

Read the Bible in a Year

Meditations Week 2 (January 13-19)

Day 8: Genesis 19-21, Psalm 7, Matthew 7

by The Rev. Dr. C. K. Robertson

Sodom and Gomorrah! Even for those who have never opened a Bible, the names are famous...or, rather, infamous. They are synonymous with depravity and lawlessness. Yet what is perhaps more remarkable is that even the hero of the tale, Lot, does not appear to be very heroic. Indeed, looking back from our twenty-first century vantage point, some of his behavior would be described as questionable at best. True, compared to his neighbors, Lot practically wears a halo, but that's not really saying much.

And this is not just in the case of Lot. Many, perhaps most, of the protagonists we encounter in Genesis, and also in the biblical books that follow, say things and do things that might shock or embarrass us, or even anger us. Polygamy, concubinage, drunkenness, incredible violence all form part of the saga of God's "faithful" leaders. We might be pardoned, therefore, for judging Lot and company fairly harshly...but as Jesus reminds us in Matthew 7, looking back in judgment does little good.

Rather, we can note that the stories in Genesis, like this one about Sodom and Gomorrah, are really about the choices people make, both then and now. Lot, his spouse, his neighbors all made fateful choices that resulted in consequences of one kind or another. The reason that judging others does little good is precisely because, in the end, it is what we ourselves do or do not do that really matters. What, then, exactly should we do? Again, it is Jesus who answers that in words that have been immortalized as the Golden Rule: "Do unto others what you would have them do unto you." Now that is a daily choice worth making.

QUESTIONS

- What have you read so far in the Bible that has shocked you or made you uncomfortable? What things happening today might be shocking or disturbing to Abraham, Sarah, or Lot if they could visit us?
- Radical hospitality is a recurring theme in several parts of Scripture. How can you and your church community display such welcome in fresh, tangible ways?

PRAYER

God of welcome, bless us and others through us, that they might see you in all that we say and do, through Jesus Christ our Savior and Host at the heavenly banquet. Amen.

Day 9: Genesis 22-24, Psalm 8, Matthew 8

by The Rev. Dr. C. K. Robertson

The story of Abraham and Isaac is hardly a feel-good tale. In fact, you might well find yourself calling out to the boy, “Run, Isaac, run! Don’t let him get you!” You might even feel some consternation with the lad. After all, how dense can he be? He’s carrying the wood for his own sacrifice: “Wake up, kid, YOU’RE the sacrifice!” It does not help that this passage holds such an important place in our Episcopal tradition, being read each year during the great Easter Vigil service.

But as should be obvious by now in this journey through Genesis, a literalistic reading of the biblical texts will not prove very helpful for us. Rather, we are called to do as the Prayer Book says, “to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest” Holy Scripture. The Word of God is not cotton candy; it is something to be chewed on.

So as we come to the tale of a father being asked to sacrifice his son, we must move beyond our shock or repugnance and instead consider the deeper realities to which the story calls us. “God will provide,” the father tells the son. These are not empty words, not

some trite religious sentiment, but a bold assertion of faith in the face of life's very real struggles.

It does not mean that we are free from struggle, from worry, from pain. No, for as we are reminded in Matthew's story of the frightened disciples on the water, when we are in the very heart of the storm, and it seems as if Jesus is asleep and unaware of all that we face, the reality is that he is right there with us, in the storm, in the struggle, providing peace and calm and presence. The problems of life are legion. The potential sacrifices we face are great. But God's presence and God's provision are greater still. Thanks be to God!

QUESTIONS

- When have you felt most alone, as if God was far away, asleep and unaware of your struggles? How did God's presence and peace become known to you in that time?
- The story of Abraham and Isaac clearly resonates for Christians in New Testament texts such as "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." What do these words mean for you? How would you share the good news of God's love with someone?

PRAYER

O God who provides, be with us in the midst of the storms of life, and help us to share your peace and presence with others, for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Day 10: Genesis 25-27, Psalm 9, Matthew 9

by The Rev. Dr. C. K. Robertson

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—their names are legend. Indeed, in later books of the Old Testament and again in the New Testament, the LORD is often referred to as the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." And yet it has already been noted that the first of these great figures, Abraham the "Father of Faith," was far from perfect. Now, with his passing, the spotlight turns first to Isaac, whose brief time on the biblical stage is hardly impressive, and then moves to Jacob.

Abraham and Isaac resort to deception when faced with threatening situations. Jacob takes lying and cheating to a whole new level. His very name meaning “supplanter,” Jacob supplants Esau through an elaborate deception that secures for Jacob the birthright and blessing that should have gone to his brother. Jacob’s will do whatever it takes to fulfill his ambitions, even if that means spending much of the rest of his life on the run. It is difficult, perhaps, to see why God might choose to raise up “a chosen people, a holy priesthood” through such a morally questionable character.

Turning to Matthew’s Gospel, it seems that not much has changed. Instead of going for the best and brightest to be his disciples, Jesus unexpectedly calls Matthew the tax collector to join his ragtag group of unlearned fishermen. Matthew, or Levi as he is sometimes known, is not that different from Jacob. He cheats...in fact, he cheats for a living!

Eventually, Jacob spends a night wrestling with God and emerges a new person. Matthew leaves his old life behind and becomes a new person. Both then and now, God does not wait for any of us to be perfect before calling us to follow. And somewhere along the way, when we least expect it, we are born anew.

