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The National Presbyterian Church

Abraham: Culture Wars

Genesis 18:1-2a; 16-33; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

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In our sermons through August we're looking together at the story of a man by the name of Abraham – at his life, his faith and his God. This is a man who lived a long time ago, some 1500 to 2000 years before Christ, but who has had, and continues to have, more impact on the lives of individuals than perhaps anybody else in world history. He is the forefather of the Jewish people. He is the ancestor by faith of the Muslim people. And he is our ancestor by faith for those of us who are Christian people. In the New Testament, for example, he is held up to us (especially in the writing of the apostle Paul, but also in the letter to the Hebrews) as a person whose faith is to be emulated. His trust in God is to be emulated. His is the paradigm or template that we are to follow. He trusts God. He doesn't just believe that there is a God. He doesn't just believe doctrines about God. But he steps out in faith to follow God's lead. His faith moves into trust. He actually does something because of his faith. And this is the kind of faith that you and I are to have with Jesus Christ our Lord, who says to us repeatedly, as God said to Abraham,

“Follow me! Follow me!” Don't just stay where you are, but follow me.”

“But, Lord,” we say, like Abraham, “we don't know where you are going!”

“Well, he says, “Like Abraham, don't worry! Just follow me.”

So Abraham stands out for us in the New Testament as a person whose character, whose faith, whose trust in God, is something that is to be emulated.

And more than that, as we've been looking at the story of Abraham for the last few weeks, what we've seen in his story so far (the story is told between the 11th and the 25th Chapters of Genesis) is that the God of Abraham is, in a remarkable way, the same god as the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. The parallels in understanding come up to the surface again and again and again. For example . . .

- The God of Abraham is a God who is interested in ordinary people. Abraham's just this ordinary person and Jesus was interested in ordinary people.
- The God of Abraham notices people, speaks to people just as Jesus spoke to people.
- The God of Abraham calls people into his service, directs people, makes promises to people, even as Jesus makes promises to you and me.
- And the God of Abraham is also remarkably gracious and patient.

Last Sunday we looked at Genesis 17-18 and saw that Abraham's life and the life of his wife Sarah which was not always perfect. Yes, his faith is held up as something to be emulated, to be copied, to be followed. But sometimes Abraham is not particularly faithful. And this is, in a sense, good to know! It's good to know that this person held up before us as someone to follow

has his flaws, and that God thought it worthwhile to record those flaws in the Bible! Abraham and Sarah at times found it hard to believe, and sometimes we surely do too.

The two of them wrestled with their faith especially with a particular promise that God gave to them, and that they couldn't easily believe: the promise that they would have descendants; that they would have a child and through that child multiple descendants, so many, in fact, that they couldn't be counted – as much as the dust on the face of the earth (Gen. 13:16), as the stars in the sky (Gen. 15:5). And as the years went by and they had no child – ten years went by from the first giving of the promise – they (understandably?) began to doubt the promise of God: so they weren't always “perfectly” faithful.

Indeed, they began to take things into their own hands and began to try to manipulate the manner by which God would fulfil the promise. And you might think that God seeing that faithlessness would say, “*Ah, caught you. You are out! You are no longer my primary person!*” But that's not what we find in the story of Abraham and Sarah. God remains gracious to them even in their imperfection, and in time completes his promise – his way!

He says to them “Oh no! But you, the two of you, *are* going to have a child!”

And in time the child comes. His name is Isaac, and from Isaac all of the Jewish people come; indeed, from Isaac comes our Savior Jesus Christ. And through Jesus, by faith, all of us here today, are descendants of Abraham, children of Abraham, owing much to Abraham.

So his family, his family, is quite literally in the millions and billions to this day: descendants of this one who trusted, but not perfectly, at least consistently, in the promise and the faithfulness of God. God was gracious to him, patient with him. And this is the God you and I believe in as well, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ: *A promise making, promise keeping faithful and gracious God.*

Jesus, remember, makes all kinds of promises to us:

- Promises to be with us always even to the end of the age. What a great promise is that. I hope your life is based upon that promise.
- Promises to forgive us our sins. Dies for us not when we're perfect but before we're perfect so that our sins could be forgiven.
- Promises to guide us; promises to be a good shepherd to us, a faithful shepherd; promises to make our lives fruitful and effective just as God did with Abraham. Abide in me.
- And if you do so, says Jesus, he promises that your life and mine will bear much fruit. Our lives will not be in vain, but will be fruitful and effective for God, just as Abraham's life was.
- And God calls us to trust in him just as Abraham did. “Just a little, just a little,” says Jesus. What's the size of faith to begin with? Just the size of a grain of mustard seed. That will do to get you going. That's all I want. Just take that first step and follow me and then keep on going. But one step at a time. Follow me. Stumble a little, get up, keep on going. That's the God of Jesus, that's the God of Abraham as well.

