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*Ewww! The Story of Lot's Daughters*

Part 2 of "Uncensored: Sordid Stories of the Bible" Summer Sermon Series

Ruth 1:15-18, 22; Matthew 1:1-6a; Genesis 19:29-38

July 8, 2018

A little context before our third scripture reading: we are on sermon number two in a six-week summer sermon series called "Uncensored: Sordid Stories of the Bible." We are looking at just a handful of some of the more disturbing stories in the Bible. These are uncomfortable stories that don't get preached on very much. Yet they, too, are part of Scripture. They, too, have a word from the Lord for us today—though we might have to listen extra hard to hear it.

We started off last week with the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. I refer you to last week's sermon and scripture readings if you missed it. To summarize, we learned how the great sin of Sodom was its colossal failure to show basic mercy and hospitality, as demonstrated when two strange men, who are actually messengers of God, or angels, show up in the city and accept Lot's invitation to dinner and shelter for the evening. When the men of the town gather outside Lot's house and demand to violate Lot's guests, Lot is so horrified that he offers them his two virgin daughters to do whatever they want with, but they refuse and threaten Lot instead. The two angels help Lot and his wife and daughters escape, and get to a tiny little town close by, since Lot is reluctant to go too far. Ignoring the angels' warning, Lot's wife looks back and becomes a pillar of salt, so she's out of the picture. God destroys Sodom and Gomorrah. [Remember: Lot is the nephew of Abraham, the man God has chosen to be the father of a great nation. Abraham and Lot had traveled together from their homeland, and settled in separate parts of that region when their flocks got too big to graze on the same land.]

Now last week, we kind of glossed over that little detail about Lot offering to bring his two daughters out to a mob of angry, violent men. This week, we stop and wonder, what on earth was Lot thinking? Yes, we know that the responsibility to protect one's guests was a sacred obligation. Yes, Lot's honor was at stake if he failed to keep his male guests safe. But. Offering your own daughters as a substitute? What about his responsibility to THEM? Yes, the culture was different then, and the role of women was VERY different, but still. Did it ever cross Lot's mind to offer himself, instead of his daughters? Can you imagine being those daughters, inside the house, overhearing what your father is saying?

Hear now the word of the Lord as it comes to us from Genesis 19:29-38 . . .

Sometimes a good way to connect with a Bible story is to imagine being each of the characters in that story. Can you imagine being a daughter of Lot? On what must have been the most frightening and tragic night of their lives, they are rescued from God-knows-what, only to find themselves ultimately stuck in a cave with the same man who had offered them up for rape and abuse by a violent mob of angry men. No other men for miles around, perhaps none on earth as far as they know, since they've already seen their whole world scorched to the ground. No way to bear children, and no future without children. They did not choose this situation, or contribute to it any way, but there they are. Let the family die out, or do something unspeakable. The story wouldn't work at all if it had been Lot who forced himself on the daughters, but as it is, there's poetic justice in what happens to him. It wouldn't have been easy to do this under any circumstances, but I wonder if the decision to carry it out was made easier or harder, by the way their father had acted.

I was reminded of a scene in the movie The Shawshank Redemption. The main character, Andy, spends 19 years in prison for murders he did not commit, and finally manages

to escape through a tunnel he had been quietly digging all that time, but to get out, he has to travel through the prison sewer. At one point it shows him retching as he makes his way through the long sewage pipe, but he keeps going, because he knows this is it, this is the only way out.

In a similar fashion, Lot's daughters hold their noses against the stench of what they're doing, and take their chances on the least awful of the options available to them. If nothing else, we can give them credit for being resourceful and doing the best they can with what little they've got.

As a lover of stories, I wish I could hear more about how this all played out. For example, at what point did Lot realize that his daughters were pregnant, and at what point did he realize who was responsible?

But the storyteller who wrote this down was not interested in that question. He was interested in telling a story about the origins of the people of Moab and Ammon. Moab and Ammon were two territories that just happened to be right next door to the kingdom of Israel. This story tells us two things about the way the Israelites viewed the Moabites and Ammonites. First, with suspicion: "Something's not right with these people. Can't trust them. They've always been a little off, and we know why." Second, with a sense of connection. Moabites and Ammonites were descendants of Lot. Israelites are descendants of Abraham. Despite some differences, they are all related . . . although this doesn't stop them from fighting battles with each other as the need arises.

Moabite women get a particularly bad rap in the book of Numbers, for seducing the Israelite men, and inviting them to make sacrifices to their god Baal. Thousands of little

Hebrew boys grew up being warned by their mothers, “Now, you stay away from those Moabite girls.”

Fast forward hundreds of years, to the land of Moab, where an Israelite family has fled from the famine in their own country. The head of the family dies, leaving behind a wife and two sons. The sons marry, but they die too. And that leaves a widow named Naomi with nothing and no one except her daughter-in-law Ruth, who leaves her home to come to Bethlehem with Naomi, spends long days picking up scraps of grain off the ground to feed them both, and eventually marries Naomi’s relative Boaz. Ruth bears a son, providing a new family and a new life for Naomi. Ruth is so loyal that Naomi’s friends say, “Your daughter-in-law who loves you is worth more than seven sons.” That is extremely high praise in a culture where sons are always valued more than daughters.

Of the sixty-six books of the Bible, only two are named for women. One of them is Ruth, the story of a Moabite woman who becomes the great-grandmother of King David and an ancestor of Jesus the Messiah.

So what are some take-aways from the sordid story of Lot and his daughters and the origins of the people of Moab and Ammon?

First, perhaps it can remind us that there are many, many people who are in the same situation as Lot’s daughters. Not that exact situation, but situations of desperation, when the choice is between one awful thing and another awful thing. Like, do you stay in a country where the level of violence is so great that you fear for your life, and the life of your children? Or do you flee that country, and risk being arrested and detained for trying to enter another country illegally? If you’re in a country where there’s a famine and food is scarce, how do you

decide which child to feed? It's never a bad idea to put ourselves in the shoes of those who are desperate.

Second, when someone is really getting on our nerves, be they a Moabite or an Ammonite or a competitor or the opposing political party or your relative who always says the wrong thing at the Fourth of July picnic, this story challenges us to look for what we have in common. We are connected to each other and therefore we can't hurt another without ultimately hurting ourselves.

And third, this is yet another story—there are so many of them—where God takes something disgusting and despicable and brings something wonderful from it. That seems to be God's specialty. Even from an unthinkable physical union between Lot and his daughters, God brings something good. After Jesus' horrific death on the cross, God brings resurrection. Whatever ugly, awful stuff you have in your life, and whatever ugly, awful stuff I have in mine, it is not so ugly or awful that God cannot use it for good. It's like spiritual compost. I hope you're not tired of hearing this, because if the Bible were a song, this might be the drumbeat. Over, and over, and over, and over—scripture wants us to get this. I invite you to take a deep breath, and think for a moment about your own pain, your own “stuff,”—and offer it to God . . . and to stand as you are able and sing together, as our affirmation of faith, “In the Bulb There Is a Flower.”