

## ORDINARY PEOPLE:

### LOT'S WIFE

Genesis 19:12-15, 24-26

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on June 10, 2018, the Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a summer sermon series entitled "Ordinary People."*

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Nearly every summer at Westminster, I leave the lectionary behind and preach eight to ten sermons on some aspect of the Biblical text or our theological tradition that has drawn my particular interest in the previous year or so. A few months ago, I was moved by a statement I read from the German literary scholar Erich Auerbach, who said, particularly in comparison with classical literature, that literature of the Bible marks:

The birth of a *spiritual movement* in the depths of the *common people*...within the *everyday occurrences* of *contemporary life*...<sup>1</sup>

In other words, it is in the loves and hates, the hopes and fears, the strides and stumbles of ordinary people that God is both known and active in the world and which is narrated in Scripture.

Thus, this summer's series will highlight four men and four women from the Bible and hold them before our eyes that we may observe *what they experienced, what moved them, and how God may have been present* to them.

- With some, we will likely have passing familiarity: Lot's wife, the centurion at the cross, Joseph of Arimathea.
- Others will likely be new to us: Paltiel, Orpah, Huldah, Justus, and the mother of Rufus.

For some, I will be giving traditional interpretations that have been developed and passed down through centuries of Jewish and Christian study. For others, I will be giving less traditional interpretations, some rooted in my own imagination, but always seeking to present what is at least *possible* within the carefully crafted words of Scripture.

I preach this series in hopes that most if not all of these characters will serve as a *mirror* in which we can see some reflection of ourselves, and as a *lens* through which we may catch a glimpse of God in our world. For like these Biblical characters, we are "*common people*" in whose "*everyday occurrences of life*" a "*spiritual movement*...has been born."

Hear now the story of Lot's wife as found in selected verses in the Nineteenth Chapter of Genesis.

*Then the men said to Lot,*

*'Have you anyone else here? Sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone you have in the city—bring them out of the place. For we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before the LORD, and the LORD has sent us to destroy it.'*

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<sup>1</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (translated by Willard R. Trask), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 43.

*So Lot went out and said to his sons-in-law, who were to marry his daughters, ‘Up, get out of this place; for the LORD is about to destroy the city.’ But he seemed to his sons-in-law to be jesting.*

*When morning dawned, the angels urged Lot, saying, ‘Get up, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or else you will be consumed in the punishment of the city.’ But he lingered; so the men seized him and his wife and his two daughters by the hand, the LORD being merciful to him, and they brought him out and left him outside the city....*

*Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulphur and fire from the LORD out of heaven; and he overthrew those cities, and all the Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground.*

*But Lot’s wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.*

## I.

In one of the toughest stories in Scripture, after God has started over with Creation through the Flood,<sup>2</sup> dispersed the human race following the Tower of Babel,<sup>3</sup> and called Abraham and Sarah to be seeds of a great nation through which all the nations of the world will be blessed,<sup>4</sup> God appears ready *to start over – once again* – with grand but disappointing experience of the human creature – at least with that part of the world containing the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

After visiting Abraham and Sarah in their tent, three people, alternately described as “men” or “angels,” tell Abraham that they are on their way to Sodom, to destroy it. But unlike Noah, who had passively accepted God’s plans for destruction, Abraham argues with the Holy One and excises from God a promise to spare the city if ten righteous people can be found there. Two of the angels/men then proceed to the city, while one stays behind with Abraham and Sarah.<sup>5</sup>

In the city, the angels find Abraham’s nephew Lot, and urge him to flee with his family in light of the impending destruction. Lot immediately tries to enlist the two residents of the city who are engaged to two of his daughters, but both think their future father-in-law is “jesting,” and they remain in the city with their future wives, Lot’s daughters. Meanwhile, Lot, his wife, and their other two daughters flee, and are told not to look back. But in their flight, Lot’s wife – who is never named in scripture – turns around, looks back, and immediately becomes a pillar of salt.

