

July 25, 2010 “Just for the sake of Argument”

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Scripture: **Genesis 18:22-33**

Obviously we all know that among other things, the Bible is a book filled with mytho-poetry. Words and stories that speak to us at different levels. Words and stories that speak to us in the language of myth and speak to us in the language of poetry. Stories like Jonah being swallowed by a fish, stories like Jesus walking on the water, stories like the sun standing still during a day long battle...so many stories in the Bible are framed in that way. That does not mean they are not important, it doesn't mean they should be taken lightly, they should just be read with different lenses.

The story today is a story that should be read with a different lens.

A story about Abraham and God negotiating over whether God will destroy a city or not depending on how many righteous people are found in that city.

To think of this story in a literal way is simply not available to many of us anymore. However to understand the story as a statement about justice and about how when justice that comes to groups of people and how it spills over sometimes to the innocent becomes very much a story that can still speak to us today. The Bible still speaks to us...if only we have ears to listen.

Would you pray with me?

O God may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts help us in the journey of faith. Amen.

Sodom and Gomorrah. It is an infamous story. But let's be clear up about a few things first. Why God wanted to destroy the city as reported in the Hebrew text has to do with several specific events. Primary among them are sadistic cruelty to beggars and visitors, murder, and greed. The other reason

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the Hebrew texts tell us that Sodom was eventually destroyed was because of homosexual rape. Not, mind you, homosexual acts, but specifically rape. This is what happens shortly after the story of Abraham and God talking about how many people to save in Genesis 18:20–32:

According to the story, God sends two angels to Sodom to check out the bad rumors. They are welcomed by Lot, who is Abraham’s nephew. Some men of Sodom surround the house and demand that the angels be given to them so that they can be “intimate” with them. That’s not about homosexuality; it’s about raping a stranger. We are, I hope, all aware in this day and age that rape has nothing to do with sex and everything to do with violent crime. Lot refuses, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Now this morning I don’t want to talk about the problems of Sodom and Gomorrah. That is for another day, but today let’s take a look at this story that comes right before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. It tells us about the character of Abraham, and ultimately the character of God. Abraham sees the trouble coming for the cities and he wants to know: will God kill off the righteous right along with the wicked? Will God kill off the innocent along with the guilty? That’s what Abraham wants to know. Because he doesn’t believe that is good or right. So Abraham begins to bargain with God. What if you find 50 righteous innocent, good people in Sodom? Would you destroy the city, well no God says, Well, how about 45? No again. How about 30 would you destroy it if there were thirty? It keeps going..

All the way down to 10. Have you ever bargained for a car? It is a weird process. This is a strange discussion. One of my professors said, why didn’t Abraham go all the way down to 1? I don’t know. He stopped at 10. Maybe Abraham should have gone all the way to zero.

What is that about and what does it have to do with us? Today, in Arvada? That’s the question we should always ask, “So What?!!”

I hear you. I’m going to offer up an explanation, I am going to offer up an explanation for this story. You can buy if it you want, you don’t have to if you don’t. I’m gong to suggest this. When the Bible was written, it wasn’t

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written all of a piece. What I mean by that is that someone didn't just sit down and write out chapters 1-50 of Genesis. Those pieces were pieced together throughout a long time.

Would you agree with that? Why would I say that? Well for one thing, God is called by different names by different writers in Hebrew in Genesis. Sometimes a writer will use Yahweh, sometimes a writer will use Elohim. Sometimes a writer will use Jehovah. Different writers using different names. The writing styles different. It's just one piece of evidence that

indicates Genesis was put together by various writers through a number of years.

Doesn't that make sense? Now here is something that might blow your mind. It's something that we don't think of often, but when we do, it can make the Bible much more accessible to us and help us to see the Bible as a complex piece of work with even more depth than before.

Here it is, are you ready? Sometimes the writers critiqued each other through their writing. They saw what someone else had written and they tried to correct it and placed some other writings beside it. That's why in the first two chapters of Genesis you get two different creation stories.

In some sense it is one writer saying you got some of it right, but you missed some important parts.

I submit to you that this story of Abraham wrangling with God over how many people might be saved is a later addition to the book of Genesis that critiques and challenges the story that follows after...which is the destruction of Sodom.

You might say, Rusty did you make that up? I didn't make this up. Walter Brueggeman has posited this theory. He suggests that the Sodom and Gomoroh story is old/ancient and it shows God completely destroying the cities. There is no forgiveness, no mercy. At some later point in time, Brueggeman suggests that another writer came along and inserted this mytho-poetic story to suggest another way that God can be thought of when dispensing justice.

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The God that Abraham is negotiating with, would save a city if it had just 10 righteous people, God would not destroy the wicked or the righteous if there were righteous people living in the city. That's the argument that is being presented in this piece of work.

That is a God that is showing mercy and forgiveness. That is not a God who wipes out the innocent righteous and wicked at the same time.

Now what does this have to do with us today?

