

PENTECOST 7

JULY 24, 2022

GENESIS 18:20-32

PSALM 138

LUKE 11: 1-13

GRACE AND PEACE TO YOU FROM OUR GOD WHO OFFERS US LIFE IN THE PRAYER OF JESUS WHO LIVES, DIES AND RISES ON OUR BEHALF..

BEFORE US THIS DAY ARE TEXTS THAT DESTABILIZE OUR NOTIONS OF WHO GOD IS AND HOW OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THIS GOD CAN BE IMAGINED.

NOW OF COURSE, IT THE CONFESSION OF THE CHURCH THAT WE KNOW WHO GOD IS THROUGH JESUS... HOWEVER, AT THE SAME TIME.. THERE ARE MANY IN AND OUT OF THE CHURCH WHO IMAGINE GOD IN DIFFERING WAYS THAN WHAT WE LEARN OF GOD THROUGH JESUS...

SOME IMAGINE GOD AS A DISTANT CONDEMNING JUDGE AND OTHERS IMAGINE A PASSIVE INEFFECTUAL PRESENCE.. .. OTHERS DESCRIBE GOD AS A MASTER PLANNER.. ONE WHO HAS MAPPED OUT EVERYTHING THAT WILL HAPPEN AND THAT WE ARE SIMPLY PAWNS IN THE DIVINE GAME...

HOWEVER... AS OUR TEXTS BEFORE US TODAY TESTIFY... THE GOD OF THE SCRIPTURES AND JESUS IS WONDERFULLY MORE COMPLEX THAN THESE IMAGES... FOR IN JESUS WE LEARN OF A GOD WHO IS LOVINGLY AND INSISTENTLY ENGAGED IN THE WORLD, always SEEKING JUSTICE WHILE always OFFERING MERCY AND LIFE..

ON THIS DAY.. JESUS POINTS US AGAIN TO THE GOD WHO INVITES US INTO AN ACTIVE RELATIONALITY AND as such, into ACTIVE PRAYER... AND SO JESUS DESCRIBES GOD'S RELATIONSHIP WITH US USING THE STORY OF A PERSON IN NEED URGENTLY AND PERSISTANTLY KNOCKING ON THE DOOR OF A NEIGHBOR AND FRIEND AT MIDNIGHT.

JESUS DESCRIBES A GOD WHO IS LIKE A FRIEND AND NEIGHBOR WHO LISTENS AND EXPECTS US TO SHARE OUR NEEDS AND OUR HOPES AND FEARS... WHETHER WE KNOCK ON THE DOOR AT MIDNIGHT OR ON A SUMMER MORNING IN JULY.

THIS NOTION OF BEING A FRIEND OF GOD REMINDS ME OF AN ESSAY WRITTEN BY KRISTER STENDAHL THE GREAT HARVARD NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLAR, THEOLOGIAN, AND BISHOP OF STOCKHOLM. IN THE ESSAY HE WROTE THAT IN BIBLE - IN ORDER TO BE CALLED A FRIEND OF GOD - YOU HAD TO BE SOMEONE WHO HAS ARGUED WITH GOD...

AND SO IT IS THAT ABRAHAM IS ONE SUCH FRIEND..

TODAY the TEXTS BEFORE US INSIST THAT ...PRAYER ITSELF... THE CONVERSATIONS THAT ARISE IN our RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.....THESE TEXTS INSIST THAT THESE PRAYERFUL ENCOUNTERS ARE MORE THAN POLITE EXERCISES BETWEEN CREATOR AND CREATURE.. BUT RATHER ARE EVENTS OF LIFE AND DEATH..

AND IN PARTICULAR .. IN OUR FIRST LESSON WE ENCOUNTER AN INTENSE RE-IMAGING OF WHO GOD IS AND HOW IT IS WE ARE INVITED TO PRAY...

IN OUR TEXT GOD HAS DECIDED TO LET ABRAHAM KNOW THAT GOD INTENDS TO ADDRESS THE GRAVE EVIL OF THE CITIES OF SODOM AND GOMORRAH..TWO CITIES WHOSE BLATANT LACK OF HOSPITALITY TO THE STRANGER WAS AN AFFRONT TO THE GOD OF WELCOME FOR ALL.

...before entering in though ... one side note...

