

Sunday 7th August 2011

10 a.m.

Laurieston Parish Church
Morning Worship

Welcome/Notices

Introit: As the deer pants (MP 37)

Call to Worship

HYMN 225: Summer suns are glowing

Story Time

HYMN 237: Look forward in faith

O.T. Reading: Psalm 103: 1-14 *The Love of God* p. 599

Prayer of approach and confession

The Lord's Prayer

HYMN 123: God is love, let earth adore him

N.T. Readings: Luke 17: 26 -30 Coming of the Kingdom p. 102
2 Peter 2: 1-10a *False Teachers* p. 299

Sermon:

Tales of Terror: Sodom & Gomorrah

HYMN 158: God moves in a mysterious way

Offering

Choir Voluntary: Teach me thy way, O Lord (MP 626)

Prayer of dedication, thanksgiving & intercession

HYMN 167: Guide me, O thou great Jehovah

Benediction & Sung Amen

Welcome/Notices

Introit: As the deer pants (MP 37)

Call to Worship:

- ◆ I listened to the rain pounding on the rooftops early this morning and remembered what I had chosen as first hymn
- ◆ but the beauty of this hymn is that it's not just for sunny days but for dreich ones as well

*"The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has never been able to put it out"*

HYMN 225: Summer suns are glowing

Story Time

- ◆ Mrs L had had a hard life - no doubt about it - and she blamed most of it on her husband
- ◆ when she wasn't blaming him, she blamed that uncle of his - the one he thought could do no wrong; whatever Uncle Abie said was right, was right; wherever Uncle Abie went you could be sure her stupid, gullible Lot would follow
- ◆ It started years ago, when Uncle Abram got it into his head that God was telling him to up sticks and leave home; leave Haran where they had been living happily enough all their days and go to.....
- ◆ Where? ... she asked Lot when he came and told her they were moving. 'Where to exactly, and why?' 'We don't know yet - but God will show us.'
- ◆ So they packed up their bags, loaded up their camels, told the shepherds and cowherds to get the animals into line, and off they went.

- ◆ They went all the way to Canaan, then it looked as though there might be better prospects in Egypt, so they went to Egypt (on foot, mind you - it was a long journey); then from Egypt back to Canaan, all round every town and village, up and down each hill and valley - adults, children, servants, animals - the lot - until they came to the plain between Bethel and Ai.
- ◆ By this time, not surprisingly, there were quarrels breaking out among the men. Abraham and Lot were as close as ever, but they each had a lot of animals, a lot of men, and there just wasn't room for both of them to settle in the one place
- ◆ So Mrs L watched and listened as old Uncle Abram told Lot what was going to happen next - nothing new there, then.
- ◆ It seemed a generous offer, right enough. Stood on the top fo a hill, and Abram let Lot choose which part of the land he wanted to settle in
- ◆ For once her stupid, gullible husband seemed to be making a sensible choice. He looked out over the Jordan valley: green, fertile, plenty of water - it was like Paradise (too good to be true, right enough, but they didn't know that then)
- ◆ 'I'll have this part', Lot said, pointing to the east. And Abram, give his due, stuck to his word. So Abram and his flocks and herds, his wife, his children, his grandchildren, his servants, stayed on in Canaan, while Lot and his people moved into the Jordan valley
- ◆ Surely now, his wife thought, we'll get a chance to settle down and live a peaceful life. Uncle Abie is out of the way; maybe Lot will grow up once and for all and take responsibility for himself and for his family
- ◆ But it didn't stay peaceful for long; and Uncle Abram soon had to step in to the rescue once again.

- ◆ The Jordan valley wasn't the peaceful, fertile place it had looked from the hilltop. Well, it was fertile, but it certainly wasn't peaceful. No fewer than 9 kings were fighting over it: 5 against 4.
- ◆ And as far as Lot and his family were concerned, the wrong side one. The four kings of ELAM, GOIIM, BABYLONIA and ELIASAR gubbed the five kings of SODOM, GOMORRAH, ADMAH, ZEBOIIM and BELA, and after the gubbing they came to claim the spoils of war... including the city of Sodom, where Lot and his family had decided to settle and live happily ever after.
- ◆ Lot and his family, including his poor, long-suffering wife, were taken prisoner, but fortunately one man escaped and managed to get a message to Uncle Abie, who, despite being in his 80's, marshalled his troops, and sent an army to set him free.
- ◆ Back to live that peaceful life in the peaceful, fertile valley of Jordan, in the sleepy city of Sodom - NOT!
- ◆ Poor Mrs L.; living in Sodom was her worst nightmare. The people were unbelievably awful. Not just noisy and rude, but violent. There was always fighting going on; drunken riots late at night; and they clearly didn't like incomers.
- ◆ Still, they might have been able to stick it out, keep a low profile and make a place for themselves, if it hadn't been for that stupid, gullible husband of hers.
- ◆ He came back one night with a couple of strangers - good-looking young men, right enough, but trouble from the start. He said he had met them at the city gate, and insisted that they come to stay the night. They had been quite happy to camp out in the square, but no, he insisted - 'my house is your house'; my wife will be delighted to see you.

