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

My opening text for this sermon is the story of Abraham’s intercession for the town called Sodom. As I read two of the early verses aloud, please notice a particular characteristic of Abraham’s prayer. He prays for the safety of the whole city—not just the safety of the righteous in the city but of the whole place. It is a large-hearted prayer. Verses 23 and 24, then, go this way:

23 Then Abraham drew near, and said, “Wilt thou indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked? 24 Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; wilt thou then destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? (Genesis 18:23-24, RSV)

As I become older, this is a story that makes me very sad. It makes me sad because I know how it is going to work out in the long run. It is going to mean the death of Jesus on the cross. And as I get older, I seem to love Jesus even more and want to live a good life worthy of our Saviour. I am sad to think of what sin has meant for Jesus. It has meant his death! Abraham’s prayer in this morning’s story is the opening scene in the divine drama by which we have hope in this world — that divine drama that will mean salvation for us, but crucifixion for our Lord Jesus.

There is a similar story about Moses of old. You will remember that when Moses was atop Mt. Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments from God, the people of Israel at the foot of the mountain were becoming restless and impatient and they broke out into idolatry. They fashioned a golden calf and danced around it and worshiped it and so forth. The LORD was furious about this, of course, but just as he had done with Abraham, so he did with Moses. As if confiding in a friend, the LORD told Moses what he had in mind to do to the people of Israel. The passage goes this way:

9 And the LORD said unto Moses, I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiffnecked people: 10 Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them: and I will make of thee a great nation. (Exodus 32:9-12, KJV)

But like Abraham before him, Moses intercedes for the people. Indeed, he intercedes for them at the offer of his own life. The great words go this way:
So Moses returned to the LORD and said, “Alas, this people have sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold.

But now, if thou wilt / forgive their sin -- and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written.” (Exodus 32:31-32, RSV)

I honor Moses for this — it is such a Christ-like thing to do. Ponder what Moses is saying. He himself is innocent. He has been in communion with our holy God for forty days and forty nights on Mt. Sinai. His soul must have been made more pure by that. His spirit and his mind must have been elevated by that time with the LORD. But then he comes down from the mountain and finds his people dancing before a golden calf. It is a stunning turn-a-round... a great descent for Moses to have to see. Again, Moses is innocent, and the people guilty, but Moses is willing to be blotted out of the LORD’s book if thereby he can save the people.

How can we Christians, who bear the name of Christ and who have such good people as Abraham and Moses in our background... how can we fail to be people of mercy, even on those with whom we deeply disagree or who even seem very wicked to us? How can we not pray for them and treat them with compassion akin to the compassion of Abraham, Moses, and our Saviour Jesus?

Well, let us start again to look at this morning’s story of Abraham’s intercession for Sodom. Let’s admire the largeness of his soul. He starts off speak of fifty righteous people. Note that he could have interceded for those fifty righteous ones, but not for the whole city. He could have phrased his prayer to focus on them — the righteous. And so our passage might have gone this way:

Then Abraham drew near, and said, “Wilt thou indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; wilt thou not spare them? Will not thou destroy the city, but create a way to spare the fifty righteous ones?

There would have been a kind of emotional logic to this. Abraham was trying to save his nephew Lot, who lived in that town. He believed that Lot was a good and righteous man, in a bad town, and so he could have prayed for the salvation of Lot, but the destruction of the town. But Abraham’s heart is too big for that. He seeks to save not only Lot, but everyone!

