

The Journey of Faith: Container or Conduit?

16 When the men got up to leave, they looked down toward Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way. 17 Then the LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? 18 Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. 19 For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."

20 Then the LORD said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous 21 that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know."

22 The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD. 23 Then Abraham approached him and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 24 What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? 25 Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

26 The LORD said, "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake."

27 Then Abraham spoke up again: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, 28 what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five people?" "If I find forty-five there," he said, "I will not destroy it."

29 Once again he spoke to him, "What if only forty are found there?" He said, "For the sake of forty, I will not do it."

30 Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?" He answered, "I will not do it if I find thirty there."

31 Abraham said, “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?” He said, “For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it.”

32 Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?” He answered, “For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.”

33 When the LORD had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home. (Genesis 18:16-33)

22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. 23 Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? 25 But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

26 In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. 27 And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God. (Romans 8:22-27)

This story has really grown on me this week. I have started writing this sermon three or four times, and yet each time, it was not quite it. But I think I have finally seen what I needed to see, and I want to share that with you.

The setting is that the Lord and some angels have just visited Abraham and Sarah. They had a meal together, and the Lord promised by this time next year, they will have a son together. Abraham and Sarah laugh the laughter of faith. Is anything too hard for God? Then comes the initial scene of this new story.

16 When the men got up to leave, they looked down toward Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way. 17 Then the LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? 18 Abraham will surely become a great

and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. 19 For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.”

So the Lord reiterates the promise to Abraham, to bless Abraham, that Abraham would become a great nation, and that all the nations will be blessed through him. Pretty standard stuff, right?

How Bad Are Sodom and Gomorrah?

But then the Lord is going to check out how bad Sodom and Gomorrah are.

20 Then the LORD said, “The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous 21 that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.”

The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah has been debated endlessly for years, and I do not want to get into the details today. While I do believe that the traditional understanding is mostly correct, I think there is something more fundamental going on there. That is, the complete breakdown of human society, and a descent into chaos.

In the beginning, God created order out of chaos. Genesis 1 says that the earth was formless and void, that is, it was chaotic, there was no order. And so the repeated event of Genesis 1 is God bringing order out of chaos.

There was chaos in Sodom and Gomorrah. Is there chaos today? Yes! Not just in society or culture, but in people. Young women who are grossly malnourished think they are too “fat”. Young people who cannot sit still in class are told they are stupid. Young men and women have such loathing and self-hatred and are in such emotional pain that they cut themselves with razor blades. Repeatedly. People feel like they need to look like magazine models to be attractive.

Our politics is in chaos. Increasingly, we refuse to criticize a member of our tribe for some bad thing done, but if someone from the other tribe does the same thing, the vitriol flows. We take tragic events by really crazy people, like the shooting of the Congresswoman in Arizona or the murderous rampage recently in Norway, and we try to make political hay out of it!

Closer to home, think of those who prey on the elderly. Just two years ago a man was convicted and sentenced in a Ponzi scheme right here in West Covina. He took over \$4 million, mostly from elderly residents, promising them tremendous returns on their investments.

Sex trafficking has come to the San Gabriel Valley. I have heard stories of massage parlors which were really sex shops. Young women were recruited in Asia to come “work” in the United States, for a fee. Once here, they were put to work as sex workers, and it would take years to pay off their debt. One of the more common schemes is for the sponsors to rent a house, and have a family live there with small children. And regularly, there would be advertised in the paper or on the internet a “birthday party” for one of the children. And so, beginning around 10 o’clock at night, young men would drive up and park near the house, and join the “birthday party” in progress, which would last into the wee hours of the morning. But they would arrive without presents, and without other children, and without other women, can you imagine? As soon as the police would bust one such operation, another would spring up elsewhere in the city.

It is not just about the sex, but it is about the exploiting of young girls. The prophets had much to say about the exploitation of workers, and the abuse of those who were hired as help. I well imagine that the cries of these young girls rises to the ears of their heavenly father.

Add to that the oppression of the poor, the unscrupulous foisting of home loans on people who could least afford it, the massive layoffs of skilled workers so that corporations can make extra millions of dollars in profits. Racial and gender discrimination affect millions. There is much praise-worthy in our culture, but there is also much to be judged. The rank unfairness of some of what goes on stirs the Holy God we claim to worship. And He will not stand still. So the Lord announces His intentions to Abraham.

The Response

This is where it gets really interesting. And I must to give Bob Linthecum the credit for pointing this out.

