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 Arlington Street Church
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Stranger in a Strange Land¹

“The Jewish people, remembering the time of their enslavement as strangers in Egypt, begin their credo with the words, “An ancient Aramean was my father.”² “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him,” says their law, “for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”³

Arlington Street has taken a bold and creative stand for immigrant justice. I spent seven years in my late teens and early twenties in the study of theology, then spent the next quarter-century trying to contradict and counteract most of what I learned. Some days are better than others. This is going to be a good day; I want to spell out the theology that under girds our activism on behalf of strangers in a strange land. Let’s talk about Sodom and Gomorrah!

“The ancient cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were located in Palestine, [at the south end of] the Dead Sea.” As the story has it, “because of the unacceptable behavior of the inhabitants ... God tells Abraham that he intends to destroy Sodom.” Right away, this makes me anxious, since there’s no indication about what the people have been doing to elicit this nuclear reaction. It’s also nerve-wracking that Gomorrah just gets thrown into the deal; all we hear about is Sodom, Sodom, Sodom, and then, suddenly, Gomorrah’s in flames. Not good.

Horrified at the idea of collective punishment, “Abraham asks God what would happen if he found ... any righteous people in Sodom. God promises Abraham that he will spare the city if it contains ten righteous people, and sends two angels to investigate.”

¹ With thanks to Robert A. Heinlein for the title! Science fiction, indeed.

² Deuteronomy 26:5

³ Exodus 22:21

At the city gate, the angels, disguised as mere mortals, meet Abraham's nephew, Lot. In the life-saving custom of the time, Lot rises to greet them, and bows deeply,⁴ and says, in his best King James English, "Behold now, my lords, turn in, I pray you, into your servant's house [He's inviting them home, as in 'I'm at your service']... Tarry all night," he continues, "and wash your feet [because they're frightful after a day in the desert], and ye shall rise up early [before the sun gets too hot], and go on your ways."

The angels refuse, declaring their intention to spend the night in the streets, probably on the lookout for ten righteous people.⁵

But Lot insists, and so they are convinced to go with him to his house, where Lot bakes unleavened bread, and makes them a feast.⁶

Here comes trouble.

"But before [the angels] lay down, the men of the city ... compassed the house round, both old and young, all the people from every quarter."⁷

"And they called unto Lot, and said unto him, 'Where are the men which came in to thee this night? Bring them out unto us, that we may know them.'"⁸

Lot goes out to greet the crowd, shutting the door behind him, and speaks to them. In a desert culture, in which inhospitality to travelers, to strangers, would mean death, he beseeches the townspeople to be welcoming to the visitors.⁹

Lot looks like a saint 'til right about now, when he decides that he'll mollify the crowd by offering them his two virgin daughters instead of his houseguests. I'm sure we're supposed to get the idea that we should treat our guests with even more honor and respect than our own family members. Unfortunately, remember that millions of people believe that the Bible is the word of God, and literally true. Next time you're faced with a mob, ask yourself, *What would Lot do?* Think family values.

⁴ Genesis 19:1

⁵ *ibid* 19:2

⁶ *ibid* 19:3

⁷ *ibid* 19:4

⁸ *ibid* 19:5

⁹ *ibid* 19:6-8

Really frightening, don't you think?

Back to Sodom.

Fortunately, the townspeople would have nothing of it. Just as they're closing in on Lot, and threatening to break down his door, the angels inside pull Lot back into the house. And then - this is one of my favorite Superman moments in the Bible - the angels smite the townspeople with blindness (I hope you'll let me know if you find the opportunity in the coming week to use the word "smite," or, better yet, the past tense, "smote.").¹⁰

The story ends in a rain of fire and brimstone. In case you're not up on brimstone, it's another word for sulfur, meaning that Sodom and Gomorrah went down in a blaze of the stench of rotten eggs. But first, thanks to the angels, Lot and his family get out, "lest [they] be consumed in the iniquity of the city."¹¹ Everyone, that is, except Lot's poor, nameless wife, who disobeys the angels and looks back at her home, and all that is lost to her, as she flees. Who can blame her? God made her into a pillar of salt.¹²

Here's a trick question: What *was* the sin of Sodom? Conservative Christians focus exclusively on that single sentence: "Bring them out unto us, that we may know them."¹³ Historian John Boswell has done the math, counting the number of times that this particular form of the Hebrew word "to know" - *yada* - appears in the Old Testament. Out of nine hundred and forty-three times, in only ten instances does it carry the sense of carnal knowledge.¹⁴ But even if this is one of them - "to know" as a euphemism for "to rape" - "the attempted ... rape of the angels at Lot's door ... is hardly the subject of the story or the cause of the punishment..."¹⁵

This is where we would do a real service in becoming crystal clear: The sin of Sodom is not same-sex orientation. Keep in mind, as Rev. Peter Gomes says, that "the fate of the city was determined well before the ugly incident at Lot's door. It was [on] behalf of that errand of doom ... that the

¹⁰ *ibid* 19:9-11

¹¹ *ibid* 19:15

¹² *ibid* 19:12-26

¹³ *ibid* 19:5

¹⁴ See John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*

¹⁵ Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*, p. 152

angels came at all.”¹⁶ Both Ezekiel and Jesus tell us that the sin of Sodom was its pride, gluttony, laziness, and its failure to serve the poor; the sin of Sodom was its *inhospitality*.

