

Proper 12-C Sermon  
July 27, 2025  
Trinity Episcopal Church  
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I want to talk about look-back moments ...those moments when you are walking away from something or someone and for some reason, you are compelled to turn and look back one more time. I remember a look-back moment in my own life when I dropped my first born off at college. I said goodbye to Maddie as she walked off toward her new dorm and I'll never forget turning back around to catch one more glimpse of her. Our eyes met, full of so many different feelings. I didn't look back because I was worried about her or because I thought I'd never see her again, but because this marked an ending. It was, in a sense, a last glimpse of her childhood and the beginning of something new. We all have look-back moments and they are some of the most heart-achy moments of our lives.

We have a look-back moment in today's story from the Old Testament, although we didn't hear it read today. It comes right after the section of the Old Testament scripture we just heard. But I want to tell the whole story. Because it's very important. Some might think me crazy to attempt to preach on the infamous story of Sodom and Gomorrah. But there is a detail in this story that stopped me in my tracks and made me want to preach on it.

Ok so the story of Sodom and Gomorrah: It comes right after last week's story of Abraham and Sarah offering hospitality to angels. Right after this, the angels head toward the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to check things out. Rumor has it that these cities have been overrun with sin and wickedness, and the angels want to see it for themselves.

Now, Abraham knows that the angels, who represent God, are considering destroying Sodom and Gomorrah in punishment for their evil ways. This brings us to the part of the story we heard read today where Abraham bargains with God and begs him to not destroy the cities as long as there are a few good people remaining there. God agrees. So, the angels make their way to Sodom and they run into Lot. Lot is Abraham's nephew and he and his family live in Sodom. Lot doesn't know that the men are angels; they just look like guys from out of town. Lot does what any good Hebrew person would do: he offers them hospitality. It is what you were expected to do in those days. If you encountered a traveling stranger, you invited them to your home for a meal or shelter for the night. One could say that hospitality was the primary value for the ancient Hebrew people. So, Lot welcomes them into his home.

Later that night, a mob of angry men – all the men of the city, in fact – surround Lot's house. They demand that Lot let his guests out so the crowd can have their way with them. Here we get an example of the moral corruption of the city: instead of welcoming these two strangers, they wish to attack them. Lot pleads with the violent mob to not take the men who are his guests. And with a very disturbing negotiation, he offers his virgin daughters instead. Now, that is an entirely different sermon, but it wouldn't have

been entirely unusual for a father to do this in order to maintain the honor of his household. Hospitality to strangers wasn't just about being polite, it was about survival, and it was a core social obligation in this place and time. The violent mob of men refuse Lot's offer and the violence escalates.

At this point, the angels tell Lot that God has sent them to destroy the city, so he and his family need to escape right now. The angels say to the family, "Flee for your life; do not look back or stop anywhere on the plain; flee to the hills, or else you will be consumed." And the angels help them escape. It goes on, "Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the Lord out of heaven; and he overthrew those cities, and all the Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground." And then it says, (and this is the moment that stopped me in my tracks): "But Lot's wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt."

That is a very general summary of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. And if you read the whole thing, there are difficult and disturbing details I haven't even mentioned. But the part that I want to focus on is this moment when a nameless woman whom scripture calls "Lot's wife" turns to look back, even though she was told not to, and is immediately turned into a pillar of salt. I want us to join this woman today, and look back at the story of Sodom and Gomorrah; look back to catch one more glimpse, to grieve, and then ultimately, to move on.

People have asked throughout the centuries, why did Lot's wife look back when she was told not to? She has received harsh judgment in many interpretations. Some say she was disobedient to God's orders so it is right that she should be punished and turned to salt. History can be harsh on disobedient women. Many poems have been written about her; about why she looked back and what she saw. One scholar even suggests that her being turned to salt is similar to what happens to people in trauma; how trauma can freeze our bodies in time. One poet suggests that she is looking back, not in an act of disobedience, but in an act of resistance to the angel's instructions.