EVERY TIME I ENGAGE THIS TEXT .. I REMEMBER THE WORDS OF THE .. JAPANESE THEOLOGIAN KOSUKO KOYAMA ... WHO INSISTS THAT WE CANNOT ENCOUNTER THIS TEXT IN GENESIS 18 WITHOUT REMEMBERING THE EVENTS OF 77 YEARS AGO .. WHEN IN AUGUST OF 1945 OUR COUNTRY DESTROYED TWO CITIES AND LAUNCHED THE NUCLEAR ERA..

HIROSHIMA AND NAGASAKI WERE DESTROYED BY OUR NATION.. OUR COUNTRY WHERE MOST WERE PRAYING THE LORD'S PRAYER.. PRAYING IN THE PLURAL.. OUR FATHER.... BUT APPARENTLY NOT THINKING THAT THE 1ST PLURAL EXTENDED BEYOND NATIONAL BOUNDARIES..

And then to deepen the bite... KOYAMA REMINDS US THAT NAGASAKI WAS HOME TO THE HEAVIEST CONCENTRATION OF CHRISTIANS IN JAPAN... AND SO HE ASKS "SURELY THERE WERE RIGHTEOUS PEOPLE IN THAT CITY... "

NOW OF COURSE, HUNDREDS AND THOUSANDS OF OTHER CITIES HAVE BEEN DESTROYED THROUGHOUT THE CENTURIES.. AND EVEN NOW IN THESE DAYS IN THE UKRAINE AND TOO MANY OTHER PLACES

DESTROYED FOR POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, RELIGIOUS, AND MILITARY REASONS.. AND TO BE SURE.. WE CAN ASK.. SURELY THERE MUST BE RIGHTEOUS ONES IN ALL OF THESE PLACES AS WELL..

BUT OF COURSE, WITH SODOM AND GOMORRAH.. THERE IS ONE DIFFERENCE... ACCORDING TO OUR ACCOUNT IN GENESIS... UNLIKE THESE OTHER PLACES.. THE DECISION TO DESTROY IS NOT THE DECISION OF POLITICAL LEADERS, OR GENERALS..

RATHER.. BEFORE IS A STORY THAT TELLS ABOUT GOD'S DECISION TO DESTROY SODOM AND GOMORRAH BECAUSE OF THEIR SIN OF INHOSPITALITY AND THEIR VIOLENCE TOWARD THE STRANGER AND OUTSIDER!! DISPISTE HUNDREDS OF YEARS OF DISTORTED INTERPRETATION..... WHAT IS CLEAR FROM THE TEXT AND OTHER REFERENCES IN THE SCRIPTURE IS THAT THE ISSUE FOR SODOM AND GOMORRAH IS ONE OF HOSPITALTIY AND THE LACK OF IT

THE DIFFERENCE THEN BETWEEN SODOM AND GOMORRAH AND OTHER DESTROYED TOWNS AND CITIES THROUGHOUT THE CENTURIES THAT HAVE SUFFERED DESTRUCTION.. IS THAT HERE WE HAVE A TEXT THAT ADDRESSES THE QUESTION.. *COULD THIS PROPOSED DESTRUCTION BE THE WILL OF GOD'S VERY SELF...* AND OUGHT THIS BE THE MANNER AND WAY OF GOD TO DO SUCH A THING?

THE TEXT BEFORE US REFLECTS AND ENGAGES THE THEOLOGY OF THE DAY... THAT GOD THE JUDGE WILL DESTROY... BUT THIS TEXT DARES TO PROPOSE THAT GOD'S WILL TO SAVE OUGHT TO TAKE PRECEDENCE OVER THE WILL TO DESTROY

AND IT IS HERE .. IN THIS PARTICULAR CASE .. THAT FATHER ABRAHAM STEPS FORWARD AND ADDRESSES GOD...

HERE IN GENESIS 18, ... JUST AFTER THE ANGEL STRANGERS VISIT AND REVEAL THAT ABRAHAM AND SARAH WILL HAVE A CHILD...

