

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost; August 14, 2022

Genesis 18:20-32

“First Pray Like Abraham”

So the LORD said, “Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very flagrant, I will go down now and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has come to me. If not, I will know.”

The two men turned from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD. Abraham approached him and said, “Will you really sweep away the righteous along with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep them away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people who are in it? You would never do such a thing, killing the righteous along with the wicked, treating the righteous the same as the wicked. You would never do such a thing. The Judge of all the earth should do right, shouldn’t he?”

The LORD said, “If I find fifty righteous people within the city of Sodom, then I will spare the entire place for their sake.”

Abraham answered, “See now, I who am but dust and ashes have taken it on myself to speak to my LORD. What if there are five fewer than fifty righteous? Will you destroy the entire city if the number is five short?”

He said, “I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.”

He spoke to him yet again and said, “What if only forty are found there?”

He said, “I will not do it for the sake of forty.”

He said, “Please, do not be angry, my Lord, but I will speak again. What if thirty are found there?”

He said, “I will not do it if I find thirty there.”

He said, “See now, I have taken it upon myself to speak to my Lord. What if there are twenty found there?”

He said, “I will not destroy it for the sake of twenty.”

He said, “Please do not be angry, my Lord, but I will speak just once more. What if ten are found there?”

He said, “I will not destroy it for the sake of the ten.”

As soon as he had finished speaking with Abraham, the LORD went on his way, and Abraham returned to his place.

She can see it plainly. Every week, every month, there is more going out of her accounts than there is coming in. The price of everything is rising. She got a raise, but it’s not enough to cover the difference. At this rate, the diapers alone could break her. Clearly, something major needs to change. What should she do now? Should she take a look at her credit card statements and decide to cancel some subscriptions? Should she search for a second job, and hope it will bridge the gap? Maybe she should do one – or both – or those things. But not first.

He has just been told that, despite all the treatments, Stage 3 has progressed to Stage 4. Now he has six months, optimistically. What should he do first? Should he pursue even more aggressive treatments, to try to turn this around? Maybe. But not first. Should he just accept it and put his house in order and enjoy as much as possible the time he has left in this world? Maybe. But not first.

Once again, she is sitting by herself in the back pew. She spent Saturday night, again, calling around to her kids and grandkids asking them, again, to join her on Sunday morning in worship. And, again, she is sitting alone. What should she do now? Should she call again next week? If she does, what approach should she take? Should she scold (“You were raised better than this!”) or gently encourage (“Jesus loves you; please come and hear it with me.”)? Well, before she does anything else, there is something she needs to do first.

Abraham has just heard the Lord say, **“Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very flagrant, I will go down now and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has come to me. If not, I will know.”** Of course, the Lord knows everything. He speaks this way for Abraham’s benefit, to inform Abraham that the Lord is on the verge of doing something major to Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham: something bad is about to happen to those cities.

But Abraham has a nephew whom he loves living in Sodom. This nephew, Lot, has his faults. But Uncle Abraham loves Lot and his family. So the impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is bad news for Abraham.

What should Abraham do first? He has a number of options. He could panic. He could resign himself to this news and say, “Well, Lot made his bed.” Besides panic and resignation, Abraham could decide first to sweep into action. He is very rich; he commands his own miniature army, enough soldiers to storm into Sodom and carry Lot and his family out before the brimstone rains down. There are a lot of things Abraham could do at this moment.

First he prays to the Lord. In a moment, we’ll look at what he prays and how he prays. But noticing that he does pray first, before he does anything else, we should ask: Why does he pray first? Before he does anything else, first Abraham prays because the Lord has come to visit him.

And this wasn’t the first time. Many years earlier, the Lord visited Abraham and promised him things. He visited and told Abraham that he his wife Sarah would one day have an heir, and more descendants than Abraham could count. He promised this even though Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and had no children so far. He also promised Abraham that all the peoples in the world would be blessed through him and his descendants.

That first visit was many years ago. Now, on this day, the Lord visits Abraham again. He comes to renew his promises to Abraham. He visits to assure him that, although he has seen no progress yet on these promises, they will happen. **One of the men said, “I will certainly return to you when this season comes around next year. Then your wife Sarah will have a son.” Sarah was listening to this from the tent door, which was behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well into old age. Sarah was past the age for childbearing. Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I am worn out, will have pleasure, since my lord is also old?” The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really give birth to a child though I am old?’ Is anything impossible for the LORD? At the set time next year I will return to you, and Sarah will have a son.”**

The Lord visits to renew his promise: Abraham and Sarah will have a son, a son who will grow into a great nation, a nation that will be a blessing to the whole world. Not only does the Lord visit Abraham, he visits in the flesh. He comes to Abraham as a man. (The fancy word for this is “theophany.”) The Lord appears to Abraham in the flesh, looks him in the eye and says, “My promises are true. No matter how things look, my promises are sure. You will have a son, who will be a great nation. You will be a blessing to every human.”

And that’s when the topic turns to Sodom and Gomorrah. That’s when the visiting Lord reveals that his wrath is about to rain down on those wicked cities. And that’s when Abraham prays. Before anything else, first he prays. If the Lord loves him and cares about him enough to visit and make promises in the flesh, then certainly he will care enough to listen to Abraham’s prayer. And certainly that prayer will be more powerful than any worry Abraham can worry, or any panic Abraham can panic, or any force Abraham can force. First, he will pray to the Lord who loves enough to visit in the flesh and deliver on his promises.

What should she do first as she looks at her financial situation? What should he do first as he walks out of his doctor’s office? How about as she gets up and walks out of church alone, again? What they should do eventually may be a matter of judgment. But what they should do first is not up for debate. Not get angry. Not get bitter. Not panic, or fire straight into action. First they should follow Abraham and pray.

