

## **The Rescue**

a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on March 24, 2019  
based on Genesis 14:8-16

Let me lead here with a question: When you hear the name, Lot, what do you think of? I'm guessing that you think of his unnamed wife who turned into a pillar of salt. But, you know, there is a "Lot" more to Lot than that. Frederick Buechner tells the story this way ...

*When God decided to wipe the city of Sodom off the map for its sins, he sent a couple of angels down to make sure that Lot was safely out of it first. Therefore he must have had something going for him. On the other hand, it's hard to see just what.*

*There was the way he conducted himself the day the angels arrived at his house, for instance. The first thing to happen was that some local weirdos started pounding on the front door demanding that he send the angels out to them for purposes that, though never spelled out, Lot seems to have understood well enough since, to save his guests, he immediately suggested that maybe they'd just as soon have his two unmarried daughters instead. The angels evidently thought this was carrying the laws of hospitality too far since, before Lot had a chance to make good on his offer, they struck the door-pounders blind and sent them groping their way back to wherever they'd come from.*

*When the next morning arrived, Lot himself still hadn't gotten out of town, and the angels were in a snit. God had already started the countdown, and there wasn't a moment to lose. Lot refused to budge an inch, however, so finally in desperation the angels "seized him and his wife and his two daughters by the hand, the Lord being merciful to him, and they brought him forth and set him outside the city" (19:16). Then they told him to flee to the hills before it was too late.*

*Lot's response must be read to be believed. "Oh no, my lords," he said ... You have shown me great kindness in saving my life; but I cannot flee to the hills lest the disaster overtake me and I die. Behold, yonder city is near enough to flee to, and it is a little one. Let me escape there - is it not a little one? - and my life will be saved" (19:18-20).*

*All of Lot is somehow in that speech. To begin with, not so much as a passing thought is given to the imminent liquidation of all his fellow citizens. Beyond that, he knows perfectly well that he'll be safe in the hills or the angels would never have told him to go there, but wilderness camping isn't for him. He had already made it clear that he would rather be blown sky-high than have to do without indoor plumbing, the morning paper delivered to the door, restaurants. But he had a hunch the angels might not think all that highly of cities after their recent experience in one, so he tried to wheedle them as tactfully as he could. Wouldn't it be all right if he fled just as far as that little city over there - that tiny little bit of a one you'd hardly even notice if you weren't looking straight at it? Just to get him moving, the angels gave him the nod.*

*His wife disobeyed the angels' instructions by looking back longingly at what they were leaving behind and was turned into a pillar of salt because of it. It was a dismal fate to be sure, but when you consider all the years of marriage to Lot that would probably have been in store for her otherwise, she may not have done all that badly at that.*

So, we have this second story of Lot needing rescue in this morning's text ...

*When Abram heard that his relative [Lot] had been captured, he took all of the loyal men born in his household, three hundred eighteen, and went after them as far as Dan. During the night, he and his servants divided themselves up against them, attacked, and chased them to Hobah, north of Damascus. He brought back all of the looted property, together with his relative Lot and Lot's property, wives, and people.*

According to Old Testament logic, life is about knowing whose side you're on, or supposed to be on. "It's us or them" is the calculus most often used. So it is, in this story. We know already that Lot is not a particularly upstanding man. He offers his daughters to men who would abuse them, he chooses property based on shallow assumptions. He's kind of a no-account, but when he is captured and taken hostage, Abram springs into action. There is no pause. No cogitation. It is reported that Abram, his uncle, just goes. We might be tempted to attribute a certain amount of courage to Abram, but Abram would probably just say, my kinsmen was captured, "I had no choice. It's what people do."

So Abram goes in pursuit to rescue Lot, and Lot's wives [plural], which are considered Lot's property, unfortunately, and he also goes after Lot's "people." Now, I want to pause and consider those individuals for a moment. They aren't thought of as individuals, of course. They aren't named in this story where lots of other people are named -- people of class and position; people who matter. They are part of Lot's entourage – his servants, I'd guess. And when you think of them you see how the "us versus them" model for life breaks down. Here is what I mean ...

There's another Old Testament story we looked at sometimes about a Syrian general named Naaman. Naaman had leprosy and he had tried every curative he knew of to take care of his skin disease and nothing helped a bit, but as the story is told, there is among his "people" a young girl who was captured from the Israelites years before who works for Naaman, and she feels badly for the general, even though he stole her from her family.

She is unnamed, as well, but the narrative focuses on her with particular affection. Knowing how depressed her master, the general, is about his leprosy; a disease that has not only disfigured him, but also carries with it a terrible social stigma, she tells him that among her people is a prophet who has healing powers and she knows where he can be found.

