

Title: Keeping in the Way of God
Date: 8/7/2022 (Proper 14, Year C)
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church
Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)
Readings: [Isaiah 1:1, 10-20](#); [Psalm 50:1-8, 23-24](#); [Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16](#); [Luke 12:32-40](#)
Video Link: <https://youtu.be/ljyq3W5UdME?t=1102>

Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom!
Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! (Isa 1:10)

Please be seated.

I bet that caught your attention.

I wonder if that's why the writers of the book of the prophet Isaiah chose to put these words so close to the beginning of their book in this dramatic fashion. No question at all, it gets us to sit up straight and take notice. AND I wonder how many people hear it and then back away, very very slowly.¹

Those familiar with the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah would know, from those first few lines, where this is going to go. Prophets in the Old Testament didn't predict the future so much as they revealed the present. Their prophecies weren't so much about the end of the world as how the people of God are going to come to a bad end if they continued on their present course.

In American culture, the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah have long been invoked to condemn homosexuality and to justify the exclusion of LGBTQIA persons from full participation in the sacraments and the life of the church. But when I picked up the Bible and read the story for myself, it surprised me that some people would think that **that** was what led to their bad end.

To refresh your memory, let's go all the way back to Genesis 18. God, accompanied by two angels, comes to visit Abraham and Sarah. Abraham is sitting by the entrance of his tent in the middle of the day, and it is hot. Like Texas in August hot.

When he sees what appears to be three men walking toward him in the blazing midday heat, he rushes to meet them. He offers them a cool place to rest and refreshments. Though he promises them water and bread, he sets before them a feast. Instead of serving bread, he asks Sarah to make cakes out of special flour. Instead of serving water, he brings out curds and milk. Not only that, he runs to his herd and picks out a calf for his servant to slaughter and prepare.² All this is as natural to him as breathing, without asking anything in exchange. He rushes and he runs and he hastens, implying that he doesn't have to think twice to share what is his.

During the meal, there's a brief interlude where the visitors predict that Sarah will have a son, and Sarah laughs out of disbelief because she is in her 90s, way past child-bearing age. After the meal, God and the angels start their journey toward Sodom, and Abraham sees them off.

God debates whether or not to tell Abraham what's going to happen. In the end, God decides that since Abraham was chosen so that he may "charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice" (Gen 18:19), Abraham should be told.

So, God tells him, "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me" (Gen 18:21).

The implication is that Sodom and Gomorrah are not shining examples of God's righteousness and justice; they are NOT keeping the way of God. As we read in the last verse of Psalm 50, this means that they will not experience salvation (Ps 50:24). In fact, the result will be quite the opposite. Since Abraham is charged with teaching his children and household to keep the way of God, God wants to reinforce the importance of being righteous and just.

Then, in one of my favorite stories in the Bible, Abraham pushes back against God's judgement. He reasons with God about what justice and righteousness looks like **in practice**.

Abraham tries his best to negotiate with God to preserve those cities for the sake of a few righteous residents. Abraham asks God, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 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?"

Then he resorts to the time-honored strategy of flattery, "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?" (Gen 18:23-26).

That feels like a mic drop moment. The closing argument in court. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?

This reminds me of today's verse from Isaiah 1:18, "Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord." God is not afraid of our questions or arguments; God welcomes it. God wants us to be fully engaged with faith, with all of our heart and all of our mind and all of our might. Abraham wasn't punished for debating God; this wasn't seen as a lack of faith. Throughout the New Testament, as we see in Paul's letter to the Hebrews, he is held up as an example of faith.

This is not to say that Abraham did this all the time. In particular, he didn't ask any questions when God told him to do as Sarah says and cast out Hagar and Ishmael, or when God asked him to sacrifice Isaac. But on **this** occasion, he does.

And because he does, God agrees to not destroy the city for the sake of fifty righteous men. Then Abraham negotiates that number down to forty-five, then forty, then thirty, twenty, and finally ten.