Recently, Nora Gallagher wrote the following:

In two weeks we will commemorate the 65th anniversary of America's use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima (August 6, 1945). I think of Hiroshima when I read the old story of Sodom and Gomorrah, not because the people in Hiroshima were evil or deserving of what happened to them, far from it, but because it's the only whole city in all of history that was destroyed all at once on a single day. Rather than the hand of God sweeping the city aside, it was our hands, the hands of human beings. And I am sure many of you remember this, but those of you who were not alive during the 40's may not know just how we Americans characterized the Japanese, our enemy.

“Wipe the Jap off the Map” was a popular poster. When they started choosing target cities for the atomic bomb, they had Kyoto on the list for awhile until Henry Stimpson, the Secretary of War, pointed out that it was a famous historical city and to destroy it would be like destroying, say, Venice. But no one on the target committee knew anything about Japan, so this news came as a surprise to them. A series of photographs ran in *LIFE* magazine the summer of 1945 that showed a Japanese soldier being burned out of his cave on the island of Borneo. The headline read “A Jap Burns.” In six photographs, a barely discernible human being on fire is shown running until he falls. The captions read like this one: “The Jap who wouldn't quit ducks out enveloped in flames.” The accompanying story ends: “But so long as the Jap refuses to come out of his holes and keeps killing, this is the only way.” I know one of the people who is in our congregation had to do that job during the war.

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Hiroshima had a population of 400,000. 100,000 were killed on August 6. By the end of 1945, 140,000 were dead. The five year death toll was 200,000. The death rate was 54%, compared to fire bombing, which was ten percent. The ratio of civilian deaths to military deaths was 6-1.

Another way to look at Hiroshima is by visiting the two museums. The museum in Los Alamos is dedicated to the technological: models of the two bombs that fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and photos of the labs. It's a very distant and detached view, a view, as a friend said, from above the bomb.

The museum at Hiroshima is another matter. There you will find, among the photos of destruction, the stories of those who managed to survive. Here you will find the human particular. Here is one story from a woman named Shin Bok-Su, a Korean married to a Japanese man, age 28 at the time:

“My grandmother was going into the living room to wash the dishes. I had pulled the hose out of the bath and was using it to change the goldfish water in the yard. First there was a flash, then an ear-splitting roar. Instantly, everything was dark: I could see nothing. I heard voices calling, 'Help me! Help me!' Terrified and dumbfounded, I stood on shaking legs in the pitch black. It grew a bit lighter. Where had my house gone? The neighbors' houses too were smashed. Everywhere I looked was a plain of rubble. I hid my mother and second son in a field of millet growing in the corner of the grounds of Hiroshima City Commercial High School and hurried back to the house. I began to pull the roof tiles off the fallen house one by one to get to my two children caught underneath. I screamed their names as if I had gone mad. Rain as black as oil fell from the sky.

Early on the morning of the 7th, our house caught on fire. I desperately shrieked, 'Takeo! Akiyo!' The fire ignited a mosquito net that was near where I expected the two children to be. Then I saw Takeo's corpse burning. The three buttons on his school uniform remained properly aligned as he burned.”

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One hundred and fifty scientists who worked on the Manhattan Project signed petitions to President Truman the summer of 1945 to try to stop him from dropping the bomb on Japan. They were present-day Abrahams, if you will, arguing against the use of a weapon which they called "a means for the ruthless annihilation of cities." They went on to say in one petition: "Our use of atomic bombs in this war would carry the world a long way further on this path of ruthlessness."

Twenty years after Hiroshima, in 1965, when an interviewer asked Robert Oppenheimer (the director of the Manhattan Project) what he thought about President Lyndon Johnson's proposal to initiate talks with the Soviet Union about halting nuclear proliferation, Oppenheimer replied, "It's twenty years too late. . . It should have been done the day after Trinity." The day after the experimental bomb was tested in July 1945 in New Mexico.

Several days after the bomb was dropped, reporters asked Gandhi for his reaction; he replied, the atom bomb "resulted for the time being in destroying the soul of Japan. What has happened to the soul of the destroying nation is yet too early to see."

The soul of the destroying nation—now there's a phrase.

But we can still consider and think about what happened to us as a nation on August 6, 1945? How did Hiroshima erode our sense of morality, what we permit ourselves as a nation to do? How did it affect our fragile sense of what is permissible for one human being to do to another? Did the use of a weapon designed to ruthlessly annihilate whole cities contribute to where we find ourselves today? Finally, what is the line of connection from Hiroshima to Vietnam, from Hiroshima to Iraq, and on to Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib? In fact just a couple of weeks ago a soldier was convicted of providing video of a military strike against a group of people some of whom were civilians.

The story of Abraham negotiating with God is still an appropriate and a timely one to think about and to meditate on even now. How do we go about

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protecting the innocent or at least reminding each other about the innocent who are lost in the fog of war? Something we should not let go.

Someone once said, Our lives begin to end on the day that we are silent about things that matter. Why are we so silent?