This is what we have seen so far as we've looked over the last three weeks or so at Abraham. This is what Abraham believes about God. But as with Jesus, Abraham doesn't just believe that God is a promising, calling, speaking, directing, gracious and patient God. He does believe that – but he also believes something more: that God is a judge. God isn't just namby-pamby all nice and sweet – the God of grace and patience is also a judge!

In the passage of scripture that we just heard read and verse 25 of Genesis 18 Abraham calls God “The Judge of All the Earth.” It's a title that he gives to God. This is how he knows God. The God in whom he believes is the Judge of All the Earth. The one who calls us, calls us not just to serve him, but “calls us” to account! to give an accounting of our lives before him – every one of us one day. God knows that there is good and bad in this world, good and evil in this world; there are right choices and wrong choices. In the midst of all the gray and the difficulty there are some things which are right and there are some things which are wrong and God calls us to make our choices faithfully knowing his will and seeking his will. What we choose makes a difference to us: makes a difference to others and makes a difference to God.

God is the Judge of All the Earth, but not because he doesn't like us! Rather, the opposite: precisely because he values us enormously. We are not mere puppets on a string. We are not mere inanimate objects (they would not need to be judged). We are not mere animals subject to animal appetites beyond our control. Rather, we are *human beings* made in the image of Jesus Christ, and given possibilities with our lives for which we are accountable. And this is a privilege. It may be scary but it is a privilege. It is because God honors us that he is also our judge.

So today as we come to the second half of Genesis 18 and also to the following chapter, Genesis 19 – two chapters which have to be read together. It's in these passages that we come face to face with this aspect of the God of Abraham: that the God of Abraham, this gracious patient, promise-making, speaking, calling, directing God, is also a judge. So the story before us is the story today of Abraham and the city of Sodom. Abraham and a city called Sodom. . .

Sodom was probably located on the plain down by the Jordan River, the region where Lot, Abraham's nephew, went when their flocks became too large to occupy the same piece of land. Abraham says to his nephew Lot, “Here, you choose where you want to go with all your flocks, with all your herds.” And Lot chooses this marvelous place down in the Jordan valley where he knows that he will prosper; and Abraham gets the leftover land! But Abraham's okay with that (he's gracious, see Genesis 13:8-18). But what we find is that Lot not only moves to another area of “countryside,” taking care of his cattle, but he and his family begin to live in the city. And the city that he moves to is a prosperous place by the name of Sodom. It's not only a prosperous place, but it's an immoral place – and Lot seems to become corrupted by the place to which he moves. Indeed, it almost seems like “*déjà vu*”: Abraham used to live in a prosperous city (Ur of the Chaldees), and God calls him to leave and to travel to what is called the Promised Land. And it's in leaving behind the idolatry of the city that Abraham places himself in a position that God can re-shape. On the other hand, for younger Lot, his action is almost like returning to a similar

city and the former life associated with it. Now, setting up home in this place called Sodom, this place which affects Lot's life even though he is a believer, this new home changes his life, even though this is a place which is about to come under the judgment of God because it is so immoral.

And God, as we heard in our story is going to send two angels who look like men (angels disguise themselves as whatever they want to be) to carry out the judgment. In fact this is the story (Genesis 18:1-8) on which a little phrase which many of you know, that we "need to entertain strangers" because we may be as we're doing that shows hospitality to strangers because we may be entertaining angels unawares (Hebrews 13:2). You never know who is beside you. Turn to your neighbor right now. They may be an angel. Got to be careful! You never know who is near you, protecting you, a messenger of God in one way, shape or form. Well these angels are going to carry out the judgment of Sodom. And I want to read to you a part of chapter 19 before we come back, as we will, to the passage of scripture in which Abraham prays for mercy.