ABRAHAM ENTERS INTO PRAYER... AND INTO A CONVERSATION THAT CONTINUES THROUGH MUCH OF SCRIPTURE CONCERNING ISSUES OF GUILT AND PUNISHMENT, OF RIGHTEOUSNESS AND WICKEDNESS.. A CONVERSATION CONCERNING THE ROOTS OF TRUE JUSTICE AND MERCY.. AND GOD'S ROLE IN ALL OF THIS

AND SO, AFTER HEARING OF THE JUDGMENT TO BE LAID UPON SODOM AND GOMORRAH, ABRAHAM PRAYS... AND HE PROTESTS! AND ASKS....

WILL YOU INDEED DESTROY THE RIGHTEOUS WITH THE WICKED??... SUPPOSE THERE ARE 50 RIGHTEOUS WITHIN THE CITY.. WILL YOU THEN DESTROY THE PLACE AND NOT SPARE IT FOR THE 50 RIGHTEOUS WHO ARE IN IT??....

IN THIS BOLD, SHAMELESS.. DARING PRAYER.. ABRAHAM BELLOWS.. FAR 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 RIGHT...??? SHALL NOT THE CREATOR OF ALL THINGS BE A BLESSING TO ALL THINGS?

ABRAHAM IS DETERMINED HERE TO ENCOUNTER A GOD OF MERCY AND GRACE WHOSE JUDGMENTS OPERATE IN A DIFFERENT REALM THAN ANY SUCH JUSTICE THAT DELIGHTS IN THE DEMISE OF THE WICKED

THE TRADITIONAL ETHIC OF HIS TIME AND OURS IS THAT THE GUILTY OUGHT TO GET WHAT THEY DESERVE.. **AND** EVEN MORE, IT IS ASSUMED THAT GUILT BY ASSOCIATION IS MUCH MORE POWERFUL THAN ANY NOTION OF INNOCENCE BY ASSOCIATION...

TOO MUCH OF THEOLOGY HAS CELEBRATED RETRIBUTION ... WITH A MORALISTIC THEOLOGY WHICH LINKS THE RULE OF GOD WITH THE PUNISHMENT OF SINNERS.. EVEN WHEN THE PUNISHMENT MIGHT INCLUDE THE INNOCENT...

BUT HERE ABRAHAM ASKS GOD WHETHER GOD WILL ACTUALLY BE BOUND BY SUCH CONVENTIONAL EXPECTATIONS AND UNDERSTANDINGS ... OR WHETHER GOD WILL BE OPEN TO A NEW WAY OF DEALING WITH SIN...

ABRAHAM WONDERS WHETHER GOD MIGHT BE WILLING TO THINK ABOUT THE EXERCISE OF JUSTICE AND MERCY IN NEW WAYS... AND PERHAPS EVEN IN SUCH A WAY THAT THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THE FEW WOULD HAVE HEALING POWER FOR THE MANY...

WILL GOD ACT LIKE EVERYONE ELSE OR WILL GOD ACT IN A NEW WAY??? .. WE MIGHT EVEN CHARACTERIZE ABRAHAM'S QUESTIONS AS ... WILL GOD ACT AS HUMAN OR WILL YOU GOD NOW.. PERHAPS ACT LIKE GOD...

FAR BE IT FROM YOU .. MY DIVINE FRIEND... YOU WHO HAS PROMISED A CHILD TO US EVEN AS WE ARE AS OLD AS THE HILLS.. YOU WHO HAS PROMISED THAT WE WILL BE A BLESSING TO THE WORLD.. WILL YOU NOT ALSO BE A BLESSING?

HOW IS IT THAT ABRAHAM DARES SPEAK TO GOD IN THIS WAY... ??

IT SEEMS THAT SOMEHOW IN HIS EXPERIENCE AND INTERACTION WITH GOD .. HE HAS DISCERNED AN INVITATION... AN EXPECTATION EVEN... THAT GOD EXPECTS SUCH QUESTIONING AND EVEN PUSH BACK.. WITH SUCH A SHAMELESS ENGAGEMENT FROM A HUMAN.

COULD IT BE THAT ABRAHAM IS SO BOLD TO SPEAK BECAUSE OF THE GOD EXPERIENCE OF SARAH AND ABRAHAM WHEN THEY WERE CALLED FORTH TO BE A BLESSING.. PERHAPS IT WAS THEN THAT ABRAHAM CAME TO BELIEVE THAT GOD IS RECRUITABLE

SOMEHOW, ABRAHAM SENSES THAT THIS GOD WHO HAD CALLED HIM WAS A GOD WHO WAS AVAILABLE TO THE KNOCK ON THE DOOR AT MIDNIGHT... THAT THIS GOD DARED TO BE IN RELATIONSHIP AND BE VULNERABLE TO CONVERSATION AND EVEN ARGUMENT...

