

Today we begin a new church year. In the season of Advent we prepare for the arrival of the newborn king, Jesus. Just as there is much preparation that has to be done for the arrival of an important guest, so also there is much to be done before the arrival of our king, Jesus.

Jesus is coming, and this is a truth that must be taken very seriously. Jesus is coming in *judgment*. (Do we take that seriously enough?) He is also coming in *deliverance*. There is a great story in the Old Testament that brings home both of these points beautifully.

We actually know a fair amount about Sodom and Gomorrah, because the cities are spoken of frequently in the Bible, and they are also mentioned in secular accounts as well. There has also been some excavating done in the areas where these cities used to be. Located below sea level, these cities were probably the lowest inhabited places in the world. If you know anything about Sodom and Gomorrah, you'll see the irony that this was the lowest place on earth. The two cities were actually part of 5 cities in a very fertile area. The area was very wealthy. Not sure exactly why. Perhaps salt trade and other minerals. Also because the region was fertile for cattle and farming.

But with their affluence also came great wickedness. The people of Sodom was wealthy and arrogant people. Law allowed that any strangers that came to the city could be treated however they wanted. Visitors could only stay in the city if the elders approved. Visitors could be raped, enslaved, murdered. They had no rights whatsoever once they entered the city gates of Sodom. Their purpose was to keep out the poor and ugly out! Charity was practically a crime in Sodom and Gomorrah. Ezekiel said, **“Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. 50 They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen.”** Ezekiel 16:49-50.

Arrogance. Immoral. No help for the needy. No sexual boundaries. Feeding their sexual lust was what they were all about. Homosexuality was also not only acceptable, but openly practiced and encouraged. This was about as bad as a culture or city could get.

And God took notice. God decided that Judgment Day would come early for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. God's patience had run out, and he would tolerate their wickedness no more. And we read:

24 Then the Lord rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah—from the Lord out of the heavens. 25 Thus he overthrew those cities and the entire plain, including all those living in the cities—and also the vegetation in the land. 26 But Lot's wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.

27 Early the next morning Abraham got up and returned to the place where he had stood before the Lord. 28 He looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, toward all the land of the plain, and he saw dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace.

God had enough. God sent the judgment on this city which was well deserved. They have done some excavating in the areas of where these cities were and they have discovered a thin layer of what looks like asphalt all over the city. Some speculate that an earthquake may have broken open the earth. Perhaps a natural gas explosion sent burn tar shooting into the air. It would have

looked exactly like fire raining down from heaven. God had enough of the wickedness of these cities and the time of their judgment came.

In a lot of churches today, the wrath of God, his hatred of sin, his intolerance of sin, his anger over disobedience, his insistence of absolute morality – a real right and wrong - his punishment on evil doers... fire and brimstone... this is something that is just not preached. This truth of God is simply brushed over. It is hidden from sight. “Well, it makes people uncomfortable. It tends to make people not come back to church.” Here at Good Shepherd, we believe all Scripture is God-breathed and is profitable and so we teach and about the holiness and righteous anger of God over sin and disobedience.

When God says, “Thou shalt” and “thou shalt not”... he means it! God didn’t give 10 Suggestions. Keep them if you want. If you have a better way, that’s fine too. They work for some, but not for all. I’m very tolerant of whatever *you* feel is right. No! They are 10 Commandments. God’s right and God wrong are absolute. They do not change. Societies change. Cultural views change. Accepted morality shifts. So what one society calls wrong, another might call right. But God’s morality is absolute. And even if a certain sin is acceptable and permissible in a given society, God still calls it wrong. And it is wrong. And God will be made at the disobeyer, even if society gives its stamp of approval.

Here’s a mistake some people make: They mistake God’s patience for acceptance, or tolerance, or approval. That’s wrong. Just because God does not immediately strike down a person or a nation for wickedness, that does not mean God approves, accepts or even tolerates that wickedness. God hates disobedience and sin. It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!

Jesus recalled this story in Luke 17:

28 “It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. 29 But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all. 30 “It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed. 31 On that day no one who is on the roof of his house, with his goods inside, should go down to get them. Likewise, no one in the field should go back for anything. 32 Remember Lot’s wife!

Because of God’s judgment and wrath, prepare! Be ready! I’ve been talking about God’s judgment as if there were no such thing as God’s deliverance. I did this on purpose so that we will never think lightly of disobedience to God. I did this so that if we ever dare to sin, we will tremble in our boots... we will be terrified.

But there is another side to this story I haven’t shared with you yet. It’s a story of deliverance. As fearsome as the wrath of God is against sinners, there is a way to receive his deliverance and escape his judgment.