So Genesis Chapter 19 is the story of the angels coming to Sodom and meeting Abraham's nephew Lot. The two angels we read in verse 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. 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." [DR: Like Abraham Lot was a nice guy. He showed hospitality. He cared for people; he cared for these strangers]. They said, "no we will spend the night in the square." But he urged them strongly [DR: maybe because he knew that Sodom was actually a dangerous place for powerless strangers to be]. 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. [DR: So far, so good. But then . . .] 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 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. [DR: Now this is not the "Welcome Wagon" coming to greet these strangers in their city. They don't just want to "know" how they are; how they're doing. When the word "know" is used here, it's used in the Biblical sense of sexual knowledge. They want sexual relationships with these men. They are strangers; they are powerless; and this desire grows into attempted gang rape. Not just sodomy, but an act of gang rape. They are going to take these powerless people and do something awful to them – a mixture of sex and violence: "*Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we may know them.*"]

Lot went out of the door to the men, and shut the door after him. [DR: He was brave, he was nice, he was kind]. Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the

door after him and said, “I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly.” [DR: He wants to protect, protect those who are his guests. And then, then Lot says something which is absolutely outrageous and repugnant. This is what he says. He says] “Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man.” [DR: remember: he’s scared, he’s running scared but he’s still repugnant!] “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.” [DR: Hospitable yes, but caring for his daughters? Well, no! ***In fact what happens to Lot is that he’s descended to the level of the people among whom he is living. If they objectify (treat people as if they weren’t real people made in God’s image) these two strangers who come into their city, treating them as if they’re just objects for their pleasure, then Lot does the same with his daughters!!! Lot objectifies his daughters and wants to use them in this situation in a terrible, terrible way.***] “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. But they replied, “Stand back!” And they said, “This fellow has come here as an alien and he would play the judge? [DR: as if to say, “Nobody’s going to judge us. Nobody’s going to tell us what we do is wrong!”] Now we will deal worse with you than with them [DR: so they ratchet up the emotion of this moment; the gang atmosphere is gaining energy, negative energy, violent energy.] Then they pressed hard against the man Lot and came near the door to break it down. But the men inside [DR: we know that they are angels] reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. [DR: And then the story moves on to its conclusion. Lot and his daughters and his wife are saved. Not all goes well after that but they are saved from this initial judgment and the judgment comes by which the wicked city of Sodom is destroyed].

So what’s going on in this story? What’s going on in Sodom? What’s going on with Lot and with Abraham? And how are we to respond to this strange and in some ways distasteful tale?

Well let’s think about these questions together. So what are we going to make of Sodom? What are we going to make of this particular story?

Well of course, the commonly held view (the “word on the street”!) would say that what went on in Sodom was, of course, “sodomy”: same-sex sex! That’s what was going on in Sodom. But to say that, or to only say that, is to miss some essential parts of the story. The bigger picture, indeed the more important picture, is a picture described for us in part in the 16th Chapter of Ezekiel, a prophet who usually doesn’t mince any words. This is what Ezekiel says about the problem with Sodom, he says: “This was the guilt of your sister Sodom. She and her daughters had pride; no room for God. We can do it ourselves, I did it my way. Pride, excess of food and prosperous ease but did not aid the poor and needy. This is at the top of their list. The fact that

they didn't treat people in need as people. Did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty and did abominable things before me.”

[DR: Note John Calvin's comment in his Genesis Commentary, 18:27, includes this observation from Ezekiel. For Calvin, “Scripture interpreted Scripture.” He writes: Although Moses, in the next chapter Genesis 18:1, explains the most filthy crime which reigned in Sodom, we must nevertheless remember what Ezekiel teaches (16:48-49) that the men of Sodom did not fall at once into such execrable wickedness; but that in the beginning, luxury from the fullness of bread prevailed, and that, afterwards, pride and cruelty followed. At length, when they were given up to a reprobate mind, they were also driven headlong into brutal lusts. Therefore if we dread this extreme of inordinate passion, let us cultivate temperance and frugality; and let us always fear, lest a superfluity of food should impel us to luxury; lest our minds should be infected with pride on account of our wealth, and lest delicacies should tempt us to give the reins to our lusts.

Ezekiel describes the sexual aspect of Sodom's behavior when he refers to “abominable things” (see Leviticus 20:13) – but first of all he understands that something else is going on here that affects and implicates EVERYONE! Indeed, what Ezekiel describes is what we may call a religious and moral spiral down (similar to the apostle Paul's description in chapter one of his letter to the Romans). The spiral begins when God moves out of the picture, when there is no sense of accountability, when God is no longer a judge – then our “autonomous” human actions begin to spiral down. Things begin to happen. People become objects rather than people. And this affects every aspect of our relationships with others and with ourselves: greed, callousness, brutality, violence as well as sexual chaos. In other words, this is a passage not just about sodomy but about social and sexual chaos.