It's a remarkable footnote in a complex little story, and the most remarkable part of it is that even after having been captured, she is open hearted about her captors. In her mind there is something larger than Old Testament "us vs them" logic. She's been adopted into another culture and she knows it's peculiar ways and those ways have become her ways. Or maybe she has become flexible about such things. Maybe, knowing that there is more than one way to worship God, or lead a people, or fight a battle, her mind is open to new ways, multiple possibilities – she can bloom wherever she is planted

Just Friday there was a piece in the NYTimes that focused on Rick Steves, the travel entrepreneur.

Steves says he wants everyone to travel, and it's not just his way of drumming up business so as to sell books or travel packages. No, he believes that Americans who go to Europe, for instance, learn to see the world differently. They find out that there is more than one "great" country in the world, and he knows that when people learn that, I mean really learn that, they are no longer xenophobic. Here is how the essay put it ...

**RICK STEVES IS ABSOLUTELY AMERICAN.** *He wears jeans every single day. He drinks frozen orange juice from a can. He likes his hash browns burned. He dislikes most fancy restaurants. When he's on the road in this country, he prefers to buy a foot-long Subway sandwich and split it between lunch and dinner. Although Steves has published many foreign-language phrase books, the only language he speaks fluently is English. He built his business in America, raised his kids in America and gives frequent loving paeans to the glories of American life.*

And yet: *Rick Steves desperately wants you to leave America. The tiniest exposure to the outside world, he believes, will change your entire life. Travel, Steves likes to say, "wallops your ethnocentricity" and "carbonates your experience" and "rearranges your cultural furniture." Steves wants you to go to Europe, and while you're there, he wants you to get way down deep into the culture, to eat with locals in the teeming markets, to make a sympathetic fool of yourself, to get entirely lost in your lack of America.*

Okay, where am I going with this? During this season of Lent I am delivering six sermons in which the concept of redemption is a core theme. Redemption, of course, is a theme at the core of the Christian religion, but it is my belief that it is often misunderstood.

I mean, what does it mean to be "saved?" It's not a term we even use here at Wasatch. Well, I want to use this Sunday to begin to answer that and next Sunday to more fully address it. At bottom, I think that the core meaning of salvation has to do with realizing you are not all you were meant to be. Just as Rick Steves says that America shouldn't think of itself as complete unto itself, you shouldn't think of yourself that way either.

You see, none of us exists apart from others, even others who are not like us in some fundamental ways. So being saved, as I see it, means that God wants to save us from ourselves – our solitary selves.

In the text for today, Lot is "rescued", but it is the little maid in the healing story who is effectively, "saved." Yes, she is taken hostage and made a slave, but in the end, she is the one who is really found, or redeemed – not stupid Lot. I mean she is the one who learned a critical life lesson – a lesson that if you miss, it's like you haven't really lived.

Way back when the narrative about Abram and Lot begins in Genesis 12, Abram is called by God and this interesting piece of information is inserted. God says, "Abram, through you all the families of the earth will be blessed."

Note that God does NOT say, "Through you, only those people who are your DNA matches on ancestry.com will be saved. No, God has in mind to bless ALL the families of the earth. It's counter-intuitive. And it's easily forgotten, which is why 80+% of Christians in this country condone racism and xenophobia.

Of course, this kind of blessing isn't always easy to deliver. Not everyone wants such a blessing. Did you hear the news story about a South African man who surprised nine men who were robbing his home? Eight of the robbers got away, but the homeowner managed to shove one of them into his backyard pool before he could run. After realizing the man couldn't swim the homeowner jumped into the pool to save him. Once out of the pool the robber pulled a knife on him and then called his eight friends, telling them to come back and finish the job. That's when the homeowner kicked the fellow and threw him back in his pool. So, you know, you do your best, and if your best effort fails, you take care of yourself.

Okay, but look, let me double-down here ... being saved in the Christian sense, is NOT about joining an exclusive club. Though many would sell it that way. Listen to this first-person story by Linda Fielder of Portland, Oregon.

**AS I PREPARED** to enter first grade, there was talk of busing in my town. My mother didn't want me riding a bus four hours every day, so she found a private religious school close to our house. My family wasn't overly religious. In fact, we went to church only on Easter Sunday. I had made a felt-and-macaroni cross at Sunday school the previous Easter, and I planned to take it with me to first grade to impress the teacher. When I got to school, however, it was obvious that I wouldn't impress anyone. My parents weren't deacons or missionaries. I didn't have a child-sized Bible with my name embossed in gold on the front. And I was the only child in my class who hadn't been "saved."