Ezekiel says of Sodom: “Behold, this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom: pride, fullness of bread, and abundance of idleness ..., neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. And they were haughty....”¹⁷ Jesus said, “And whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear you, when ye depart thence, shake off the dust under your feet for a testimony against them. Verily I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city.”¹⁸

Several years ago, I was interviewed for a television show about this little bible story. Seated to my right was a fundamentalist Christian preacher, who had only one thing to say about the sin of Sodom; I’ll leave it to your imagination. He said it over and over, stopping only during commercial breaks, at which point he would turn to face me, and say, in a booming voice, “You will die in a fiery lake.” He also said that over and over; he was big on repetition. After the first round, I stopped looking at him, and focused instead on Charlie Connors, head of Boston PFLAG, who was seated in the front row of the TV audience. Charlie kept his eyes riveted on me and mouthed the words *I love you*, over and over. What would Jesus do? And what would Jesus say?

Neither Ezekiel nor Jesus mentions homosexuality. I should say *of course* neither mentions homosexuality, since, as Episcopal Bishop Gene Robinson says, “the whole psychological construct of sexual orientation is a little better than 100 years old.... [We] can’t take something that we know now, and plug it back into a text that’s several millennia old, and think that they mean what we mean.”¹⁹

Despite the challenges of this story – especially its no-holds-barred misogyny, which almost no one ever even mentions, let alone decries – its central message is what I want to be sure we’ve heard today, loud and clear. “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the

¹⁶ Gomes, *op cit*, p. 151

¹⁷ Ezekiel 16: 48-50

¹⁸ Mark 6:11. See also Luke 10:10-12

¹⁹ Quoted in Elizabeth Adams, *Going to Heaven: The Life and Election of Gene Robinson*, p. 160. Many thanks to Corey Spence for this reference.

land of Egypt.”²⁰ While I don’t believe in a god that would destroy our city over our inhospitality, I do believe in the moral imperative of welcoming the stranger, which we ignore at the peril of the destruction of our souls.

What does hospitality look like? I want to close with a passage from a book called *It Takes a Nation: How Strangers Became Family in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina*. These words are from the forward, written in 2006 by Senator Barack Obama.

“... It was famously observed that ‘America is great because Americans are good.’

“In the days that followed Hurricane Katrina, this greatness was called into question. Our government’s slow and stumbling response left people across the country wondering why we couldn’t seem to save a major American city from drowning. We witnessed firsthand the poverty and hopelessness that had battered the residents of New Orleans long before Katrina ever did.

“And yet,” Senator Obama continues, as is often the case during times of great tragedy and despair, it was the fundamental decency of the American people that quickly shone through. An outpouring of compassion and sacrifice saved the stranded and housed the homeless and gave hope to the Gulf Coast survivors.

“On any ordinary day, I know it seems difficult to detect this spirit of selflessness at work.... Then an event like Katrina happens – a crisis that shakes off our complacency and refuses to let us ignore the suffering in our midst. Suddenly, we’re reminded of how very fragile life is....

“As we were faced with life’s fragility in the days following Katrina – as we were reminded that everything we take for granted is not always granted to everybody – ... Americans everywhere began to imagine what it would be like to live in New Orleans or Biloxi or Gulfport, what it would be like to see ... everything ... washed away without warning or reason.

“... [That] moment of imagining and the action that followed is when we became a national community again. It’s when people from Chicago and Houston, Tacoma and Charleston, Boston and Denver picked up their

²⁰ Exodus 22:21

phones and called a charity, packed up their cars and headed to the Gulf, or readied the extra bedroom for the arrival of complete strangers who could stay as long as they wanted.

“Most offered this help not out of pity or guilt, but empathy - that simple, profound notion that I can see the world through another person’s eyes. That allows us ... to imagine standing in someone else’s shoes.

“From the beginning, this idea has been at the very center of the American experience - that ... we ... feel a responsibility toward each other. That there are some things we just can’t do on our own.... [That we] follow the simple message heard in churches and mosques, synagogues and Sunday schools: to treat your neighbor as you would want to be treated yourself....

My spiritual companions, it’s a choice, and it’s up to us. Can we see that immigrants to this great country are modern-day angels, seeking the righteous? Here are Senator Obama’s closing words: “In the end, we will rise or fall as a nation depending on our ability to harness that spirit and do and care for others, not just in response to a hurricane ... but in response to the everyday Katrinas [with which] so many of our neighbors quietly and desperately live....

“America is great because Americans are good.”²¹ May we open our minds, our hearts, and our hands, and answer the call to live this truth.

²¹ Senator Barack Obama, “How Strangers Became Family in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina,” in *It Takes a Nation, The Story of MoveOn.Org Civic Action’s HurricaneHousing.org*, pp. viii-ix