In fact if I were to look at this passage and read it for the first time: -- sure, the gang rape and the violence of the people of Sodom is something which is disgusting, revolting. But perhaps even more so, is how Lot descends to that level as well, and his treatment of women – his treatment of his daughters. The corruption spirals down and it has multiple effects . . . once God the judge is out of the picture. Chaos takes control, and as so often happens when chaos takes control, what we saw then and what we see now, is that it's women, and it's children, and it's the powerless, who pay for it more than anyone else.

If you look at the web site for the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) you'll find this statement:

“sexual violence is a significant problem in the United States. Eight percent of high school students report having been forced to have sex. And an estimated 20% to 25% of college women in the United States have experienced an attempted or actual rape during their college career.”

This is an epidemic in our society today: not just in Sodom, but here, today. And these numbers, the CDC says, are almost certainly underestimating the size of the problem because such incidents are often simply not reported.

So in this cultural drift, this is what happens. People lose sight of God, pride enters in (“I can do it my way, life is my own, I have no ultimate accountability”). But when this happens, when we lose a sense of accountability and self-control, we tend to begin to turn other people into objects or statistics or commodities; a means to an end. Pornography, for example is the objectifying, the commodifying of women in particular, of sex along the way, so that the sense that the people in the pictures are real people, human beings, made in the image of God, gets lost in the shuffle.

Ivan Karamazov says to his brother Alyosha in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, “But tell me what will happen to men if there’s no God and no life beyond the grave? Doesn’t that mean that men will be allowed to do whatever they want? To which brother Alyosha replies, “Didn’t you know that already?” And laughed again. “An intelligent man can do anything he likes as long as he’s clever enough to get away with it. But you, you got caught!”

And so did Sodom. So did Sodom – by God, the God of Abraham who is also the judge, the “Judge of All the Earth,” to whom all of us are accountable.

So this is the message of Genesis Chapter 19. Yet even if this is a correct understanding, we have a problem! *That is, if we read Genesis 19 without Genesis 18 we have a problem.* Let me describe the problem like this.

If on the one hand the world is a moral mess, and cultural chaos ensues when we lose sight of God, and of God’s standards, and of God’s judgment, and of our accountability; if on the one hand this is true – then, on the other hand, if we lift up the fact that God is a judge so that this aspect of God’s character becomes the primary part of our faith and understanding, then we’ve got another kind of a problem altogether.

If you lose the theme of judgment you’ve got a problem; if you lift it so high that it becomes the center of everything then you still have a problem, because when that happens, so often the human beings who emphasize judgment, despite the fact that they too are sinful human beings like Abraham and the people of Sodom, tend to think *not just that God* is the judge, *but that they* are the judge, and the arbiters of the will of God! And they tend to force their judgment, their imperfect judgment, on others with whom they disagree.

Let me remind you of the horrific things that happen when judgment becomes the center, not just an important part, but the center of faith. Look back at Christian history and you see that the worst moments in Christian history have to do with those times when men and women, but mainly men, took judgment upon themselves.

- Think of the days of the sixteenth century Inquisition for example. The Inquisition is not exactly the most glorious moment of Christian faith.

- Or think of the treatment of Jews at times by Christians. This, too, has not been the most glorious moment in Christian faith.
- Or in the treatment of gays – think of Matthew Shepherd and some of the horrendous things that have been done in the name of Jesus Christ.
- These things are not the most glorious moments in Christian faith. But, of course, this extreme judgment issue is not merely a Christian issue.
- Look at the world today among some others who would look back to Abraham as an ancestor. Think of ISIS in the recent weeks that we've been hearing in the news. According to the Washington Post beheading people, amputating people and at times the Washington Post has said crucifying people. All in the name of a God who judges.

This is not a pretty picture at all: when judgment becomes so central, believing in a God who judges like this. **But the truth of the matter is this: that when we read Genesis 19 side-by-side with Genesis 18 the picture I believe comes into a far better balance.** Abraham's god is "The Judge of all the Earth" -- Abraham knows that: he doesn't throw out the baby with the bathwater and reject the fact that God is a judge . . . even though, in a sense, he doesn't quite like it! Or, to put it another way, he cannot stand the thought that God's judgment might be off kilter, and that God would not be fair; his heart, perhaps like yours and mine, is passionate to know that God's judgment will be laced with mercy. And so in Genesis 18, Abraham cries out to God, wrestles with God in prayer: he wants mercy, as the scriptures say (James 2:13) to triumph over judgment. Let me draw you back to the story of Abraham's prayer in Genesis 18 . . .

