

Genesis 19:1-16

That evening the two angels came to the entrance of the city of Sodom, and Lot was sitting there as they arrived. When he saw them he stood up to meet them, and welcomed them.

² “Sirs,” he said, “come to my home as my guests for the night; you can get up as early as you like and be on your way again.”

“Oh, no thanks,” they said, “we’ll just stretch out here along the street.”

³ But he was very urgent, until at last they went home with him, and he set a great feast before them, complete with freshly baked unleavened bread. After the meal, ⁴ as they were preparing to retire for the night, the men of the city—yes, Sodomites, young and old from all over the city—surrounded the house ⁵ and shouted to Lot, “Bring out those men to us so we can rape them.”

⁶ Lot stepped outside to talk to them, shutting the door behind him. ⁷ “Please, fellows,” he begged, “don’t do such a wicked thing. ⁸ Look—I have two virgin daughters, and I’ll surrender them to you to do with as you wish. But leave these men alone, for they are under my protection.”

⁹ “Stand back,” they yelled. “Who do you think you are? We let this fellow settle among us and now he tries to tell us what to do! We’ll deal with you far worse than with those other men.” And they lunged at Lot and began breaking down the door.

¹⁰ But the two men reached out and pulled Lot in and bolted the door ¹¹ and temporarily blinded the men of Sodom so that they couldn’t find the door.

¹² “What relatives do you have here in the city?” the men asked. “Get them out of this place—sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone else. ¹³ For we will destroy the city completely. The stench of the place has reached to heaven and God has sent us to destroy it.”

¹⁴ So Lot rushed out to tell his daughters’ fiancés, “Quick, get out of the city, for the Lord is going to destroy it.” But the young men looked at him as though he had lost his senses.

¹⁵ At dawn the next morning the angels became urgent. “Hurry,” they said to Lot, “take your wife and your two daughters who are here and get out while you can, or you will be caught in the destruction of the city.”

¹⁶ When Lot still hesitated, the angels seized his hand and the hands of his wife and two daughters and rushed them to safety, outside the city, for the Lord was merciful.

Matthew 5:13-20

¹³ ‘You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

¹⁴ ‘You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

¹⁷ ‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called

least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

One point: Jesus is a continuation of the God of the Old Testament: obey the Laws!

But what matters most is the Spirit of the Law.

You are salt and you are light.

You need to carry that kingdom of God into this world, even if the salt stings, even if the light exposes something that the world would rather ignore.

Do you not know that the Lord God of Israel gave the kingship over Israel for ever to David and his sons by a covenant of salt? 2 Chronicles 13:5

“Are You Funny Too?”

I think a lot of us have been reflective this week about our ancestors and their journey to this country. Such reflection has been brought on by the recent 90 day travel ban that our President has imposed upon people of 7 predominantly Muslim nations – for people from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen – as well as a 120 day suspension of refugees being admitted from six of these countries and an indefinite moratorium on refugees from Syria, unless of course you belong to a minority religion in any of these countries – in other words you are not Muslim. Why? I suppose it’s because there have been a series of terrorist attacks across the world organized by radical religious groups of various names all claiming to represent Islam, and many Americans feel in danger of such terrorists slipping through the cracks and wreaking havoc in our nation. Yes, there have been several horrible attacks, terrorist or otherwise, committed by Muslims in this country and others, some in the name of their religion, some not.

I’m not here to argue statistics; I’m here to proclaim the word of God, who is not driven by statistics, and doesn’t call us to be driven by statistics; he calls us to be driven by faith. There’s nothing wrong with taking precautions; we make sure that our children don’t go outside to play in the snow dressed in short, and tee shirt, and flip flops. We don’t drive down Richmond Ave. at 80 miles an hour for the fun of it, especially when we have children in car, because we could kill ourselves and others. Those are sensible precautions. And vetting those who wish to enter our country to determine that they are currently not a threat to the public safety is also a good policy. It’s a policy that has been in effect since we’ve been a nation. There is nothing “Un-Christian” about these measures. But exclusion based on religion or place of origin is both un-American and un-Christian. There, I’ve said it.