All there needed to be was ten righteous men. Just ten.

When the two angels of the Lord come to Sodom in the evening. Lot, who happens to be Abraham's nephew, sees them and offers them hospitality. They tell him they can spend the night outside in the square, but he strongly urges them to accept his offer. In a scary movie, he'd look around anxiously as he strategically steers them toward his house. Then the suspenseful soundtrack and the way the camera lingers and swings around them would clue us in that they are being watched.

Lot and his household offer these guests a feast. But before it is time to rest for the night, they hear noises from outside. The men of Sodom, young and old, down to the very last man, have surrounded the house.

They demand that Lot send out the guests, so they may know them. In the Old Testament, "know" is an euphemism for sex. Basically, the men of the city want to have their way with the guests. Lot takes his duties as a host so seriously he offers them his daughters instead. Fortunately, the angels pull him back in and strike the men outside with blindness so that Lot and his family can get away before God destroys the city.

Hospitality in an inhospitable climate is a matter of life and death. When a stranger shows up at the entrance to your tent, the entrance to your town, you offer what you have. You give them something to eat and drink, and a cool place to rest. If you have more, you throw them a feast.

The survival of **all** who live and travel in the desert depended on this common understanding that resources are to be shared, not hoarded.³ If a city or town or tribe does otherwise, they become known for their evil ways. And the outcry will be so loud, it will reach the ears of God.

Moreover, the men of Sodom are engaging in an act of deliberate cruelty. They weren't trying to rob the travelers, and they weren't trying to protect what they had. They were seeking to dominate, to rape, to find pleasure by inflicting pain.

The angels of God couldn't find ten righteous men among them, not even ten. How did they get to this point?

It didn't happen overnight.

Looking at the people of Sodom and Gomorrah through the words of the prophet Isaiah, they were probably still making burnt offerings of ram and the fat of fed beasts. They came together in solemn assembly at the new moons and appointed festivals. But God refused to look at their outstretched hands or listen to their prayers because they had not "remove[d] the evil of their doings."

They put God in a box and checked it off on their to-do list and called it done.

There were not even ten men who were still keeping in the way of God. Ten who would, as we read in Isaiah, “cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” It doesn’t count if there were ten who disagreed in their hearts, ten who really wanted to stay home instead of joining the mob. When it mattered, where it mattered, they were all standing there, outside Lot’s house.

How did they get to this point? Probably the same way Sodom and Gomorrah have become the prooftext for the condemnation for homosexuality, rather than rape, or neglecting to care for the socially vulnerable. The same way the Bible has been used to keep people in line with the agendas of the powerful than the needs of the vulnerable. The same way Christian language and imagery have come to part and parcel of political rallies of a certain kind. They have wandered away from the way of God, perhaps without realizing it.

So, the prophet Isaiah calls **us** to attention as well. To stop and **look down** to see if we are still walking on a path that is of God. To stop and **look ahead** to see if we are still moving toward our homeland, that heavenly country, as all of our ancestors in faith have done. In our Sunday Adult Education class, we have been talking about canon, which has its root a word that means “rule,” as in laws and principles. Ideally, we have a personal canon that will keep us oriented toward the right direction and provide a rule of faith that helps us keep in the way of God.

Our presiding Bishop says, “If it’s not about love, it’s not about God.”⁴ In another courtroom scene, reminiscent of Psalm 50, the prophet Micah tells us that we are to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God” (Mic 6:8)

As we head into the fall, things are going to get busy, or busy in a different way.

How will you make sure God is not a box you check off?

What will help you keep in the way of God?

¹ <https://tenor.com/view/homer-simpson-back-away-never-here-you-dont-see-me-gif-18121192>

² Footnotes for Gen 18:3-8 in The Harper Collins Study Bible, OT 27

³ <https://www.scu.edu/mcae/publications/iie/v11n1/hospitality.html>

⁴ https://twitter.com/pb_curry/status/884798246538891264?lang=en