The two men who later go to Sodom in Genesis 19, approach Abraham, along with a third person (who seems to be God!). And God decides to share with Abraham that he's about to judge Sodom and its twin town of Gomorrah. God is going to enter into judgment, and while Abraham knows how bad these folks are, and almost certainly knows that his nephew, Lot, has been corrupted by that cesspool of sin in Sodom, he does not cry out with glee! He does not say, "Great, you get 'em, God! You nail those sinners, God. You pin them to the ground." He does not do that. Instead he steps back and he takes a risk with God. He decides to take God on – as if to say, "So you're really going to do this? Judge them? But, what happens if there are some in the city who are not worthy of judgment? Will you judge the whole city then?"

"Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you sweep away the whole city and not forgive it, for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing. [DR: He begins to tell God who he wants God to be.] Far be it from you to do such a thing to slay the righteous with the wicked so that they fare as the wicked. Shall not the Judge of all the Earth do what is just?"

And the Lord says this. He says, "If I find that Sodom, fifty righteous in the city I will forgive the whole place. For their sake I will forgive the whole place for their sake if there are just fifty."

And Abraham keeps talking to God and takes him down the numerical list, all the way to “what if there are only ten righteous persons in the city?”

“Oh, do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once; suppose just ten are found there. He answered, “For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.” And the Lord went his way.

There is nothing in Abraham in Genesis 18 which loves this idea of judgment or in which he will take it into his own hands to be the instrument of God to judge. His passion is to make sure that the God he believes in is a God who, if and when he is a judge, (and he is) will be absolutely right and fair and just. There is no passion in him that others be condemned, but that they be saved. “If there are fifty,” says God “I’ll forgive the others because of the fifty.”

It’s important to note that this hesitation of Abraham is very close to the teaching of Jesus on judgment in the gospels. In particular, Jesus’ teaching in the gospel story that we call the Wheat and the Weeds comes to mind. In this story, Jesus speaks about a man who has a farm and he sows good wheat seed in his field, but at night an enemy comes and sows bad seed, weeds, in the middle of the wheat (and the weeds and the wheat all look the same) and the servants begin to see that the field is no longer pure. It’s no longer as the owner wants it to be. And the servants come to the owner and say “Can we go in there and rip up those weeds which are destroying the field?” As if to say, the culture is all wrong. It’s messed up. Let’s sort it out in your name! And the owner says “No! No! Judgment *is* coming. Oh yes it is coming. But right now you may do more harm than good if you are overzealous and overrighteous. Just take your time. God will sort it out in the end. You just take your time.”

That’s the thrust of Jesus’ teaching in this Matthew 13 story: There’s going to be a judgment but I don’t want people on my team who are itching for it to come, despite all the cultural chaos and moral confusion.

So here’s the story of Abraham as it continues in Chapters 18 and 19. To Abraham, God is a judge! God is not just “*a speaking, calling, directing, promise making, patient and gracious God*” – though he is, but God is also a judge, who judges not because we’re evil but because we’re made in God’s image and he calls us to account because he thinks we’re precious and our choices matter. This is Abraham’s God.

But Abraham knows his own weakness and his own sin and he’s not eager for that judgment to come on him or on others. Yet he knows he’s accountable to God, and that he must follow God’s path whether others take it or not, and so he keeps a little distance between himself and Sodom.

When they need help, by the way, he’s not so “self-righteous” or “holier-than-thous” that he’s un-willing to come to their aid. Indeed, he does precisely that for them and for his nephew, Lot (Genesis 14); but he keeps himself away from Sodom in the same sense that he moved out of Ur (Genesis 11), so that as John’s

gospel implies, “he can be in the world but not of the world” (John 17). The world he truly has a sense of belonging to is God’s world – the Kingdom of God.

Abraham is in the world but not of the world, so that he would not be corrupted by the kind of corruption that corrupted Lot – this nice guy who believed in God, but who, living in a society where there was no accountability, became a part of the culture in which he was living, and did some awful things along the way. Yet even with Sodom and Lot, Abraham’s plea was that God’s judgment would be rich in mercy and that God would only do what was right.

So Abraham cries out: “Shall not the God who is the judge of all the Earth do right?” For Abraham, God, the judge, could and would do nothing less!

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