

**“THE DANGER OF LOOKING BACK”**

**Text: "The angels said, 'Flee for your life, do not look back, nor stop anywhere in the Valley, lest you be consumed!'... But Lot's wife, who was behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt."**

**Genesis 19:26**

**Rev. Richard M. Cromie, Ph.D., D.D.  
Sharon Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina  
June 1, 2008**

**Today, I want to tell you to a once-upon-a-time familiar Old Testament story; then ask what it originally meant in Genesis; then finally add a little sermon about what it might mean to you and me, and the life we share together at Sharon Presbyterian Church.**

**The story in Genesis 19 is about a man named Lot, L-O-T, one of the early figures of our Judeo-Christian heritage. He is often overlooked, mainly because he comes onto the Biblical stage as a footnote to the story of Abraham. But then Abraham, after all, was the founder of the Jewish Nation. Lot was his nephew. Terah, Abraham's father, had two other sons: Nahor, and Haran. They lived with their mother and sisters down in the Tigris-Euphrates Valley, in a prosperous city then called Ur of the Chaldees, now known the City of Baghdad in Iraq.**

**Around 1900 B.C. or so (BCE, if you prefer), Terah decided to leave Ur. It does not say why. He took his son Abraham, Sarah and his grandson Lot with him to look for a new life, I guess. It says they were heading for the Land of Canaan, but when they got to Haran, a hundred miles away, at the northernmost part of Israel, near what is now southwest Turkey, where the Kurdish population live, Terah settled there.**

**The Bible does not say, but I do not think it was a coincidence that Terah chose Haran. That was the name as his youngest son, which in Hebrew means peace or sanctuary. (Actually in Hebrew the town is spelled with a double “r”.) Terah’s son Haran had died in Ur, leaving behind one son, Lot, and two daughters. It is difficult to lose a son, especially one so young.**

**The death of a child, as you know, can have far-reaching consequences for a family. I think that after Haran died, Terah felt he had to do something, or go crazy. Moving far away was a radical response, but it fits. I have seen far stranger things at such a time. As**

a good uncle should, Abraham had adopted his deceased brother's son, and he treated Lot as his own. It doesn't say what happened to Haran's daughters. Working with his Uncle Abraham Lot also became rich in land and cattle and gold and silver. But then nothing lasts forever. The day came when their herdsmen started to quarrel with each other about who should have the best grazing fields for the sheep and cattle. Genesis hints that the day had come, as it often does, when it was time for the son, or nephew in this case, to go off on his own.

Abraham took the young man aside, and said: "Lot, I loved your dad. You are his son. I love you as mine own. (Abraham and Sarah did not yet have a child.) It is not good that we should quarrel. This whole land is mine. I will give you half of it. Choose whatever you want, up to half of it." Lot looked around. He saw that the River Valley was lush and well watered. The mountains and the hills were as yet unknown. He chose the Valley, the easier choice. That was where the growing cities were, and the action. Abraham took the rolling hill country, up to the Oaks of Mamre, near present day Damascus, in Syria. And, being bright and energetic and blessed by God, Abraham became more prosperous still.

Lot, meanwhile, "pitched his tent toward Sodom." The Bible adds ominously, "The men of Sodom were wicked and great sinners against the Lord." (So were the women, just for equality's sake.) Abraham meanwhile, up at Hebron, built an altar to the Lord, where he and his family worshipped Yahweh in the secluded grandeur of the uplands. The author of Genesis knew what was going on. I mean, it's the choices we make or do not make that make or break us.

Lot had barely settled in Sodom long enough to marry a lovely local girl, whose name unaccountably we are never given, when the King of Sodom waged a foolish war against neighboring kingdoms. He lost, miserably. Poor Lot, he had made his choice, now he was robbed of his wealth and carted off as a slave.

Meanwhile, back at the farm, Uncle Abraham learned of Lot's lot. Naturally he went to rescue him. His warriors routed the enemy and Lot was back in the saddle. The King of Sodom offered Abraham gold and silver, but, Abraham refused, saying, "I have everything I need." What a lovely expression: borrow it for yourself: "I have everything I need." I hope you do. A new translation of Psalm 23 reads: "The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need." Amen.

Abraham returned home. Not long after two angels, disguised in everyday clothing came to tell him that the Lord God was thinking of destroying all of Sodom for its wickedness. Abraham was aghast! He could not imagine that God could be so merciless, and anyway that was where Lot lived. Abraham asked, "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do what is right?" I.e., was it fair for God to annihilate the entire city because of some un-named evils and sin. What about the innocent people?

A negotiation followed: Abraham said: "If I can find 50 righteous people there, will you spare the city?" God said: "Go and find them, and if you do I will change my mind." He couldn't find them. So he bargained it down to 45, then 30 and on down to ten." The Lord renewed his promise that he would relent if he could find just ten righteous men. He never found them.

