

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost – July 24, 2022

²⁰ Then the LORD said, “How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! ²¹ I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me, and if not, I will know.”

²² So the men turned from there and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD. ²³ Then Abraham came near and said, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴ Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? ²⁵ Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” ²⁶ And the LORD said, “If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.” ²⁷ Abraham answered, “Let me take it upon myself to speak to my lord, I who am but dust and ashes. ²⁸ Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?” And he said, “I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.” ²⁹ Again he spoke to him, “Suppose forty are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of forty I will not do it.” ³⁰ Then he said, “Oh, do not let my lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there.” He answered, “I will not do it, if I find thirty there.” ³¹ He said, “Let me take it upon myself to speak to my lord. Suppose twenty are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.” ³² Then he said, “Oh, do not let my 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.” ³³ And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place.

¹⁹ The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. ² He said, “Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant’s house and spend the night and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way.” They said, “No; we will spend the night in the square.” ³ But he urged them strongly, so they turned aside to him and entered his house, and he made them a feast and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. ⁴ But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house, ⁵ and they called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.” ⁶ Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, ⁷ and said, “I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. ⁸ Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.” ⁹ But they replied, “Stand back!” And they said, “This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them.” Then they pressed hard against the man Lot and came near the door to break it down. ¹⁰ But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them and shut the door. ¹¹ And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door.

¹² Then the men said to Lot, “Have you anyone else here? Sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone you have in the city—bring them out of the place. ¹³ For we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before the LORD, and the LORD has sent us to destroy it.” ¹⁴ So Lot went out and said to his sons-in-law, who were to marry his daughters, “Up, get out of this place, for the LORD is about to destroy the city.” But he seemed to his sons-in-law to be jesting.

¹⁵ When morning dawned, the angels urged Lot, saying, “Get up, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or else you will be consumed in the punishment of the city.” ¹⁶ But he lingered, so the men seized him and his wife and his two daughters by the hand, the LORD being merciful to him, and they brought him out and left him outside the city. ¹⁷ When they had brought them outside, they said, “Flee for your life; do not look back or stop anywhere in the plain; flee to the hills, or else you will be consumed.” ¹⁸ And Lot said to them, “Oh, no, my lords; ¹⁹ your servant has found favor with you, and you have shown me great kindness in saving my life, but I cannot flee to the hills, for fear the disaster will overtake me and I die. ²⁰ Look, that city is near enough to flee to, and it is a little one. Let me escape there—is it not a little one?—and my life will be saved!” ²¹ He said to him, “Very well, I grant you this favor too and will not overthrow the city of which you have spoken. ²² Hurry, escape there, for I can do nothing until you arrive there.” Therefore the city was called Zoar. ²³ The sun had risen on the earth when Lot came to Zoar.

²⁴ Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven, ²⁵ and he overthrew those cities and all the plain and all the inhabitants of the cities and what grew on the ground. ²⁶ But Lot’s wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.

Havre, Montana, was chosen as the winner, if you will, of worst winter in 2017/18 by The Weather Channel and as their senior meteorologist Jonathan Erdman noted, they won by a landslide.

82.6 inches of snow fell between when it started on October 2 u through March 26, 4 feet more than average.

I first visited in April. Patches of snow were still visible in shady coulees amid the farmlands. But given that it was above 80 degrees on the Saturday I was welcomed with a picnic as the likely new pastor, the new problem was creeks were flooding throughout the area from the rapid snow melt.

The council president then at Messiah Lutheran told me if I'd flown up from Arizona a month earlier, there's no way I would have accepted the call. It's questionable whether they'd even be able to get me up there from the Great Falls airport 115 miles south.

**By contrast, my first winter there began quietly and mildly. After a dusting gave us a white Christmas just two years prior in the high desert valley at the foot of the Huachuca Mountains in southern Arizona, about 5 miles north of the Mexican border, ironically less than an hour from the Canadian border we didn't see the first snow until ...
December 26.**

The winter snowfall came in well below average when 2018/19 got totaled up. But I had the pleasure, if you will, of enduring Havre's coldest February on record. The mercury never once reached above zero. It bottomed out at 30 below with a windchill of 54 below. I'll never forget it.