QUESTIONS

- What do you think of Jacob, of Esau, of Isaac when you read these stories? Why does God sometime use questionable people to work through?
- When have you experienced God through...a surprising person?

PRAYER

God of new beginnings, meet us where we are in our journey, imperfect as we are, and use us in ways we cannot imagine to make a difference in the world for you, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Day 11: Genesis 28-30, Psalm 10, Matthew 10

by The Rev. Dr. Francis H. Wade

We would probably not like to have Jacob as an influence on our children. He was a liar and cheat who found his match in his Uncle Laban. These two rogues swindled one another back and forth, riding roughshod over the feelings of Rachel and Leah to say nothing of poor Zilpah and Bilhah. It is natural to wonder what rogues like this are doing in the Bible. And how did Jacob get to be a patriarch, mentioned in solemn tones along with Abraham and Isaac? The Gospel lesson does not help us out very much as the twelve disciples are introduced with a tax collector (a profession then based on extortion) and a traitor prominent among them. They are sent into a world of wolves where betrayal, slander and discord are to be expected.

Thoughtful modern readers stand with the Psalmist asking, "Why?" Why does God let the arrogant, the wicked and the deceitful seem to have free reign? Why isn't the Bible full of saintly folk who set us a good example?

The answer is that our ancestors knew that the Bible is not a book about people but a book about God. They do not go out of their way to make the People of the Bible appear any more saintly than anyone else. The wonder is that the glory of God is able to shine through sinful humanity. The wonder is that God does beautiful things with rogues, misfits and bumbleres as well as the occasional saint. That is what God was doing in ancient times and it is what God is doing today.

QUESTIONS

- How might the glory and goodness of God shine through sinful people?
- How might God be working through you – in spite of yourself?

PRAYER

God of glory and goodness, let your light shine through my life in ways beyond my knowing and help me to always be ready to see that light shining through others. Amen.

Day 12: Genesis 31 – 33, Psalm 11, Matthew 11

by The Rev. Dr. Francis H. Wade

The story of Jacob's return to face the brother he had cheated twenty years before is a powerful one by any standard but it also provides a significant insight into our Judeo-Christian tradition. Jacob did all that he could to protect himself from the righteous anger he expected from Esau. Lavish gifts were sent ahead; he divided his household into two groups thinking that if one were attacked the other might escape. Still, the fact that Esau was coming with four hundred men was worrisome. You and I would probably say he was left wrestling with his conscience but in the narrative terms of ancient storytellers we are told that he wrestled with a strange man who turns out to be God. One result of the match is that Jacob is given a new name, something that often accompanied turning points in life. The new name is Israel which means 'one who strives or wrestles with God'.

What is especially revealing about this story is that when our faith had developed to the point where it needed a name there were many options. The People of God could be named for obedient Abraham or faithful Isaac or Moses the Law Giver. But the chosen name was Israel because the People of God continually wrestle with God about almost everything in life – faith, morality, sin, forgiveness, etc. We wrestle with God partly because, as the Psalmist says, God tests the righteous along with the wicked. We wrestle as John the Baptist did when he lost his confidence in Jesus as the messiah and sent a deputation to ask if he really, really was the Anointed One.

The name Israel was not lightly chosen but rightly chosen because the People of God must always wrestle with God.

QUESTIONS

- How do you wrestle with God?
- What happens if we stop wrestling with God?

PRAYER

Challenging Lord, you come to us in the still of night when we are alone by our own River Jabbok. Help us to engage with you as

our ancestor Jacob did that we might greet the dawn with your blessing in our ears. Amen

Day 13: Genesis 34 -36, Psalm 12, Matthew 12

by The Rev. Dr. Francis H. Wade

Those who navigate rely on fixed objects to help them find their way. The North Star, mountains, rivers, longitude and latitude provide points of certainty for people venturing on unfamiliar paths. Those who undertake spiritual journeys tend to seek similarly reliable points as they (we) try to be faithful in a changing landscape that rises into an unknown future. The genealogies that tend to confuse the modern reader were part of our ancestors attempt to establish fixed points for their journey. Like a title search in modern real estate, these lists sought to establish the true owners and, therefore, the true inheritors of property both temporal and spiritual. In Jesus' day the Pharisees relied heavily on certain fixed dogmas that told them whether they were on the right path. One of these was the sanctity of the Sabbath, another was predictable pre-established signs of God's favor, a third was one's place in family life.

Unfortunately, Jesus shows that none of these provide the certainty that the faithful expected from them. In today's reading, Jesus proclaims God's concern for the Gentiles who were outside of the genealogical grid; says that He has greater authority than Sabbath laws; refuses to give a traditional sign; and rates his spiritual community above his nuclear family.

Lest we feel we are being left to wander, Jesus affirms in each instance that He is the fixed point. Our ongoing living relationship with Jesus as Lord is what guides and sustains us on our journey. Today's texts also remind us of a constant in that relationship: God's concern for what the psalmist calls the despoiled poor and the groaning needy; the sick to whom Jesus responded; and even in their rough way, the justice sought by Israel's sons. When God's concerns are ours, we have a fixed navigational point.

QUESTIONS

- What have people relied on in the past to tell them that they were being faithful?
- How does Jesus provide guidance for our spiritual journeys?

PRAYER

Blessed Lord you have set us on a journey into an unknown future. Sharpen our eyes to see the path you have chosen for us, attune our souls to recognizing the Spirit that goes before us, quicken our hands to reach out to those who struggle beside us and keep us in living relationship as we make our way. Amen