22 The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD.

Linthecum writes:

In audience before God, Abraham began his famed negotiations for the rescue of Sodom and Gomorrah from divine destruction.

However, the earliest manuscripts do not support the reading, "Abraham remained standing before the Lord". There is irrefutable textual evidence that the passage originally read, "The Lord remained standing before Abraham!" Who was begging whom for the city? Could it be that a scribe, thinking this reading could not possibly be right, reversed the text?

Even if this suggested original reading is not true, Genesis 18 remains a profound statement of God's love for the city, the role of intercession, and the presence God's people have in a pagan society. But if it is true, it has profound implications for our understanding of the church's responsibility in its city.

Let me interrupt here. Do you see what is happening? If the original reading and translation are correct, and there is terrific evidence that it is, then when the Lord announces He is leaving, He doesn't leave. What could that possibly mean? Linthecum continues:

If the passage correctly reads, "The Lord remained standing before Abraham", it means God was the supplicant before Abraham for the city! It was God begging for Sodom's deliverance before a judgmental Abraham! It is as if God were saying to the patriarch, "I take seriously the entreaties of my people. So go on, Abraham – ask me! Ask me to spare Sodom for fifty people – and I'll do it!"

Tentatively, Abraham asks in faith to spare the city for fifty people, and God responds, "Done!"

"Go on, man, ask me! Ask me for forty!"

"Lord, spare the city for forty people."

"Done! Go on, ask me for thirty!"

"Lord, thirty?"

"Done. Ask for twenty!"

If Abraham had asked for it, would God have spared the city for one family – the family of Lot? Would he have spared it for Lot

alone? If the wording of Genesis 18:22 has indeed been reversed, then the answer clearly is “Yes”! God so loved Abraham and so loved Sodom and Gomorrah, he would have given the salvation of the city to Abraham for anything the old man had asked. God wanted the city saved. God’s sense of justice, however, demanded judgment.

“Go on, man, ask me! I want to forgive; I want to stave off judgment.” Beyond his request for ten people Abraham could not go. So it was that the bargaining stopped – not because God lacked mercy, but because Abraham lacked nerve!

Considered this way, Abraham’s response to God standing before him for Sodom is another trial of faith. Could he believe God for the birth of the promised son? Abraham turned to Hagar because he thought Sarah barren, and Ishmael was born. Could he believe God for the pregnancy of Sarah? Sarah laughed and Abraham wavered. Could he sufficiently believe God for the city? He could not; he could not barter with God far enough. This makes Abraham’s later trust in God – when he faced God’s demand for Isaac’s sacrifice – even more remarkable.

It is an indication of how Abraham had grown over the years in his trust in God. That is God’s cry as he stands before us and pleads for the city. We are called by God to be his community, both the foretaste of the kingdom and its present embodiment. All that the city will know of God’s kingdom, it will know from our life together, our witness, and our commitment to the city’s broken, hurting and poor.

“Go on, man, ask me! Go on, woman, ask me for the city!” Do we have sufficient nerve to ask God for our city – the nerve to be in the city, to proclaim and to work for justice, for what God calls the church to be? Are we willing to be the embodiment of the kingdom of God in our city?

“Go on, church – ask me for your city!” (Chapter Six, “Truly Strategic Scriptures Avoided by the Lectionary”, Robert C. Linthicum)

Now, did you notice the juxtaposition? The Lord says he is going to bless the nations through Abraham, then announces that He is going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. And then the Lord waits. What is the Lord waiting for? Probably for Abraham to get it, and to act on what he

knows. The Lord is giving Abraham the chance to bless people by preventing the Lord from destroying them! It is pretty hard, after all, to bless people when they are dead. It does them no good! And the great thing is, Abraham catches on!

One of the things I think the Lord wants to show here is this: to be a blessing is a conduit rather than a container. That is, Abraham was blessed to be a blessing. The blessings *to* Abraham should also flow *from* Abraham. If we are the children of Abraham, then the blessings of God to us should not only stay with us, but should also flow to the neighborhood and city around us.

If I fill a container with water, what happens? The more I put into it, what happens? Right, eventually, water will spill all over the place, and we will have a mess. But if I attach a hose to a spigot, and turn the spigot on, that water will flow to water the grass, the trees, the flowers, it could quench thirst, it could fill a child's pool. The blessing of water was not meant to stay in the hose, but to be spread to other areas.

