

## ***We Are Sodom Now***

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—Roger Wolsey

### **Ancient Witness: Genesis 19:1-7**

Six years ago a jury acquitted Scott Warren, a geologist and volunteer with a group called No More Deaths in Arizona. Warren was facing up to 20 years in prison, but thankfully, the jury was deadlocked 8 to 4, with the majority voting to acquit him.

What was his crime? Warren had the audacity to take the words of Jesus literally: “For I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me something to drink, an alien and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, sick and you ministered to me.”

Warren encountered two migrants who had lost their backpacks containing their food and water. Now, this could be a matter of life and death in this case, as thousands have perished in the desert over the past 20 years. So he provided the two with life-giving water, food as well as clean clothes and bed at a shelter called “the Barn.” Many men, women and children have died along this same route where Warren and No More Deaths have provided food and water to avoid tragedies like these.

This trial was part of a new zero-tolerance policy by the administration, cracking down on those providing humanitarian aid. Miguel de la Torre, a professor of ethics at Illiff Seminary wrote, “We are a nation that has made humanitarian aid a crime, and has made fidelity to the Bible a felony.” What have we become?

During the first Trump administration, there were numerous reports of inhumane conditions of prison camps for those seeking asylum in the United States. In a report released by Homeland Security itself stated there was extreme overcrowding, in one case over 900 people held in a cell designed for 125, with people standing on toilets to find air to breathe and detainees crammed into standing-room only cells for weeks, with no access to showers or clean clothes.

It is important to remember that many of those imprisoned at the border were not doing anything illegal. They were simply refugees fleeing violence and persecution in their native countries. They were fully within U.S. and international law to present themselves at the border to seek asylum.

Many men, women and children were first held in these open-air pens, sometimes referred to as “dog pounds,” where they were unprotected from the elements and forced to sleep on the dirt. Sometimes with no access to water. Then they were moved to centers called “hieleras,” which is

translated as “ice boxes” or “freezers” because the air conditioning was cranked up so it’s freezing cold, as low as 55 degrees, and they were given only these mylar blankets that look like aluminum foil to stay warm. They were forced to sleep on concrete floors under bright lights that are kept on 24/7. In some cases, they were imprisoned here for weeks—even children. There was no baby food for the little ones or diapers. Many were ill, and there was no medical attention.

In the midst of all this, a lawyer for the Department of Justice actually argued before the Ninth Circuit Court that the right to “safe and sanitary conditions” does not mean that asylum seekers held in prisons should be given soap or toothbrushes or a place to sleep other than a cold concrete floor under bright lights. What have we become?

In that first term and in the campaign for this second term, the President talked about rounding up and deporting 11 million undocumented immigrants who have been in this country for decades, inciting fear, and terrorizing and demonizing vulnerable men, women and children. And we remember, when through history whole groups of people are demonized, don’t we?

And we have seen eight months now, into the second Trump administration an escalation of hostility toward immigrants. Masked, heavily armed and often unidentified men snatch people from city streets, traffic stops, work sites, hospitals and college campuses. Some have been shipped to prison camps in El Salvador, Africa or the Everglades in south Florida. Many of these immigrants have legal status, work visas or green cards. Many families have lived peaceful and productive lives in this country for years.

The hateful rhetoric and the demonizing of immigrants has continued, casting them as criminal, as an impurity and as less than human. We are told lies that they take your jobs and are a drain on the economy. When it is the opposite: they create jobs and boost the economy. We are told to fear them and to blame them instead of the billionaires and oligarchs for the widening wealth gap, declining wages, the disappearing middle class and our shrinking share of the economy. We are told to look down and not up for the theft happening from the American people.

This week, the Trump regime declared to the United Nations they will no longer accept refugees or provide asylum for those who present themselves as they escape persecution, violence and death. This breaks an international agreement and humanitarian practice that has been in place since World War II. And this will be utterly disastrous for millions of refugees and immigrants around the world for years to come. What have we become?

Well, one could say we have become like Sodom.

