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“Learning to Look Back”

Genesis 19:15-26

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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.

When they had brought them outside, they said, “Flee for your life. Don’t look back or stop anywhere in the plain. Flee to the hills, or else you will be consumed.”

And Lot said to them, “Oh, no, my lords, your servant has found favor with you, and you have shown me great kindness in saving my life, but I cannot flee to the hills, for fear the disaster will overtake me and I die. Look, that city is near enough to flee to, and it’s a little one. Let me escape there—is it not a little one? —and my life will be saved!”

He said to him, “Very well, I grant you this favor too and will not overthrow the city of which you’ve spoken. Hurry, escape there, for I can do nothing until you arrive there.”

Therefore, the city was called Zoar. The sun had risen on the earth when Lot came to Zoar.

Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the Lord out of heaven, and God 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.

Genesis 19:15-26

The disturbing story of Lot’s wife goes from strange to stranger things. We only read twelve verses. You have to read the whole chapter to get how horrible this is. Genesis

19 includes graphic accounts of mob violence, attempted rape, and incest.

You wonder what bizarre event this story, which includes what sounds like a mushroom cloud, is attempting to explain. Maybe there was a fire or an earthquake they attributed to God's displeasure. The area around the Dead Sea is still full of salt, and the smell of sulfur. And—this is strange but true—salt formations in the area are so peculiar, locals say it is easy to imagine one that looks like a woman looking back.

Lot, his wife and their two engaged daughters live in Sodom. Sodom and its sister city, Gomorrah, are famous for their lack of hospitality. God hears about these cities' wickedness—which is, by the way, not described as having anything to do with sexual ethics. But thoroughly incensed by their lack of friendliness, God announces the cities will be destroyed. In Genesis 19, God does not sound nearly as forgiving as the God Jesus describes.

Abraham begs for the lives of his nephew Lot's family. God sends two angels to rescue them. Lot is at the city gate to welcome them: "Please, my friends, come to my house and stay the night. You can get up early and be on your way."

Lot will not take no for an answer. Men from the city hear that these two are saying that the city is going to be destroyed. When small-minded men hear about injustices they have committed, they often threaten the messengers.

The angry men surround the house and say, "Lot, where are the two loudmouths who are staying with you? Bring them out so we can have our way with them!"

The story gets worse.

Lot says, “Don’t do this” and incredibly, disturbingly, says, “I have two daughters, but don’t touch my guests.”

Most fathers would rather be killed than endanger their children, but Lot is willing to allow the townspeople to abuse his daughters. It does not come to that. The angels—there are no normal parts to this story—blind the men who are trying to break down the door. The angels pull Lot inside the house and lock the door. The scene is brutal and ugly. We never hear what Lot’s wife or daughters think about any of it.

The angels say, “You’ve got to get out of here. We’re going to destroy this place. Those are the most uncaring people in the world. We’re going to blast the whole county into oblivion.”

Sodom and Gomorrah are going to be destroyed for not welcoming migrants.

Lot warns the fiancés of his two daughters, “We have to run. The city’s about to go up in flames.”

His daughters’ would-be husbands think it is a joke.

When the sun comes up, the angels say, “Run as far as you can as fast as you can.”

But Lot is dragging his feet.

The angels ask, “What part of run do you not understand?”

No matter how many bad memories they have, Lot’s family does not want to leave their home.

The angels drag the family to safety outside the city and order them, “Head for the hills.”

Lot protests, “Please, no. I know you’re saving my life, but I can’t go to the mountains—who knows what terrible

things might happen to us there. There's a small town, Zoar, which means small town. There's hardly anything to it. Let us escape there."

The angel says, "Fine, but hurry."

God rains fire and brimstone—smoke, ash plumes, dust clouds over the twin cities, homes becoming rubble, and sulfur smelling like burning hair and rancid eggs. Lot's wife looks back and, in that moment of hesitation, the destruction catches up with her. She is wrapped, head-to-toe in a confusing metaphor, a sarcophagus of sodium chloride, and a crystallized statue erected to human frailty.

The whole story is confusing, but Lot's wife turning into salt is the attention grabber. The writer of Genesis could have explained, at least a little. Some biblical scholars sound misogynistic when they try to defend this bizarre punishment. She must not have been a nice person to begin with. For one thing, she was a native of Sodom, unwelcoming to foreigners. Maybe she was fond of gossip or borrowed too much salt from her neighbors. Those lost two are actual theories.

Her critics assume she is guilty, but we should admit she might be innocent. How could she not look back at the disaster behind her, her home and her city, people she loves, engulfed in flames and burning to the ground?

"Why did Lot's wife become a pillar of salt?" is a good question, and the only answer we get is "Because she wasn't supposed to look back." The punishment is unfair, unjust, uncalled-for, unwarranted, and unreasonable.

Lot's wife might be glad to learn that she has not been universally condemned for looking back. Anna Carter Florence, who has preached at Plymouth several times, writes, "The woman has more poets in her corner

than any other Wife-of-Somebody in Scripture, and they are not about to let centuries of quite-certain critics have the last word. The poets are not buying it, that it is okay to condemn a person for looking back without at least asking if she might have had her reasons. The poets want to rewrite, revamp, and repair whatever damage has been done to Lot's wife's reputation."

