

Then the men set out from there, and they looked toward Sodom, and Abraham went with them to set them on their way. ¹⁷The Lord said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, ¹⁸seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? ¹⁹No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.” ²⁰Then the Lord said, “How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! ²¹I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me, and if not, I will know.”

²²So the men turned from there and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the Lord. ²³Then Abraham came near and said, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? ²⁵Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” ²⁶And the Lord said, “If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.” ²⁷Abraham answered, “Let me take it upon myself to speak to my lord, I who am but dust and ashes. ²⁸Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?” And he said, “I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.” ²⁹Again he spoke to him, “Suppose forty are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of forty I will not do it.” ³⁰Then he said, “Oh, do not let my lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there.” He answered, “I will not do it, if I find thirty there.” ³¹He said, “Let me take it upon myself to speak to my lord. Suppose twenty are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.” ³²Then he said, “Oh, do not let my lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.” ³³And the Lord went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

We've been working through a series of stories about Abraham and his dysfunctional family. We read about how Abraham blindly journeyed with God and how Abraham and Sarah both laughed at God. We're diving into untraditional behavior, and now we hear that he barterers with God.

Now, there is a world of difference between making bargains with God for selfish reasons and wrestling with, advocating for, and negotiating with God on behalf of others or even yourself because life is painful and messy. The first is bad for you; the second is, I would argue, vitally important.

But not all would agree with me. Just as some would think that laughing at God crosses a red line, so too do they think bargaining is inappropriate. The famous evangelist Billy Graham said, "God is not a bargaining God. You cannot barter with him. You must do business with him on his own terms."

Hindu leader Mahatma Gandhi said, "A man of faith does not bargain or stipulate with God."

And so I find myself confused. Because some Biblical people of great faith have given us great examples of bartering with God.

Jacob, Abraham's grandson, would famously wrestle a divine being in the night, and would refuse to let go until the being told their name. Jacob also received a new name that night, Israel, which literally means, "one who wrestles with God." Jacob wrestled both physically and verbally. And remember, he only received his desired bride, Rachel, after 14 years of bargaining for labor for his uncle.

Hannah barterers with God when she begs for a child. "If You give me a child, I will raise that child and then have that child then serve you in the temple."

Moses bartered with God when God grew frustrated at the people. David bartered with God, too. And so did the tempter, the evil one. In Job, we have a story about God and the evil one negotiating about testing Job's faithfulness, and in the gospels, the tempter

offered Jesus a throne and power in exchange for obedience. Striking bargains throughout the centuries.

Now, there aren't many times we practice bargaining in our capitalistic economy. In our days, we have non-negotiable pricing. We scan barcodes at the grocery store rather than barter at a market stand. We pay sticker price for clothing rather than negotiate. But there are still a few times we can practice our negotiating skills. How many of you have gone back and forth on the price of a car or a home? That's still one realm of consumerism where we can assume that the sticker price is not going to be the actual purchase price. We are expected to barter and negotiate.

But even though we don't bargain much anymore in our retail shopping, we do bargain throughout our lives. Parents bargain with their children about eating vegetables. Amen? I gave you just 10 peas. You could fit them all on one spoonful and be done with it, but just, just eat five. Eat five, and I'll let you have five more minutes of screen time. Eat five peas and you can stay up half an hour later. Eat five, and I'll give you five dollars! What will it take for you to eat five peas! Name your price!

Bargaining and negotiating is not just for purchases and children's vegetables. It's also one of the stages of grief that we all go through. There are five stages - denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Bargaining is the middle finger of grief. God, if you'll do x, I'll do y. Let's make a deal. Punish me, not the one I love. Give me that burden, not them. I'll go back to church if you do blank. I'll volunteer. I'll stop doing something, or I'll start doing something. Name your price, just fix it.

Sometimes bargaining with God is a sign of our desperation.

But even more commonly than that, we bargain and negotiate when we pray on behalf of others. We don't think of it as bargaining but when we pray for others, we call that intercessory prayer. Much of our prayer life is intercessory. And that's what Abraham was doing in our scripture today.

Abraham didn't have a vested interest in Sodom. Now, his nephew Lot and Lot's family lived there, but he didn't know anyone else in Sodom. He didn't know why Sodom had a bad reputation. And he wasn't questioning that God was just and had a right to investigate.

I do think he was probably concerned for Lot, and I think God heard that, because in the next chapter Lot and his family were warned to get out before the punishment fell, but Abraham was interceding not specifically for Lot and his family but for all the innocent and righteous. As we all should be doing.

Each week in worship, we pray for one another. I receive prayer cards, prayer emails, prayer requests. Please pray for so-and-so. Please pray for x and y and z.

There's been a diagnosis, an accident, a crisis. Things are not going well, and we want God to intervene and change the course of fate. And we should. We are called to be in dialogue with God. And called to love our neighbors. And called to advocate for the marginalized and powerless. We are called to believe in a miracle-maker of a God who hears our prayers. And we are called to have faith that God loves us and we are all mortal and mistake-prone, but worthy of God's mercy.

What amazes me about this story is that it demonstrates for me what I hope all of us can aspire to. I hope that we all get to a point in our relationship with God in which we can have a conversation like the one God and Abraham have. This is what I want for you! Such comfort praying to God and God communicating to you that God can think, "should I tell (your name) what's on my mind?"

Yes! Yes, God! We want to be so in sync with God and so close to the Divine that God's response to the rhetorical question is, "Yes, yes. (your name) is faithful, and I've made a covenant with (your name). I'm going to need (your name) to bless others, so he/she should know what I'm up to."

I want all of us to be in that inner circle of closeness!

