

Fire and Brimstone and Climate Change

Cityside Baptist, 3 September 2023

Silvia Purdie

A Narrative and Pastoral reading of Sodom and Gomorrah in the face of a warming world

Bible Reading: Genesis 19

Ngā mihi nui ki a koutou. Kororia ki te Atua. Mihi nui ki te whare e tū nei. A, ki a koutou katoa – kia ora!

I would like to begin this morning with an apology. I have chosen to speak about Sodom and Gomorrah. This story has cast a long shadow, both within the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, but also within our history. The Bible should never be a tool of oppression, but I acknowledge that this story has been used to oppress, specifically to enforce heterosexuality as the cultural norm. If you or someone you love has had this text used as a weapon against you, I apologise to you. As far as I can, I apologise on behalf of the church for the ways we have enforced patriarchal versions of gender and sexual expression. I want to approach Genesis 19 from a very different perspective, in order to explore how it might reflect back to us our current situation in relation to threats of environmental destruction. I will highlight some of the emotional and social responses in scripture and how these might connect with how we feel about climate change.

Is that OK?

With some trepidation, then, let's look back, a long long way, to the time of Abraham and Sarah, some 4,000 years. They had come south from their homeland to the land of Israel together with Abraham's nephew Lot. And as they became established they decided to respectfully part company; Lot set up on his own down on the Jordan plain north of what is now the Dead Sea, while Abraham and Sarah stayed up in the hill country. Lot settled in a town called Sodom, found a wife and had 2 girls. Unfortunately all was not well in Sodom. It gained a reputation for a complete absence of moral behaviour.

Ezekiel 16 describes the guilt of Sodom as "pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but they did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it."

Remember the men who were also angels, who visited Abraham and Sarah and who promised her a child, the night she laughed bitterly at the promise? Well later that night they tell him that they have been sent to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because of their terrible sin, and Abraham negotiates them down to a promise to save the towns if they should find as few as 10 righteous people there.

The following evening the men-angels arrive at the gate of Sodom, where Lot meets them and insists that they come into his home, where he shows them good hospitality. But their evening is ruined when the entire town comes bashing on the door demanding the right to torture the strangers. Lot tries to calm the situation but gets attacked himself. The visitors pull him inside, bar the door and the crowd blindly disperses. The angels tell Lot and his family to get out of town, and invite him to bring along anyone else he loves. Lot sets off in the night and tries to persuade his daughter's fiancés to join them, but the sons-in-law tell him he is quite mad. So it seems that only 4 righteous people were found in Sodom, not

even 10. Before dawn the angel men have to physically drag them out of their home and out of town, and tell them to run for their lives. Don't look back.

As the sun rises a fire storm engulfs the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah, and it smells of sulphur. Fire and brimstone. Like the inside of a volcano. Like a blast of lightning.

Lot and his daughters run for shelter, but his wife cannot help herself. She turns, looks back, is frozen in her tracks by the awfulness of it, her home, her possessions, her community, destroyed, and she herself is lost there where she stands in her tears, becoming a pillar of salt.

This is the story. And it casts a long shadow. It stands in the traditions of Judaism, Islam and Christianity as the ultimate symbol of divine judgement. Jesus referred to Sodom and Gomorrah as a glimpse of "the day of judgement". Revelations 11 links Sodom with Golgotha, the place where Christ was crucified. Only Jude links Sodom's sin specifically with sex, and it is through that one verse that the whole thing got warped into a battery of attack on homosexuality.

One person deeply influenced by the fire and brimstone of Sodom and Gomorrah was the most reluctant of prophets, Jonah. God sends Jonah to Ninevah, and Johah heads in the opposite direction. He gets thrown in the ocean, and he is saved by a marine mammal, who delivers him to – Ninevah! Jonah hates Ninevah with a passion. He has no desire to save it, so he does the absolute bare minimum, whispering in back alleys that God is sending judgement on the place. Jonah is frankly appalled when the entire city grasps onto this news and is 'cut to the quick'. The King of Ninevah hears about it and declares a state of emergency: A proclamation!:

"All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."

And sure enough, God does relent, God sees their radical turn-around, their willingness to change, and they are spared.

Only Jonah is not happy about it. He sulks. He wanted to see fire and brimstone fall from the sky. They deserved it!

I have told you two stories. And in those stories are several characters.

