



“Haggling with God”

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
5:30 pm Saturday, July 23, 2016
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Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Genesis 18:20-32

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

If you follow along with our weekly pericope, the weekly readings that we preach from, you know, first, here at Saturday worship we only generally use two of the four assigned readings, and, second, that last week, we heard the beginning of this story of Abraham and his conversation with God.

Back at the start of Genesis 18, Abraham has a visitation. Three men, or at least, what look like men, come to Abraham. Abraham, being the gracious host that he is, quickly tries to please them. He gets fresh meat, has his wife Sarah make dinner, and he sits with the men and they talk. The men tell Abraham and Sarah that by this time the next year, they will have a son. Sarah laughs in disbelief: “I’m past menopause, and Abraham’s older than I am. Like we’re really going to get pregnant.” The men assure Abraham (and eavesdropping Sarah) that what they say is, indeed, the truth.

Then, with both full stomachs and their message delivered, they’re on their way. Abraham, again to be the good host, decides to walk with them. As they walk, they come close to the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah. YHWH sees the town of Sodom (because, as it turns out, that’s who this was all along, the Lord God and two angels) and sends the two angels on down into Sodom to deal with things there. And if you keep reading on into the Chapter 19, you’ll read about the fate of those angels, along with Abraham’s nephew Lot and his family, and what all transpires in town.

We need to remember that the focus of the transgressions of Sodom and Gomorrah, the “how very grave their sin” (v21) as The Lord God puts it, is **not** what we in the 21st century North America often assume that it is. The Hebrew words that YHWH uses here, in the description of the sins of these cities, are words and terms that in English strongly imply what would be understood as *oppression*, and social and economic *injustice*. Those are the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah: oppression and injustice, **not** sex.

Regardless, these two men (angels?) head to town, while Abraham stays with the LORD. Abraham, for reasons that are not explained or fully explored, be it because his nephew lives there, or simply out of concern and sympathy, begins this discussion with God.

A: So, Lord, what if there are 50 righteous people living in there? Would you still destroy the ENTIRE town, including those 50 righteous people?

To which God answers, No.

A: So, Lord, not to be a pest, but what if there are fewer than 50. Would you still destroy the place if there were only 45 righteous people?

G: No, I would not destroy them for the sake of 45.

And so it goes, Abraham asking questions, slowly whittling the number lower and lower: 50; 45; 40; 30; 20, until he arrives at the number ten.

"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." (v32)

So, an interesting thing is going on here: Abraham is haggling with God. And haggling with God is not limited to Abraham alone. I am fairly positive that in all probability, since, to the best of my knowledge, everyone here is a human being, that pretty much means **all of us**, at one time or another, have done the same kind of thing - haggled with God. Not necessarily haggled over the destruction of a city, but we have all probably haggled over some aspect dealing with our life.

Last summer, as I faced major surgery, I don't know that I could call it haggling, but I did pray that I would outlive my mother – because I'm conceited enough to think that the passing of her son, only a few years after the passing of her husband, would be more grief than she could endure. That might not be the case, but that was my thinking.

In our lesson, though, Abraham is haggling *On behalf of others*. Whether it was for his nephew & family, or the entire population of Sodom and Gomorrah, we don't know. But he does appear to have fairly decent motives – that is, Abraham is striving to save the lives of others. When we haggle (notice I said **when**, not **if**), is it for our own behalf, or for *others*? For Whom is it that we haggle?

I like what one of my commentaries had to say about this passage:

The text is making one basic point: No retributory schema will explain why disastrous events do not occur. The wicked may not suffer consequences of their own sins because of the presence of the righteous." . . . "Most basically, however, the numbers speak to the issue of a critical mass in relation to the moral order. The wickedness of a few can have a contaminating effect on the larger group of which they are a part. . . here the issue is reversed; the righteousness of a few can so permeate a wicked society that they can save it from destructive effects of its own evil ways" (pp 469-470) (The New Interpreter's Bible Volume 1)

In different words (maybe a bit less technical), there is the old saying:

"One rotten apple spoils the whole barrel."

What Abraham is arguing here is the *opposite* of that saying. Abraham is saying that ten righteous people **can** influence an entire town.

This past week we just finished up one big political shindig, and this next week we have a different one happening. I have to be honest, I didn't watch any of the event, and I don't plan on watching anything this coming week. I am not in any way, shape, or form

attempting to promote one party or agenda over the other - that's said in case anyone here works for the IRS or any other government agencies who may be here or listen to this online - but it seems to me that all we're hearing about this election season is how *bad* things are. Unfortunately, even news events seem to bear that out: civilians being shot by police, police being ambushed, and now what appears to be a mentally ill individual causing havoc and death in Munich, Germany.

But what if, *What If*, all of us here tonight, or those listening online or reading this next week, what if, we **all** tried to live that righteous life? I don't mean righteous as in self-righteous, like those superficial, annoying, jerks we've all run into, who know they are right, and demand we agree with them regardless of whatever it is.

No, I mean, what if we were all faithfully righteous? What if we all tried to be nice to others, especially to folks we don't know? What if we listened to someone who needed to talk, actually listened, not just sit politely waiting for our chance to speak but truly paying attention to what the other person is saying? What if, instead of getting annoyed with someone of another faith, or a person of a different culture, because we don't understand what they're doing, or why they wear what they wear, or whatever, what if we - **Politely** - asked them if they could explain to us why to do that thing in worship that seems strange to, or why do they wear those clothes that seem so odd?

What if **we** attempted to be those ten righteous people that Abraham haggles about? If God feels that even ten righteous people can influence their town, with God's help, what would we, *together*, be able to accomplish?

Amen.

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