ABRAHAM TRUSTS THAT GOD HAS ESTABLISHED A RELATIONSHIP WHERE GOD IS NOT THE ONLY ONE WHO HAS SOMETHING IMPORTANT TO SAY!! GOD IS OPEN TO NEW PERSPECTIVES AND INGREDIENTS THAT THE HUMAN BRINGS TO THE CONVERSATION...

ABRAHAM TRUSTS THEN THAT PRAYER HAS THE POTENTIAL TO SHAPE THE FUTURE IN WAYS DIFFERENT FROM WHAT WOULD HAVE BEEN THE CASE HAD NO PRAYER BEEN UTTERED.

OR AS THE GREAT OLD TESTAMENT SCHOLAR TERRY FRETHERM HAS WRITTEN.. THERE IS ENOUGH LOOSENESS IN THE MORAL ORDER FOR PRAYER TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

AND SO ABRAHAM ASKS AND PUSHES GOD... CANNOT THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD BE A BLESSING EVEN FOR THESE CITIES...

THE BOLDNESS OF ABRAHAM'S SPEECH IS STAGGERING BUT EVEN MORE STAGGERING TO OUR STATIC AND STALE IMAGES OF GOD IS THE WITNESS HERE THAT GOD RECEIVES AND HEARS THESE DARING WORDS OF ABRAHAM

AND SO GOD ANSWERS YES.. IF THERE ARE FIFTY RIGHTEOUS.. THE WHOLE PLACE WILL BE SAVED..

WHAT A DIFFERENT WAY OF THINKING ABOUT GOD .. AND OF THINKING ABOUT PRAYER... FOR HERE WE HAVE A GOD WHO TAKES INTO ACCOUNT OUR PLEAS AND DEMANDS.. HERE WE HAVE A GOD WHO EXPECTS OUR PRAYER.. EVEN EXPECTING OUR QUESTIONING AND OUR PLEADING

AND SO ABRAHAM AND GOD'S CONVERSATION CONTINUES LIKE THE TRANSACTION IN A MIDDLE EASTERN MARKET.. HOW ABOUT 40, HOW ABOUT 30.. 20?? OR EVEN 10???

and with that..

THE POINT THEN HAS BEEN MADE.. THESE ADDITIONAL PETITIONS OF ABRAHAM ARE NOT REALLY ABOUT SPECIFIC NUMBERS BUT RATHER SERVE TO DEEPEN THE CONVERSATION ABOUT GOD'S JUSTICE AND MERCY.. PUSHING GOD and US TO CONSIDER WHETHER OR NOT THE INNOCENT CAN SAVE THE GUILTY.. AND PUSHING US TO PONDER .. WHAT KIND OF GOD IS THIS WHO IS SO VULNERABLE TO US AND OUR QUESTIONS

THIS CONVERSATION before us today REVEALS A GOD WHO IS LESS AND LESS A SCORE-KEEPER AND GUARDIAN OF MORALITY .. AND MORE AND MORE ONE WHO IS WILLING TO CELEBRATE THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF A FEW.. AND EVEN TO SAVE THE MANY FOR THE SAKE OF THE FEW..

AND PERHAPS THEN ONE DAYA GOD WILLING TO SAVE ALL FOR THE SAKE OF ONE.. A BELOVED ONE EVEN ..WHO WILL SAVE AND RECONCILE THE WHOLE CREATION

ABRAHAM'S PRAYER HAS NOW OPENED A DOOR THAT CANNOT BE SHUT.. IT CANNOT BE TAKEN BACK... THIS RADICAL PRAYER OF ABRAHAM FUNCTIONS AS A GERMINATING SEED OF GOOD NEWS IN THE SCRIPTURES.. PARTICULARLY FOR THE PROPHETS LIKE MOSES, ISAIAH, EZEKIEL HOSEA, JOB AND JONAH .. ALL OF WHOM ARE FRIENDS OF GOD SUCH THAT.. THEY TOO WILL PUSH AND QUESTION THIS GOD...