Lot and his two remaining daughters continue their flight. When they arrive at the place the angels have agreed for them to go, the daughters assume that the three of them are the only people left on earth. Just as Noah had gotten drunk after the Flood and been violated by one of his sons, these two daughters get their Father drunk on successive evenings, become pregnant by him, and give birth respectively to the nations of Ammon and Moab. Centuries later, from the line of *Moab*, Ruth is born, as is David the King, as is the Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah<sup>6</sup> we worship.

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 6-9.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 11.1-9.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 12:1-4.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 18:1-15.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 19:30-38.

## II.

Lot's wife is remembered *critically* in scripture and tradition as the person who looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt.

- In her backward glance, she violates a tradition found in several major religions of the world against looking back once one has been called by a deity.<sup>7</sup>
- She is one who, in the later words of Jesus, “puts her hand to the plow” but “looks back” and therefore may not be “fit for the kingdom of God.”<sup>8</sup>
- When teaching his disciples about the need for absolute commitment, Jesus had warned them, as a negative example, to “Remember Lot’s wife.”<sup>9</sup>
- If Kierkegaard wrote: “Purity of heart is to will one thing,” Lot’s wife is one who is “double-minded.”<sup>10</sup>

Thus, in traditional preaching and teaching across the centuries, this unnamed wife of Lot serves as an example of how *not* to be if we seek to be faithful and committed followers of Jesus Christ.

## III.

But a close reading of this story at least opens the door for a more *charitable* and *humane* interpretation of Lot’s wife.

- Notice that when the angels are speaking to Lot, they say “take your wife and your two daughters *who are here...*” The words “*who are here*” indicate that Lot and his wife have at least four daughters, two of whom are prepared to flee from the city and two of whom plan to remain behind and marry.
- In addition, note that the angels describe the punishment as falling “*on the city*,” *not* specifically on Lot or his family, *not* specifically on Lot’s wife. The angels are saying that if Lot or his family choose to remain behind, they will suffer as a *natural consequence* the same fate as all in the city. In fact, when this event is referenced in Deuteronomy, *everyone* in the city is blanketed with salt; Lot’s wife is neither singled out nor even mentioned.<sup>11</sup>

In this line of interpretation, the turning of Lot’s wife into a pillar of salt is not so much an expression of *punishment* directed *specifically* at her as a *natural consequence* of her choice.

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<sup>7</sup>Theodor H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament, Volume One* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1969), 159-160. Gaster

<sup>8</sup> Luke 9:62.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 17:32.

<sup>10</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing* (Originally published, 1938).

<sup>11</sup> Deuteronomy 29:22-24. In Genesis, the city is engulfed in “sulphur and fire”; in Deuteronomy, it is “sulphur and salt.” I am thankful to a thirteenth-century rabbinical source, Rabbi David Kimchi, also known as RaDak, whose views on Lot’s wife are summarized in Rebecca Goldstein’s “Looking Back at Lot’s Wife,” *Commentary* 9/1/1992, available at <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/looking-back-at-lots-wife/> for these insights.

#### IV.

In addition, when we look at the *nature* of her choice, we can come to a *more positive appreciation* of Lot's wife. While her husband and two of her daughters obey God and flee toward safety, she looks back at her two daughters who have chosen to stay with their future spouses.

Going one step further, I believe it *possible* that Lot's wife is actually included in scripture less as someone who *disobeys* the commandment of God but more as a woman, a mother, a human being who in a moment of life or death, makes an *instinctive decision not to flee* with her daughters who will be safe in favor of *remaining with* her daughters who will not be safe.

- As such, she is the model of a parent who chooses to suffer the fate of her children who are *in danger* rather than remain with her children who are *safe*.
- She chooses to be with her children who will *suffer* rather than with her children who will *survive*.
- She chooses *solidarity with the suffering* over *life with the living*.

Like the Messiah who will come centuries later, her act is one of ultimate *identification with* and *sacrifice on behalf of* her children.

