

“Impossible Dreams”

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Texts: Genesis 18: 9-33; Genesis 22: 1-14

(To be read right before the Genesis 18 scripture reading): For many of you, this is a trigger warning. For those of you who are survivors of sexual assault, this scripture may bring up some difficult issues for you. The same is true for those of you who have survived despite being treated horribly by Christians and others for your sexual orientation. Often, when Sodom is mentioned in any form, people rush to talking about the so-called “sin of Sodom.” Walter Brueggemann tells us that “the Bible gives us considerable evidence that the sin of Sodom was not specifically sexual, but general disorder of a society organized against God.” Brueggemann clearly knows the Bible better than I do, but I am still of the opinion that the sin of Sodom given in Genesis 19 was not about same-sex activity, but it was about sexual assault. For some reason, Lot feels better offering his virgin daughters to the mob instead of the three presumably male figures. Whichever position you take, or another one, this much is true, the story of

Sodom is mistakenly often used as judgment concerning sexual orientation. There is no little to no evidence that this is true.

Further, sexual assault is the result of the abuse of power and the lack of consent. Regardless of who was about to be victimized in this story, abuse of power (mob mentality, even) and lack of consent were at play. This is wrong in every case and always. One of the best aspects of Brian McLaren's *We Make the Road by Walking* is that he has us deal with stories in our scripture we often avoid. I appreciate that, but I do feel it necessary to remove some misinformation in a culture saturated with it whenever I can.

Have you every laughed at the idea that something good could happen in your life? I mean, you look around and everything you see is going to heck in a handbasket. Maybe your health, your family, your finances, your community, everything is not going well and somewhere you get the idea that something good is about to happen. You laugh at yourself thinking, "That's impossible"! If you've ever done that, you begin to understand the story of Abram and Sarai, later known as Abraham and Sarah. They had been promised descendants much

earlier in their lives, but now they were very advanced in age and the idea that they could have children – well, that Sarah could – made that promise seem null and void. So sure were they that Abraham and Sarah took matters into their own hands and Abraham fathered a child with the servant-girl Hagar. That did not turn out well for the family, and especially for Hagar, at least not at first. We always struggle with what God is going to do and what is ours to do. I think that most often we take matters into our own hands when they're not meant for our hands. Often this leads to messing things up. But that is not the point of today's message. The dream of childbearing for Sarah was impossible as far as she knew. So, no wonder she and Abraham both got caught laughing at the possibility. So sure were they of this impossibility that even when their son was born, they named him Isaac, which literally means laughter!

“We can never capture God in our concepts like a fist,” Brian McLaren tells us, “In fact, the more we know about God, the more we have to acknowledge we don't know. The bigger our understanding about God, the bigger the mystery that we must acknowledge. Our faith must always be open to correction, enhancement, and new insight. That's why humility is so essential for all who speak of God.” He's so right! One of the problems of today's church is that it tries to be so sure of everything. Meanwhile, anyone who has read scripture knows

that each time you come to it, you learn something new. I've been in the ministry over 25 years and trust me, we've talked about Sodom and Gomorrah a lot over those years, but somehow re-reading the scripture and Brueggemann's work, I am amid the questioning and searching about whether he's correct that the "sin of Sodom" might not have had to do with sexuality at all, but something far more. In fact, if he's right, then we're in the same mess today. Brueggemann refers to Ezekiel 16:49 which tells us that the sin of Sodom was "pride, excessive food and indifference to the needy." (Genesis: Interpretation Bible Commentary, p164). No wonder we tried to scapegoat others with the "sin of Sodom" if indeed we might all be guilty. As an aside, the greatest sin is nothing we've said, but our constant scapegoating of the other, pronouncing them sinner while we are the righteous.

The point here is that static faith, and static understanding of scripture never has and never will serve us well, not as individuals and not as the church. And yet we persist.

The other thing I wanted to talk about in this chapter refers to Abraham's bargaining with God over whether God will save Sodom. We share this story so little in the church, but it's a powerful testimony to the relationship we have with God. God is impacted (and perhaps changed?) by us in ways we can't or won't

imagine. That does not mean that God gives us everything we ask for if we ask enough times. No, the purpose of Abraham's discussion with God is reminding God who God is. This is a question throughout the Bible. This short story gets to the character of God. While it is true that there is no painless route for Abraham and Sarah in the book of Genesis (promised children and then barren for decades!), an heir is born. You see, because of the character of God, everything is possible, but there is no painless way to get there. God has promised a future in new community, but not everything we would seek (Brueggemann, 161). But the back and forth reminds me that God desires community with us and at least biblically is willing to enter the conversation about what makes God god. If God can do that in scripture, then can God weather the storm of your and my questions about God? I think so. One more thing, why does Abraham negotiate for the safety of Sodom, but not for Isaac, his only son and heir? I don't know, but it's an interesting question. One thing is true, Abraham demonstrates a passion for the well-being of all – including the disobedient of Sodom.

"We must decide," says Brueggemann, "if there is good news, even for Sodom – for the people caught in disobedience to God," which frankly is all of us at some point.

McLaren reminds us “that God could never need anything *from* us (not human or animal sacrifice, or perfection, or anything else), since God provides everything *for* us. Not only that...God isn’t the one who is angry and hostile and needs appeasement. We humans are the angry ones! Our hostile bloodthirsty hearts are the ones that need to be changed! The only sacrifice that mattered to God was the holy gift of humble hearts and lives dedicated to God’s way of love.” And it is never too late. It’s never too late for a dream to come true, and it’s not too late to learn something new.

McLaren ends his chapter this way:

That’s true for us today as we follow in the footsteps of Abraham and Sarah, walking this road together. We’re still learning, rethinking, growing, discovering. In spite of long delays and many disappointments, will we dare to keep dreaming impossible dreams? In spite of the assumptions that everyone around us holds to be true, will we dare to ask new questions and make new discoveries – including lessons about God and what God really desires? It may seem as if it’s too late to keep hoping, to keep trying, to keep learning, to keep growing. But to be alive in the story of creation means daring to believe that it’s not too late.

Put another way: maybe we can have some impossible dreams and keeping toward making them a reality in partnership and relationship with God who simply wants humble hearts and lives dedicated to God’s way of love.

That’s harder than it looks, but it is our calling.

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.