And I want us to say, “God, You are holy and I am not, but You are also just, so don’t harm the faithful ones. Don’t take out Your wrath on the innocent. If there is evil, I understand, but the whole place isn’t evil.” And then have the courage to speak up over and over again on their behalf.

So that’s one aspect of this story that I appreciate.

But then there’s God’s explanation to Abraham. God doesn’t seem to have a particular plan. He has an investigation, a curiosity. God says, “I have heard that bad things are happening, and I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me, and if not, I will know.”

Now, this is theologically loaded. Perhaps it’s the reason why this passage is not in the lectionary, because it reveals some unusual characteristics about God, and yet maybe we shouldn’t read that much into it, but I grew up being told that God is omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient. You all got that Bible study lesson in 2nd grade, too, right? Omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient.

Based on the giggles and confused looks, I’m guessing some of you were absent that Sunday when we learned about God, so omnipresent means that God is present everywhere. God is with the suffering in a hospital in Omaha, Nebraska and simultaneously God is with someone suffering in a hospital in Odesa, Ukraine.

Omnipotent means God is all powerful. There is nothing that God cannot do. Defying physics, keeping the universe forever expanding and yet perfectly balanced so we don’t crash into the sun or the moon. All-powerful. And yet evil exists.

And omniscient means that God knows everything – completely, perfectly, and especially since God exists outside of the constructs of time and space, God knows the beginning, middle, and end of it all already. There are no secrets. There is no question. God knows it all. Omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient.

So why, in Genesis 18, is God curious about what is happening in Sodom and physically needs to send two divine beings from Abraham's home to Sodom to investigate? God doesn't know what is happening and isn't there already? And why is God negotiating with a mortal about how many righteous people there might be and what God's response should be? Doesn't that fly in the face of all-present, all-knowing, and all-powerful God? I think I understand why this passage is not commonly read in churches . . . it really throws a wrench in some theology.

But here we are. God is curious. Things have reached God's ear, but God wants to see personally what's going on before passing judgment. And I like that. I think there's a lesson for us in this. That we should have first-hand experience before passing judgment on someone or something? We tend to listen to opinion panelists rather than credible witnesses. We live in an age in which we don't use primary sources anymore. We hear how dangerous the southern border is from people who don't live in border towns. So, investigation is worthy. Fact-checking before knee-jerk responding is honorable. Primary sources are better than secondary sources or people who get paid to be loud on tv. So, we should ask, are LA and DC deplorable places, or are they metropolitan cities with normal metropolitan challenges? Who can tell us? Who are our sources?

Let's look deeper into the mirror for a moment. Do you personally know someone who uses medical marijuana or do you condemn all marijuana use as a danger to society, a gateway drug, without any personal testimony about how it helps people on chemo, people with PTSD, MS, and anxiety? Personally, I've never held a joint or even been in proximity to one that's been lit, but I know people who swear by its efficacy.

A recent study says four in ten Americans know a transgendered person personally, but that means six in ten do not. Do you? Has any one of them ever told you about the fear and depression they experience? The danger of meeting new people. The years long journey to start hormone therapy. The risk they took the first time they told their family, their friends, and their HR department that they were using a different name and pronouns? I'm not talking about a television personality or someone who is in the headlines. I mean know

them. If not, perhaps you should withhold judgment about all of them. I have six in my phone contact list, and I met all of them at church.

Do you have loving relationships with people who are members of the opposite political party to yours? Do you condemn all people who vote a certain way or do you realize, like Abraham, that even in the midst of Sodom, there must be some righteous people among them. The whole lot should not be condemned. Polarization is not the answer.

Within any population, however defined, there is a spectrum of good and evil, passion and apathy, ideology and societal norm, and we are called to the truth of our collective humanity. We are all sinful, selfish people in need of mercy. Yes, some sin is violent and oppressive and harmful to others in tangible ways while other sin is more individualistic and less impactful to others. The law is the law. Violence should be met with justice, but none of us are perfect, and Abraham humbly acknowledges that he, too, is mortal and imperfect, and God is just to condemn, and yet he knows that righteousness is what God sees in him and what God can see in others. Certainly, there must be other righteous people in Sodom, imperfect though they may be.

And we can apply that to our own lives.

What I pray for in the midst of all of this is that we can be so comfortable in our relationship with God that we can say, I understand that we are all mortals and messy and embarrassing and violent sometimes and unholy and You are immortal and holy, but can I talk with you about dementia? Can you maybe please inspire some researcher somewhere to find a cure for dementia? Or I understand that there has been conflict in the area of Israel and Gaza since civilization first made fire, but could you please for the love of all things holy get Netanyahu to stop talking about taking all of Gaza, get the hostages released, and get those precious children some food? God, I know democracy and Christianity aren't the same thing, but for the love of Jesus, would You have mercy on our democracy there are still good people in public service.

We can say things like that. It's ok. Even if we believe God already knows the endgame. Because God has made a covenant with us and wants to use us to bless others, and wants that kind of comfort level where we ask ourselves, "Should I tell God what's on my mind?" And God asks Godself, "Should I tell Gin what's on my mind?" and the answer to both questions is "Yeah, you should."

Friends, don't hold back. Advocate for what you love, your neighbors, people who seek refuge and work in America, even your enemies. Be curious, not judgmental. (Now where have I heard that before?) Bargain with God for those who need someone to advocate for them. Don't worry about polishing your vocabulary or getting it all right. Don't worry about renegotiating, even several times over the same issue, but then trust God. Just as Abraham negotiated over and over and then went home after the conversation ended instead of running to Sodom and getting Lot and his family out, we, too, should trust God's justice and mercy. Give it to God, fight for what you believe in, negotiate for what you hope for, bargain for what you grieve for, and what you need, and then have faith and trust in God to be God – loving and just and merciful. Amen.