- ◆ Hospitality she could do, that wasn't a problem. She got the servants baking bread; prepared a nice meal and they were just sitting relaxing over a glass of wine when there was the all too familiar sound of drunken louts shouting down below.
- ◆ 'Just ignore them', she said. 'Ignore them and they'll go away' But they didn't go away, and the shouting got louder and clearer. I won't repeat the exact words, but you can fill in the gaps. They were shouting for Lot to send out the two young men - his honoured guests - so that they could do what they liked with them, including gang rape.
- ◆ 'Let them go.', Mrs L said. 'We don't even know these men. They can stand up for themselves. Let them go and maybe they'll leave us in peace.'
- ◆ But she knew she was on to a loser. No way would her husband betray the rules of hospitality, and secretly she admired him for that - but not for what came out of his mouth next. That she had never expected; and could never, ever bring herself to forgive.'
- ◆ He went down to the hallway and shouted out to the rioters, "You can't have my guests - but I've got two lovely young daughters; why don't you take them instead?'
- ◆ Mrs L's blood ran cold. Her life ended at that moment. She had been frustrated with her husband before; wished he would be more decisive; wished he would settle in the one place; but basically she trusted him.. he was a decent man, trying to do the best for his family. 'Take my daughters', he said - 'our daughters; her daughters'. That was it. The end.
- ◆ It was wasted anyway. The guys weren't interested in any deals. They shoved the door open, and had hold of Lot, until the two visitors grabbed hold of him, pulled him in, and did some weird thing that meant the rioters couldn't see.

- ◆ But the damage was done as far as Mrs L. was concerned. She was in a daze as the visitors were speaking; hearing the words, but not really listening.'
 - ◆ 'You've got to go', they were saying. 'Quickly. God has had enough of this place and he's going to destroy it. You can get out, but only if you go now... run quick.. and get away as far as possible - run to the hills.'
 - ◆ Lot was obviously as tired and fed up as she was, because he tried to do a deal; he didn't have the strength to get any further than the nearest village, and so they settled on that. 'Run to Zoar... run as fast as you can... and whatever you do, 'DON'T LOOK BACK'
 - ◆ Lot's wife heard the words, but she didn't really take them in. To be more precise she didn't really care. She was tempted to stay where she was and let events take their course.
 - ◆ But Lot was on the move, and she'd had a lifetime of following him. And she followed this time too. In the dead of night.
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- ◆ As they got to the outskirts of Zoar, just as the sun was rising, a different sort of glow appeared in the sky, and a sound like nothing she had ever heard before. The air was warm, the noise was deafening; the smell was disgusting;
 - ◆ Behind her, were sounds of buildings falling, children crying; animals roaring... sounds of devastation and disaster.
 - ◆ 'Don't look back'... the angels had said. 'Don't look back'...
 - ◆ She heard the echo of their words, even as she felt her body turn, and she looked... and she saw... and the destruction of that god-forsaken place was the last thing she ever saw, because Lot's wife was turned to a pillar of salt which stands there to this day as a warning to others.

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HYMN 237:

Look forward in faith

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O.T. Reading: Psalm 103: 1-14 *The Love of God* p. 599

Praise the Lord, my soul!

All my being, praise his holy name!

² Praise the Lord, my soul,

and do not forget how kind he is.

³ He forgives all my sins

and heals all my diseases.

⁴ He keeps me from the grave

and blesses me with love and mercy.

⁵ He fills my life with good things,

so that I stay young and strong like an eagle.

⁶ The Lord judges in favour of the oppressed

and gives them their rights.

⁷ He revealed his plans to Moses

and let the people of Israel see his mighty deeds.

⁸ The Lord is merciful and loving,

slow to become angry and full of constant love.

⁹ He does not keep on rebuking;

he is not angry forever.

¹⁰ He does not punish us as we deserve

or repay us according to our sins and wrongs.