The point here is not whether he found the righteous men; it is that Abraham, the Chosen one, felt free this early in the Scripture to challenge God. This was the day when God was still seemed to be a vengeful tyrant. It is a first initial step in the Bible's long journey to try to understand the presence of evil and suffering in the world. Later the Psalmists wondered; the prophets argued over injustice with God; the Kings were puzzled, as are we.

Well with that, the angels proceeded on down to Sodom with Abraham in tow and said, "Because the outcry from Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, the Lord will destroy those two cities." When they arrived (Abraham had returned to his home) Lot happened to be sitting at the fortified Tower at the entrance gates. When Lot saw the strangers (He did yet not know that they were angels.), following the required ancient regimen for hospitality, he befriended them. The city streets were dangerous then, as now, so he asked them to come home with him to find food and safe lodging. They first objected, but finally agreed to go.

While there, a most frightening thing happened: "All the men of Sodom came to Lot's house" (All!). They banged on the door, screaming, "Where are those two strangers you brought here? Bring them out that we may know them!" "Know" is a specific word in the Old Testament. Sodom did not get its name for nothing. Sexual aberrations were in vogue back then, too. Baal after all was a fertility god who practiced what he preached!

Well, Lot refused to turn over his guests, which obviously angered the men of Sodom, and no doubt empowered by demon's rum, they shouted louder for the strangers. Then one of the angels already inside quietly opened the door, took Lot by the hand, and pulled him back inside. As punishment, all the men of Sodom were struck blind in a flash of lightning. "And they grew weary groping for the door of Lot's house." (Genesis 19:11)

God could bear it no longer. It was not the first time in the Bible, nor the last, when the Lord God ran out of patience. "It grieved him to his heart." But, there is always a remnant. As was true earlier with Noah, God had decided to spare Lot. Notice that it does not say why in this case. It says that Noah was "Righteous". It does not say that here with Lot. II Peter 2:7 adds much later that "Lot was righteous", but Genesis 19 does not say it that way.

**It turns out that the reason Lot was spared was because Abraham was his uncle, who was interceding with the Lord and praying for his nephew all the while. The Bible says that God remembered Abraham, as it had previously said of Job, sitting on his ash heap outside the city. Here is the first evidence that one man can intercede with God to save others in his world, a familiar theme of course with us. God remembered Abraham.**

**Wherever you are at the moment or where you have been and where you might be someday, tuck away in your heart those comforting and enduring words: “God remembers you.” He does and he will. Moses reassured his people in the wilderness: “God will not fail you or forsake you.” (Deuteronomy 31:6). If you ever get lost, or are afraid, or don’t know what to do, or when you run out of chances and choices - just whisper a little prayer in your soul: “ Dear God, please remember me”; you are not alone.”**

**\*\*\*\*\***

**Well, back to the story: Lot finally realized the warning was true. He went and told his sons-in-law-to-be to run for their lives. They thought old Lot was crazy, not unlike many sons and daughters-in-law who might think that today. "You’re telling us that God is going to rain fire and brimstone down and destroy our town?" The boys snickered? “How do you know?” "Two angels told me." It says, they laughed out loud at him. Lot, likely still unsure himself, continued to delay all though the night. After all, he lived in a palatial mansion. He was rich and respected. How on earth could God be unhappy with him?**

**So, early the next morning the angels frantically woke him up. “We were not kidding,” they said. "Flee now!" Lot dilly-dallied some more. So the angels seized him and rushed Lot, his wife, and their two daughters outside the city, leaving the snickering sons-in-law-to-be behind. There they clearly warned them: "Flee for your life. Do not look back or**

stop anywhere in the valley, or you will be consumed.” . . . “Do not look back!” Lot escaped over to the neighboring town of Zoar. The Grace of God granted him that favor. Within minutes, fire and brimstone rained down upon the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. And “Poof!”. they were gone.

The Bible then says that Lot's wife was running along behind him, which might tell you something about Lot in itself. And she did the unthinkable: she disobeyed. Even though she knew the warning, as Eve also did in the Garden of Eden, she looked back, at Sodom, in flames. And presto, in that second, she was gone forever, turned to stone.

It seems harsh. After all, she was a mother and a daughter. She had friends down there. Sodom was the city of her birth. Her parents were there, along with her sons-in-law-to-be. She turned around to look at Sodom, perhaps just to say good-bye with a tear in her eye, and in that instant, the Bible says, “Her life was over; she was turned into a pillar of salt”, a standing frozen rigid human form, with all life removed.

