

Genesis 18:16-32: **Judging in Mercy**

C. Nolan Huizenga, Highland Presbyterian Church, 27 July 2025

The saga of Abraham and Sarah becomes one of the anchor stories of Hebrew scripture. God who created the world calls Abram to uproot from his home and to follow God faithfully to a new land. The text says “Abram trusted the Lord, and the Lord recognized Abram’s high moral character” (Gen 15:6). God renames him Abraham and promises to bless him with descendants countless as the stars.

Abraham and his wife Sarah are elderly and still childless when God shows up at their tent — mysteriously arriving as a group of three people — and promises that in a year they will have a child of their own, a pronouncement that brings incredulous laughter from Sarah.

Right after that we get today’s story. Listen with me for God’s word to us from Genesis chapter 18, and I’m actually starting at verse 16 (CEB).

¹⁶ The [visitors] got up from there and went over to look down on Sodom. Abraham was walking along with them to send them off ¹⁷ when the Lord said, “Will I keep from Abraham what I’m about to do? ¹⁸ Abraham will certainly become a great populous nation, and all the earth’s nations will be blessed because of him. ¹⁹ I have formed a relationship with him so that he will instruct his children and his household after him. And they will keep to the Lord’s path, being moral and just so that the Lord can do for Abraham everything he said he would.” ²⁰ Then the Lord said, “The cries of injustice from Sodom and Gomorrah are countless, and their sin is very serious! ²¹ I will go down now to examine the cries of injustice that have reached me. Have they really done all this? If not, I want to know.”

²² The men turned away and walked toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing in front of the Lord. ²³ Abraham approached and said, “Will you really sweep away the innocent with the guilty? ²⁴ What if there are fifty innocent people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not save the place for the sake of the fifty innocent people in it? ²⁵ It’s not like you to do this, killing the innocent with the guilty as if there were no difference. It’s not like you! Will the judge of all the earth not act justly?”

²⁶ The Lord said, “If I find fifty innocent people in the city of Sodom, I will save it because of them.”

²⁷ Abraham responded, “Since I’ve already decided to speak with my Lord, even though I’m just soil and ash, ²⁸ what if there are five fewer innocent people than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city over just five?”

The Lord said, “If I find forty-five there, I won’t destroy it.”

²⁹ Once again Abraham spoke, “What if forty are there?”

The Lord said, “For the sake of forty, I will do nothing.”

³⁰ He said, “Don’t be angry with me, my Lord, but let me speak. What if thirty are there?”

The Lord said, "I won't do it if I find thirty there."

³¹ Abraham said, "Since I've already decided to speak with my Lord, what if twenty are there?"

The Lord said, "I won't do it, for the sake of twenty."

³² Abraham said, "Don't be angry with me, my Lord, but let me speak just once more. What if there are ten?"

And the Lord said, "I will not destroy it because of those ten."

On 21 January 2025, the day after the presidential inauguration, Episcopal Bishop Mariann Budde preached at National Cathedral to a congregation that included the new president. Standing here the next Sunday I quoted her because her plea on behalf of others was so Christlike and timely. Near the end of that sermon she said,

I ask you to have mercy, Mr. President, on those in our communities whose children fear that their parents will be taken away. And that you help those who are fleeing war zones and persecution in their own lands to find compassion and welcome here. Our God teaches us that we are to be merciful to the stranger, for we were all once strangers in this land.¹

This week I'm again pondering Bishop Budde's courage because like Abraham, she used her voice to confront the powerful about the suffering of the innocent. Now I am *not* morally equating the Lord of creation with any president or politician. It's just that in both situations one party has the power to make judgments that either destroy life or preserve it. And like Bishop Budde did the with president, Abraham in our text "appeals to God's better nature" as my seminary Hebrew professor puts it.²

There's a strong tradition in the Bible for this kind of moral arguing with God, even after human sin causes plenty of pain on its own. During the Exodus Moses talks God down from destroying in anger the people of Israel, the very people God has chosen and liberated (Exodus 32:1-14). The writer of Lamentations chapter 3 accuses God of using him for barbaric target practice: "He shot into my vitals the arrows of his quiver" (3:13). In Psalm 88 the poet blames God directly for their awful suffering.

These biblical voices refuse to explain or justify God's role in human suffering. Because true faithfulness never accepts that suffering is okay and always prays, pleads even, for God's mercy to set things right. With deadly judgment looming, Abraham argues, "It's not like you to do this! Will the judge of all the earth not act justly?"

Cries of injustice have drawn God's attention to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. What we read today doesn't tell us what *kind* of injustice. We learn in the next chapter that those

¹ Budde, Mariann. "Hello, I'm Bishop Mariann." Reflections on Courage, Faith, and the Work of Love, 9 July 2025. <https://mariannbudde.substack.com/p/hello-im-bishop-mariann>

² Lapsley, Jacqueline. "Commentary on Genesis 18:20-32." Working Preacher, 25 July 2010. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-17-3/commentary-on-genesis-1820-32>

cities routinely practice inhospitality, even sexual violence, toward outsiders and newcomers. So God plans righteous judgment against a culture that cultivates such abuse.