¹¹ As high as the sky is above the earth,

so great is his love for those who honour him.

¹² As far as the east is from the west,

so far does he remove our sins from us.

¹³ As a father is kind to his children,

so the Lord is kind to those who honour him.

¹⁴ He knows what we are made of;

he remembers that we are dust.

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"Bless the Lord, O my soul,

and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits."

LET US PRAY:

Gracious and most generous God, how easily we do forget the many reasons we have to be grateful, and to praise your name.

You are the source of our life, and of all life. Everything on our small planet and in our vast universe is the fruit of your creative imagination and your generous grace.

We live in a world rich with resources; each human being born has gifts and talents and potentials, along with the power to choose between right and wrong, good and evil, this way and that.

We confess, O God, that our choices have not always been the best ones. Sometimes we knew that from the start; often it has become apparent only with hindsight.

We have chosen the easy, safe road instead of the hard, challenging one. We have narrowed our focus to the safe limits of family and friends rather than attempt to welcome the stranger and love our enemies, as Jesus did and as he told us to.

Our God, we give thanks for the Psalmist's insight, long before Jesus came and taught us to pray to you as Father, that you understand and care for us as the gentlest of loving parents.

You are merciful and loving, slow to anger and full of constant love. You do not punish us as we deserve. If we are willing to put the past behind us, you are more than ready to do the same.

"As high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is your love for those who honour you. As far as the east is from the west, so far do you remove our sins from us."

Give us that fresh start, O God, we pray. May we not forget the past - all that has brought us to who and where we are today. May we learn the lessons it has to teach, and then go forward, wiser and stronger, to live better, kinder, more generous lives from now on.

Help us to understand other people and make allowances for them, as you do for us. Help us to forgive as we have been forgiven. Help us to see the best in people; to make peace rather than stir up trouble. Make us hopeful, and joyful and ever grateful for your love; and hear us as now we pray in the words that Jesus taught:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our trespasses (*debts*)
as we forgive those who trespass against us. (*our debtors*)
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever. AMEN

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HYMN 123: God is love, let earth adore him

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N.T. Reading (1) Luke 17: 26 -30 Coming of the Kingdom p. 102

²⁶ As it was in the time of Noah so shall it be in the days of the Son of Man.²⁷ Everybody kept on eating and drinking, and men and women married, up to the very day Noah went into the boat and the flood came and killed them all.²⁸ It will be as it was in the time of Lot. Everybody kept on eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building.²⁹ On the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulphur rained down from heaven and killed them all.³⁰ That is how it will be on the day the Son of Man is revealed.

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N.T. Reading (2) 2 Peter 2: 1-10a) *False Teachers* p. 299

¹ False prophets appeared in the past among the people, and in the same way false teachers will appear among you. They will bring in destructive, untrue doctrines, and will deny the Master who redeemed them, and so they will bring upon themselves sudden destruction. ²Even so, many will follow their immoral ways; and because of what they do, others will speak evil of the Way of truth. ³In their greed these false teachers will make a profit out of telling you made-up stories. For a long time now their Judge has been ready, and their Destroyer has been wide awake! ⁴God did not spare the angels who sinned, but threw them into hell, where they are kept chained in darkness, waiting for the Day of Judgment.⁵ God did not spare the ancient world, but brought the flood on the world of godless people; the only ones he saved were Noah, who preached righteousness, and seven other people.⁶ God condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, destroying them with fire, and made them an example of what will happen to the godless.⁷ He rescued Lot, a good man, who was distressed by the immoral conduct of lawless people.⁸ That good man lived among them, and day after day he suffered agony as he saw and heard their evil actions.⁹ And so the Lord knows how to rescue godly people from their trials and how to keep the wicked under punishment for the Day of Judgment,¹⁰ especially those who follow their filthy bodily lusts and despise God's authority.

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Sermon:

Tales of Terror: Sodom & Gomorrah

I'm grateful to the person who told me, last week or the week before, that she had happened to see an old film on television and was going back to the Bible - to the book of Genesis - to read

the original story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Her comment prompted me to do the same. And what a story it is!

We heard some of it earlier on, from the point of view of Lot's wife, whose own name we are never told. But the Biblical story is told with Abram, Lot's uncle, as the central character.

The angels (as the passing strangers turned out to be), three of them at first, and then, for no apparent reason, only two, let Abram into the secret of what God plans to do to Sodom because of its great wickedness. He is going to destroy the town and all its people.

