can be hard to find the love of God at work in this story so riddled with abuse and annihilation. However, as Christians living in the light of Easter, we can enter this story knowing that the final word is Good News, since God has conquered sin and death once and for all. Our faith in the living Christ helps us to enter fully into the

scary darkness of this story, knowing that God has truth to teach us in the night and through the dark nights of our soul. Lessons that we would never discover in the light.

Let us trace the difference between Abraham's long obedience to God, and Lot's quick descent in a city where no one has any respect for God or God's ways. Lamentably Lot, Abraham's nephew, a tag along character at best, has fallen in with the wrong crowd. We begin with v. 1, "The two angels came to Sodom in the evening." This time of day signals us to, "Look out, something bad is about to happen." This is a convention not only within the general world of folktale, but specifically for the people of Israel, which occurs throughout the Hebrew Bible. In the mirroring of Mamre and Sodom, not only do they begin with a contrast between noon and night, but the geography is also inverted: Sodom is down in a flat plane in a city, rather than up in the country by the pastoral Oaks of Mamre.

Like Abraham, v 1. "When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down his face to the ground." Unlike Abraham, his pace is much slower (Lot never seems to hurry, even when he is told to). At first they refuse his offer, v.2 "no, we will spend the night in the square" perhaps thinking they could better observe Sodom in the square. But Lot insists, v. 3 "He urged them strongly" (likely knowing how dangerous it would be for them out in the open all night) and so they, "turned aside to him and entered his house." Lot's hospitality compared to the Mamre feast is spare: he provides only "unleavened bread" rather than "a cake with choice flour" and no calf, old or young, is prepared. This mission already in the first 3 verses feels nothing like Mamre.

Despite Lot's effort to protect the visitors, trouble stirs up quickly between their meager meal and bed. A mob is forming outside Lot's house, a mob that our narrator wants to make sure we know includes *everyone* in Sodom. Look at v. 4, "But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man." The language carefully stresses that whatever their sin may be, everyone in the city is infected.

When they had surrounded the house, they call to Lot through his door, demanding: v.5 "Where are the men who came to you, tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may *know* them." If only *we* knew what the men really meant by the word translated as "know" That little Hebrew root, *yd'*. Most of us, and it seems that Lot too, took them to mean the sexual connotation of the word. Yet even within the same Abraham narrative, *yd'* is used to mean something else. God uses *yd'* to describe the choosing of Abraham: In 18:19 "I have chosen (*known*) him." And again at the climax of the binding of Isaac story in Gen. 22, after Abraham proves his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, God says: "For now I *know* that you fear God." This word in Hebrew, *yd'* also means intimate knowledge and relationship with God. I find it extremely ironic that this in this troublesome phrase "we want to know them," they are stating the very thing that God calls for, yet has vanished in Sodom: human beings' desire to know, to be in relationship, intimate relationship with God. Here our story cleverly positions us face-to-

face with the dark side of *yd*, flipped over from the ultimate command to know God, to either a mocking taunt or a threat of violent gang rape. Something very good and holy, has gone very, very bad.

At this demand, Lot comes out to the mob through the door and shuts the door behind him, protecting his guests. Trying to appease them, Lot suggests a preposterous, terrible alternative: he offers them his virgin daughters instead. Who knows what his intention was? We do know Lot's attempt to protect his guests backfired. They instantly turn on him. At the beginning of the story he was sitting at the gate, a place of authority where judges of a city would be. But now, in the heat of this riot forming, his place in the pecking order of Sodom has fallen quickly to being an alien, whom they are about to kill, v. 9 "Now we will deal worse with you than with them."

Lot's two visitors/angels literally reach through the door in order to rescue Lot from the crowd breaking through the door. Next they strike the marauders with blindness: men who are already blind and deaf to the ways of God. At this point, the angels have seen enough, they have made their judgment and announce their next move. This time, it is not about a miraculous birth as it was in Mamre. Instead it's about death to their entire city & to Gomorrah—not only "all the *inhabitants* of the cities, but also "*what grew on the ground.*" Death to all people, animals, and plants.

In the next section, we see how far off the path Lot and his family have strayed. The angels ask Lot, v.12-13 "Have you anyone else here? Sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone you have in the city—bring them out of the place. For we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before the Lord, and the Lord has sent us to destroy it." How much clearer could they have been? But strangely, *all* of them, including Lot, fail to respond to this urgent and dire warning: The sons-in-law thought Lot was joking, Lot lingers, finally the angels have to seize him to get him to leave, then Lot's wife fails to follow the strict instruction issued moments earlier, "do not look back or stop or you will be consumed."

Poor Lot. Lucky Lot. Lot had a problem with making bad choices. But he had the luck of being Abraham's nephew. And God, remembered Abraham. Look at verse, v. 29, the key verse to this whole story, probably the reason why this story appears in the Abraham cycle of stories at all: "So it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the Plain, God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow when he overthrew the cities in which Lot settled." Not only key to this story, but key to the character of our covenant keeping God.