Each school day began and ended with the Pledge of Allegiance, the pledge to the Christian flag, and four choruses of "Onward, Christian Soldiers." Then our teacher, Mrs. Green, would call for any sinners in the class to come forth and be saved. In order to be saved, the child had to confess a list of sins and then drop to his or her knees and pray for forgiveness. After that, Mrs. Green would ask everyone to turn to a verse in their Bibles (I used a loaner Bible from the teacher's desk), and we would read aloud about redemption and pray for a spot in Jesus' kingdom.

The emphasis on salvation didn't end with this twice-daily ritual. My classmates and I pieced together elaborate "sin collages" by cutting out magazine pictures of people engaged in sinful acts — smoking, drinking, dancing, wearing pantyhose — pasting the pictures onto poster board while reciting, "The wages of sin is death."

I soon realized that if I was going to be saved, I needed some more impressive sins to confess. So, at home I back-talked to my parents, refused to eat my vegetables, and spewed profanities. By the end of September, I was ready.

On a Friday afternoon, I stammered through the Pledge of Allegiance and the pledge to the Christian flag. By the time we got to "Onward Christian Soldiers," I was a nervous wreck. My time was at hand.

When Mrs. Green called for the sinners to come forth, I swallowed hard and ran to the front of the classroom, grabbing the loaner Bible from her desk on the way. I dropped to my knees, shut my eyes hard, and let the sins fly: "I pulled the legs off a daddy longlegger. And I said, 'God damn you, Grandma,' and I spit green beans on the floor and I poured red Kool-Aid on my sister's dress and I kicked my dad in the knee."

I opened my eyes slowly, hoping to see Mrs. Green, and maybe Jesus himself, welcoming me into the flock. Mrs. Green was clutching her Bible to her chest. She seemed to be having a hard time breathing. She excused the rest of the students for the day and silently led me out to the circular drive, where my mother waited in the car.

I stood on the sidewalk while Mrs. Green lowered herself into the passenger seat of my mother's car and closed the door. I saw her wag her Bible at my mother several times, and they took turns pointing at me and shouting. Then Mrs. Green burst out of the car, coughing and fanning away cigarette smoke with her Bible. I scurried into the car and shut the door.

As we drove away from the school, Mother rolled down her window and flicked her cigarette out at Mrs. Green's feet. "That damn woman is as crazy as a loon!" Mother said, fumbling in her purse for another cigarette. "Why didn't you tell me they were torturing you in there?" I could see tears in her eyes. I understood that I wouldn't be going back to the Christian school again.

When Mother stopped yelling, I asked the question that had been gnawing at me since I'd come forward and taken my place in the sinners' circle: "Did Mrs. Green tell you if I was saved?" I said. Mother slowed to a stop and looked at me. I was still clutching the loaner Bible in my trembling fingers. My mother pried the book from my grip and set it on the back seat. "Oh, yes, Linda," she said, as she checked the rearview mirror and pulled away from the curb. "You are absolutely saved."

Today our Wasatch 101 class is beginning. If you've been to one you probably have heard me say right up front to those attending that if you are looking for "the one true church" we're not it. We're not it because we don't believe there is such a thing.

Wherever you are on your particular journey of faith, you are welcome here. So we're not out to "save" people because while we take the Bible seriously we don't take it literally in everything, especially in doctrines invented after it was written, like the business of hell.

Not many of us here believe it exists, or that God is interested in sending anyone to eternal punishment. It just doesn't jibe at all with the gospel love Jesus is obsessed with.

As I said, being saved might just mean God wants to rescue us from ourselves and also from puny theological ideas that keep us from being the all-loving, Jesus infused people God means us to be. I mean, if there is anything to being saved, it is clearly about coming to see the world outside the usual box the way that unnamed little maid did in the story of Naaman.

St. Francis, for example, describes his own conversion experience as being just such a moment. He was walking and saw a beggar who was a leper. Now Francis was of the upper-crust of the town of Assisi. His people were wealthy and dressed in finery.

Francis had a natural antipathy for the poor, especially those who looked and smelled like lepers did. But somehow, in a moment of mystical transformation, he was able to not only touch this untouchable man, he was also able to greet him with a kiss as if he were among his best friends. And then he gave the poor man his own coat. And that was the door that led him to become Francis, the man he really was underneath his wealth, his biases, his phobias, and cultural predispositions.

Let me close with a word from Fr Richard Rohr that sets everything I've spoke of in context:

*Christianity is a lifestyle - a way of being in the world that is simple, non-violent, shared, and loving. However, we made it into an established "religion" (and all that goes with that) and have avoided the lifestyle change itself.*

*One could be warlike, greedy, racist, selfish, and vain in most of Christian history, and still believe that Jesus is one's "personal Lord and Savior" . . . The world has no time for such silliness anymore. The suffering on Earth is too great.*

*Amen*