And mind you, these were real sinners — not dainty, imaginary sinners, but the real thing! The LORD has heard bad reports about the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah. Our text begins this way:
Then the LORD said, “Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, 21I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry which has come to me; and if not, I will know.” (Genesis 18:20-21, RSV)

As the story progresses, we find that this outcry is justified. Sodom is a pretty wicked town. The setting for this morning’s story is the visit of the LORD to Abraham and Sarah. The opening verse goes this way:

And the LORD appeared unto him in the plains of Mamre: and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day; (Genesis 18:1, KJV)

The LORD appears to Abraham in the form of three holy men. The Church has long perceived in these three holy men a kind of picture and foretaste of the Holy Trinity. The three holy men tell Abraham and Sarah that they will soon bear a son, even though they are far advanced in age. So, the three men tell Abraham and Sarah about the coming birth of their son. Then two of the holy men go on their way to Sodom, and it is there, in Sodom, that they are threatened in an outrageous way. The men of Sodom — both old and young — surround the house of Lot and demand that Lot send the holy men out so that the men of Sodom can rape them. We are talking about rape here. We are not talking about dainty, imaginary sinners, but the real thing.

Yet, Abraham intercedes for them. He does not try to save just his nephew, Lot, but the whole town. Abraham negotiates with the LORD. He starts off defending the city by speaking of fifty righteous people. He shows great humility and courtesy before the LORD, but also he perseveres in his project. He is trying to save Sodom. He goes on from fifty righteous people to forty-five. Then forty. And then to thirty. Then to twenty. And finally to ten. He stops there.

But in our minds and in our faith, we can extend the negotiation all the way down to that dreadful number, one. Suppose there had been but one righteous person in that town. Would the LORD have spared that sinful town for the sake of one righteous person? The answer is Yes, but the cost is the life of that one righteous person. It means the death of Jesus. It means the death of the Innocent one for the sinners. It means the death of Jesus for you and for anyone at all in this whole wide world who is willing.

Let me suggest three lessons we can learn from this story.

First, do not underestimate your importance to your city and to your various communities. Fifty righteous persons would have saved Sodom. You should strive that you will be among the fifty righteous people who save New York City. Fifty, or five hundred, or five... I do not know the number. But I do know that your righteousness is a blessing for our town. You might even be the one who is holding back the flood in our city, in our church, in our school
systems and health care systems and all the communities we care about. Fifty righteous people. Let us try with all our hearts to be among them!

Second, do not underestimate the power of your prayers. The prayers of Abraham gave Sodom a chance. The prayers of Abraham changed reality. They introduced new, public commitments in the LORD. He had been set to destroy the city, but because of the prayers of Abraham, he agreed to new thresholds to spare the town — from fifty righteous persons all the way down to ten.

Recently I had a conversation at the Pastor’s Booth in which my guest mentioned that she did not believe in prayer. She seemed puzzled that I do. She asked whether I really believe in prayer. I said that I do. I said that prayer helps save the world. She conceded that our prayers have spared our city from a lot of tragedy. I simply believe this and I hope you do too. In the Bible, Jesus urges us to pray and promises that God will grant the prayer. One day, we will live to see that that has been true, even if for now it is a mystery for us. So, do not give up on prayer. Pray on!

My third and final point is that mercy and forgiveness are appropriate for us who bear the name of Christ. Think of the petition about forgiveness in our Lord’s Prayer. We read it in this morning’s Gospel Lesson:

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\text{and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive every one who is indebted to us; (Luke 11:4, RSV)}
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An early father of the church called this petition “terrible” because it places such responsibility on us who pray to be forgiven. Fair is fair. Jesus requires fairness of us. If we would pray for forgiveness we should at the same time be willing to forgive. Questions of forgiveness are complicated and should probably be taken case by case. But at least we can say this: If someone has done us wrong, but desires our forgiveness, we should grant it. If Abraham could seek the forgiveness of Sodom, Moses of the people of Israel, and our Lord Jesus of the whole world, then we should be a forgiving sort of people. We should join this illustrious company in hoping for and granting forgiveness in this world.

So, the story of Abraham interceding for Sodom is a sad story when we think of its ultimate meaning for Jesus and the Cross. But also it is a beautiful and glorious story, because Good Friday is followed by Easter Sunday, and the whole story is a great revelation to us that we have an awfully good God, even

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the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, to whom belongs the glory now and forever. Amen.