A container could bless others, though. How? By turning it upside down! And haven't many of us had our worlds turned upside down? Perhaps God wants us to empty our containers of blessing on other people. This is what happened in Acts. After Jesus commanded them to wait for the Holy Spirit, and then go into the world, in Acts 6 the church was still "stuck" in Jerusalem. But the death of Stephen brought persecution which drove Christians out of Jerusalem into the wider world. God was turning their container upside down.

Likewise, a hose will bless nothing if it is not hooked up to a water supply, right? It does my backyard garden no good just to take this hose to it. "Here, tomatoes, look at this hose. Aren't you blessed? Look at this cool hose, zucchini, aren't you blessed?" That's crazy talk. So for us, if we are to be conduit people, like a hose, we must be connected to a source of water, a source of blessing. And this we have through Bible reading, prayer, and communion with our living God.

Pray!

So what are we to do? Eugene Peterson has written, "Prayer is political action. Prayer is social energy. Prayer is public good. Far more of our nation's life is shaped by prayer than is formed by legislation. That we have not collapsed into anarchy is due more to prayer than to the police." (Eugene Peterson, "Earth and Altar". Christianity Today, Vol. 30, no. 1.)

As the oldest Protestant church in West Covina, have we taken this call this seriously? Are we on our knees for the welfare of our fellow residents? I know that most of you would like your friends and neighbors to join our church, but why? If you do not pray for them, and for what concerns they have, why would they want to join us? Are we interested in them as human beings, or are we interested in them solely as potential church members? Are we asking God for our city?

The problem with many churches is that our vision is far too small. Of course there are issues facing us. Declining membership, declining finances, declining health, people die or move away, the roof leaks, rooms need cleaning, graffiti needs painting out, etc. All valid concerns. But we treat those concerns like containers. We wonder whether Almighty God, Creator of Heaven and Earth, who placed the stars in the heavens and knows each one by name, who sent His only Son to die for us that we might be reconciled to God, we wonder whether this God could possibly spare a few pints of water for our container.

God is not looking to fill containers! God is looking for people and churches who are conduits of His blessing! The more we concern ourselves with the mission God has for us, and being conduits of His blessing, the less we will have to worry about whether our bucket is full.

Abraham is concerned with having a son, and rightly so. And he continues to pester the Lord about it. "What about my son? What about my son? What about my son?" When Abraham thinks that way, he is only thinking about being blessed. Container thinking.

And yet, with the Lord standing by Abraham, the Lord's response might well be, "What about the world? What about the world? What about the world?" When Abraham thinks this way, he is concerned about the blessings of God for others. Conduit thinking.

A Suggestion

When I first arrived, I met with the Principal of the Walnut Grove Intermediate School. It turns out we already knew each other a little. He had been an active member of the small inner city church I served in Highland Park. So we met together, caught up on our careers and families. And then we did two incredible things.

First, we each asked one another, "How can I bless you?" I cannot tell you how radical that is. What would happen if several people in this congregation adopted one of the 18 schools in West Covina. All it takes

is two to three people per school. And what if each group of 2-3 people made an appointment with the Principal and asked them “You know, we are from Community Presbyterian Church in West Covina. We love children and teachers and our community. We don’t have a ton of resources. But we want to know how can we bless you?”

Let me just say, that if you and a couple other people from this church did that, you may have to bring oxygen to revive the principal, who may just faint from the offer! Instead of figuring out how we can get students to come to us, why not go to them? Instead of seeing ourselves as a container, why not see our selves as a conduit? Can you imagine the response? Can you imagine if every church in West Covina would adopt a school, to ask how to bless it, to listen to the teachers and staff, to offer after school tutoring, or offer any sort of assistance we could do?

Second, we prayed for one another, right there in Rich’s office. I prayed for the school, the teachers, the staff, the parents, the students, for Rich, for the school board, all of it. And then Rich prayed for CPC, for the session, the staff, the members, the vision, the outreach. Can you imagine what would happen if each church in West Covina took seriously our calling to be a blessing, and adopted a school to pray for regularly and diligently. Not because we are trying to recruit more members, or to balance the finances, but to bless them?

This suggestion is not to set some new strategy. Nor is it to detract in any way from the ministries here which are already conduits, like the school backpacks, the clothing ministry, the adopt a family, etc. This suggestion is simply to illustrate the power and promise of being a conduit of blessing, rather than settling for being a container.

Conclusion

Are you a container, or a conduit this morning? Just as God blessed Abraham to be a blessing to all the nations on the earth, God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Jesus Christ, so that we also would be a blessing. To be you a container is much too small a vision. Be a conduit! You are blessed to be a blessing! And in your own small way, you can have huge impact on our culture, by impacting lives.