Today’s reading of Sodom is one of the most misused and misunderstood passages in the Bible. Let’s take a look at it. In Genesis, chapter 18, it says “There was an *outcry* against Sodom.” And the word, “outcry” is associated in other passages with the cries of the oppressed. And because of its injustice and lack of compassion, it says that God was determined to destroy the city. It says that Abraham then argues with God and intercedes for Sodom. Perhaps it was because his nephew, Lot, lived there. Abraham says to God, “Will you really destroy the whole city? Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are 50 righteous

people?” So God answers and says, “O.K., I’ll not destroy it if there are 50 who are righteous.” Abraham doesn’t stop, “How about 45?” God says, “O.K., if there are 45, I won’t do it.” Abraham still doesn’t stop, “O.K. God, what if there are 30?” God responds, “O.K., I will not destroy the city if there are 30.” Abraham is persistent, “God, what if there are 20?” God is getting impatient, “Fine, Abraham, if there are 20 I will not do it.” Finally Abraham is really pressing his luck, “God, how about 10? If there are 10 righteous people will you still destroy Sodom?” An exasperated God says, “O.K., for the sake of 10 righteous ones, I’ll not destroy it.” And it says God then leaves.

So we pick up in chapter 19 with our passage today where two visitors/angels/men come to spend the night in Sodom, and they come upon Lot. They say, “We’ll just spend the night in the town square.” Lot says, “Umm, that’s not a good idea. This is not a good neighborhood. You better stay at my place.” So Lot shows these two travelers hospitality, giving them food, water, a place to sleep and to wash. So this was the true sin of Sodom: the failure to show hospitality. It was the failure to provide life-sustaining protection. When the two strangers or migrants visited Lot, it says they were getting ready to go to sleep for the night.

*But before they lay down, the men of the city... surrounded the house, and they called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know (euphemism for sexual intercourse) them.” (Gen. 19:4-5)*

Now as I said, this text is one of the most misused in the Bible and is often used to condemn homosexuality because it refers to men “knowing” other men. Thomas Merton once said that it is dangerous to put the Bible in the hands of people whose inner self is not sufficiently awakened to encounter the Spirit because they’ll just use it as a weapon to fulfill their egocentric desires. And we’re seeing that a lot recently with the rise of Christian nationalism that is driving many of our policies today.

But the sin of Sodom wasn’t about homosexuality. It wasn’t about a caring and loving sexual relationship, as many conservative Christians have tried to frame it. Rather, it was about gang rape, intimidation and humiliation. It was what often happened in military conquests or in prison—violent aggressive assertion of control over a more vulnerable human being. It was predatory behavior. This is a story of inhospitality toward to vulnerable migrant/strangers, the opposite of what God requires. As Roger Wolsey, a United Methodist minister wrote, “I strongly urge us to use the term sodomy to refer to what it really is—oppressing and otherwise not giving a damn about the poor and the immigrants.” The real Sodomites are those elected officials who are promoting this heinous abuse of migrants and not protecting them from it.

Lot says, “I beg you brothers, do not act so wickedly.” So they say to him, “This guy, Lot, comes here as an alien himself, who is he to judge us? We’ll deal worse with you, Lot, than with them!” (Gen. 19:19) Finally, it says “Then Sodom was destroyed when sulphur and fire rained down upon it.” (Gen. 19:24) Sodom brought destruction upon itself because of its injustice and indifference toward the weak and vulnerable.

In the book of Ezekiel, it says, “Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her sisters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy.” In this verse,

the city is the “mother” because it is supposed to be a place of protection and nurture, while the surrounding towns are her “daughters.” But instead, it was a place of hostility toward strangers and those who were different. And it did not protect the people, but allowed brutality toward the weak and vulnerable.

In the Talmud (ancient Jewish commentary on the Torah), it says that charity was actually forbidden in Sodom because they believed it encouraged the proliferation of beggars. Poverty was a character flaw. Sound familiar? And there was a story that the last straw and final outrage toward Sodom was when a young girl was caught giving bread to a stranger. (Or could it have been giving someone water in the desert?) She was tried and found guilty, daubed with honey and put on the city wall, where the bees consumed her. Her outcry (there’s that word again) reached up to heaven, and God determined to destroy Sodom. (Steinsalz Talmud from Sanhedrin, source: Rabbi Rachel Adler, 2013)

Perhaps, indeed, this nation has become Sodom. Where humanitarian aid is criminalized. Where innocent families and children are systematically brutalized to deter them from begging for mercy, while most remain indifferent. Where the migrant families are terrorized and abused. Perhaps at this very moment Abraham is interceding on our behalf. How many who are righteous will there be found? And will it be enough?

*(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)*