

**St. Bartholomew's Anglican Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ - Associate Rector      Scripture: Genesis 18:20-33

***"50-45-40-30-20-10-Boom!"***

A Christian woman wanted a parrot that could talk. She looked all over and finally found one. She was warned that the parrot had been owned by a bartender and he occasionally used bad language. She bought him and would teach him to say good things. After about a month he learned to say "Praise the Lord" and other Christian phrases. One day she forgot to feed him and when she came home she heard him cursing like a sailor! She scolded him and said, "I told you not to talk that way. I'll teach you." So she put him in the freezer and shut the door. After a few minutes she took him out and asked, "Have you learned your lesson?" The bird shivered and replied, "Yes, ma'am." She asked, "Are you going to talk that way anymore?" The parrot replied, "No, ma'am. Several months went by and it seemed that the bird was cured of his bad habits. One day she forgot to feed him, water him, or change his cage. When she got home he was throwing a fit and really carrying on. She put him back in the freezer but then she forgot about him. When she remembered him he almost froze to death. She took him out of the freezer and into his cage to thaw out. When he finally began to move and talk a little, she asked him again, "Did you learn your lesson?" "Yes, ma'am," he said. Then he sat there silently shivering and said, "Can I ask you a question?" She answered, "Yes." The parrot said, **"I thought I knew all the bad words there were, but just what did that turkey in there say?"**

**Actions have consequences!** Abraham and Sarah found out when they refused to wait upon God and the result: Ishmael was born. The actions of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah most certainly would have serious consequences – as we read in today's lesson from Genesis chapter 18.

Abraham in our lesson last week was confronted with three strangers: The pre-incarnate Jesus Christ and two angels. The Lord was still there and Abraham was faced with a troubling question. Would God sweep away the righteous along with the unrighteous? Abraham was convinced there were righteous people in Sodom—he was not standing up only for Lot—so he appealed to God for Sodom on the basis of the Lord's justice. Abraham exhibits great character by his willingness to intercede. He prayed that all in the cities—the wicked as well as the righteous— would be spared for the sake of the righteous.

A little background history: Abraham had personally rescued the people of Sodom and Gomorrah by going into battle – to rescue Lot – going as far as Dan to the north in Genesis 14. Now he was pleading for them with the very same boldness, perseverance, and generosity with which he had fought for them. It would almost seem as if Abraham was bargaining with God, but Abraham's prayers, though daring, were made with genuine humility and profound reverence. Instead of bargaining - he was pleading for justice: deliverance for Sodom if there were as few as 50.... 45.... 40.... 30.... 20, or even 10 righteous people there. He was not trying to talk God into something against His will - and so his cry for justice that God may preserve the wicked for the sake of the righteous. Certainly Israel learned from this that God is a righteous Judge, and that righteousness exalts a nation. Just read these words from Proverbs 14:34 *"Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people."* **Righteous people help preserve society!** Jesus spoke of such righteousness as salt in Matthew 5:13: *"You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men."* These truths should have been as great a concern to Israel as they were to Abraham who turned them into compassionate intercession.

Having been to Israel – you learn very quickly that haggling is a part of Middle Eastern transactions. I remember, in the marketplace of Jerusalem, negotiating over a rug – and how not only price was at stake – but a great deal of honor. Here, however, Abraham’s determination of the exact number of righteous persons needed to prevent the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah provides a repeated demonstration of God’s just actions. He was convinced that a just God will not destroy the righteous without warning or investigation. Even the unrighteous could be spared for the sake of the righteous. At the same time however, justice is not served by turning a blind eye to wickedness. **Whether it is a small sin or a hundred sins – they are still sins and sin causes separation from God.**

Abraham’s prayer was based not on the mercy of God but His justice. Abraham said to God “*Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?*” (Genesis 18:25) Listen to these words describing God from Deuteronomy 32:4 “*The Rock! His work is perfect, for all His ways are just; a God of faithfulness and without injustice, Righteous and upright is He.*” A just and holy God could not destroy righteous believers with wicked unbelievers. Lot was a believer as we are reminded by the Apostle Peter who wrote “*if God condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly lives thereafter; and if He rescued righteous Lot, oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men (for by what he saw and heard that righteous man, while living among them, felt his righteous soul tormented day after day by their lawless deeds), then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment.*” (2 Peter 2:6-9)

Scripture reminds us that the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were exceedingly wicked because the men of these cities were given over to sexual practices that were contrary to nature (you only need to look at Genesis 19:5; Jude 7; Romans 1:27). The words “sodomy” and “sodomize” are enough to describe the sins that were running rampant. The men did not try to hide their sin as the Prophet Isaiah declares in 3:9. They felt no absolutely no need to repent – which the Prophet Jeremiah makes clear in 23:14. The absurdity that ruled in that region is reminiscent of the way our culture today is leaning – making excuses and **rationalizing behavior** as acceptable – with no consequence for sin – and no repentance – instead trying to make it the norm.

The sudden destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is an example of God’s righteous judgment on sinners and Our Lord Jesus used it as a warning for people of the end times as He said: “*It was the same as happened in the days of Lot: they were eating, they were drinking, they were buying, they were selling, they were planting, they were building; but on the day that Lot went out from Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed. On that day, the one who is on the housetop and whose goods are in the house must not go down to take them out; and likewise the one who is in the field must not turn back. Remember Lot's wife.*” (Luke 17:28–32).