Now, of course I didn't get caught up in a true whiteout blizzard of a snowstorm until April 28, the second Sunday of Easter, as I traveled home from Messiah in Havre, passing the empty church building at Christ Lutheran in Big Sandy where I lived, 35 miles south. We were holding one of our quarterly joint worship services as a parish but wisely, everybody else in Big Sandy took better stock of the forecast and stayed home. We – I brought the whole family along – crawled along at no more than 20 mph, stopping intermittently as the edge of the roadway became impossible to make out in the blowing snow.

I'd been fooled by the deceptively calm skies an hour and a half earlier when we drove up. I don't think I failed to check the forecast before heading north for the remainder of my tenure there.

Longtime residents of Havre and Big Sandy alike all had their tales of travel in terrible blizzards throughout decades past. My next council president at Messiah in 2019 had the worst I ever heard, fighting his way back all the way across North Dakota and more than half of Montana, largely guided by little more than the tail lights of a tractor-trailer in front of him.

For all the examples I could give you of nasty winter weather in my neck of the woods, that was just the tip of the iceberg. The churches I served did not do this, as neither is as prone to these kind of storms nor as remote as many counterparts farther east. But I had colleagues in eastern Montana, some who served other points in the parish across

the North Dakota border, who confirmed the practice. Many of the churches out that way leave the doors unlocked and the heat on for travelers who get stranded in these kinds of storms.

It's literally a matter of survival.

And it's the nearest natural comparison I can think of to the requirements of hospitality in the desert societies of the Middle East, particularly in ancient biblical times. Without hospitality that often sounds radical to our modern sensibilities, fewer would survive the harsh climate, as my colleague Pastor Katherine Rohloff pointed out in her podcast this week. People had to care for one another to accommodate any kind of travel. Do unto others ... and a difficult existence is made substantially more livable.

Hospitality was and is of vital importance in that part of the world and in the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism,

Christianity and Islam founded there. And to fail it and fail it miserably and deliberately and detestably would wind up wiping Sodom and Gomorrah off the map.

The extent of the cities' sin comes to God's attention and our passage from Genesis this morning gives us this account of God's preparation to send a team of investigators, essentially, from Heaven. God doesn't act in haste and as we hear in the dialogue with Abraham, needs little coaxing to extend mercy. As the patriarch bargains, sounding as if he is dealing with a shrewd shopkeeper, 50, no please, please, I beg of you 45, can you make it 40, on down ... there's no pushback from God. Sure 40, 30, 20, even 10 is fine. And it's not clear to scholars today why they stop there and go their separate ways.

But the episode of the ensuing 19th chapter does make clear a further winnowing down to 1 would not have changed the result. Abraham's nephew Lot insists upon having the

two angels who are sent as a vice squad, if you will, as guests in his home. Lot serves them a nice meal. Textbook hospitality. But in the fourth and fifth verse, “before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house, and they called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.”

I probably don’t need to spell out the euphemism here. It escalates. It gets very problematic. Lot offers to surrender his two young daughters to the violent mob if that will protect his guests. In short order, it’s evident there’s nothing salvageable here in this city.

As Pastor Rohloff points out, for the first millennium of Christian history, this story is understood for what it is: a failing of hospitality, a condemnation of sexual violence and a commentary on the pitfalls of pursuing power over the vulnerable. Ezekiel 16:49 reads: “This is the sin of your sister

Sodom: She and her daughters were proud, had plenty to eat, and enjoyed peace and prosperity; but she didn't help the poor and the needy."

But for the next millennium, things change. Church politics. Economics as feudalism fades away. The modern definitions of the word "sodomy" and the traditional, if you will, teaching of the fatal sin of Sodom and Gomorrah are developed. These become the so-called clobber verses, utilized to condemn same-sex romantic relationships.

But the emphasis on the sexual nature of Sodom's sin is rare. It does appear in Jude, chapter 1, verse 7, calling out that its residents "indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust," which do not misunderstand me, they most definitely did. Violence, coercion, abuse of power in any relationship, nevertheless the most intimate, is immoral, unnatural and in opposition to God's law and to the Gospel.

But love is not. God is love. And I believe that the love my LGBT+ friends who are committed to one another have is true and good and reflective of God's love. Others disagree. But I will defend the marriages of my siblings in Christ on the basis of what I have learned, what I have seen, what I have come to understand from my study of the Scriptures. Here I stand. I can do no other. And I cannot and I will not sit idle and let my friends, my siblings, be left out in the cold.

Amen.