The reason we know as much as we do about this city is because there was a certain family living in that city. Lot, the nephew of Abraham, lived in Sodom. How did Lot end up settling in such a wicked and godless city as Sodom? Maybe you’re familiar with the story. God had blessed Abraham and Lot so much, that their flocks could no longer graze in the same area. The land wouldn’t support such a large number of animals. Fights broke out between Abraham’s shepherds and Lot’s shepherds. Abraham knew this couldn’t go on, and knew that the two families would have to part ways. So Abraham gave Lot his pick. He told him to go whichever way he wanted, and Abraham would go the other way. Lot took a look at the land, and saw that the area of Sodom and Gomorrah was fertile and would be a great area to tend flocks. What Lot

was willing to put up with was that these cities were so incredibly evil. I wonder how he rationalized. “Well, it’s them, not me. I’m a follower of the one true God. God will give me strength to stand up under the temptations. In fact, I will change them, they won’t change me!” However he was thinking, he chose poorly.

We’re told that Lot pitched his tent near Sodom. But by the time God is ready to destroy these cities, Lot has taken up residence inside the city. Abraham had prayed that God would spare the city because Lot and his family were there. But instead God chooses to deliver Lot and his family from the destruction. Two angels go to the city to lead them out. When the two angels arrive at the city to rescue Lot and his family, they find him at the gate of the city. That he was there indicates he was a man of influence and importance in the city, either in business or in politics. The city gate was the one entry point into the city. All travelers and commerce went through the city gate. It was both airport security checkpoint and port of call. That’s where Lot was, so we know he was important in the city.

We don’t have time for all the details, so I would encourage you to read Genesis 18 and 19 to get it all. Before God destroyed Sodom, God chose to deliver Lot and his family. The destruction was immanent, and here’s what happened:

15 With the coming of dawn, the angels urged Lot, saying, “Hurry! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away when the city is punished.”

16 When he hesitated, the men grasped his hand and the hands of his wife and of his two daughters and led them safely out of the city, for the Lord was merciful to them. [God is so persistent in his deliverance, isn’t he? Lot doesn’t seem to recognize the gravity of the situation. He doesn’t realize how quickly and severely the judgment on the city would come. So the angels not only warn them, the angels take them by the hand and hurry them out of the city.] **17 As soon as they had brought them out, one of them said, “Flee for your lives! Don’t look back, and don’t stop anywhere in the plain! Flee to the mountains or you will be swept away!”** [God’s judgment would be devastating. There was no time for second guessing. There was no time for hesitation. If they wanted to survive, they would have to go fast and go far, and not look back. We heard earlier what happened. As God rained down destruction on these cities, Lot’s wife looked back. She hesitated. She yearned for that which had fallen under God’s judgment. And she was turned into a pillar of salt. But Lot and his daughters were delivered.

29 So when God destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered Abraham, and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe that overthrew the cities where Lot had lived.

Rescue came to Lot because Abraham interceded for him. God did it. He delivered.

Friends, this story is one God wants us to really think about today. Jesus is coming! He is coming soon to judge the world. Will that day be for you one of judgment or one of deliverance? Will you be Lot and his daughters – delivered; or the rest of the people – judged?

God desperately wants you to be delivered. So he provided a way. Judgment is about to rain down on this wicked world in which we live. But God sends to you his Son, Jesus. Jesus calls to you and says, “Get out!” He grabs you by the hand to lead you out from destruction. Holding Jesus’ hand, your deliverance is guaranteed.

In order to spare us from the wrath of God because of our disobedience, Jesus first of all lived obediently for us. The Father looked at his Son and was only well pleased all the time. The perfect Son of God loved us so much that he was willing to do whatever was necessary to deliver us from the wrath and judgment of God. And so he took the blame for all of our disobedience. He was willing to be counted as wicked, standing in our place. When he was nailed to the cross

on that little mount just outside of Jerusalem, the wrath of God came down on him so severely, that fire and brimstone would have been easy by comparison. In agony, Jesus was forsaken by the Father for your sins and mine.

But because God's wrath was poured out on Jesus, it is not poured out on you and me. We are spared. We are delivered from God's wrath and judgment. Jesus, our loving Savior, comes to you and me. Even though we are reluctant to let go of the wicked pleasures of this world, he is insistent. He takes us by the hand, and we follow him. We follow him to safety. We follow him to deliverance. We follow him to life eternal with our loving God.

Friend, judgment day is coming. It is at the same time a day of judgment and a day of deliverance. Why is God holding back the day of judgment? Why has it not happened yet? 2 Pe 3:9 **The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.** For the sake of deliverance, he waits!

Why will God hurry the day of judgment? **Mark 13:30 "If the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would survive. But for the sake of the elect, whom he has chosen, he has shortened them."** Some may fall way in the wicked last days, so God cuts short the time of this world, and hastens the day of judgment. He does this for the sake of deliverance! He wants people to be saved.

Judgment and deliverance. This is what the last day is all about. Let's take with us God's own summary of this account, as he inspired Peter to comment on this story:

2 Peter 2:6-9 If [God] condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; 7 and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men 8 (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard)— 9 if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment.

Judgment Day is coming, dear friends. Or for we who take Jesus' hand, who follow him who leads us to safety... shouldn't we really call it: Deliverance Day? Amen.