

What Are We Becoming?

Genesis 19:1-29, Luke 9:28-36

The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights

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In September, we started to read our way through the first book of the Bible – Genesis. The idea was that as we listened to the stories that have to deal with the beginnings of life and God's intentions for his world, that we might be able to glean from them some resources that would help us to live faithfully in the 21st century. The last time we considered Genesis was just before Ash Wednesday, when we saw Abraham receive three visitors. As he and his wife, entertain these strangers, it becomes clear that they are not simply men, but in fact the Lord and two angels who only appear as humans. The Lord reveals to Abraham that he is on his way to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham is deeply moved by this, for among other things, his beloved nephew Lot is a resident of Sodom. Do you remember that we talked about Abraham's prayer, and the end result was that God would not destroy the city if only ten righteous people were found in it.

Let's turn our attention once more to Genesis, and see what happens next. As we do so, the only introduction I'll give to this passage is that it is one of the most profoundly sad stories that we have in scripture. You can follow along in your Bibles; I'll be reading in bits and pieces this morning.

Gen 19:1 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.

When the two angels come into town, they find Lot seated at the gate to the town. That probably means that he'd become a leader in his adopted community – the town council sat at the gate and oversaw the affairs of the city on a daily basis. The angels express their desire to spend the night sleeping in the town square, and Lot hurriedly suggests another plan...it's the first hint that we have that he is not so comfortable with the goings on in his hometown. Instead, he offers them hospitality as he opens his home to them.

Gen 19:4 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."

The population of the town shows up and says that they want to "know" these visitors. The word that's used there is a word that implies sexual activity. There is evil and violence afoot here. Lot steps out of the house and locks the door behind him, thinking that he can reason with the men.

For hundreds of years, this passage was used as a means to bash homosexuals – to single out one specific sin and say, "See! This is what God thinks of *those people*. The problem is, that's not what this passage is about. Lot is not resisting the townspeople because of their inclination; he's embarrassed because the townspeople are attacking visitors who have sought shelter in his home. Listen: I think that the Bible has plenty to say about homosexual practice – but it doesn't say it in this

passage. If we make this passage only about homosexuality, then we lose the ability to hear truth in it.

Can you imagine Lot's thought processes? He's got to be asking himself, "How in the world did I get here? When I started out, I was with my uncle Abraham, who was learning about what it meant to be a blessing; I sought God's will; I wanted to be a person who was faithful. But now I'm standing in the doorway of my house offering up my daughters for evil purposes." If Lot had known that this is what he was becoming, he probably wouldn't have settled in Sodom. He's not from there, that's for sure: the people in town make it a point to remind him of that:

Gen 19:9 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.

If Lot had known that he was going to be in that situation, he'd have made different choices. But he didn't see it coming. How many times have I found myself in that situation? Have you found yourself in that situation? Lot didn't make a huge life choice: "You know, I think I'll go live in this pit of sin and bring my kids up so that they are surrounded by people who make vile choices and maybe one day I'll end up trying to trade the lives of my daughters for some visitors who have sought shelter under my roof." No, he got there one small step at a time...every day, he left God's best for him a little bit at a time...he liked being liked by the people in the town...he enjoyed making money there in Sodom. Sure, he had to compromise his scruples a bit now and then, but hey, he had to get with the times, right? At least he wasn't stuck out in the desert like old Uncle Abraham.

While he's in this huge moral dilemma, the crowd is getting more and more upset. The angels save Lot's life by unlocking the door and reaching around and pulling him back inside. Miraculously, they prevent the mob from doing any immediate harm. Then the angels address Lot and reveal their purpose for coming to Sodom:

Gen. 19:12 "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.

It must be beginning to dawn on Lot – the horror unfolds slowly for him. He goes to the men who were pledged to be married to his daughters, and they won't believe him. Lot is so far from where he started out that the notion of a God who rules heaven and earth sounds foreign to those who ought to have been closest to him – and his daughters' fiancés laugh at him. The angels continue to press Lot all night, and when morning came,

Gen. 19:15 ... 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.

Do you see the incredible irony here? Lot is still indecisive. He knows that he's in a lousy place. He knows that his home is about to be destroyed. He knows that he is far from God's best in his life...but he won't leave it.

Do you see any of yourself in there? Have you encountered a place in your life that you know is wrong. It is tearing you up. I don't know what it is for you...maybe it's the little drink you need before you get home every day. Maybe it's the websites you surf to "to relax". Maybe it's an unhealthy relationship, a pattern of cheating or laziness at school, a little cocaine now and then just to take the edge off. Whatever it is, is there something that you know is wrong, but you like it too much to change? You know that it's going to do you damage, but you just can't let go of it? That's what happened to Lot! He is only saved because the angels literally drag him out to the edge of town! May God be merciful to us and tear from us that which is slowly killing us and twisting our lives and our families!