The Lord and Abraham already have built up a trusting relationship, which emboldens Abraham to remind God that he knows the Lord's nature to be *merciful* as well as just. It is not the divine way to inflict collateral damage when rooting out evil. God acknowledges, yes, if I find even fifty innocent people in Sodom, I'll forgive the whole city because of them. So the bargaining begins as Abraham respectfully and doggedly whittles that number down.

God doesn't resist Abraham's persistence, but welcomes it. Advocating for the deliverance of others is the core of faithfulness. "Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who has wronged us."

Why does Abraham haggle God down to ten blameless people and stop there? It could be related to the Jewish tradition that required a minimum of ten men, called a *minyan*, to constitute a synagogue. The Wikipedia page about this custom also says: "A possible reason why...men...were obligated to form a congregation...is that women were individually considered sufficiently holy and did not require the combination of a group and special prayers to achieve added holiness deficient in men."³

If there aren't enough faithful people to start a minimal house of prayer, a culture's in bad shape indeed. Turns out God does find fewer than ten virtuous people in Sodom, but the Lord's messengers do help that righteous remnant escape the destruction.

One gift of biblical literature is that it so often reflects the human condition. If this story is a mirror, where do we see ourselves in it? What characters might some of us identify with?

Maybe like everyday citizens of Sodom we find our culture sliding toward inhospitality, toward demonization and abuse of "outsiders." Maybe we notice violence becoming normalized and even celebrated as a way to solve disputes and to treat people who are different.

If our consciences stay sharp maybe we perceive perversions of justice before they become just the way we do business. Did Sodom's residents notice their culture turning malicious? What would it have taken to rehabilitate their public life?

Or maybe we resonate with God's righteous anger over injustice. In our text the countless cries of those in pain prompt God to investigate how deep the injustice goes. God decides that if it's all true, powerful divine judgment will rain down on Sodom. God does not *want* to destroy the city. Sometimes, though, it's hard to imagine moving forward without first wiping the moral slate clean.

Or maybe with Abraham our hearts cry out because we feel desperately the plight of innocent sufferers. Like God's beloved children throughout Gaza who are in a state of starvation. Many, including children and infants, already have succumbed to death by malnutrition, or have been killed simply for trying to reach emergency food handouts.

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minyan>

These are horrible ways to die and it's utterly wrong that we the world are still allowing this to happen. Abraham advocated with compassion for as few as ten innocent victims surrounded by a culture of brutality. By extension, thousands of us should be speaking out on behalf of two million starving Gazans. Faith in the God of Abraham, the God of Jesus, demands it.

You do not have to be Abraham, father of a nation, to use your moral voice. He's bold before God, yes, but he's not a superhero. Any one of us, like Abraham, can "trust God's justice enough to plead for God's mercy."⁴ Because even in the midst of evil, we pray for God to reveal what is good and preserve that.

And maybe some of us here feel like innocent sufferers who desperately yearn for someone to plead their case in the divine court. If that's where you find yourself today, the bold love of Abraham, the intercession of Jesus Christ, the groanings of the Holy Spirit, and the prayers of this your church, are all with you and for you. The God of merciful love will not write you off as collateral damage. That's the truth Abraham banked on, and it's one reason Abraham and Sarah become a blessing to all people.

Bishop Mariann Budde recently reflected on all that's happened in our culture over the last several months, and I'll share a few paragraphs of hopeful challenge. First, as we pray for our church leaders being ordained and installed today, along with their colleagues already in service, Bishop Budde reminds us:

It is essential for Christian leaders to speak and act with the clarity of our convictions and with humility. For we are all in need of the same forgiveness, mercy, and grace that we are called by God to embody for others.

[She goes on...] I believe that our greatest contribution as Christians is to speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen. More importantly, we are to live as best we can according to the highest aspirations of humankind revealed to us in Jesus:

- to recognize the inherent, God-given dignity of every human being
- to love our neighbors as ourselves, and even to love our enemies
- to share what we have and to strive for an equitable and just society
- to refrain from evil and refuse to hate
- to be mindful of the power of our words, and to speak without malice or contempt
- to forgive, as we have been forgiven
- to live in hope
- to be willing to sacrifice, even our very lives, for the sake of love....

In a culture of contempt, may we speak with dignity.

In a world of mean-spiritedness, may we act with kindness and love.

At a time when it is tempting to be cynical and despairing, may we live in hope.

All are welcome.⁵

In the name of the Judge, the Redeemer, and the Advocate — one Holy Trinity of Love.

⁴ Lee, Kyong-Jin. "Commentary on Genesis 18:20-32." Working Preacher, 27 July 2025. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-17-3/commentary-on-genesis-1820-32-6>

⁵ Budde. Ibid.