Natalie Diaz writes, *Of Course She Looked Back*:

"Listen
You would have, too.
She wondered had she unplugged
The coffee pot?
The iron?
Was the oven off?
Her husband uttered Keep going.
Whispered Stay the course, or
Baby, forget about it.
She couldn't.

Wislawwa Szymborska thinks Lot was a bad husband:
"They say I looked back out of curiosity.
But I could have had other reasons.
I looked back mourning my silver bowl.
Carelessly, while tying my sandal strap.

So I wouldn't have to keep staring at the righteous
nape of my husband Lot's neck.

From the sudden conviction that if I dropped dead
he wouldn't so much as hesitate."

Kristine Batey thinks Lot's wife had too much on her
plate:

"While Lot, the conscience of a nation,

struggles with the Lord,
she struggles with the housework.
The City of Sin is where she raises the children.
Ba'al or Adonai—
whoever is God—
the bread must still be made
and the doorsill swept.
The Lord may kill the children tomorrow,
but today they must be bathed and fed.
While her husband communes with God,
she tucks the children into bed.
In the morning,
when he tells her of the judgment,
[that is, God's decision to destroy the city]
she puts down the lamp she is cleaning
and calmly begins to pack.
In between bundling up the children
and deciding what will go,
she runs for a moment
to say goodbye to the herd,
gently patting each soft head
with tears in her eyes
for the animals that will not understand.”

Why did Lot's wife look back? Why wouldn't she? We look back all the time. Maybe the problem is the way she looked back. We are not helping ourselves when we look back only with longing or morbid curiosity. We often look back because we are afraid to look forward.

Hadestown on Broadway is an ancient Greek myth. Eurydice, a young girl looking for something to eat, goes to work in hell to escape poverty.

The poor singer Orpheus comes to rescue her. Hades decides to let Orpheus and Eurydice go on one condition: Orpheus must lead them out. If he turns around to confirm that Eurydice is following him, she will return to Hades and remain there forever.

As Orpheus makes his way he sings,
“How cold it’s blowing.
Where do I think I’m goin’?
Doubt comes in.
Why am I all alone?
Is this a trap that’s bein’ laid for me?
Is this a trick that’s bein’ played on me?
How cold it’s blowing.”

Orpheus is overcome by fear and doubt and looks back. He looks back because he does not believe in the love in front of him. Sometimes we look back because we do not believe in the love in front of us.

Every one of us has painful stories from childhood. We had parents who had too many rules or gave us too much freedom. Parents who wanted us to fulfill their dreams. Parents who did not care about our dreams. Parents that did not love us enough or parents who loved us too much.

We often remember the negative and ignore the positive. We exhaust ourselves trying to put a puzzle together when we only see half of the pieces. We have pain that takes up too much space in our brains—the death of someone we love, verbal, physical, sexual abuse, or the times we thought about suicide. We allow the pain of the past to keep us from seeing the promise of the present. We choose to remember only the bad.

Three weeks ago, when Matthew Perry died, people began looking at his autobiography for insights into his troubled life.

Toward the end of the book, he wrote about an encounter in which his mother told him she was proud of him: “I’d wanted her to say that my whole life. When I pointed this out she said, ‘What about a little forgiveness?’”

Perry, to his credit, was determined to break the cycle of negativity.

He told his mother, “I do forgive you.”

He writes of how he forgave his father, who left his mother when he was a baby. He expresses his adoration for friends, along with his hope that they might someday forgive him for everything he put them through as his addiction laid waste to his life.

According to Heather Havrilisky in *The New York Times*, the one person Perry could not seem to forgive was himself. He kept looking back and blaming himself for all the bad things that happened. He had trouble seeing his own good fortune. For long stretches he could only look back in an unhealthy way. Matthew Perry’s death is not just a cautionary tale, but a call to recognize our need to look back with love and forgiveness instead of holding tightly to our sorrows, mistakes, and tragedies. By the end of his book, Perry seems to be learning to see the joy of gratitude, connection, and empathy.

Because looking back can be hard, some make the mistake of trying not to look back at all. Have you heard this piece of advice? “Don’t look back. You’re not going that way.”

What an annoying, meaningless thing to say. How can we know where we are going without knowing where we are coming from? We need to look back so we can move forward. We need to look back to see what matters now. We need to look back to learn from the pain we have endured.

We need to recognize that the past lives on as part of the present, that, as William Faulkner said, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

By the grace of God, when we have been through the worst, we find peace on the other side. God gives us an amazing gift. We can look back whenever we need to. We can look back and understand that though most of the time we failed to see it, we were never really alone.

Frederick Buechner writes, “Sometimes we see that in our emptiest moments, something came to fill the emptiness. Sometimes in (looking back at) the difficult times, we see that God was there all along.”

We look back at the times when things were good—the gifts that came our way that were undeserved, the precious people who loved us more than we deserved to be loved, the ones who made us better people just by being there, the times we were better than we really knew how to be, and the times we stumbled on to the right road for the wrong reasons.

Looking back is inviting our past to shape our present, claiming our past with forgiveness and gratitude. We look back over the years. We sift through the things we have done and the things we have left undone for clues as to who we are and who we are becoming.

With God’s help, we let go of what we do not need to keep holding on to. We make peace with our past in a way that lets us spit out what we keep holding in. We forgive some who do not seem to know they need our forgiveness.

We turn around and head in a new direction. We accept healing and grace. We look back and see that our lives are the story of God with us. We look back and see that God is with us now.