\*\*\*\*\*

Now, let me pose a question: Do you believe it actually happened that way? All the poor woman did was take a little peek back over her shoulder, as you or I would surely do if we were leaving our childhood home forever. Far be it from me to question the Will of Almighty God, but it sure seems to be "cruel and unusual punishment to me." I want to stand up with Abraham and ask: “Why Lord? Why would you do that to Lot's wife? Why would you turn her into a pillar of salt, just because she turned around and looked back at her homeland?”

I suppose it could have happened that way. If you take the Bible as entirely literal, that is fine. But let me suggest a couple of other possibilities, which serious Christian scholars

have long postulated. If you are a believer, there can be no doubt that God had the power to do it. The question is "Why?" And, what does it mean?

Most Biblical scholars take for granted that the story is an independent saga, a fable from a near-by culture which was dropped into the collection of the early Genesis stories. That sometimes happened. It might sound sacrilegious but some of the early Biblical stories appear in the traditions of other cultures and religions. Other folk parables of the day found their way into the Old Testament.

There are plentiful other incidents in ancient near-Eastern lore where people were turned into salt, or stone. It is also a fairly common motif in ancient mythologies. Rain, wind and erosion have resulted in bizarre rock formations with most peculiar shapes. In one particular one the standing residue resembles the shape of a woman. Josephus, the first century historian, wrote that he had observed it too. He wrote: "Lot's Wife looked back, and she was turned into a pillar of salt. I have seen it with my own eyes, Josephus writes, and it remains to this day." (The Antiquities, 1-11-4). I have seen it too, down in the Death Valley of Israel at the southern end of the Dead Sea. Or at least that is what our guide told me I was seeing.

The story of Lot's wife could have arisen as an explanation of these strange salt formations. Whatever, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is portrayed in Genesis as an historical event. At one time the valley was green and verdant. Now it isn't. The Dead Sea area is rich in deposits of asphalt and sulphur. Unexplained fires are plentiful. Who knows: it depends on what you think about how the Bible came to be.

The story as told is a puzzlement, almost too sad to be absorbed, much like the volcanic destruction of Pompeii, some time later.

But, thankfully the narrator of Genesis ends the story with a beautiful touch: The scene

shifts back to Abraham, up on the mountaintop. It says, "Abraham looked down on Sodom and Gomorrah, and behold the smoke of the land went up like a furnace. But (listen), it reads, again: "God remembered Abraham, and sent his nephew Lot out of the midst of the fire." . . . And Lot soon went up out of Zoar, with his two daughters, into the hills. . . ." Lot learned his lesson, not for good, but he learned it that day. And, save the occasional references in later Scripture all the way to Luke 17 and II Peter 2, we never hear from Lot again

That's the story, now for a little sermon and we will go, in three parts:

First, be careful of the land and life you choose to occupy. Abraham gave Lot his choice. God always gives you and me our choice, each day, each season, each decade of our lives: "Where will you dwell in body, mind, and spirit?" Your choice! I am speaking mainly to the young, but also to the middle-aged, and to those of us on up in years. You need to choose what you want to be, and who you are going to be with. How your life will go is up to you. Sure there are variables, over some of which you have no control, but the compromises you decide to make, and where you spend your time is a conscious decision. It's your choice. But, once you make it, you must take the consequences. "We shape our dwellings," Churchill once wrote, "and afterwards, our dwellings shape us."

Henry Ward Beecher, the great preacher of a century ago, was talking one day to a young man in his study. The boy was telling the pastor what a mess he had made of his life, as one thing led to another. You have heard it before. Finally, seeking to justify himself, he said to Dr. Beecher: "Sir, what would you have done if you had been in my place that night?" Beecher said: "I would never have been in your place that night." An ounce of prevention is still worth a pound of cure.

What it means that if you court trouble, trouble you will find. Play with fire, and you will

get burned. Make your bed and you have to sleep in it. "Whatever you sow," the Bible says, "that you will also reap." "Choose the land you will occupy. Come with Abraham and Jesus Christ up to the hill country and live with a purpose, or go down to the city of Sodom and live with what's left!" Compromise and cut corners, or stay straight and steady. Seek the weak and tawdry treasures of the now, or fasten your life to all that endures. That's first.

\*\*\*\*\*

Second: This is tender, be careful what you say or do to those you meet along the way. Lot was sitting at the gate when the two visitors came into the city. They were angels, but they did not look like angels. "Be careful," it warns in Hebrews, "for you may entertain angels unawares." I have entertained quite a few in my life and in the days and decades of my ministry who have blessed me mightily. It usually did not start out looking that way. They were often critical of me. They complained about the church. They disagreed with my theology and philosophy. Mostly I would never have guessed how it would work out. The Lord does not alert you when an angel comes on the scene. God sends his guardian messengers to support and help and nudge you on, but they travel incognito, they do not wear nametags. Sometimes they come to test you. But they are there to take care of you.

