

Genesis 19

Chapter 19 is a story in three parts. The parts deal with hospitality versus inhospitality, the judgment of God and the creation of the peoples of Moab and Ammon.

Part one of the story opens with the two men, or angels, from the previous chapter arriving in the city of Sodom. There they encounter Abraham's nephew Lot. Lot, knowing what a dangerous place Sodom is, demonstrates hospitality by inviting the men into his home. As Abraham had shown hospitality in the desert by feeding the men, so Lot does in the city. The story then takes a dark turn when all of the men of the city come to Lot's house and demand that the strangers be turned over to them to be abused. It is at this point that commentators have often wanted to say that the sin of Sodom (from which the term sodomy comes) is homosexual practice, but this is doubtful at best. The issue at hand is not sexual practice but how strangers are treated and cared for. We see this in that the people also demand that Lot be abused as well, because he too is a stranger.

In the face of this attack, the angels blind the attackers, thus making possible an escape for Lot and his family. Lot, his wife and his daughters all escape to the desert. Though the angels have told them to escape to the hills, Lot bargains with them to allow Lot and his family to only go so far as a neighboring town, Zoar. Along the way, Lot's wife looks back (which she had been warned not to do) and turns into a pillar of salt.

Part two of the story deals with God's judgment. If we were to return to chapter 18, we would remember that Abraham made a bargain with God, that if there were even ten good men in Sodom, God would spare it. The destruction of Sodom implies that there were not even that many good men in the city. The destruction of Sodom and its sister city Gomorrah is described as occurring by God raining down "sulfur and fire..." Or, as others refer to it, fire and brimstone. It is only at this point that we are told that Lot escapes, not because he is perfect, but because he is related to Abraham, the bearer of God's promise to rescue creation.

Part three of the story concerns the creation of two of the Semitic peoples whose lands bordered Israel. These were the Moabites and the Ammonites. They are created through the sexual union of Lot and his two daughters. This liaison is set up by Lot taking his two daughters into the wilderness because he is afraid in Zoar. The daughters, being afraid that they would not bear children because they are hiding in the wilderness, get Lot drunk and sleep with him. Each then becomes pregnant. Interestingly, there is no condemnation of this act, and it serves instead as a reminder that Israel, Moab and Ammon are all related peoples.

Reflection: As noted above, this chapter has been used to condemn homosexual relationships. What this simplistic understanding fails to see is that this chapter wants to contrast the justice and righteousness of God (as seen in Lot's hospitality) with the injustice and unrighteousness of certain people (as seen in the acts of the people of Sodom). God's desire is for the restoration of right relationships between God, humans and creation. The people of Sodom chose to not only ignore this desire, but to move in the opposite direction; to violence and abuse. Their destruction then is not based on a simple moralistic equation, sin leads to destruction. It is based instead on God's relentless work to restore creation as a place of love and grace.

Questions:

1. Where have you seen a contrast between hospitality and inhospitality?
2. Have you ever had God rescue you? What was that like?
3. How do you understand the connection between God's judgment and God's mercy?