

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

**C: Sixth Sunday after Pentecost / Lectionary 18
Genesis 18:20-32, Luke 11:1-13**

**24 July 2022
Salem, Bridgeport**

“The Power of Persistent Prayer”

Wow!

What astounding stories we’ve just heard!

What incredible insights into how God interacts with human beings!

What powerful promises God speaks to us through these readings this morning!

First, we have this story of how God is fed up with the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

(And – parenthetically – in case you’ve heard that God was angry because of homosexuality, let me disabuse you of that fact.

God was angry because the people weren’t loving God, and they weren’t loving their neighbors.

Not only did they neglect to offer hospitality to and care for people who were not like them,

some of them violently attacked these “others” and no one else did anything to stop the attacks.

But back to today’s story....)

God is so angry God threatens to completely destroy both cities.

And when Abraham hears this he is immediately concerned for those who might not have been involved, and he raises this concern with God.

“But God, what if there are 50 innocent people there? Will you still destroy the city?”

And God replies, “No. If there are 50 innocent people I will not destroy it.”

Then Abraham thinks “Oh, what if there are a bit fewer than 50?”

So he says to God, “What if there are 45 innocent people? Will you destroy it then?”

And again God says, “No. If there are 45 innocent people I won’t destroy it.”

The conversation continues as Abraham goes back again and again to God, negotiating from 50 down to 45, to 40, to 30, to 20, and finally down to 10

in his effort to save the people in the cities from the God who has the power to destroy them.

On the one hand, it seems quite daring

for Abraham to negotiate with a god who has the power to destroy entire cities.

A god who is willing to destroy an entire city even if there are innocent people living there,

certainly has the power to destroy one man who calls that god’s judgement into question!

And yet, because of the deep relationship he has with his god, Abraham trusts he can speak & God will listen.

After all, this is the god who showed Abraham the starry sky and promised that the childless Abraham would have as many descendants as there were stars in the sky.

This was the god who had walked with him and led him since the age of 70 for 24 years.

This was the god who had just sent 3 messengers to tell Sarah and Abraham

that SHE at age 90 and he at age 100 would have a child together within the year.

This was the god that Abraham knew so well that he could say to that God,

“Far be it from you to act unjustly. Remember who you are God. Be who you are.

Live up to who you are. Don’t disappoint me. People are watching. Be the God of whom I can boast.”

Knowing God’s character gives Abraham the courage

to plead with God, argue with God, negotiate with God – not as an equal,

but as creature to Creator, a child to a father, as one in a loving relationship.

Knowing God so well, he knows just how to best plead his case.

And knowing God so well, he can trust in God’s love enough to go back to God again and again and again.

It's a wonderful story, one which might very well have been in Jesus' mind
when he tells the story of a man who goes to his friend late at night
to beg some provisions for an unexpected guest,
and perseveres in his asking until his friend comes through for him.
Jesus compares our relationship to God to that of a child to a loving parent.
God loves us so of course God wants to provide for us.

As if those words were not enough to encourage us, Jesus goes on to make this powerful promise:
"Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.
For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds,
and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened."

So let me ask you: Do you believe what the Bible says? Do you believe Jesus spoke the truth?
Well, if you are like me you will say "yes" to those questions:

Yes, I believe what the Bible says, and yes, I believe Jesus spoke the truth.

But do we REALLY believe?

Do we believe with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength? Do we believe all the time?

And of course the answer to those questions is sadly, "no".

Yes we believe in theory, in our heads,

but sometimes we find it a challenge to believe in practice, with our hearts.

We find it a challenge because there is something inside of us that causes us to not believe.

You can call that thing the devil, or evil, or our sinful nature, or negative thoughts & emotions,

but no matter what you call it, it whispers words into our minds

that cause us to doubt that God has heard us, that God will answer,

that God cares enough to respond to our prayers.

A couple of weeks went by earlier this month

during which I didn't hear God, didn't see any signs or wonders, didn't feel God's presence,

I felt like God had taken a vacation, or was mad at me, or was punishing me,

or was trying to teach me a lesson or something.

Despite the fact that God has accomplished probably 100 signs and wonders in my life in the last year or so,

I found myself wondering if I'd ever hear from God again.

There was the part of my mind that knew I should believe, and yet I couldn't help but doubt.

Then I went to the inauguration service of the Ephraim French Seventh Day Adventist church

and towards the end of the service, a guest vocalist got up, and introducing her song,

she said, "We serve the God of the impossible!"

As she said that tears came into my eyes because I realized

that in my focus on my own need, my own lack, my own myopic worldview,

I had forgotten how powerful and how loving God truly is.

I had forgotten how faithful and trustworthy God is.

I had forgotten that yes, we do serve the God of the impossible (!) and it was so good to be reminded of that!

The speaker continued,

"I know that there is something in every one of our lives that feels impossible.

And so I'm going to invite you to close your eyes

and pray right now about that impossible thing and ask God to answer your prayer — this week."

As the singer closed her eyes and as the music played softly in the background,

I closed my eyes and prayed about a broken friendship that I saw no way of mending.

I said, "God, all I need is a sign, a clear and unmistakable sign

that someday that relationship will be fully healed."

And then the singer went on to sing about the God of the Impossible.

That night in my gratitude journal I wrote the following:

“I am so grateful that the singer at the Seventh Day Adventist service reminded me that we believe in the God of the impossible and that she had us pray for one impossible thing and trust God to answer it this week and that I prayed that God would give me a sign that one day that friendship will be fully healed, and that I am believing God will do it.”

The next morning when I awoke to my phone’s alarm and reached to turn it off, there on the home screen of my phone was a picture of that very person about whom I had prayed.

Our stories today remind us of the power of prayer, a power that arises from the relationship into which we’ve been called, our relationship with the God who had the infinite power to create us and all that exists, and who has and will always have infinite love for us and for God’s whole creation.

“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.”

Those are the words of Jesus’ promise.

Those are the words we profess and proclaim.

Those are the words we hold onto in faith as we pray in the Spirit and in Jesus’ name.

Let me invite you into that promise. [<https://youtu.be/YUa-9debrvs>]

“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.” I invite you to close your eyes and think about whatever it is in your life that feels impossible, and ask God to do it – or tell you how to do it – or to give you a sign that God will do it.

[silence for prayer]

God, we thank you for who you are, for all you’ve done,

and most especially now, for creating us to be in relationship with you.

We thank you for hearing our prayers and we thank you for your promise to answer.

Give us the faith to believe so that we might receive that for which we’ve asked.

Trusting in your boundless power and endless love,

we pray in the name of Jesus and by the power of the Spirit. Amen