Because how could she not look back? She wasn't able to say goodbye or even to grieve. It was her home. Her friends. Her memories. It was an impossible request for the angel to ask her to not look back. So, let's join her in looking back on this troubling story that has been the cause of so much pain and so much harm to the LGBTQ community. Let us look back to resist harmful theology and careless interpretation.

The city of Sodom is mentioned 40 times in the Bible. It came to *represent* wickedness and a warning of what happens when people rebel against God. The thing is, the great sin of Sodom wasn't about sexuality. It was mainly violence, inhospitality, abuse of power, and disregard for the vulnerable. We know this, because we have lots of scripture that corroborates it. In the book of Ezekiel it says, "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." Adultery is mentioned elsewhere in a list of the sins of Sodom, but nothing more specific than that.

In reading the many Bible references, you get the idea that these cities were definitely corrupt, but not because of homosexuality. There is a detail in the story, however, that has influenced this misinterpretation. When the mob of men comes to Lot's house, they demand that the guests come outside. (The guests are angels disguised as men). It says in the text, "Bring them out to us, so that we may know them." It is not clear in this case what the verb "to know" means, but it might very well have a sexual meaning. But if that's the case, it is referring to violent sexual assault by a large group of people. It is also possible that the sentence means: "Let those men out so that we can know what they are made of." Regardless, it is about violence and domination. Not sexuality. But that's all history needed to turn this story, over time, into a warped version that has linked homosexuality with God's violent destruction of this city.

So let us join Lot's wife and look back in resistance at this story that has done so much harm to the LGBTQ community. Let us grieve and say goodbye to this harmful reading, Let us embrace the God who made LGBTQ people in God's image, exactly as they are.

This story also depicts a vengeful and destructive God. I appreciate scholars who help us see that these early depictions of God reveal an evolution in scripture of how humans understood God. How grateful I am to be part of a tradition that can look critically at scripture and to have the space to wrestle and question parts of it without fear, trusting that God is with us as we do so. I appreciate the freedom we have to look back and name the hurt and to frame these stories in more truthful and generative ways.

Now ... to bring all of this to our current time and place, we as a nation, we as a people, have been trying to look back on our stories in order to name the hurt and re-tell our nation's stories with more truth. We have a long way to go, but we have made progress. And now we are being asked to erase this progress. I am thinking specifically about the recent goal of the current administration to remove certain language from the plaques, movies, and printed materials of our national parks. Park service employees have been asked to flag words that mention the perils of climate change, the brutality of slavery, and the imprisonment of Native Americans, for example.

It's the same thing with the president wanting to revert to the original name of sports teams whose names carried racism, and also to re-name the ships, military bases and monuments that carry names of civil rights activists or marginalized groups of people. It is all very chilling.

How we look back at our narratives matters, whether it be our history or our scripture. Regarding the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, the poet Padraig O'Tuama writes, "This scene is something we see again and again: angry men whose response to a message they don't want to hear about the injustice they don't want to see is to brutalize the messenger for daring to confront them."

But today, we look back with Lot's wife, and we look back as an act of protest. We protest the stories that hurt the vulnerable and we protest the belief that the stories we inherit from our history books or our holy scriptures are frozen like pillars of salt, preserving warped beliefs that oppress. I want to be like our Jewish siblings for whom

the Torah is the beginning of the conversation. So often, the Bible is the end of the conversation, as writer Rob Bell reminds me.

This look-back moment, this grieving and naming, are courageous steps in our collective healing as we make space to join God in God's vision for our world. In looking back, we aren't frozen as pillars of salt, but moved to go forward, with God at our side. We look back so that we can look forward.

I will end with a poem by Anna Carter Florence that she wrote in honor of Lot's wife:

*This could have been any of us.  
It might still be any of us.  
And looking back at burning ruins,  
at destruction and holocaust,  
looking back at what we loved as it is utterly destroyed,  
is never weakness, but resistance;  
never sin, but benediction:  
a way to bless, and then go,  
so we can honor what we must leave behind.*

Amen.