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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Genesis 18:20–19:28, Psalm 138, Colossians 2:6–19, Luke 11:1–13
Praying As If Life Depended upon It

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In this morning's Gospel Lesson, our Lord Jesus says this:

⁹And I tell you, Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. (Luke 11:9, RSV)

Our main subject this morning is prayer. The Prayer of the Day sounds this theme with its confidence that our God hears our prayers:

O God, your ears *are open always* to the prayers of your servants.

Our Gospel Lesson includes the passage called “The Importunate Friend at Midnight,” with its theme that we should persevere in prayer and keep on knocking on heaven's door. And our First Lesson tells the story of Abraham's prayer of intercession on behalf of the town Sodom. All join together to urge us to be people of prayer.

PRAYING EVEN WHEN DOUBTING

I once met a man who was trying to make his way through a terrible time of crisis. It was a moral crisis. The man had done wrong, and now the truth was catching up to him. In his despair he mentioned something that seems puzzling at first, but which in the end is radiant with hope. He said that he was not sure that he believed in God any more, and that he had been unsure about God for many years, and yet he prayed. He prayed each day, on the train, on his way to work. He was a born and bred Christian. In fact, he was a born and bred Lutheran, though not a member of this congregation. So, I guess he had learned to pray when he was a youth, and he kept it up all these years. I thought to myself, well, if you are a man of prayer, then you are very close to becoming a man of faith again.

How much good is lost because we have lost the habit of prayer? If you remember nothing else from this sermon, let a single verse from a hymn we will

sing later in this liturgy stay with you. It is a verse from the hymn *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*, and the verse I commend to you goes this way:

Oh, what peace we often forfeit;
oh, what needless pain we bear —
all because we do not carry
ev'rything to God in prayer! (LBW 439)

This verse is almost a sigh, a lament, for us poor people of faith. We bear pain and we forfeit peace because we do not take advantage of the faith we have. We face the struggles of the day as if we were all alone, as if Almighty God is not eager to hear our prayers and to take them into account in his governance of reality.

It is a strange thought, but a wonderful one: Our God, the Maker of heaven and earth, seeks our advice. Little minds and little hearts that we have: nonetheless, almighty God desires to hear our opinion about how the universe should go. And he desires not simply to hear, but to honor our opinion, as a loving father honors the childlike requests of his children. There is good lying at hand before us through prayer. Let us not neglect the good we could do by praying about the things on our hearts. Someday, we will see and understand how our prayers changed the shape of the universe and the flow of things and played their part in building up God's kingdom.

ABRAHAM WAS A MAN OF PRAYER

As we see in our First Lesson, we see that Abraham was a man of prayer. His prayers of intercession for Sodom are remarkable for his good heart and for his persistence in prayer. Why, he dares to press God! He negotiates on behalf of the town. He whittles God down, from fifty righteous persons to but ten. If Sodom has but ten righteous persons in it, then the Lord promises Abraham that he will not destroy that place.

ALAS FOR SODOM

Alas, there were not fifty righteous persons in Sodom, nor even ten. Some people seem to be quite thoroughly bad. We could say of such-and-such a one: "He is bad—bad to the bone." So it is with Sodom. That town is bad to the bone.

In the story of the attempted rape of the two visitors, the Bible emphasizes that *all* the men of the town gather at the house of Lot, demanding to satisfy its lust with the two strangers. It's extraordinary to think of that crowd outside Lot's door. The text puts it this way:

...the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, *all the people to the last man*, surrounded the house; ⁵and they called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them.”
(Genesis 19:4-5, RSV)

If that crowd included all the men of the city, “to the last man,” then it included rich and poor, learned and unschooled, police and judges, doctors and lawyers, clergy and school teachers. All were united in lust for rape. A man looks across the crowd and sees his own son, and father and son, uncle and nephew together cry out for the rape of the strangers in town. No one is righteous, no not one.

MASS DELUSION

So Abraham has whittled God down to ten righteous persons, but in this town, ten is too much. It is as if a mass hysteria has come upon the town, or a mass delusion. It is like that confusion the angels cast upon the men of the city, so that they grope and feel for the door to Lot’s house, but cannot find it. Likewise with the moral mindset of the men of Sodom. It is as if they are under some spell, as if strange and ungodly desires have so bewitched them that they can hardly think straight.

These things should remind us that the consensus of a whole community does not make a wicked thing right. All the world might say Yes, but if God says No, then that is the truth of things.

There is no saving this town. At the end of the story, we find only smoke and ashes.

LOT

But also at the end of the story, we find a little story of grace. Lot is like his uncle Abraham. Though Lot is appalled at the wicked desires of his neighbors, nonetheless he seems to love his neighbors, as well he should. When the angels warn him to gather together his family and flee that town, Lot lingers. We can picture him thinking of his favorite people in town: the baker of bread, the reliable carpenter, his pastor and the people in his church. He can hardly imagine fleeing the town and leaving everyone to disaster. So, he lingers. But the angels recognize that he is a good and holy man and they compel him to go:

¹⁶...he lingered; so the men seized him and his wife and his two daughters by the hand, the LORD being merciful to

him, and they brought him forth and set him outside the city. (Genesis 19:16, RSV)

The first instruction of the angels was that Lot was to flee with his family to the hills. It is not clear why, but Lot seems convinced that if he must flee to the hills, that he will perish. So, he requests that he might instead flee to a nearby town:

²⁰Behold, yonder city is near enough to flee to, and it is a little one. Let me escape there -- is it not a little one? -- and my life will be saved!" (Genesis 19:20, RSV)

The Lord grants his request, and so Lot and his two daughters are saved. His wife, sorry to say, disobeyed the angels and looked back at the town of Sodom. In her disobedience, she perished. She was turned into a pillar of salt.

But notice this, not only was Lot saved in that nearby town, so was the town itself. What happened to Sodom was a massive catastrophe, destroying five cities all told. But the disaster did not befall this particular city, because Lot was there.

THE PRESENCE OF A SINGLE SAINT

Let us not underestimate the role that a single saint can have in saving a town. Abraham prayed for Sodom and almost saved it. A single man on his knees almost saved a whole town. And Abraham's nephew Lot saved a town by his presence there. Again, a single, righteous man was the saving of that city.

Likewise, you and I can be the starting point of renewal in our families, in our work places, in our community. We can be what Jesus says we should be: salt of the earth and light in darkness.

Judging by the word of Lord about Jerusalem through his prophet Jeremiah, if Abraham had negotiated even farther, all the way down to one, the Lord would have spared Sodom for the sake of that one:

Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, look and take note! Search her squares to see if you can find a man, one who does justice and seeks truth; that I may pardon her. (Jeremiah 5:1, RSV)

Likewise with the prophet Ezekiel. Through him the Lord says that he is searching for at least one righteous person:

And I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found none. (Ezekiel 22:30, RSV)

Let us, then, resolve to be that one. It is a good resolution. Let *us* — you and me — be the start of the comeback trail for our families and communities. We can succeed in this. It is worthwhile for us to resolve to be the one who saves others by our presence, because God has already found that One for whose sake, he has goodwill toward our whole planet, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.