But look at what happens next! Even when he is brought safely out of town, Lot *still* knows better than the Lord!

Gen 19:17 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.

The angels say, "Head for the hills!" and Lot says, "You know, I'm afraid of heights. How's about I go into that next town over there, instead?" Again, is that something that's ever happened to you? Here you are, coming through something terrible, and God's people are saying, "Sounds to me like you need..." and our first response is "Oh, no, I'm all right...Sure, I was a little off-kilter there, but I'm fine now, just fine..." We come to church and engage in a new kind of community, but we don't really want people to tell us how to live. Lot still does not trust God's provision for his life – he's still acting as if it's all up to him. But as they're running, tragedy strikes the family:

Gen 19:24 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.

I'm told that south of the Dead Sea in Palestine there are a number of grotesque salt "statues" that serve as reminders to this story in scripture. I want to remind you about what we've said all along – that Genesis isn't here to give us the chemistry lesson about *how* God went about creating a universe, but rather to help us understand *why* we are here. Lot's wife had become so adapted to her life in Sodom that she couldn't leave. Lot and the angels took her by the hand and tried to flee, but she found herself unable to live outside of that place. This is a tragic truth, my friends: that sometimes we become so accustomed to the sin in our own lives that we feel like we can't live without it. Even after being warned about the city, even after being dragged to the outside, she can't help but turn and watch and in the process, the punishment of the city covers her and she dies with Sodom. She couldn't leave.

Our reading from Genesis ends by connecting back to Uncle Abraham, who gets up in the morning and sees the smoke coming from what used to be Sodom and Gomorrah:

Gen 19:27 Abraham went early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the LORD; 28 and he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and toward all the land of the Plain and saw the smoke of the land going up like the smoke of a furnace. 29 So it was that, when God

destroyed the cities of the Plain, God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when he overthrew the cities in which Lot had settled.

This terribly sad and tragic tale ends with a hit of good news: that God remembered Abraham. Even in the midst of a family that seems destined to leave all of God's best behind, God brings life where we ought to only expect death. That's all we're going to read from Genesis this morning, although I might encourage you to read the rest of the chapter later on. For Lot, things don't get any better – he continues to stumble blindly as he is further and further from God's intentions. But even there, you'll read of how God brings life and hope out of a situation that might yield only death and despair. It's not pretty – but it is, in at least some way, a sign that God is allowing his people to hold out for a better way of living.

That is, as I have said, a profoundly tragic story. Very briefly, I want to compare it with the New Testament story that we've heard this morning: another tale of heavenly visitors who show up amongst a group of faithful people living in a strange culture. In the reading from Luke, we've seen where God reveals himself through Jesus the Christ, and even Jesus' physical appearance is changed. It is interesting to note that while Peter, John, and James are terrified when they encounter the glory of the Lord, Lot never expresses any fear when dealing with the trouble in Sodom. I wonder if I, too, am more comfortable with the dark side, the sinful side of my own life than I am with God's light shining on me?

I want to ask you a question this morning – a question that comes straight from the scriptures we've heard. To whom are we listening as we become the people we're becoming? Lot obviously listened to the men of Sodom. Peter, John, and James listened to the voice of God in Jesus.

How much are we changed or affected by what we hear and see? How often can we slide into the pits and not be tarnished by them?

To ask it another way, on this "Kids Klub Sunday", what do we want for our children? As I mentioned a few moments ago, Lot found himself in a situation where he thought the best thing that he could do was to offer to give his daughters over to a group of strangers. How can we live so that we are never in a situation where that is even remotely possible?

There were two men who wanted to build houses near the ocean. The first man was so in love with the beach that he built right on the sand. He couldn't dig much of a foundation, of course, but he put a real nice place right there next to the water. His friend thought that was foolish, and he chose to build his home a little higher up on the shoreline. He dug deep into the rock and laid a strong foundation for his home.

They continued to be friends, of course. Every day they spent time together. Usually, they found themselves at the beach house. It was just easier to be there. The ground was flat. The water was inviting. You didn't really notice the lack of a foundation.

And then one night while they were in the beach house watching "American Idol", the storm hit. The waves crashed against the seawall, the floods came, and the house on the beach was totally swept away. The house on the hill, however, stood firm. Both men died, because they were in the beach house at the time.

The moral of the story is that it doesn't really matter where you have your house if you don't bother to live in it after it's built.

The truth that you know is that we live in a world that has been twisted by the power of sin – a world that looks a whole lot like Sodom and Gomorrah at times. The good news of the gospel is that

we have a messenger, a bridge, a hope from God who will show us a new way. The way of Christ is open to all – can you put yourself in a place where you'll be able not only to hear his call, but to act on his presence, his forgiveness, his wisdom, and his power? Believe the good news – that there is no Sodom that is so messed up that it can keep you from God. And act on that news by leaving behind the sins that fascinate you and hold you captive. Come into the newness of life that is promised by Jesus. In his name, amen.