But why would Abraham want God to spare such wicked people? One could make the argument that it would be far better that they should be wiped off the face of the earth! Of course, Abraham’s first concern was for Lot and his family. Abraham did not want to see all those people die and be lost forever. “*God is not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance*” (2 Peter 3:9), that’s why He sent His son – remember John 3:16? Paul tells us that God “*desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*” (1 Timothy 2:4). God spoke to us through the Prophet Ezekiel “*I take no pleasure in the death of the*

*wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways!*" (Ezekiel 33:11). To "turn away from" is the definition of "repent."

What it all boils down to - is **not what kind of sins people commit**, though it might seem to us that some sins are worse than others – **the fact remains: sin is sin. The truth is "the wages of sin is death!"** (Romans 6:23) As Christians we need to pray - with compassionate hearts and a deep concern for the salvation of the lost, those who have not found Jesus Christ, no matter what their sins may be.

Abraham did not argue with the Lord. He was very humble as he presented his case. Abraham was sure that there were at least ten righteous believers in the city. And so the countdown title to today's sermon "**50-45-40-30-20-10-Boom!**" As few as ten people would have saved a whole city from destruction! If Lot had only shared his own faith in the Lord with his family, judgment would have been averted. **Your personal witness today is important to God, your faith, no matter how insignificant you may feel – it is our job and privilege to tell others about Jesus Christ.**

When Abraham finished interceding, he had God's promise that He would spare Sodom if as many as ten righteous persons could be found therein. But when the required number could not be found, nothing could avert the inevitable catastrophe. In pleading with the Lord as an intercessor, Abraham clearly demonstrated genuine love and concern. God had already said to Abraham: "*I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse.*" (Genesis 12:3), and **He is about to give Abraham a very graphic example of what it meant for those who reject the ways of the Lord; for them - "The WAGES OF SIN really is DEATH."** (Romans 6:23)

We see in the world today a return to the ways of Genesis 18. We are witnesses to a wholesale departure from the faith in which new doctrines are invented to provide a façade of religious piety. The Apostle Paul predicted "*For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.*" (2 Timothy 4:3-4) In our lifetime, we have been witnesses to that; we have personally been victims to that! What we are seeing is driven by a cry for a "user friendly" religion that affirms people's feelings and needs rather than listening to and obeying the Word of God – in which culture dictates and warps the Bible rather than the Bible dictating to culture.

The Apostle Paul, once gain was clear in the way things would turn and he warns: "*For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. For those who sleep do their sleeping at night and those who get drunk get drunk at night. But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation. **For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him.**"* (1 Thessalonians 5:2-10)

God punishes sin, but offers mercy to the sinful! Why did God let Abraham question his justice and intercede for a wicked city? God was merciful enough to allow Abraham to intercede. God was also merciful enough to help Lot, Abraham's nephew, get out of Sodom before it was destroyed. God does not take pleasure in destroying the wicked, but **sin must be punished**. As I have said before – **actions have consequences**. Our God is both just and merciful. We, as followers of Jesus Christ, should be thankful that God's mercy extends to us. God's justice is not changed by His mercy. Abraham knew that God is just and that He punishes sin. Abraham seemed to be checking to see how merciful He really was. He left his conversation with God convinced that God was both kind and fair. Prayer, when we spend time with God, in relationship, helps us better understand the mind and heart of God.

A true story – as related by an Anglican Priest:

A young woman, who had been brought up in a good Christian home and who often questioned the importance of accepting Jesus as Lord, chose instead to take the way of the world. Although this hurt her mother greatly, the girl insisted on keeping company with a wild crowd, who lived only for the moment and was not concerned one bit with eternity. Again and again she was pleaded with to turn to Christ, but she kept refusing – vehemently.

She got very sick and they did everything that they could to heal her, but it became evident that her case was hopeless and death was imminent. She continued to refuse when it was suggested that she turn to God in repentance and accept Jesus as Savior and Lord.

One night she awoke suddenly with a frightened look in her eyes, and asked excitedly, "Mother, what is Ezekiel 7:8-9?" Her mother said, "What do you mean, my dear?" She said that she had had a most vivid dream and that there was a Presence in her room, who very solemnly said to her, "**Read Ezekiel 7:8-9.**" Her mother reached for a Bible. As she opened it, her heart sank as she saw the words, but she read them aloud to the dying girl: "*Now I will shortly pour out My wrath on you and spend My anger against you; judge you according to your ways and bring on you all your abominations. My eye will show no pity nor will I spare. I will repay you according to your ways, while your abominations are in your midst; then you will know that I, the LORD, do the smiting.*" (Ezekiel 7:8-9)

With a look of terror, of horror on her face, she sank back on the pillow, utterly exhausted, and in a few moments she passed away. **When God's grace is rejected – then His judgment comes!** There can be no salvation except through Jesus Christ! When He is refused – then the wages of sin must be paid. When He is accepted- then when judgment comes, His righteousness is seen – instead of our unrighteousness.

If you are struggling with sin in your life and would like to dedicate yourself – or re-dedicate yourself to Jesus, then bow your head right now. You don't need to stand, or go anywhere. Just remain seated, for Jesus and the Holy Spirit will come to you! Bow your head – and admit your need. Be willing to turn from your sins and repent, and confess Jesus as Lord of your life. I urge you - please take this opportunity to pray with me now – repeating after me:

*"Dear Lord, I know that I am a sinner; and I ask your forgiveness. I believe that you died for my sins and rose from the dead. I turn from my sins and invite you to come into my heart and my life. I want to trust and follow you as my Lord and Savior. In your name, Jesus, I pray. Amen."*