

READ

Genesis 19

REFLECT

The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is among the most culturally fraught passages in Genesis. It's graphic and disturbing; reading these verses can be difficult or even distressing. Even though it's hard to read, there is value in it. The messengers who entered Sodom were the same messengers that had just been with Abraham to announce the birth of Isaac. When they went to Abraham, he bent over backward to offer them hospitality – water for washing, food, shade, etc. Their experience in Sodom was quite a bit different. Lot insisted they stay with him, which was awfully nice of Lot, but then all the men in town showed up at his door to bring the strangers out so that they could rape them. It's an unthinkable thing to even consider – why would their first response to strangers in the town be rape? The answer is power – they didn't like new people and anyone who showed up would be humiliated in the vilest way possible. Because Lot brought the messengers into his home, their protection was his job and his only means of trying to offer protection was by giving the crowd his daughters rather than the messengers, a terrible choice indeed. It wouldn't do though, so the crowd threatened Lot's life, too. This was the straw that broke the camel's back, and the messengers began their work of destroying the cities. Lot and his family were saved, though his wife perished after looking back at the city and turning into a pillar of salt.

Following their escape from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot and his daughters headed into the mountains and bedded down in a cave. His daughters were fearful that they'd never find husbands, so they plotted a way to get pregnant from their father, and their plan worked. Their children were the ancestors of the Moabites and Ammonites, two historical enemies of Israel – their origin story as a people born of incest only solidified Israel's opposition to them. These stories of destruction, rape, and incest aren't pleasant in the least bit. But their horror underscores the importance of caring for one another – welcoming the stranger, not abusing power over others. It's when we lose the ability to care for one another that our own civilization is destroyed.

REACT

- How do you feel after reading such difficult words in scripture? What do you take from the horror presented – can you find good news at all?
- How power is used in a community can say a lot. People who use their power to subjugate and humiliate rather than to protect and love is a clear violation of the way in which God created us to be. These power dynamics, even if the issue is not rape, continue to plague humanity – how can you hear God’s call to shift the dynamics of our own community to be more equitable?
- The lineage of the Moabites and Ammonites makes them seem awful – they’re the product of incest and fear. The entire communities were marred by that beginning and it created tension for thousands of years. Many communities today still have negative associations because of events that happened a long time ago. Do you continue to view such groups negatively? Why or why not?

RESPOND

Shift the power: All of our relationships are built in some way on power. Your boss has power over you by virtue of their position. You have power over your children, unless they’re grown and out of the house, and you wish you still had power over them! When that power is used in love – to protect your children, for instance – it’s a very healthy and good thing. When it’s used negatively, like when you’re forced to do something you’re uncomfortable with just because your boss tells you to, it’s not. Reflect on your own relationships, the ones where you have power over others and the ones someone else has power over you. How are the dynamics? Can you think of the times the relationship has been unhealthy? How can you shift the power dynamic to create something healthy from the unhealthy? Reconciliation is at the heart of our faith – make your task this week to try and seek reconciliation in one relationship where the dynamics of power have created tension, allowing the Spirit to guide you in love.