



# *St. Mark's on the Campus*

## *Episcopal Church and Student Center*

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The Rev. Jerrold Thompson  
Sermon for the 9th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 12  
St. Mark's on the Campus  
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I hardly knew where to begin this morning with such incredibly rich readings. So let's start with the first line of our first reading – but don't worry, I promise I won't comment on every line of every reading!

Our passage from Genesis begins with these words: "The Lord said, "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin." That's probably a line that needs to be met head on. Most of us know that some parts of the church interpret the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah as homosexuality. Plenty of reasons exist to question that interpretation, including that the prophets located the sin of these cities elsewhere:

Ezekiel viewed these communities as missing the mark with pride and excessive prosperity coupled with callousness toward the poor (16:48-50); Jeremiah understood Sodom and Gomorrah's sin as adultery, lies, and siding with the wicked (23:14); and Isaiah refers to the considerable *injustice* of Sodom and Gomorrah (1:10, 3:9).

Whatever is going on, the Lord says he's going to "go down" and check out what's happening. Clearly a little anthropomorphizing going on. I get this picture of God hiking up his bathrobe and walking down the steps to see what the children are up to so late at night! Or if things are *really* serious, God is hiking up *her* bathrobe and heading downstairs! As if God would have to *go down* from *anywhere* to check out *anything*. This passage reflects that ancient view of God as residing in a heaven that is above the sky somewhere, not a worldview most of us hold in 2007.

We use other metaphors to talk about God. That's part of the power of language when talking about God. Metaphor gives us the ability to use human images that refer to realities we see and know from our lives to talk about the living God who is unseen yet who lives among us and is revealed to us in Jesus. And so we have a picture of God hiking up the metaphorical bathrobe to stomp down the stairs and check things out. The images we paint are imperfect, imprecise, but they also help us enter more deeply into the mystery of the God "in whom we live and move and have our being."

We likewise need to keep all that in mind when talking about the most fascinating aspect of this passage from Genesis, which is the interchange between Abraham and the Lord, especially given that the lectionary has coupled it with this particular gospel reading about prayer.

The Biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman understands the passage we have this morning as a later addition to the book of Genesis, a passage written to nuance and expand the theological perspective offered in the story about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah largely presents an equation: human disobedience leads to destruction of the community by God. Brueggeman thinks that the passage we have before us this morning was added to give some counterpoint to that theology, to expand the inherited theological tradition.

The interchange between Abraham and God is really quite powerful when thought of in this way. In this passage, the Lord chooses not to bag us because of our *unrighteousness*, but rather to have faith in the future of humanity as expressed in our *righteousness*. As Brueggeman puts it, "[God trusts that] innocence has the capacity to save others and the power to override the destructiveness of guilt." Which has greater power in a community – evil or good? This passage presents God as confident, finally, in goodness – and as choosing mercy again and again in response. How do we get to that point in this passage; or better put, how does God reach that point?

Through a prayerful conversation with Abraham. Prayer is, if anything, a conversation: a conversation in which we both talk and listen, as all good conversations go. And with prayer, we're open to hear what we need to hear from the other party, in our case, from God. In our gospel this morning, the man in the gospel is praised for his persistence with his friend. The word translated "persistence" is actually best rendered "shamelessness." When I came upon this, I thought immediately of Abraham in our first reading. Abraham is presented as being absolutely shameless in his pursuit of this issue with God: if there are fifty

righteous people in the towns, are you going to destroy the whole community? What about forty? How about thirty? Twenty? Ten? What's the cut off for God's mercy? Or perhaps there isn't one, but rather it's as wide as the sea and as far reaching as Jesus' hands upon the cross, encompassing all.

As we pray in one of the collects for mission in Morning Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit, that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your name."

This passage from Genesis closes with the following line: "The Lord went on his way when he had finished speaking to Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place." I hear that final phrase, "Abraham returned to his place," not only as describing physical movement, but also that Abraham was somewhat out of his traditional place in relationship to God during their conversation; out of the place in which the religious tradition would have put him.

He knows it, too: "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I am who are but dust and ashes. . . . Do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. . . . Let me take it upon myself [again!] to speak to the Lord. . . ." Honest conversation with God means honest conversation, nothing more and nothing less, even when it seems as if we're stepping a bit out of our rightful place.

That's why Abraham can confront God as he does and Job can rail as he does in the midst of suffering and why you can weep or rail or confront God in the midst of your life. Because God is who God is -- ever merciful, with no bounds on loving you -- you can be absolutely honest as the two of you talk about life.

As Jesus gets ready for the cross, he says to his disciples, "I no longer call you servants . . . I call you friends, because I have revealed to you everything that I have heard from my Father. And I appoint you to go and bear fruit . . . ."

There's an intimacy between God and Abraham in the passage we have for this morning that surpasses one based on unequal power relationships between master and servant. It's an intimacy based on deep trust, the kind of trust one has with the closest of friends. God is open to Abraham and Abraham knows that he can be open to God.

Abraham's argument is not based on what feels good in the short term – vengeance can feel very good for a while. It's not even based on what can appear morally attractive, that is, having a tit for tat situation in which we live with the painful consequences for sin, whatever our sin might be. No, Abraham's conversation with God is about who God is: just, merciful, loving. Twice he says, to the Lord, "Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked!" It's as if Abraham is saying to God: "Such unjust behavior would be profane – *unholy!!*" And God, that's not who you are.

What's perhaps most critical in this prayer, in this conversation with God, is that God is affected by Abraham. Jesus suggests that same thing in his parable about the two friends, one of whom is affected by the other's shamelessness. God isn't some grand Santa Claus in the sky who gives us what we want because we have been nice, nor does God withhold it because we have been naughty.

But as we come to know God in the person of Jesus, and in this story of Abraham, and in Jesus' parable of the two friends, God *is* affected by us, God *is* moved by us – by our needs and desires, our passions and disappointments, our sorrows and joys, our faithfulness and our sins. And the affect we have on God affects what God does, in ways we don't completely understand.

Certainly what we do and say and long for doesn't determine what God does: that would be control rather than love. And just as God does not control us in our love of God, we don't control God in God's love of us. But the deeper our trust in God's love for us and for this world we live in, the more we live accordingly, and the more God knows the effects of that trust, the more God can live accordingly, and continue to call us into deeper trust, and deeper love. And the world is changed; we bear more and more fruit; the world gives greater glory to God. Righteousness grows among us and spreads beyond us.

That kind of trust, that faith in God, enables Abraham to stand with God and talk honestly. That kind of trust enables us to turn to God, knowing that when we knock, the door is going to be opened to us, not reluctantly but with joy; that when we search, we will find more than we can imagine or hope for; and that when we ask, we will receive. We will receive Jesus in his fullness:

Our Lord and master, and our friend; the embodiment of holiness and forgiveness; our food on which we live, the one who communicates himself to us in love.

Thanks be to God.