Now that we've looked at the whole story, let's take a step back and consider the central question of this sermon: ***What was the "Sin of Sodom?"*** What made Sodom the "poster child" for an entire city gone wicked and wrong? A city beyond restoration. A city so far removed from God, that God's most merciful response to its outcry was total annihilation. First of all, the "Sin of Sodom" *was not* homosexuality. This becomes

evident first, by noticing that the story itself has nothing to do with mutual, committed love relationships between two people of the same gender. It's about the threat of some form of gang rape. It becomes evident second, when you look at the other Old Testament references to the sin of Sodom. When the prophets refer to it in their own context, they use Sodom to stand for a variety of social and individual sins: In Isaiah 1:10, and 3:9 the sin of Sodom was the maladministration of justice; in Ezekiel 16:49, the sin of Sodom is identified with pride, excess of food, and indifference to the needy; and in Jeremiah 23:14 the sin of Sodom is used to condemn adultery, lying, and lack of willingness to repent. All major sins, but none of them was homosexuality. *Clearly the Bible itself did not interpret the sin of Sodom as homosexuality.* Yet, this is the one of the key passages in the Bible commonly misinterpreted and misused to justify the belief that according to the Bible, homosexuality is a sin.

So if the Sin of Sodom is *not* homosexuality, what is it? Certainly the Sodomites' hostility to the outsiders and their threat of sexual violence (against the angels and then even against Lot) is a big sin at the center of this story. Their lack of hospitality, especially compared to Abraham and Sarah's in Mamre, astounds and repulses us. Lot's readiness to sacrifice his own daughters to the marauders to the men of the city is even worse. Yet, as offensive as these sins are, I see them as a symptom of a larger sin. Something I am calling the "Sin of Oblivion." What do I mean by the "Sin of Oblivion?" It is the sin of a person or a people who are *totally oblivious or unaware or blind* to the sins they are committing against God. In Sodom they have traded righteousness (right relationship with God) for no relationship with God. Look at this story: There's no gratitude here. There is no regard for anyone. Sodom has become a Zombie land of the living-dead. In Sodom, God and God's ways are totally disregarded: injustice runs rampant in the streets among the "young and old, all the people to the last man."

Here's the thing: although we would rather distance ourselves from this horrifying story, **I hear it calling to each of us and to all of us.** I hear it calling to me and asking a difficult question: What are the *sins of oblivion* that you are committing here and now? How am I, how are we, turning a blind eye to the ways we stigmatize and polarize people who are different than we are? People, who get their news from different channels than we do, who vote differently than we do. How are we turning a blind eye to plight of immigrants and refugees, seeking asylum and safety here in our great country? And all over the globe? How quickly do we dismiss or distance ourselves from the root causes of the opioid epidemic decimating neighborhoods and communities near us? Do we prefer to ignore or beg oblivion when we regard or disregard the ticking bomb of climate change?

The "Sin of Sodom" pushes us to look in the mirror at our "social sins" meaning the sins of our culture: the ways we systemically disregard God's command to love our neighbor as ourselves. I hear this story asking us, compelling us, to look at the ways we passively participate in systemic discrimination of anyone we might see as "other" or

“alien” whether because of race, religion, politics, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, or gender identity.

These problems that I raise are obviously, huge. They have been around for a long time and are way beyond our control. Our temptation is to be overwhelmed and stymied. What can we possibly do? Just being here, working together as a community of faith moves us in the Mamre Miracle direction and away from the Sodom sin. Adding six new members this week strengthens our ability to together, become better aware of, rather than oblivious to, the suffering of people in our community and beyond. Together we can listen, we can attune our ears and hearts to what God is calling us to do about the underlying problems that contribute to suffering and injustice. Starting right here in Marshfield. The Mamre miracle happens when we fight together with all our might against injustices all around us.

As Jesus was hanging on the cross, dying for our sins and from the oblivion of the crowd that crucified him, he said, “Father, forgive them, for they not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34). They did not. But now, this side of the cross, we do. Jesus died to show us the way. God raised Jesus from the dead to save us from all our sins, including the sin of oblivion. God heard the outcry of the people of Sodom, and did not stand idly by. God sent angels into the midst of the town to experience first hand what this outcry was all about. Within a few hours, God judged them to be irredeemable in this life. And God remembered God’s promise to Abraham, saving Lot and his daughters. God will not leave us, God’s beloved children, to self-destruct. This is the message we hear from Genesis to Revelation: that has been true from the beginning of creation to the beginning of the new creation in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

The fatal car crash has been cleared. We are free to drive on our way down the road. But let’s do more. Let’s do whatever we can to move forward into the Mamre Miracle that God is opening before us: the miracle of redo’s and restarts and of impossible possibilities—that shine light into the darkest, most broken hearts, and most failed institutions. That’s what Easter people can do. And must do.