

The Rescue

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on July 17, 2022
based on Genesis 14:8-16*

So, when you hear the name, Lot, I'm guessing that you think of his unlucky wife who turned into a pillar of salt. Right? But, you know, there is more to Lot than that. Frederick Buechner tells the story this way ...

When God decided to wipe the city of Sodom off the map for its sins, he sent a couple of angels down to make sure that Lot was safely out of it first. Therefore he must have had something going for him. On the other hand, it's hard to see just what.

There was the way he conducted himself the day the angels arrived at his house, for instance. The first thing to happen was that some local weirdos started pounding on the front door demanding that he send the angels out to them for purposes that, though never spelled out, Lot seems to have understood well enough since, to save his guests, he immediately suggested that maybe they'd just as soon have his two unmarried daughters instead. The angels evidently thought this was carrying the laws of hospitality too far since, before Lot had a chance to make good on his offer, they struck the door-pounders blind and sent them groping their way back to wherever they'd come from.

When the next morning arrived, Lot himself still hadn't gotten out of town, and the angels were in a snit. God had already started the countdown, and there wasn't a moment to lose. Lot refused to budge an inch, however, so finally in desperation the angels "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" (19:16). Then they told him to flee to the hills before it was too late.

Lot's response must be read to be believed. "Oh no, my lords," he said ... You have shown me great kindness in saving my life; but I cannot flee to the hills lest the disaster overtake me and I die. Behold, 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" (19:18-20).

All of Lot is somehow in that speech. To begin with, He gives no thought at all to the imminent liquidation of all his fellow citizens.

He's just like Donald Trump telling his aides that he thought it was fine that the January 6th insurrectionists were packing guns because he was sure they weren't going to shoot him. Can you believe this guy? Back to Buechner

Beyond that, [Lot] knows perfectly well that he'll be safe in the hills or the angels would never have told him to go there, but wilderness camping isn't for him. He had already made it clear that he would rather be blown sky-high than have to do without indoor plumbing, the morning paper delivered to the door, restaurants ...

*His wife disobeyed the angels' instructions by looking back longingly at what they were leaving behind and was turned into a pillar of salt because of it. It was a dismal fate to be sure, but when you consider all the years of marriage to Lot that would probably have been in store for her otherwise, she may **not** have done all that badly at that.*

Well, if that isn't enough we have this second story of Lot needing rescue in this morning's text ...

When Abram heard that his relative [Lot] had been captured, he took all of the loyal men born in his household, three hundred eighteen ... [Abram] brought back his relative Lot and Lot's property, wives, and people.

According to ancient middle eastern ethics, life is about knowing whose side you're on, or supposed to be on. "It's us or them." You side with members of your clan whether you like them or not; whether they are worthy of rescuing or not.

I mean, look, we know already that Lot is not a particularly upstanding man. He offers his daughters to men who would abuse them, he chooses property based on shallow assumptions. He's kind of a loser, but when he is captured and taken hostage, Abram springs into action. There is no pause. No cogitation. It is reported that Abram, Lot's uncle, just goes. We might be tempted to attribute a certain amount of courage to Abram, but Abram would probably just say, "My kinsmen was captured. I had no choice. It's what we do."

So Abram goes in pursuit to rescue Lot, and also Lot's wives [plural], which are considered Lot's property, unfortunately, and he also rescues Lot's "people."

Now, I want to pause and consider those individuals for a moment. They aren't thought of as individuals, of course. They aren't named in this story where lots of other people are named -- people of class and position; people who matter. These folks are part of Lot's entourage. In fact, they're his slaves. And when you think of them you see how the "us versus them" model for life breaks down. Because "us" is not about our clan or extended family really. It's about mutual pacts of support you make with a few select males you're related to by blood. It's about your obligation to protect their stuff -- their camels and wives and slaves and Lot has the deed to them all.

You know, as kids we read these Bible stories in Sunday School and thought of the men and women who are attached to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob as if they are all on the same level socially, but they didn't really matter as people to those who wrote down these ancient stories. We need a bit of information about ancient anthropology and also bullshit detectors to help us see through the comforting romantic lenses Sunday School gave us to read these stories with, so we can read these stories on their own terms and thus hold a mirror up to our culture today and see the present and the past for what it really is and was.

