

Opposite of elimination – Genesis 18:20-32

I chose today's reading by a process of elimination! The lectionary, the three-year cycle of Bible readings that takes us through the church year and unites us with Christians around the world, usually lists five or six passages: an Old Testament reading and a psalm, an alternative Old Testament reading and a psalm, a second reading (usually a New Testament letter or epistle) and a gospel reading.

This week the gospel was Luke 11, Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer, but to be honest, that felt too big for my energy levels this week. The epistle was Colossians 2, but it doesn't feel that long ago since I preached an entire series on Colossians. The main Old Testament reading was Hosea which is daunting when Rev Dr Jeanette Mathews has written a whole book on the subject, so, by elimination, we have the alternative - Genesis 18!

But it's appropriate I chose it by elimination because this passage is all about elimination, isn't it? 'Sodom and Gomorrah!' Don't we hear those names and immediately think of 'fire and brimstone' raining down from heaven? Don't we visualise something like this? (John Martin's *The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah*.) Don't we associate these cities with, as Wikipedia says, "*human wickedness and divine retribution*"?



But there's two things I need to immediately clear up!

Firstly, it wasn't just Sodom and Gomorrah. This judgment was a response to the great outcry against, the grave sin of the five cities of the Plain; Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim and only Bela (or Zoar) is spared.



Perhaps if you're making a placard, "Remember Sodom and Gomorrah and Admah and Zeboiim" takes too long to write!

And, secondly, nowhere in this story and nowhere in the Bible are any of these cities condemned for same-gender sexuality! According to the prophet Ezekiel (Ezekiel 16:49) the sin of Sodom and her cohort was, "*pride, excess of food and prosperous ease,*" while not aiding "*the poor and needy*". These were the abominable things they did before the Lord. And Jerusalem, Ezekiel says, is even worse! (Perhaps we could look even closer to home – to our own cities and our own lifestyles. To borrow a line from Rev Dr Charlie Edward Bates, the closing preacher for the Baptist World Congress, "*We have come so close to hell, you can smell the smoke!*")

The false claims that same-gender sexuality were the reason these cities were destroyed come from the demand of the men of Sodom to have sex with the men (or angels) who appear in our reading, but this is not sex, it is rape, and a gross violation, in the ancient world, of the code of hospitality. We need to

remember that rape is not about sex or sexual desire, but all about violence and power; a need to dominate, a desire to inflict harm.

But returning to Genesis 18, Abraham's dialogue with God, I believe this has more to say to us than that God will punish the wicked. To me it says much more about our relationship with God, about the character of God, and therefore, about what our relationship with the world is to be as people who reflect God's character. This passage is not about preaching 'elimination'. It's preaching the opposite in fact! It is preaching nomination; preservation; and our vocation as people called, like Abraham, to be a blessing to the nations.

Because the first thing that strikes me about this passage is the extraordinary intimacy between Abraham and the Lord.



The great patriarch Enoch was famous for this kind of intimacy. According to Genesis 5, he, *"walked with God and then he was no more, because God took him."* And here is Abraham, too, walking and talking with God, demonstrating hospitality to God and God's angelic companions by setting them on their way. And God, in verse 17, decides to confide in him, *"Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him?"*

And Abraham, in return, has the boldness to speak further with God. Verse 22, *"So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the Lord."* The ancient texts read, *'But Yahweh remained standing before Abraham'*, but because 'to stand before' could mean 'to worship', the scribes reversed the two. But however, you read it - or rewrite it - it is a depiction of incredible intimacy between God and Abraham, of God's nomination of Abraham as God's counsellor and advocate for the nations.

What of us, of God's people today? Associate Professor of Old Testament at Fuller Seminary, Kyong-Jin Lee, writes, *"This combination of reverence and daring anticipates a central dynamic of post-Pentecost life. With the Spirit now indwelling the community of believers, the church is called to approach God not with fear, but with parrēsia—that is, with freedom of speech, boldness, and confidence."*

Our prayers should also be characterised by bold love. Bold love because, as Elliot said in the video, *"God loves us, and likes it when we talk to him."* Bold love because we, like Abraham, have been nominated to counsel with God about our world.

The second remarkable aspect of this passage is its portrayal of God's mercy.

