

## Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

August 18, 2019

Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church  
Farmington, New Mexico

**Genesis 18:20-32** 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[b] 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.”

### “God’s Gift of Prayer”

Sometimes I barely notice. Drive through town and seeing flags flying at half staff is so common. Are we mourning innocent lives lost in a mass shooting? Are we grieving a tornado in Oklahoma or flooding in India? Was it maybe something closer to home like a firefighter killed in action or a cherished political leader who died recently? Even if you keep up on the news, it can be difficult to keep track of the tragedies. There’s a danger on one side of becoming numb to human suffering and desensitized to the pain people suffer because of very real evils in this fallen world. On the other side, the danger is getting so caught up in grief over the awful events that happen over and losing hope, starting to despair or see confidence in God’s goodness deteriorate.

In his book “The Screwtape Letters,” C. S. Lewis takes the voice of one demon giving advice to a lower demon about how to trap and defeat Christians. About prayer, he advises:

“Interfere at any price, in any fashion, when people start to pray. Real prayer is lethal to our cause.”<sup>1</sup> Prayer is deadly against the work of Satan and his minions because it connects us with a real God and draws us closer to him.

In Genesis 18 Abraham shows us an appropriate response to danger and destruction. Abraham models for us good qualities and habits for prayers. But Abraham helps us understand how to see God most clearly. He shows how God’s people grow to understand God better through prayer and grow to trust God deeper through the answers he gives. Through his interactions with the Lord he teaches believers what a precious gift we have in prayer.

First, Abraham becomes aware of what God is planning to do to Sodom and Gomorrah. He is concerned about the people. He is disturbed by the suffering and destruction so many souls will face. So Abraham responds by turning to our merciful God.

When we are at someone’s mercy, it makes us feel vulnerable. I’ve been reminded of that recently when I’ve been talking to mechanics about repairs to my vehicle and then talking with salespeople at car dealerships. Before you now how to interact with those people you have to figure out as best you can if you can trust them. You know their job is to make money, but will they be willing to put your needs first or allow their own interests to let them take advantage of you? Wouldn’t it be terrible to have that same skepticism toward God in response to real human needs or personal suffering?

When we see suffering in the world, we can start to wonder what kind of God would allow this. Can God be good and allow pain? Can God be powerful if he doesn’t do anything about it? If he is good and he is powerful and suffering still goes on, is this the kind of God we want to believe in? Is this someone we want to have a personal relationship with?

Abraham dares to bring his concerns to this good and powerful God: **“Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 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? Far be it from you to do such a thing.”** (Genesis 18:23-25) There is audacity in Abraham’s words. But there is also confidence that he is bringing his concerns to a God who is concerned about his own creation. God cares. God doesn’t act like the gods and goddesses of mythology who inflict pain and suffering just because they can. God doesn’t flash glimpses of his power to put mortals in their place and keep them from questioning him.

A recent magazine article claims “Twitter Needs a Pause Button.” The author shows social media platforms are designed to enable users to upload and view content instantly.<sup>2</sup> But we’ve seen plenty of time how easy it for media outlets to get the story wrong when they

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Henry Gariepy, *Treasures from the Psalms*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002, p 13.

<sup>2</sup> Rauch, Jonathan. “Twitter Needs a Pause Button.” *The Atlantic*, August 2019 Issue. Accessed: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/08/twitter-pause-button/592762/> on 16 August 2019.

respond instantly or publish breaking news that turns out to be inaccurate. We've seen examples of people we know who respond to something emotionally only to wish they could take back what they just posted.

This interaction between God and Abraham teaches us about God. And what we see is God isn't rash like we are on our phones or computers. God doesn't behave randomly or let emotions cause him to do something he will regret later. This episode is introduced when God gives us a glimpse into his motives: **"The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous 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."** (Genesis 18:20,21) God has decided to act in judgment against Sodom and Gomorrah. And of course, God knows exactly what is going on without doing any in-depth investigating. Yet God always works in wisdom for his ultimate plan and the good of his people. What was going on in Sodom and Gomorrah is so outrageous it can't be ignored. God is offended by sin. Out of mercy for his people, he cannot let this unbelief and rebelliousness go viral or spark a wildfire of evil.