First we have the angel men, who initiate the story. Their job is to enable communication between people and God, and to find and save those who are righteous, which they learn by the power of good hospitality. But saving Lot and his family is easier said than done. It requires much persuasion, and even physical force, to get them out in time.

Second, we have Lot himself, a good man in a bad place, trying to save his own skin and look after his family.

A special note about Lot's sons in law. They dismiss the warning, and accuse Lot of being daft in the head.

Then there are the daughters, most reluctant to leave their home

and their mother, who looks back. Lot's wife stands as the embodiment of being overwhelmed by compassion. She becomes the salt of her tears.

Then there's Jonah, who secretly longs for destruction. Bring it on! Show your mighty hand, God!

And one more significant character, the King of Nineveh, who uses his power to call his people to repent, with sackcloth and ashes.

I wonder which of these characters you can relate to.

I am taking you into these stories this morning because, like them, we face massive environmental threats, predictions of disasters greater than we have ever experienced.

Our world is warming. It's been a cold wet winter here but on other side of the world temperatures have jumped high. Predictions were for a couple of degrees of warming, but many places were 5, 6, 7 degrees hotter than expected, which pushed the temperature beyond what most forms of life can cope with, and which triggered unbelievably huge intense fire storms. Mostly I have not been watching the news. I work in climate change but still I cannot bear to hear those stories. As of this week 140,000 square kilometres of Canada has burned. The fires in Greece over the past 2 months are the largest in Europe's history.

I suggest that the Bible story of Sodom and Gomorrah is as relevant now as it ever was, together with its twin story of Nineveh who managed to avoid their fate.

This morning I am speaking about climate change, and especially on how it might impact our mental wellbeing, and our faith.

And so I would like to ask you to talk about, how do you feel about the reality that our world is warming?

And I am suggesting some possible ways to respond to climate change, based on the characters in the stories I have told this morning.

1. Trying desperately to alert people (the angel-men)
2. Wanting to be safe (Lot)
3. Anger, even violence (the Sodom mob)
4. Denying and minimising (Lot's sons-in-law)
5. Dislocation, loss of home (Lot's daughters)
6. Grief and overwhelm (Lot's wife)
7. 'Bring on' the catastrophe (Jonah)
8. Repentance (King of Nineveh)

Which of these reactions do you recognise in yourself?
Which do you see happening around you?

5 mins discussion in pairs

The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is the Biblical 'tohu', or sign, for God's judgement. I grew up in the liberal Methodist Church, which had quite rejected any theology of God's judgement. I was taught that wrath and punishment belonged to the Old Testament God, which we were far too enlightened to believe in any more. We just politely ignored the bits of the Bible that made us uncomfortable. In the face of climate change I don't think we can do that any more. I think we need all our scriptures, the full resources of theology.

Christian faith is not just being good and loving everyone. It is not just living peaceably and comfortably in God's blessing. Christian faith and mission drags us towards the truth of things, which includes the ugliness of humanity. What we have done to this planet is ugly. What has been done to Māori in their own land is ugly. And our world is warming. These things are not unrelated. The Bible word is 'abomination' – which is nothing about loving sexual expression and everything about abuse, greed and destruction.

I am grateful to be able to talk about these things with you. I'm sorry if it's all a bit negative. On the whole I hear from the church a deafening silence on climate change. Probably because we are so committed to being uplifting, and positive, and speaking peace and enabling healing. I'm all for those things. But will they help us grasp and speak the truth about what is happening to our world? I certainly hope so.

I passionately believe that the Bible, inspired by Wairua Tapu, is our most valuable taonga. It is riddled with disasters, and it is packed with amazing people responding to disasters in all sorts of ways, including with astonishing courage and grace. We have a powerhouse of inspiration to address fear and loss.

And, I know that Jesus is alive, and that Jesus is with me, and alive here at Cityside, and with people of faith everywhere. If, as Revelations hints, Christ was crucified in Sodom, then Jesus himself has claimed the judgement of God and transformed that judgement in himself through his own death and resurrection. Because I know Jesus and I love Jesus I am OK with the judgment of God. I do not desire it, as Jonah did, nor do I flee from it, as Lot did, but I trust it. The judgement of climate change is upon us, no matter what we think or feel about it. The invitation of scripture is to find ourselves standing firmly within the story of God, especially now in a warming world.