Initially it appears, in this exchange, where Abraham, like a skilled negotiator or a practiced haggler, brings God down from fifty to ten, that the focus is on saving the righteous. And that God knows nothing about the art of the deal!

Because, when Abraham starts the negotiation at fifty, the Lord does not raise his figure, saying he will spare the cities for the sake of a hundred. That is how negotiation – haggling – works. Instead, as Alistair Roberts points out, *“There is no alternation of competing terms, steadily converging on a mutually acceptable figure. No, not a single one of Abraham’s requests meets with the slightest resistance. Fifty, forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty, even ten: YHWH would spare Sodom for even ten righteous.”*

The emphasis becomes not on how many righteous people are required to save these cities, but how few are required! The intention is not elimination, but preservation.



It feels rather weighty to be preaching this sermon at a time when the Netanyahu government’s efforts to destroy Hamas and to free the hostages have resulted in 61,800 deaths in Gaza (59,866 Palestinians and 1,983 Israelis) according to the Gaza Health Ministry and Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In addition, 217 journalists and media staff have been killed, 120 academics, and over 224 humanitarian aid workers. Scholars have estimated 80% of Palestinians killed are civilians, and a study by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, which verified fatalities from three independent sources, found that 70% of those killed in the destruction of residential buildings were women and children.

I don’t know how God will judge the wicked or decide who they are. I can only go back to Ezekiel; those who demonstrated, *“pride, excess of food and prosperous ease,”* while not aiding *“the poor and needy”*. But I share Kyong-Jin Lee’s view that what is, *“most revelatory in this passage is not Abraham’s daring, but God’s response. The divine willingness to listen, to engage, and even to adjust the terms of judgment is not a sign of instability or uncertainty, but of justice that is always open to mercy.”*

In the words of the song, we just sang, the words of the psalmist, *“The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love.”*

And what follows from understanding that our God is rich in love, of seeing in the bold negotiations of Abraham a unshakeable faith in God’s mercy, is that we are called, as God’s people, to be merciful.

To love our enemies. To do good to them. To bless those who curse us. To pray for those who mistreat us. To give without expecting to get anything back... *“Then,”* Jesus says in Luke 6:35-36, *“you will be children of the Most*

High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."

God calls us not to elimination, or judgment, but to a vocation of mercy. Kyong-Jin Lee writes, *"The church's mission is not to pronounce judgment from afar, but to become a presence of advocacy, compassion, and hopeful intercession, even where hope seems least warranted."*

I do not know how our prayers impact the suffering of those in our lives and in our world, but I know that we are called to pray, and to pray with *parrēsia*, as Lee says, bold love, to be frank and fearless before our God

In her book, *Praying for Peace, Reflections on the Gulf War*, Kate Compston wrote about the struggle of praying for that conflict.

"When I intercede for a troubled person," she says, "I visualise holding her in my arms before God – until God stretches out to take her from me: then I can step back and leave her where the love and strength are a billion times greater than mine...

But I can't hold this war: when I try, everything and everyone caught up in its vast network spills out of my arms. It is too hot – and too huge – to handle. I arrive before God and am empty handed. No prayer wells up in me – just horror and helplessness. And then – tears.

At first I am ashamed. The tears go on and on.... And then slowly it comes to me that just 'sitting with it'... being struck dumb and shedding this fountain of tears...is not a failure to pray. Being horrified and helpless and sad and frightened and spiritually mashed up in the presence of God...feeling in every cell, as it were, the pain, violence, futility and guilt of war...maybe this, of itself, is prayer.

And I stay with that for a while.

Then something else comes. The conviction that, having sat in the mud, I can maybe now lift my eyes... In the past, prayer has taken me beyond the 'is' of a situation to the 'what has not yet come to be'. Might it not do so now?



"Abraham's prayer," Kyong-Jin Lee writes, "is not merely an ancient negotiation. It is a mirror held up to the church's calling in the age of the Spirit.... In a world in desperate need of justice and mercy, the church is called to speak, to plead, and to hope with God."

May we walk alongside Abraham, and our God, knowing that God seeks and invites our counsel. May we, too, discover and even dare to challenge God with the richness of God's mercy. And may we continue to pray and to plead and to hope with our God.