The Rev. Eugene LeCouteur
Emmanuel Episcopal Church
Middleburg, VA

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
10:00 a.m.
July 27, 2025

"Got a Tiger by the Tail"

Back in 1965, country music singer Buck Owens and his band, the Buckaroos, released a song that went all the way to the top of the country music charts. It was called "I've Got a Tiger by the Tail." The song begins with the chorus. The words are:

> "I've got a tiger by the tail, it's plain to see
> I won't be much when you get through with me
> Well, I'm a-losing weight and a-turning mighty pale
> Looks like I've got a tiger by the tail."[1]

What does this have to do with today's scripture readings you might ask. Well, if Abraham had any good sense when he started negotiating with the angel, who we know was God, he would have realized that he had a tiger by the tail and his prospects for success were not good. But this one scene that we heard today is part of a much bigger story that provides an important concept. Do you know what the larger story might provide for us? That's the right context. This story is interesting, but when it is in the context of all that happens before and after, we learn more.

Let's go back to the beginning of this episode. Abraham has set up a camp in the desert. One day, he sees a group of what he assumes are three men approaching from a distance. He runs to meet them and offers them a respite and refreshment. This was the way of life when living in the desert. Strangers were welcomed and offered what we might call Southern Hospitality. Life in the desert is hostile; people looked out for each other as long as they came in peace. Of course, he offers them a little water and bread, but provides them with a banquet.

In the process, it becomes apparent that the three men are not who they at first seemed to be. One revelation is the way that they predict that Sarah will bear a child despite her advanced age. Then they set out for the city of Sodom on a mission. Their mission is to verify the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and the graveness of their sin.

As two of the men/angels proceed toward Sodom, the third one, who we know is the Lord, decides to tell Abraham what their mission is. It is at that point that Abraham decides to take the tiger by the tail. Being very deferential and not presuming any privilege, he asks the Lord how he will determine the punishment for the cities.

This interchange between God and Abraham is remarkable on many levels. First, how much chutzpah does it take for someone to argue with God face-to-face. Many of us argue with God, but it is on a rhetorical level. God is

[1] "I've Got a Tiger by the Tail" written by Howard Harlan and Buck Owens, recorded and released in 1964.

not sitting in the chair next to us (at least we cannot see God sitting there). We make our argument, not expecting the verbal response that Abraham wants and gets.

Next, Abraham is not satisfied that he gets God to come down to a level of fifty righteous people. We might consider that a success and not tempt fate, but not Abraham. He gets God down to forty-five, then forty, then thirty, then twenty, then ten. At which point he stops. The numbers from fifty to twenty seem to be arbitrary; they have no particular meaning. However, I think ten does. Ten is the number of adults, typically men, who must be present for certain prayers and rituals in Judaism. This number is called a *minyan* and emphasizes the communal nature of these prayers and of most Jewish tradition. Without ten righteous people, the prayers and rituals cannot be performed. When Abraham stops at ten, it is because with fewer than ten righteous people, the city is without righteousness.

There is another aspect of Abraham's request that may not be apparent at first. Abraham does not ask for the guilty to be punished and the righteous to be spared. He asks that the Lord forgive the entire city because of the righteous. Even with as few as ten righteous people in the city, he would have God refrain from destroying the city. He asks the Lord to forgive the entire city for the sake of the innocent. This concept shows up elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures and is prominent in rabbinic literature. Where there is the notion that for the sake of thirty-six righteous people, the world endures. Imagine that one of us here today is among the righteous who are saving the world. This concept shows up in Jesus' teaching. Remember the parable of the wheat and the tares. The tares/weeds are not pulled up for the sake of the wheat. We should not risk pulling up one stalk of wheat when trying to remove the tares.

God's mercy is all-encompassing. Additionally, God's love is always hopeful. Even in a city with only ten righteous people, there is no telling what they can do. Who knows how many of those who are evil might be saved through the work of the righteous? God is always hopeful that those who have strayed will return to the ways of the righteous.

What is frustrating about this Lectionary cycle is that we do not hear the end of the story. We lose that part of the context. To finish the story, we know the two men/angels enter Sodom, and there they learn the sin of that city. However, the sin is not what we have been taught, and it is all because the story is taken out of context.

The people of the city do not offer the men/angels hospitality. Instead threaten to rape them. What the story tells us is that Sodom is a place where even customary hospitality has gone by the wayside. Instead of hospitality, the men of Sodom offer violence. Lot, who tries to prevent this travesty, does so in a most egregious manner by offering his two virgin daughters to be raped by

the crowd. It is not just hospitality that has gone out the window, but every form of justice and righteousness.

The men/angels provide for Lot and his family so that they may escape the place before they destroy it. The outcry against Sodom was even worse than the angels had been prepared for. Thus, Sodom, which means “scorch” or “burn,” and Gomorrah, which means “ruined heap,” meet the fate their names portend.

This story tells us of the importance of righteousness and justice in the eyes of God. It shows us God’s willingness to listen to and heed our petitions even when they may be extreme. It shows us that God does not take cries for justice second or third hand but investigates for God’s self. When God finds injustice, it is punished. Note that the only people in town who might be just and righteous are the strangers, which includes Lot’s family. The narrator points out that those who want to violate the men/angels were “the men of Sodom, young and old—all the people to the last man” there to commit this crime. Abraham plumbing the depths of God’s mercy was unnecessary because no one in Sodom was righteous. Not one.

This fable is an outcry to care for the stranger in your land. Offer a sip of water and a little bread, but provide a feast. Care for aliens because they are also children of God. Care for the outsider because they might be messengers of God. Care for them because they may be God. As it is written in the Letter to the Hebrews, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."[2]

[2] Hebrews 13:2, ESV