#### V.

A few weeks, ago, as we were preparing dinner, I was telling my wife, who is also a Presbyterian minister, what I was finding in the research on Lot's wife. (This is what clergy married to each other talk about over dinner!) When I told her that *two* of Lots' daughters remained behind in the city, she immediately said: "That is why Lot's wife turned around and looked back."

Lot's wife reminds us of every woman who so identifies with her children – of any age – that she will do *anything to be with* them. *Anything*.

- She is the mother of the disabled child who will only leave that child's presence for a few minutes – maybe an hour at most – twelve to fifteen years after the child comes into the world, and even then will only leave nervously.
- Lot's wife is the father of the child with special needs who knows he *does not* and *cannot* spend the same time and energy and money with his children whose needs are not as special.
- Lot's wife is the mother I knew whose second child – a son – was bedridden and unable to communicate from the time he was injured as a teenager until he died in his fifties and whom she visited at the facility in which he lived two hours, four hours, six hours eight hours nearly every day of his life.
- Lot's wife is the mother *and* father of the two boys in wheelchairs in the youth group of a church I served – boys just two years apart born with the same genetic condition – the mother of whom said to me *on the church mission trip* – as she pushed a wheelchair with one son up the ramp of their specially equipped van while her husband followed pushing the wheelchair with the other son – "We do believe that God considered us the best equipped people to bring these two boys into the world and care for them as long as we can."

- Lot's wife is every parent or adult figure who "looks back" or never gives up on children of any age with addiction issues, mental health challenges, children who have been shamed, bullied, rejected, abused for whatever reason.
- She represents all those who never turn away from their charges, the "good shepherd" who "sees the wolf coming" and does not "run away" from the sheep, but "lays down" her life.<sup>12</sup>

I know Jesus is right when he says: "No one who puts a hand to the plow and *looks back* is fit for the kingdom of God."<sup>13</sup> I know he is right in reminding us that sometimes we *have* to choose the will of God over the will of someone we love and someone who loves us. "Who are my mothers and brother?" he once asked. "My mother and my brothers are those who *hear* the word of God and *do* it,"<sup>14</sup> he answered.

But I also remember when Jesus wept over Jerusalem, he compared himself to a *hen* desiring to *gather her brood* under her wings.<sup>15</sup> I trust that Jesus understood why Lot's wife would turn back to be with her children. I trust Jesus was able to hold in his mind the *two* truths of single-minded devotion to God and solidarity with those we love. I trust he knows that sometimes we have to choose what *seems* to be *one* over *the other* and at other times we are able to *choose both*.

## VI.

The poet Anna Akhmatova was a dissident in her native Russia throughout the better part of the twentieth century. She had ample opportunity to flee the totalitarianism, political persecution, censorship, and warfare in which her nation was mired. But she refused to leave. In Lot's wife, she found a spiritual sister. She wrote:

The just man followed then his angel guide  
Where he strode on the black highway, hulking and bright;  
But a wild grief in his *wife's* bosom cried,  
*Look back, it is not too late for a last sight*

*Of the red towers of your native Sodom, the square  
Where once you sang, the gardens you shall mourn,  
And the tall house with empty windows where  
You loved your husband and your babes were born.*

She turned, and looking on the bitter view  
Her eyes were welded shut by mortal pain;  
Into transparent salt her body grew,  
And her quick feet were rooted in the plain.

Who would waste tears upon her? Is she not  
The least of our losses, this unhappy wife?  
Yet in my heart she will not be forgot  
Who, for a single glance, gave up her life.<sup>16</sup>

I know that today is not Mother's Day, but what love this *unnamed woman* showed her dying children, what sacrifice she made to be with *them*. Amen.

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<sup>12</sup> John 10 11-12.

<sup>13</sup> Luke 9:62.

<sup>14</sup> Luke 8:21.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 23:37-39.

<sup>16</sup> Anna Akhmatova, "Lot's Wife," in *The Paris Review*, Issue 26, Summer-Fall, 1961, available at <https://www.theparisreview.org/poetry/4644/lots-wife-anna-akhmatova>. The poem was originally written in 1924.