Some of you may be bristling inside, but I ask you to hear me out and let scripture and the Holy Spirit speak to you. I added the Old Testament passage at the last minute because it emphasizes how seriously God emphasizes hospitality. Sodom and Gomorrah have come to be synonymous with human depravity; these were cities that God destroyed by raining down sulfur and fire upon them. What was the great depravity that led to their destruction? It’s hard to say how the depravity started, but what it ultimately became was a LACK OF HOSPITALITY. In the chapter preceding our Old Testament lesson, the Lord and two angels visit Abraham (the

Hebrew word for *angel* being מַלְאָךְ - mǎl'âk - which simply means “messenger from God”). Abraham had invited them into his home and prepared for them a great meal. The Lord reaffirms his promise to Abraham, saying that through him all nations would be blessed, because Abraham kept “the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice.” Then these messengers shared their message with Abraham that they were coming to destroy the city of Sodom. Abraham, knowing that his nephew Lot was living in Sodom, bargains with the messengers and a deal is struck; if they can find ten righteous men in Sodom, God will spare the city. Our reading begins with two angels coming to visit Lot (it’s assumed that the third “man” who had visited with Abraham was indeed God himself, and that God himself had not gone to Sodom and was thus spared the indignity that was to come. Lot didn’t know these men from a hole in the ground. He invites them into his home, and when they say to him, “No, that’s alright; we’ll find a place to sleep out here in the streets,” Lot insists that they stay in his home, and he prepares a lavish meal for them as well.

Then the men of the city show up and demand that Lot send the strangers out so they can rape them. Now I know it’s hardly to Lot’s credit that he offers up his virgin daughters instead of these two strangers, but you have to remember that women were pretty much treated as chattel back then, and that Lot is basically trying to protect these messengers from the men of Sodom.

A couple things to take note of: Lot welcomed these two men, and it doesn’t say that he knew that they were angels or even messengers of God. This was just the way Lot had been raised, to *welcome strangers*, even inviting them into his own home to share a meal and spend the night. Contrast that to the men of Sodom who want to abuse his friends. You could say that Lot practiced radical hospitality while the men of Sodom practiced radical inhospitality. Hear what they said to Lot:

“Who do you think you are? We let this fellow settle among us and now he tries to tell us what to do! We’ll deal with you far worse than with those other men.”

Do you hear that? Lot, himself, seems to be a stranger to the men of Sodom. They consider him to be “alien,” and though Lot is a man of God they plan to do worse to him than they do to the strangers who Lot welcomes. The men of Sodom are guilty of the sin of inhospitality, and because of the “**stench**” of their sin, and the fact that fewer than 10 righteous men could be found there, the whole city will be destroyed.

This story of the “angels” emphasize how important true hospitality is, and what hospitality looks like. Hospitality toward the stranger is the very expression of love that we are called to live. In our Gospel lesson Jesus calls us “the salt of the earth.” There are many ways to interpret this, but think of Jesus’ followers as people who are sprinkled all over the world, among every population, and we are to be a “seasoning” that both flavors the world in a good way and preserves justice and righteousness the way Abraham did. There is no better way to exercise God’s love than to welcome the stranger. When the Roman emperor Julian ordered the establishment of hostels for transients in every city, he referred to the example of the Jews “in

whose midst no stranger goes uncared for.” Even in the worst of times, every Jewish community had a society to provide food and lodging for any traveler, without discrimination. And the Jews themselves were “strangers” in the places they inhabited.

Christians have emulated such an example. This, I believe, is part of what Jesus meant when he calls us “the salt of the earth.”

And we are a light that shines in darkness. I can’t help but reference Lady Liberty and that torch that has remained lit for over 128 years. It represents shelter and hospitality, the kind that Lot showed to God’s messengers.

I don’t think that America has become a Sodom or Gomorrah yet. We have, I suppose, more than ten just and righteous individuals living in our midst, but we have forgotten our Christian calling to welcome the stranger.