

The story of Lot's wife is the end of the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Before we engage the story of Mrs. Lot and her transformation into a pillar of salt, it is important for me to say something about the destruction that she is fleeing. The scripture tells us that God has heard an outcry of the wickedness of the two cities and has decided that the only option is to destroy them. God sends two angels disguised as visitors to the city of Sodom where they are met by Lot. When Lot learns that they planned to sleep in the city square, he urges them to come to his home for their own safety. Once the men of the city learn that Lot has welcomed strangers into his home, they descend upon the house and demand the visitors be turned over so they could be raped. Lot refuses to hand over his guests (though he offers up his daughters, which is a whole other sermon). The strangers then tell Lot that they have been sent to destroy the city and that he and his household must run to the hills to escape the destruction.

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah has been used by some religious leaders to declare that homosexuality is the reason the cities were destroyed and therefore, homosexuality should be considered sinful and some go so far as to say that homosexuality leads God to cause floods and tornadoes and earthquakes in modern times. I want you to hear me say that I completely disagree with this interpretation of the text and it is abusive and irresponsible for preachers to continue to proclaim this message. The heinous act that the men of

Sodom were seeking to carry out amounted to a gang rape. It was sexual violence. And I do believe that God thinks rape is horrific and must stop. The men of Sodom were not seeking respectful, loving, consensual intimacy and to equate the violent acts of the mob with a consensual sexual act is not only a bad reading of the text, it is abusive and self-serving. Furthermore, other scripture in the Bible don't even mention sexual immorality as one of the sins of Sodom. Ezekiel 16:49 states "Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy." Hospitality was practically a commandment in ancient Israel. Not only were the men of Sodom inhospitable to the guests, the mere presence of "foreigners" drove them into a violent rage. If there was a reason for the destruction of the city, it was their greed, self-absorption and their outright violence toward anyone who didn't belong.

Moving ahead – the focus of the message this morning is Lot's wife. She is never given a name in the text and is often simply called "Mrs. Lot" by commentators.

I think Mrs. Lot gets a bad rap. She is held up as an example of what happens with people disobey God. She was warned by the angels to not look back but she defied them and looked back anyway. She got what she deserved. But I think the story of Mrs. Lot is a bit more complicated.

Although the text tells us almost nothing about her, theologians have been speculating about her for nearly two thousand years. Jewish Midrash is an ancient commentary on scripture in which respected Rabbis of the time prayerfully attempted to explain some of the unwritten pieces of scripture. One of the Midrash accounts presents the possibility that Lot and his wife had more than two daughters. Many people assume they only have two daughters because only two are mentioned in the text. But it is quite within the realm of possibility that Lot and his wife had other adult children who were married and not living in their house. Mrs. Lot may not have been aware of the plan to flee until the angels are practically dragging Lot and his family out of the city. There would not have been time to seek out other children and include them in the escape.

This is just one of the reasons Lot's wife may have looked back. I wonder if she was simply overwhelmed by grief and despair and unable to move. Maybe her transformation into a "pillar" was more metaphorical than literal.

Video has been circulating of a little boy in Aleppo Syria who was pulled from the rubble after an airstrike. The video shows 5 year old Omran Daqneesh being pulled from a bombed-out building and carried to an ambulance. He is plopped on a seat in the ambulance and left there for a few minutes while people continue to rescue more children from the building. Covered in dust and blood, the little boy seems absolutely stunned. He isn't screaming or even crying. He

sits fairly still and gently wipes some of the blood from his forehead. I can only imagine that the shock and terror of what is going on is just too much to take in.

This feeling of shock and terror would have been absolutely reasonable for Lot's wife. Presumably when she fled with her husband and two of their daughters, she left behind friends and quite possibly extended family. Hearing the destruction and the chaos behind her, who could blame her for looking back? Maybe the act of looking back isn't what turned her into a pillar of salt but that after looking back, the scene stunned her into immobility. The text says she "became" a pillar of salt. There is no indication in the text that this transformation was a punishment or an act of God. What if the transformation was a metaphorical one? She became a pillar – something immovable and stuck. A pillar of salt – upon seeing hearing the violent destruction of the city had she become engulfed in her own salty tears?

It is also possible that Lot's wife was simply afraid of the unknown future that lay ahead of her. Sodom was a toxic place filled with greed, arrogance, and violence. And yet, it may have been the only life that Mrs. Lot knew. Many of us have experienced situations or relationships that we know are destructive or toxic, yet we hesitate to cut ties and seek something more healthy and life-giving.

Especially when that toxicity comes from people we love. I had a friend in college that we'll call Susan, who grew up with a physically abusive father and a mother who was an alcoholic and emotionally manipulative. She had been a really active

child and teen, playing field hockey and other sports. But her last year of high school she became less active and began gaining weight. Just before starting college, her mom made it very clear that she was displeased with her weight gain. While traveling to the University, they engaged in a lengthy discussion about her weight. Susan's mom turned her and said "I just want my Susan back." I would assume her motivation was to encourage Susan to make healthy choices and lose the weight but she went about it in a way that produced shame communicated to Susan that her mom's love and approval was dependent on her dress size. Susan experienced this toxic conversation just days before she began her freshman year of college at a school where she didn't know anyone and was likely already nervous and self-conscious. And yet, how could we expect Susan to cut ties with her mom and "run for the hills"? Life is usually more complicated and messy than that.

Sometimes not looking back on our past can be harmful too. It is important to understand where we have come from and the experiences that have shaped us in both positive and negative ways. A friend of mine shared that he was working through an abusive past with a therapist when a family member told him it was time to move on and get over it. They used a metaphor of a boat. They said that when you are driving a boat you don't look behind you to watch the water being churned up by the motor, you look ahead to see where you are going. I pondered this for a minute and then said "but if your boat is still tied to

the dock and you are looking forward pushing the engine to its limits wondering why you aren't making any progress, I think you need to look behind you and find out what is keeping you from moving forward.

Looking back can be necessary and healthy but it must lead us to a more whole and positive experience. When we are only looking back, dwelling in the past or staying in a situation that is toxic and unhealthy to the point that we become as immobile as a pillar of salt, something needs to change.

Like most stories, this one about Lot's wife needs to be read with nuance and a grain of salt. (Pun intended!) Life is not as simple as following a set of prescribed steps that apply to everyone.

I firmly believe that God desires a whole and healthy life for each one of us. What that life is looks different for different people. But I am confident that that life is free from selfishness, violence, abuse, and greed just to name a few. I believe we often encounter angels in our midst who urge us to leave behind situations and people who are toxic and destructive. Sometimes we listen eagerly and trust that God is guiding us toward something better, and sometimes we have to be dragged out by force. New life can be terrifying! It is unknown and unfamiliar. But each of us deserves wholeness.

So I leave you with this question. What do you need to flee from and not look back? Is it a toxic person or relationship? A job that seems to suck the life

right out of you? Maybe it is a toxic way of thinking. The good news is that we are here to be angles for each other! To help each other have the courage to let go of toxicity in our life and to seek a new way. We are not on this journey alone and with God and each other by our sides, we can seek health and wholeness for ourselves and for each other. May it be so. Amen.