

Precarious Ambiguity

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Genesis 18

16 Then the men set out from there, and they looked toward Sodom; and Abraham went with them to set them on their way. 17 The LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, 18 seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? 19 No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; so that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." 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 the 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 the 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 the 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 the 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.

Psalms 138

7 Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies;
you stretch out your hand,
and your right hand delivers me.
8 The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me;
your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever.
Do not forsake the work of your hands.

Luke 11

9 "So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. 10 For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. 11 Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? 12 Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? 13 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

I love the Book of Psalms, but frankly during worship from week to week, I sometimes don't pay much attention to them. It's a bit embarrassing to admit this, but yes, it's true. How easy it is for me to feel the psalm simply sandwiched in the liturgy, like a splendid slice of musical mustard between the Old and New Testament messages – between the gritty tribal epoch of Jehovah's justice, and the softer, sweeter salvation of the Lord's love! I wonder how many others of us feel something like this as well. I wonder if you, like me, get distracted during the psalms.

I wonder if that happened this evening. Maybe you didn't even notice -- there's something odd about this psalm today. Listen again to the end of Psalm 138. The first part of verse 8 says: "The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever." Ok, fine. But then listen to the second half of the verse: "Do not forsake the work of your hands." What a way to end it! What ever happened to the robust confidence in the fulfillment of the Lord's purpose? Lord, you will fulfill your purposes! And your promise is for the salvation of the people your hands have created! But, oh by the way, God, please don't forsake the work of your hands. If first part of the verse is right, why does the psalmist utter the second part? Talk about mixed messages! Suddenly, the calm and steady trust of the psalmist seems cast into ambiguity. The promise of salvation seems suddenly to be hanging rather precariously. It's as if the psalmist were saying: Lord, I know you'll redeem your people. I know that the eventual fate of the earth is secure and that life will go on. I know that the *larger* cosmos is in your hands. But Lord, what about *me*? I am in your hands, I am a work of your hands. Don't pass *me* by.

Now this may seem an odd message in the light of what Scripture has to say elsewhere. Aren't we assured, time and again, that God won't pass us by? One familiar hymn reminds us that God's eye is on the sparrow, and I know God watches me. That's in the Gospel of Matthew – more or less. And we're told that all we need to do seek out God's generous watchfulness. As today's Gospel reading says: Seek and ye shall find! "Everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." Now this is what we want to hear, isn't it?

So why do some other passages perhaps strike us as so precariously ambiguous? Why the mixed message we find at the end of today's psalm? That's what I'm wondering about. Why would it even occur to the author of a passage such as this psalm that God might pass us by?

I think the Genesis passage gives us a good clue. Today's passage is placed at the end of chapter 18, immediately after a crucial moment in the life of Abraham. If you were listening closely, you may have noticed that we came into this in mid-narrative. ("Then the men set off from there)... Who were these "men"? Well the beginning of the chapter (which we did not read today) refers to these men as the "appearance" of God Himself, in the form of human visitors who had come to give Abraham some news: His elderly wife Sarah would be having a son. This would be Isaac, through whom the entire tribe of Israel would be born. Now, Sarah was already a lady very advanced in years. And this made that promise so extravagantly improbable on its face that Sarah herself can barely stifle a cynical fit of laughter. She guffaws when she overhears it. And when she's caught laughing, she even denies that she laughed! Sarah has serious integrity problems!

Why do I mention this? I mention it to begin us thinking about the precarious ambiguity of God's promise. And I want to start out on a hopeful note. Sarah, we might say, was not greatly endowed with the most generous and lovely spirit. And yet God would fulfill the promise of fertility and ensure the future of Israel to one like Sarah, despite all her imperfections. Maybe there's hope for me after all. Maybe God won't abandon the work of his hands when it comes to this imperfect lump of biological clay. Maybe God won't pass me by after all.

So that's the context, and we might feel encouraged. But then, today's passage seems to take a very different tone. Right after making that promise to him, Abraham's visitors looked toward Sodom; and what do they see? We can only imagine. Sodom and Gomorrah were terrible places, and we don't even have to know why. Whether the problem was inhospitality towards strangers, or stinginess towards the poor, or sexual immorality – and various commentators have listed each of these – none of this really matters for today's reading. Today's passage is about Abraham pleading for justice and mercy, and it's a story that does not end happily.

Here's what happens. In the face of the impending catastrophe that God was about to visit upon these civilizations, which would wipe them off the map of human history -- Abraham intervenes. He asks brazenly of God: Lord, would you really destroy the righteous along with the guilty? Would that be a just thing to do? Would you really pass those poor innocents by, as you wreak havoc on the others? I should hope not (he says). I'll tell you what, God. If I can find but fifty good people – well, Sodom's pretty awful, maybe only forty-five... eh, would you believe – thirty? I'll tell you what, would you let it go for ten – aren't ten good people worth sparing the city for?

