

January 26, 2003
Third Sunday After Theophany

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Abraham's nephew Lot was no good judge of neighborhoods.

First, there was Sodom. With the whole Promised Land from which to choose, "Lot dwelt in the cities of the plain and pitched his tent even as far as Sodom" (Genesis 13:12). It was a perfectly awful choice. Hardly had Lot and his family moved in when a group of Bedouin kings came and raided the place, taking the whole bunch of them captive (14:1-12). Were it not for the prompt intervention of Uncle Abraham, that probably would have been the last we heard of Lot (14:13-17).

In addition, Sodom was hardly a salubrious place to live, because "the men of Sodom were exceedingly wicked and sinful against the Lord" (13:13). We know that Lot did not enjoy living there. The Scriptures speak of "righteous Lot, who was oppressed by the filthy conduct of the wicked (for that righteous man, dwelling among them, tormented his righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds)" (2 Peter 2:7).

Why, then, did Lot continue to live in such a vile place? He seems to have been one of those many people who, once they have settled down somewhere, are reluctant to move away, long after the situation has proven itself hopeless. Such souls are excessively fond of the familiar, the sort of folk who imagine all manner of evil that may befall them if they should change neighborhoods. "I cannot escape to the mountains," insisted Lot, "lest some evil overtake me and I die" (19:19). If anyone in Holy Scripture, however, should ever have heeded the warning, "Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues" (Revelation 18:4), surely that man was Lot.

Still, Lot stayed put in Sodom, until almost too late. That time of crisis that Jesus called "the days of Lot" (Luke 17:28) had well nigh run its course. Loudly sounded, even now, the hour of overthrow. The brimstone was ready, with the pitch pots boiling to the brim, and the rescuing angels were urging Lot to hurry: "Arise, take your wife and your two daughters

who are here, lest you be consumed in the punishment of the city. . . . Escape for your life! . . . Escape to the mountains, lest you be destroyed!" (Genesis 19:15,17)

Second, there was Zoar. Even as he fled from Sodom, Lot already began to miss the old neighborhood and was reluctant to move too far away! When the angels pressed him to flee to the mountains, he begged them for a compromise. How about Zoar, little Zoar, not far from Sodom? "See now," Lot pleaded pathetically, "this city is near enough to flee to; and it is a little one; please let me escape there (is it not a little one?) and my soul shall live" (19:20).

So Lot moved to Zoar, and his soul did live, but not his wife's, alas. Zoar was simply too proximate to Sodom, and it was not safe for Lot's family to remain so immediate to the scene of the overthrow. His wife succumbed to the temptation to "look back," in spite of the angelic admonition not to do so (19:17,26). Her backward glance to Sodom became, for all time, the symbol of those unwilling to put sufficient distance between themselves and sin. Her punishment stands forever as a portent to God's people: "Remember Lot's wife!" (Luke 17:32).

In spite of the unflattering picture of him in these biblical stories, Lot is remembered in the Bible as a righteous man. As we have seen, the Apostle Peter uses the word "righteous" three times in the two verses he devotes to Lot. In this respect Peter followed the example of the Wisdom of Solomon, which spoke thusly of Lot: "When the ungodly perished, [Wisdom] delivered the righteous man, who fled from the fire which fell upon the five cities. Of such wickedness, even to this day, the smoking wasteland is a testimony, and plants bearing salt that never come to ripeness; and a standing pillar of salt is a monument of an unbelieving soul" (10:6-7).

One observes that when the Bible calls Lot righteous, the term is somewhat relative; that is, he is called righteous by way of contrast with those around him, whether his wife or the citizens of Sodom. It is largely in this contrast that Lot is held forth as a model. In the words of St. John of Mount Sinai, "So we had better imitate Lot, and certainly not his wife" (The Ladder of Divine Ascent 3).

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