The least of the brethren, those with special needs can be angels in disguise. The homeless and the hungry and the exiled can touch your life with grace. David Beers here at Sharon told me a few weeks ago about the homeless man who was being helped by our Committee, heard that we were having financial problems, and the penniless man immediately tithed ten per cent of his meager little income so he could help us. David was overcome. So was I. Praise the Lord!

The two angels in Genesis 19 came dressed in ordinary desert robes. They had no wings, no clerical collars, and no stoles around their necks – no nametags either. The angels God sends into your life might come in ordinary street clothes. You might not realize it by

what they say. They could challenge you and be critical of you; they might even hurt your feelings. But, they could be heavenly visitors all the more. The wonderful thing about the men Lot was trying to protect and save, ended up protecting and saving him. Just like God to do it that way. There are angels everywhere. Be careful, you might meet them unawares.

\*\*\*\*\*

Third and final, in Luke 17:32: as he was speaking to his followers about the second coming, warning them to be ready on the spur of a moment, for it will come as the Fire came suddenly on Sodom, Jesus added: "Remember Lot's wife." What he meant was that we have to remember how fragile life is and how suddenly it can end. Lot's wife was reluctant to leave Sodom. She looked back for a number of reasons. But more than that, she represents those who are fascinated by and wedded to the way things used to be, who refuse to let go, and who are sure and certain that their way is the right and only way. It is not enough to say that you believe in change. I told you once of the lady who told me years ago that she was in favor of progress, but she added: "It's all these changes I can't stand!"

We need to make the break. Lloyd George once warned that "You cannot cross a chasm in two jumps; you will fall in every time." If you insist on holding on to the way you always did it, it will go round and round in circles. I heard someone say at Sharon just the other day, "You cannot continue to do the same things in the same way and expect to get different results." Someone has to be brave enough in a home, in a community, or in a church, to say "It is time we trusted the Lord and moved on to the future and live in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, not in the days of yore.

The story of Lot's wife looking back at Sodom is a symbol of what God's children are

inclined to do; and while they do not literally turn into pillars of salt or stone, the stagnation which results is identical. As we dig in with our creative foot-dragging and go on spinning the same old wheels in the same old ruts, the inquisitive people get bored, the energetic people get up and walk away and the young people go off somewhere else.

\*\*\*\*\*

On a more personal level, I also have known those who enter marriage or anew relationship or a new job, or new committees - still looking back. They try later to find something to fill the void, copying and pasting the old playbooks into new situations. And they stultify. They might not become literal standing pillars, but they turn into salt. Or they just stand there, watching all the world go by. Or they become pillars of complaint, or pillars of regrets, or pillars of anger, or champions of "If only." They become pillars of resentment, feeling over-looked or over-worked. They refuse to walk on into the future.

The memory of things gone wrong can do it too. But one mistake does not a failure make. I have known people who get so devastated by a failure or a bad decision in the past that they cannot function. Their self-esteem crumbles because of something someone else said to them, or they hold a grudge forever because they didn't get their way. I have worked with those who carry the burden of grief or guilt around, heaped up on their own shoulders, squashing them down, hindering their progress, stifling their joy. If you ever learn to let it go, whatever "It" is, you will be free forever, and "It" will never touch or trouble it again.

It happens also to people and their faith. It starts out with great enthusiasm, but then it levels off and looks around and looks back, goes sideways and drifts away; and a once vibrant faith turns as stagnant as Death Valley. It happens with people in the pew and it happens to pastors and professors and ecclesiastical leaders at every level.

**Faith needs to keep moving forward. If we allow ourselves to ruminate over and over, postponing our personal decision about where we currently stand with Jesus Christ, and leaning on what we said one night decades ago, we will fall for whatever weak and tawdry choice comes wandering by. Faith cannot be stagnant: you either move ahead and grow, or you drop back and turn into a pillar of yesteryear, lonely and afraid in a brave new world.**

**St. Paul had his hands full when he wrote: "This one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind, I reach out for that which lies ahead, the high calling of Jesus Christ, my Lord."**

**\*\*\*\*\***

**Well, the mainsail has been up for a while; it is past time to head for home. This one last word: Jesus told His followers to follow Him. Simple. Don't try to lead; you will end up stepping on my feet. Just follow – follow me! When Jesus said the same to one of them back then: "Follow me." The man said, "O.K., sure Lord. But first I have to go back and put my house and business in order. I will be ready to take the journey in a little while. I can't respond that suddenly Lord, I have other things to do and other goals to accomplish."**

**Jesus replied in effect: "What did you not understand about the command: "Follow Me? Was I not clear enough? The man said, "B-b-b-ut I have some family things I have to settle." Jesus said: "I'm sorry . . . but no man or woman having put a hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God." No one looking back, not now, not ever, is fit for the Kingdom of God. Remember Lot's Wife. For now and forever more. Amen.**