And so Abram starts bargaining with God. He begins by appealing to God's good nature - his essential nature: "Surely the judge of all the earth is just"? And it would be unjust, surely, to destroy the entire town if, say, there were fifty good people in it? And God plays along with him and says, yes, if there are even 50 good people in Sodom, he won't destroy it. And then the haggling begins. Abram says, "supposing I can't find 50, but there are 45 good people, what then?" And God says OK, you find me 45 good people Sodom will spared. Then Abram really starts chancing his arm: what if there are only 40/ 30/20/10 good people there?

We can imagine the story-teller, with his audience sitting round the fire. There's no hurry. There's nothing on the tele. The tension is building, and all but the youngest of his hearers know what the outcome of Abram's bargaining will be. There are not even 10 people in Sodom good enough for the city to be spared.

And so the destruction begins - awful, devastating disaster. Sulphur rains down upon the city, and all its people are killed.

Almost everyone, whether they are familiar with the Bible or not, has heard of 'Sodom and Gomorrah'. Already by Jesus' time, these names had become a byword for depravity, and a warning of what happens to those who disobey God's word.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus says, 'remember Lot's wife', in the same way my mother used to say, 'remember the boy who cried 'Wolf!''. There's no need to retell the story, because the child - the adult hearers - know it already.

But there's always a danger when we think we know a story very well that in fact we have forgotten some details, and changed others, and quite possibly also missed what the story has to tell us.

This particular story is a very ancient one - at least 4.000 years old - and has many different layers of meaning.

Archaeologists and geologists have inevitably had a field day (quite literally!) trying to explain what sort of disaster may have overtaken these unfortunate towns.

The Dead Sea has, apparently, a layer of bitumen at its base. People used to mine it many years ago - a very hazardous occupation. So if there were to be an earthquake, with intense heat and disturbance of the earth's surface, burning tar might very well rain down upon the area.

The Dead Sea is also thickly saturated with salt, and is surrounded by all sorts of strange rock salt formations, some of which have an eerily human-like form. There is an element to this story very similar to the tales told in Iceland about Trolls being turned into rocks. The story is, at one level, like many other ancient fables told to explain the geology of the landscape.

But it also raises important theological questions about the nature of God and about sin and punishment.

We tend to assume that we know what the sin of Sodom was. The clue - and the danger of being misled - lies in the English word 'Sodomy'. That's why this story has come to the surface again recently, in the current church debates.

But when we look at the Genesis story itself, it's by no means obvious that this is what made God so angry that these people had to be destroyed. Yes, the young men of Sodom wanted Lot to hand over his male guests, and there is no doubt what they intended to do with them, but it was seen as quite acceptable - unremarkable - when Lot offered the mob his virgin daughters instead, something that would be unthinkable by any moral standards today.

Why was that? Why were the storyteller and his audience untroubled by something that horrifies us today? The answer seems to be that hospitality was of the highest importance in Hebrew culture. Your guests had to be welcomed and protected at all costs.

When Jesus quotes the story of Sodom in Matthew 10 & 11 and Luke 10, it is in the context of towns which reject him and his disciples in the same way as the people of Sodom rejected their angelic visitors. The disciples had been sent out in pairs to the towns and villages of Galilee, and they were told, if they were welcomed, to accept the hospitality that was offered, but if they were not made welcome, they were to leave, and 'shake the dust off their feet'. The eventual punishment of these unbelieving towns would be worse than that of Sodom and Gomorrah. So it

seems reasonable to suggest that, for Jesus, the sin of Sodom was primary the sin of rejecting God's messengers.

The prophet Ezekiel gives a different take on the story again. In Ezekiel 16, we read that the people of Sodom were punished because they were 'proud because they had plenty to eat and lived in peace and quiet, and did not take care of the poor and underprivileged.' A charge that has a strangely modern ring to it, and is very different from the usual explanation, including that of New Testament writers. Each culture seems to reinterpret the story in terms of its own and its own problems.

In 2 Peter, and in Jude, the story is cited as part of advice about how to deal with 'false teachers'. Only Jude specifically mentions 'sexual immorality and perversion' (Peter speaks more vaguely about 'filthy bodily lusts') and for both New Testament writers the message is that God will rescue good, godly people who hold firm against the ungodly, just as he rescued Lot...

... good, godly Lot, who offered his young daughters to a rioting mob intent on rape...

... good, godly Lot, who later allowed those same daughters to get him drunk so that they could get pregnant by their own father, there being no potential husbands around.

The most important question this story raises for us today - like other 'tales of terror' from the Bible that we prefer to avoid - is what it says about the essential nature of God, and how God operates in the world.