They should pray first, because God has also proved his love to them by visiting them in the flesh. God visited Abraham and made a promise that all peoples in the world would be blessed through his line. Then God came back again, in the flesh, to renew the promise. To keep that promise of blessing the whole world, God came and visited us in the flesh, too. On Christmas night in Bethlehem, the almighty God came as a squiggly little baby boy, visiting us in the flesh to bless us for eternity.

He came in the flesh to keep God’s promise to bless the whole world. He visited us and saved us for eternity. He came and prayed perfectly in the place of those who too often panic, or complain, or just sweep straight into action (because God helps those who help themselves!) instead of praying. He prayed perfectly on mountaintops and in the Garden, alone and with crowds. Prayer was his first instinct always. He prayed perfectly in our place, and did everything else perfectly for us, too.

God visited us in the flesh to keep the promise he made to Abraham. In order to keep it, his holy body was pierced by nails, to bleed and die as the sacrifice for our sins. Because he kept that promise, his dead body rose on Easter morning and ascended back to heaven.

Why should all Christians pray first, like Abraham? Because God has visited his people in love, to keep his promises, to save them from their sins. And, as he did for Abraham, God returns to us in the flesh to renew his promise. Every time you come to Jesus’ Supper, he comes back to you again and again, giving you his body and blood, promising you again and again, “This is my body; this is my blood; for the forgiveness of your sins.”

God’s love for Abraham was so great that he came and made promises. Then he came back in flesh to repeat them. So when the time came that Abraham needed help, he prayed first – to the God who comes to his people in person to bless them. God loves us and has visited us in the flesh to keep the promise he made to Abraham, to save us from our sins. And now he returns in the flesh to repeat and refresh the promise. So when the time comes that we need help, we pray first, like Abraham.

Besides praying first, Abraham shows how to pray. First, Abraham prays in the confidence of faith. **...Abraham remained standing before the LORD. Abraham approached him and said...** By this point in the story, Abraham clearly understands that the man who has come to visit him and renew his promises is the Lord himself. Abraham is only a man. And yet he has the confidence to stand in front of God, to approach the almighty Lord. Where does this confidence come from? Abraham believes the Lord's promises. He knows the Lord is his friend.

We know this, too. Jesus has come to visit us, and makes us God's friend by removing our sins. When Jesus returns to us in the sacrament, he grows our confidence in this truth. So approach God with confidence that he wants you to speak to him, because in Jesus you are his friend – even more than a friend, you are his dear child.

Abraham is, in fact, more than confident; he is bold when he prays. Listen to how he pleads for the Lord to spare his nephew Lot: **“Will you really sweep away the righteous along with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep them away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous who are in it? You would never do such a thing, killing the righteous along with the wicked, treating the righteous the same as the wicked. You would never do such a thing. The Judge of the all the earth should do right, shouldn't he?”** That is right on the border of what my grandma would have called “sass.” But it's not. It's bold praying! Abraham knows what the Lord has revealed about himself, and he is bold to hold the Lord to who he is and what he has promised to do.

First pray, and do it with confidence and boldness. The Lord has told you things about himself. He's promised you things. When you pray, you have the confidence of knowing the Lord will listen, but you can also be bold to hold him to what he's told you about himself and what he's promised you. He has promised to work all things for your eternal good. He has promised to provide what you need to live in this world. He has told you that he is gracious and merciful. Remind him of these facts when you pray to him. Be bold. Hold him to who he is and what he promises.

Now, you do have to be careful. If you're going to hold God to a promise, you better be sure it's something he has actually promised to give you, such as a stronger faith through Word and sacrament, heaven through faith in Christ, or to listen and answer your prayer. And if you're going to remind God of something he is, you better make he's told you that about himself in his Word.

But, if it's something he has promised you, be bold to hold him to it. And if it's something he has told you about himself, hold him to be true to himself. That's bold praying, like Abraham.

First Abraham prays. Confidently and boldly. But also humbly. **Abraham answered, “See now, I who am but dust and ashes have taken it on myself to speak to my Lord.”** So in one breath Abraham is bold, and in the next he acknowledges that, by his own merit, he has no right at all to speak to the Lord. This is God-pleasing prayer: walking the tightrope of praying confidently and boldly through faith in Christ, and the humility of knowing that God's love in Christ is the only reason you get to speak to him at all. Like Abraham, keep it at ninety degrees. In Christ I am confident and bold. Not in myself. In myself there is humility.

First Abraham prays. He prays with confidence in the Lord, boldness in who the Lord is and what he's promised. He also prays with humility. Finally, he prays without giving up. He starts by dropping the bar of righteous people by five. Then he starts dropping faster, by ten. It's almost as if Abraham feels he should move the proceedings along a bit. But notice: the Lord never expresses any irritation or impatience

with Abraham as Abraham continues to nudge the necessary number of the righteous in Sodom and Gomorrah down and down. The Lord never interrupts or tells Abraham to cut to the chase. Why not? When he visited us in the flesh, God's Son said, **"I tell you, keep asking, and it will be given to you. Keep seeking, and you will find. Keep knocking, and it will be opened to you."** The Lord encourages, and rewards, persistence in prayer. He does tell us not to babble with mindless repetition. But you can hardly accuse Abraham of that. Nor could you accuse any Christian who has to keep asking, keep seeking, and keep knocking. God does reward the hardy faith that keeps at it in prayer. **"It will be given to you...you will find...it will be opened to you."**

Abraham prayed to the Lord of promises, the Lord who loved him enough to visit in the flesh with the promise. He kept his most important promise to Abraham when he visited us in the flesh to save us. And he still visits us to renew our faith in his promise. So, like Abraham, first pray to the Lord. And do it as Abraham does: confident that the Lord will listen, bold in your requests, humble in yourself, without giving up. Amen.