And yes, God agrees. God will spare the city if a small number of righteous inhabitants can be found. Just ten. For just ten, the City would be spared, along with all its history – a history which, we imagine, could not have been all bad. After all, human beings are complicated creatures – morally as in every other way -- and we can imagine some good to have taken place at some point even in Sodom. For here were the cobblestones where kids took their first steps, the gardens where young lovers first happily found each other, where stories were told and pains were soothed. I like to think of the Sodomites as humans, not as pieces of rhetorical cardboard – despite what the biblical tale literally says about the incomparable evil of those places..

And so for just ten righteous people, the City of Sodom and all its cultural memories, the locales and symbols of precious human life, would have been spared. That's what the story says.

But notice something. That's where the conversation ends. Many of us know the rest of the story. There was only one righteous man in all of Sodom and Gomorrah. His name was Lot. Lot and his family were spared. But not those cities. There were not ten righteous men to be found, and Abraham's bargaining with God stopped at the number ten. Why? Why was not a single righteous family enough to save Sodom? Why was this righteous family not a sign of hope and redemption for others as well? Lot and his family could live there and be righteous! This was not an entirely hopeless environment!

So why did God decide to pass the city by, and let all the imperfect but still precious handiwork of its human inhabitants be consigned to the fire of oblivion? Isn't cultural life always a complicated mixture of good and evil, and isn't there always hope for redemption, even in the darkest of situations? Isn't that what we are told to believe?

Or is there a point where God finally reaches the limits of mercy? God's steadfast love endures forever, but maybe there is a limit to what God is ready to preserve. And I wonder if this isn't what's on the mind of the psalmist, in the very last verse of Psalm 138. Don't give up on us, Lord. Don't give up on me, even if circumstances don't look redeemable. Even if I can't give you ten good reasons to include me in your Kingdom.

Now, it would be nice to say, rather cheaply and easily – Don't worry. God's mercy is infinite! That's our doctrine, and that's what we should believe. But that I think is too pat an answer. That's what the German theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." It leaves something out. It redeems the sin without redeeming the sinner. It misses what really worries the author of today's psalm. For while God's *mercy* may be infinite, *the resilience of earthly existence is not*. This is obvious. It's written into the very nature of mortal life – just look at the aging process! -- and it's one thing that binds us to our time and place in history. Like the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah, whose individual hopes and dreams were consumed in the fiery fate of their degenerate society; so too, many of our own fellow citizens are misshapen images of life in the big bad City, and seem consumed in the wreckage of a social system in terrible disrepair. The closer we look, the more precariously ambiguous God's promise may begin to feel, at least for those suffering from the uncertainties of a very precarious social world.

Yes, there are limits to what God is going to preserve, and some of us may feel this rather acutely and rather personally. Human life, left entirely on its own, has a tendency to sink and to unravel, and sometimes that's just where we find ourselves, isn't it? It's not just the aging process! Sometimes some of us find ourselves in life

circumstances that seem to be sinking and unraveling even faster than our biological clockwork. At those moments perhaps we may wonder if God is going to pass us by.

This happens differently for different people. Some of us may be precariously close to the very margins of survival. For others of us, what we've spent many fervent years doing, in professional or in family life, may suddenly perhaps seem no longer very important, and we may even find ourselves wondering just what is. For still others of us, what we still think is very important may seem suddenly beyond our grasp, and we may wonder where our future promise lies. And just as long as we see ourselves entirely in terms like this, God's promise may seem rather ambiguous and quite precarious, just because we do sense that there certainly are limits to what God is willing to preserve.

But I won't leave things at this precarious juncture. What are those limits? Here I think we may find some hope, if we are willing to hear it. God does not promise to preserve everything that *we* think is important. As much as we'd wish it to be otherwise, God does not guarantee the preservation of every human effort upon the earth. Sometimes the mess we've made is just too great to be redeemed in tact. Or sometimes the proper season is simply past, and we may have failed to notice this. God's justice, even when tempered with mercy, does not always preserve all that we would like it to.

How then are we to take the gospel passage for today? "Seek and ye shall find! Knock and the door will be open!" That sounds like the prosperity gospel! "Think positively, and the material abundance we seek will be ours!" But notice what the scripture does not say: "Seek and ye shall find exactly what you think you think you want." The scripture does not say: "Knock and the opening doorway will look exactly as

we imagined it to.” That’s not the deal at all. The deal is that though God’s love is unconditional, our salvation is **not**.

God’s love is *un*conditional, but our salvation has conditions. I have to be careful when I talk this way, because it sounds like a denial of God’s grace. But that’s not what I mean. Our salvation is not unconditional -- in one particular sense. Our salvation, in this life at least, is conditional upon our faith – not as a work to be accomplished but upon faith as a way of being. Seek ye first the *Kingdom*, and in doing that we need to seek and knock in a certain way, one that leaves open and unsettled much of what, up until now, we may have taken for granted about ourselves.

I wonder: Which of our own attachments – which of our own ways of seeing the world -- which of our own most cherished projects... which of these are we actually willing to see pass away, if the benefit is God’s future fully opening before us? If we are *not* willing to listen to what God has in store for us, if we insist on identifying what we think we want with who we think we are, then we may well wonder if God is passing us by, because it may well feel that way. For in that case, we may have missed who we are. The message is that we are children of a loving God, and there is no precarious ambiguity about that message.