I often think that the question "Do you believe in God?" is one of the most meaningless questions you can ask. An entirely appropriate response would be to ask, "Which God do you mean?"

- ◆ the God who created the world, in all its beauty, wonder and complexity; who looked round on all that he had made and said, "Boy, I've done well! This is good!"?
- ◆ the God of Psalm 103, who understands our human frailty and makes allowances for it; who loves us like a father; who is 'slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love'?
- ◆ the God who rains sulphur down on those who displease him (after promising Noah not to lose his temper again)?
- ◆ the God who tells Joshua to destroy every last inhabitant of the land, and who punishes those soldiers who dare to show mercy and leave some of the defeated enemy alive?
- ◆ the God whom we see in Jesus, loving his enemies; upsetting the rich and powerful; dying rather than repay violence with violence?
- ◆ or one of the many Gods whom Christians have invented, and who conveniently excludes all but those who believe and behave as they themselves do?

Our vision of God is always partial. Inevitably we shape God in our own image. The best we can do is to be aware of that, and to be open always to the possibility of being wrong; open to being challenged by the living Spirit of God, speaking sometimes through Scripture and sometimes through other people challenging our reading of the ancient texts.

When we are too fearful, and in unhealthy awe of God, we need to be reminded of his grace and goodness. When we are too cosy and comfortable with the almighty creator of the universe, then perhaps it does no harm to read a story like this one and be reminded of his justice and power.

We need to read the old stories, reinterpret and retell them for our own time; but we need also to live out our own stories and tell

them so that our vision and experience of God becomes part of the great composite image that will help others to know God and live the rich, full lives for which we were created.

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HYMN 158: God moves in a mysterious way

Offering

Choir Voluntary: Teach me thy way, O Lord (MP 626)

LET US PRAY:

God, we hear the story of Sodom and how it brought about its own downfall. We read about gang fights; abuse of alcohol; abuse of sexual power; gangs of young men roaming the streets with no purpose other than to cause trouble.... and we could be hearing about London, or New York, or Glasgow on a Saturday night.

We picture in our mind's eye the sulphur raining down on Sodom and Gomorrah, and the images come from our television screens: pictures we have actually seen of the devastation caused by earthquake, volcano, hurricane and tsumani.

We see the bodies of the dead; the blank faces of survivors who have lost everything except their lives. We hear the wailing of the bereft; and the question 'Why?' hangs poised above the wreckage of human life.

God, who sees the whole of human history as we cannot, who understands 'why', and who grieves with us when we suffer, whatever the cause, we understand this ancient story because, at the deepest possible level, it is our own.

We are the ones who cannot settle; the ones who try our best to live up to our highest ideals and sometimes succeed, but often fail. We are part of the human race, which has done so much that is noble and good alongside so much that is shameful and wrong. We have brought trouble on ourselves, sometimes; and sometimes been victims of blind forces of nature that are still beyond our power to control.

Loving God - for so we dare to believe you to be - we bring our world before you now, in all its brokenness and confusion.

We pray for victims of natural disaster and human wickedness; and think especially of the people of Somalia, where both those things have come together in the most appalling of ways.

We pray for the people of Pakistan, terrified as the rainy season comes around, that new floods will begin before they have come close to recovering from the last ones.

We think of children who are poor and have no chance of receiving the education that might help them climb out of poverty; and alongside them we place those youngsters who have no interest in education because they cannot see the point of it.

We give thanks for the good gifts of the earth - grapes, and barley and bright red poppies among them - and grieve that these good gifts are abused through the misuse of drugs and alcohol.

We bring before you, our God, the people who matter to us most: the ones to whom we are bound by ties of family, faith and friendship.

We give thanks for those who are well, and strong, and happy, and ask your blessing and protection on them. We pray for those who are sick, or sad, or struggling, asking your comfort, your presence and your healing power.

Loving God, we give thanks for the insight we have into your character through Jesus, the closest we will ever come to seeing you in human form. He healed the sick; welcomed the outcast; comforted the sad; encouraged those who thought they were worthless to discover their value to you.

We offer these prayers, and present our gifts, in his name, trusting always in his grace and the power of his spirit. AMEN

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HYMN 167: Guide me, O thou great Jehovah

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Benediction:

Keep hold of what is good;
avoid all forms of evil.
May God himself, the God of peace,
make you holy through and through,
and may the blessing of God Almighty,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit
rest upon you and remain with you all,
this day and for ever more.

Sung Amen

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