THIS TEXT INVITES US TO ALWAYS ACT AND PRAY .. TO IMAGINE GOD AS ONE WHO WELCOMES, EXPECTS AND HOPES FOR OUR PRAYERS

AND IT IS THE WITNESS AND TESTIMONY OF THIS PLACE.. THAT THE SEED OF THIS PRAYER.. THIS CONVERSATION BETWEEN ABRAHAM AND GOD.. SPRINGS FORTH AGAIN ... IN THE LIVING AND DYING AND RISING OF JESUS.. WHERE WE ENCOUNTER A GOD WHO HAS GIVEN UP CALCULATIONS.. AND WHO NOW OFFERS RIGHTEOUSNESS AS A GIFT TO THE WHOLE CREATION.. ALL FOR THE SAKE OF ONE RIGHTEOUS ONE!!

ALL FOR THE SAKE OF THIS JESUS ... THIS RIGHTEOUS ONE WHO IN THE GARDEN PRAYED NOT MY WILL BUT THY WILL BE DONE ... AND THEN HANGING ON THE CROSS.. VIEWING THE CRUCIFIERS... HE PRAYS. FORGIVE THEM... GIVE MERCY EVEN TO THOSE WHO SHOW NO MERCY...

...FOR WHAT ABRAHAM PRAYED FOR ON BEHALF OF SODOM... THAT THE INNOCENT SHOULD SAVE THE WICKED.. THIS NOW WE TRUST IS A REALITY IN THE FULLNESS OF JESUS OFFERING HIMSELF FOR ALL...

WE TESTIFY HERE IN THIS PLACE.. THAT GOD IS SHAMELESS IN GIVING HOLINESS AWAY ...GIVING WITNESS THAT GOD DOES SPEAK A YES.. TO US AND THE WHOLE CREATION.. AND THAT FINALLY... THERE IS NO PRICE EXCEPT GOD'S VERY SELF .. THAT IS GIVEN AWAY.. AND NOT ONLY FOR THE SAKE OF THE RIGHTEOUS BUT FOR THE EVIL DOER AS WELL..

TODAY IT IS THIS GOD WHO WELCOMES AND EVEN COMMANDS OUR WILLINGNESS TO PRAY AS ABRAHAM AND JESUS PRAYED.. .. TO PRAY PERSISTANTLY AND INSISTANTLY ON BEHALF OF THE NEIGHBOR AND YES.. ON BEHALF OF OUR ENEMY.. AND THAT WE BE SHAMELESS IN SEEKING THE WELFARE OF OTHERS.. AS WELL AS OURSELVES...

WE CAN BE SHAMELESS BECAUSE THERE IS NO SHAME IN PRAYER OFFERED TO THE ONE WHO IS PERSISTENTLY SEEKING A RELATIONSHIP WITH US.. A GOD WHO INVITES... DESIRES AND HOPES FOR OUR PRAYERS..

WE PRAY THEN AS DID JESUS.. FOR DAILY BREAD FOR ALL OF US..

PRAYING ..GIVE US .. NOT JUST ME .. BUT US.. ALL OF US.. OUR DAILY BREAD.. .. GIVE US.. FEED US.. CLOTH US.. HEAL US...
FORGIVE US... BRING WHOLENESS...
SAVE US.. FROM THE TIMES OF TRIAL .. FROM PRINCIPALITIES AND POWERS.. AND ALL THAT LEAD US TO VIOLENCE AND SEPARATION..

TO PRAY THIS WAY IS FINALLY THEN TO LIVE THIS WAY.. TRUSTING THAT GOD HAS LET GO OF VENGEANCE FOR THE SAKE OF RECONCILIATION.. WE TOO THEN CAN LET GO.. TRUSTING THAT THE MERCY AND EMBRACE OF JESUS IS OUR WAY OF IMAGING WHO GOD IS... THIS FRIEND OF ABRAHAM AND THIS FRIEND OF OURS.

SO LET US PRAY ... LET US FOLLOW .. AND LET US COME NOW AND EAT... FOR HERE AT THIS TABLE IS GOD'S SELF OFFERED FOR YOU ALL... THE RIGHTEOUS AND THE SINNER.. COME AND EAT AND THEN GO AND GIVE THIS GOOD NEWS AWAY