Here's something from a review of a new book called *The Wrath to Come: Gone with the Wind and the Lies America Tells*, by Sarah Churchwell that does this very thing.

The night before Gone with the Wind's Atlanta premiere in 1939, there was a ball at a plantation. Dressed as slaves, the children of the black Ebenezer Baptist Church choir performed for an all-white audience. They sang 'There's Plenty of Good Room in Heaven'; the actress playing Belle Watling, Rhett Butler's tart with a heart, wept. The scene is already striking: a painfully literal example of the mythologizing of the South for white consumption, redefining slavery as harmless and the slaves themselves as grateful. Yet Sarah Churchwell finds a jaw-dropping detail: 'One of the little Black children dressed as a slave and bringing a sentimental tear to white America's eye was a ten-year-old boy named Martin Luther King, Jr, who would be dead in thirty years for daring to dream of racial equality in America.'

(Alex Von Tunzelmann in Literary Review).

You see what I'm getting at here? I mean, this business of "Make America Great Again." It's all about nostalgia for an America where, in fact, people of color were never happy living under the thumbs of white folk, and where women didn't even have a right to their own bodies; not even when making choices about their body in the privacy of a consult with their physicians. Can you believe it? It's all coming back folks.

Okay, before I go completely ballistic here, let me return to the heart of this morning's text. The "Us vs. Them" paradigm and what might help us lay it to rest.

Not long ago there was a piece in the NYTimes that focused on Rick Steves, the travel entrepreneur and where his heart is.

Steves says he wants everyone to travel, and it's not just his way of drumming up business so as to sell books or travel packages. No, he believes that Americans who go to Europe, for instance, learn to see the world differently. They find out that there is more than one "great" country in the world, and he knows that when people learn that, I mean really learn that, they are no longer xenophobic. Here is how the essay put it ...

RICK STEVES IS ABSOLUTELY AMERICAN. *He wears jeans every single day. He drinks frozen orange juice from a can. He likes his hash browns burned. He dislikes most fancy restaurants. When he's on the road in this country, he prefers to buy a foot-long Subway sandwich and split it between lunch and dinner. Although Steves has published many foreign-language phrase books, the only language he speaks fluently is English. He built his business in America, raised his kids in America and gives frequent loving paeans to the glories of American life.*

And yet: Rick Steves desperately wants you to leave America. The tiniest exposure to the outside world, he believes, will change your entire life. Travel, Steves likes to say, "wallops your ethnocentricity" and "carbonates your experience" and "rearranges your cultural furniture." Steves wants you to go to Europe, and while you're there, he wants you to get way down deep into the culture, to eat with locals in the teeming markets, to make a sympathetic fool of yourself, to get entirely lost in your lack of America.

Okay, where am I going with this? “Rescue” is the title of this sermons and redemption, of course, is a theme at the core of the traditional Christian religion, but it is my belief that it is often misunderstood.

I mean, what does it mean to be “saved?” It’s not a term we even use here at Southim. At bottom, I think that the core meaning of salvation has to do with realizing you are not all you were meant to be. You can’t “save” yourself. Just as Rick Steves says that America shouldn’t think of itself as complete unto itself, you shouldn’t think of yourself that way either.

You see, none of us exists apart from others, even others who are not like us in some fundamental ways. So being saved, as I see it, means that God wants to save us from ourselves – our solitary selves.

Way back when the narrative about Abram and Lot begins in Genesis 12, Abram is called by God and this interesting piece of information is inserted. God says, “Abram, through you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”

Note that God does NOT say, “Through you, only those people who are your DNA matches on Ancestry.com will be saved.” No, God has in mind to bless ALL the families of the earth. It’s counter-intuitive. And it’s easily forgotten, which is why 80+% of white Christians in this country condone racism and xenophobia.

Okay, but look, let me double-down here ... being saved in the Christian sense, is NOT about joining an exclusive club. Though many would sell it that way. Listen to this first-person story by Linda Fielder, now of Portland.

AS I PREPARED to enter first grade, there was talk of busing in my town. My mother didn’t want me riding a bus four hours every day, so she found a private religious school close to our house. My family wasn’t overly religious. In fact, we went to church only on Easter Sunday. I had made a felt-and-macaroni cross at Sunday school the previous Easter, and I planned to take it with me to first grade to impress the teacher.