Abraham is growing in his understanding of who God is. That's why his prayers on behalf of the inhabitants of Sodom are appeals to God's justice: **"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?"** (Genesis 18:25) Abraham shows a healthy attitude toward the sin and the sinners inside Sodom. He doesn't defend them or excuse their behavior. Abraham doesn't rationalize what they did or why. He simply asks the Judge of all the earth to show justice.

But as he prays to God and is drawn into a better understanding of who God is, Abraham also shows something about himself in relation to God. As he persistently pleads for the people of Sodom, Abraham prefaces his request like this: **"Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes."** (Genesis 18:27) Abraham shows us a difference between our default mode of approaching God in prayer. Abraham doesn't bargain or barter with God. He doesn't make deals to get the responses he is after. He doesn't bring up how much better he is than the sinners in Sodom. He doesn't give any indication that he thinks he is more deserving of being heard than the really sinful people he is praying for. Abraham doesn't pray like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable: **"God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector."** (Luke 18:11) Instead, he prays like the tax collector: **"God, have mercy on me, a sinner."** (Luke 18:13)

Abraham shows God's people we can be bold and persistent in prayer. We can be humble as we come before him and compassionate in our concern for others. We can do all those things right, and yet we can feel frustrated in our prayers. Abraham was able to get a response from God to each of his requests. They came almost instantly and positively. Yet experience shows us that is rarely the way God operates. Sometimes the answers don't come. Sometimes the results of our prayers aren't what we want or expect.

The other day I was inside a restaurant when I notices something that I'm sure was always there, just a little out of sight. Behind the counter, facing the employees is a screen. And that

screen not only shows what the customer just ordered, but the time it took to fulfill that order. We expect rapid responses. We get perturbed when we have to wait on hold for customer care. But God has a reason for not giving us exactly what we pray for precisely when we want it.

God is teaching his children to trust him. When we see a clear solution to problems around us, God wants us to know he might have a better answer. When we grow impatient because the God is slow to respond, God is helping us see he might have a better way. And yet Abraham shows us God wants us to keep coming back to him. Keep reaching out to God. Keep crying out with boldness and holy shamelessness. When you don't know why or what, keep coming to God in prayer. Pray humbly for a miracle for friends like Dan Jensen. Pray boldly and persistently for the good of Christ the Rock. God will never lose his patience or brush you aside like the pestered parent of a toddler after hearing 'Mom! Mom! Mom!' played on repeat for what seems like an eternity.

Abraham's prayers for the people of Sodom show us there is a tension between God's justice and grace. God's justice applied fairly would require him to eliminate anything corrupting his perfection. It would bind him to annihilate any person on the wrong side of his holiness. And yet God's grace means he doesn't treat sinners the way we deserve. The only way to resolve this tension is at the cross. We can waste time and energy speculating about what God is doing and why. But ultimately God makes himself known most clearly in the obvious answers he does give us. God is most clearly and unmistakably seen at the cross. God's justice and mercy meet at the cross.

The cross of Jesus shows us God is aware of human suffering and pain. The cross shows us God doesn't ignore the sins committed by fallen people in this fallen world. The cross opens up for us God's solution that has the best interests of all humanity in mind. The cross of Christ is the ultimate statement of divine justice being rendered. The cross of Christ is also the definitive declaration of divine mercy for humans in real peril. The death of God's own Son on the cross is the one thing we can know for sure when we are searching for all kinds of other answers to the question why. The blood of Jesus paying the price to buy back sinful humanity is the one answer we hold onto when we don't understand what's going on in the world. The peace of "It is finished" by Jesus is the certainty we carry with us through chaotic wrestling with God in prayer.

I've noticed a few friends who have a habit of responding on social media to tragedies and disasters with the phrase "Lord, have mercy." When we witness evil, we turn to the Lord. When tragedy strikes, we are reminded of our constant need for mercy. And to those prayers we can add another phrase: "Come quickly, Lord Jesus." In mercy, Jesus has come to deliver us from the worst we will experience in this world. When he returns, justice will be handed out on a global scale. But God's people can rest securely knowing the return of Jesus will mean ultimate and permanent deliverance from sin and all the consequences of sin in this fallen world. Today we can pray boldly, persistently and humbly as we rest securely in the peace of Christ. Today's peace is just a foretaste of the absolute peace we will enjoy for all time with our merciful Savior. Yes, come quickly, Lord Jesus. Amen.