When I got to school, however, it was obvious that I wouldn’t impress anyone. My parents weren’t deacons or missionaries. I didn’t have a child-sized Bible with my name embossed in gold on the front. And I was the only child in my class who hadn’t been “saved.”

Each school day began and ended with the Pledge of Allegiance, the pledge to the Christian flag, and four choruses of “Onward, Christian Soldiers.” Then our teacher, Mrs. Green, would call for any sinners in the class to come forth and be saved. In order to be saved, the child had to confess a list of sins and then drop to his or her knees and pray for forgiveness. After that, Mrs. Green would ask everyone to turn to a verse in their Bibles (I used a loaner Bible from the teacher’s desk), and we would read aloud about redemption and pray for a spot in Jesus’ kingdom.

The emphasis on salvation didn’t end with this twice-daily ritual. My classmates and I pieced together elaborate “sin collages” by cutting out magazine pictures of people engaged in sinful acts — smoking, drinking, dancing, wearing pantyhose — pasting the pictures onto poster board while reciting, “The wages of sin is death.”

I soon realized that if I was going to be saved, I needed some more impressive sins to confess. So, at home I back-talked to my parents, refused to eat my vegetables, and spewed profanities. By the end of September, I was ready.

On a Friday afternoon, I stammered through the Pledge of Allegiance and the pledge to the Christian flag. By the time we got to “Onward Christian Soldiers,” I was a nervous wreck. My time was at hand.

When Mrs. Green called for the sinners to come forth, I swallowed hard and ran to the front of the classroom, grabbing the loaner Bible from her desk on the way. I dropped to my knees, shut my eyes hard, and let the sins fly: “I pulled the legs off a daddy longlegger. And I said, ‘God damn you, Grandma,’ and I spit green beans on the floor and I poured red Kool-Aid on my sister’s dress and I kicked my dad in the knee.”

I opened my eyes slowly, hoping to see Mrs. Green, and maybe Jesus himself, welcoming me into the flock. Mrs. Green was clutching her Bible to her chest. She seemed to be having a hard time breathing. She excused the rest of the students for the day and silently led me out to the circular drive, where my mother waited in the car.

I stood on the sidewalk while Mrs. Green lowered herself into the passenger seat of my mother's car and closed the door. I saw her wag her Bible at my mother several times, and they took turns pointing at me and shouting. Then Mrs. Green burst out of the car, coughing and fanning away cigarette smoke with her Bible. I scurried into the car and shut the door.

As we drove away from the school, Mother rolled down her window and flicked her cigarette out at Mrs. Green's feet. "That damn woman is as crazy as a loon!" Mother said, fumbling in her purse for another cigarette. "Why didn't you tell me they were torturing you in there?" I could see tears in her eyes. I understood that I wouldn't be going back to the Christian school again.

When Mother stopped yelling, I asked the question that had been gnawing at me since I'd come forward and taken my place in the sinners' circle: "Did Mrs. Green tell you if I was saved?" Mother slowed to a stop and looked at me. I was still clutching the loaner Bible in my trembling fingers. My mother pried the book from my grip and set it on the back seat. "Oh, yes, Linda," she said, as she checked the rearview mirror and pulled away from the curb. "You are absolutely saved."

If you've been to our new member class you probably have heard me say right up front that if you are looking for "the one true church" we're not it. We're not it because we don't believe there is such a thing.

Wherever you are on your particular journey of faith, you are welcome here. So we're not out to "save" people because while we take the Bible seriously we don't take it literally in everything, especially in doctrines invented after it was written, like the business of hell.

Not many of us here believe it exists, or that God is interested in sending anyone to eternal punishment. It just doesn't jibe at all with the gospel love Jesus is obsessed with.

As I said, being saved might just mean God wants to rescue us from ourselves and also from puny theological ideas that keep us from being the all-loving, Jesus infused people God means us to be.

Allow me to close with a word from Fr Richard Rohr that sets everything I've spoke of in context:

Christianity is a lifestyle - a way of being in the world that is simple, non-violent, shared, and loving. However, we made it into an established "religion" (and all that goes with that) and have avoided the lifestyle change itself.

One could be warlike, greedy, racist, selfish, and vain in most of Christian history, and still believe that Jesus is one's "personal Lord and Savior" . . . The world has no time for such silliness anymore. The suffering on Earth is too great.

Amen