

Returning to the Burning City: Reimagining Lot's Wife

Genesis 19:15-26 2 Corinthians 13:5-14

A STAGE PLAY I've written—BOTTLE OF FIRE!

Two black women, sisters, have discovered a letter long hidden behind a photo in a family photo album.

The letter reveals an incident of anti-black terrorism in a town in the Midwest.

What really happened to a boy named Elijah.

Lucille is the director of the county library in the town not far from where the incident took place.

Her younger sister, Carmanita, is a Pentecostal minister in a city a couple hundred miles away.

Upon reading the letter, the sisters discuss going to the white authorities to ask that Elijah's remains be exhumed for an autopsy.

CARMANITA: You'll have to try and convince the state to come in. And they're not going to want to touch it with a forty foot pole, even if they have one. You'll have to put up a fierce fight!

LUCILLE: I'm not helpless, you know.

CARMANITA: I know you're not. But exhuming that boy's remains is not going to set well in some people's minds, especially when it ends up on television and everybody's computer and phone screen. Some folks are going to fight back.

LUCILLE: Let 'em fight.

CARMANITA: You might have to hire your own night security guard. You might lose your job. Could be, you'll have to run and not look back like Lot's wife. Only in that big ol' car you bought.

LUCILLE: Except I'd have you riding with me, sister, wouldn't I? Lot's wife had to turn herself around all by her lonesome, didn't she?

CARMANITA: Nobody knows for sure. I think she turned around to look back because she was thinking *“If I make it back to the city, I can help all those poor folks who are being torn up by the fire & the brimstone.”*

LUCILLE: You think that’s what happened?

CARMANITA: I think the pillar of salt is a monument to her.

LUCILLE: Well....

CARMANITA: Instead of calling her Lot’s wife, we ought to give her a real name. Start calling her... I know....Lottie.

Lottie! God’s first female super hero!

LUCILLE: Well, it’s about time she acquired her own name!

CARMANITA: Instead of flying, she could run extra fast!

Back and forth! In and out!— of the burning city!

Carrying babies! Grandmas and grandpas! Loose dogs! Cats! Sick folks!

If they try and chase you outta town, you can come stay with me in my little brick house

LUCILLE: I’d rather it didn’t come to that.

Here’s another possibility in this old, old story, which, frankly, can get quite ugly the way it’s been told.

Suppose we give Lot’s wife a different name this morning!

She was a Jew, wasn’t she?—let’s give her a Jewish name.

Let’s call her Tzadeket! T-Z-A-D-E-K-E-T..... Tzadeket!

You say it..... T-Z-A-D-E-K-E-T

In Jewish lore, a Tzadeket is one of the secret righteous persons who—*“repairs the world.”*

A person who holds the world together!—keeps the world alive!—without any fanfare—or without anyone knowing it at all.

Lot's wife?

What do you think?

Tzadeket! Come repair our world!

How many of you saw George Floyd's brother on television this week?

He was speaking right there in the street in Minneapolis where his brother was murdered.

He told everyone to stop looting! Stop breaking windows! Stop throwing stuff at the police because "That's not what my brother would have wanted."

And it wouldn't help bring justice in the case or bring about the policing reforms that are necessary so killings like George's don't happen ever again.

It was hard on him, giving that talk.

When he finished, he collapsed into the arms of the people standing next to him.

The President and other people want to change the focus to the looters, the criminals, the rock throwers, the car burners.

But that's just a distraction!

No one wants them. You don't want them! I don't want them!

The issue of George Floyd's murder and other people like him and the issue of the opportunists who are just taking the opportunity to do what they always do anyway—they are not the same issue.

Holding up a Bible in front of a church doesn't do anything to solve the problem of anti-blackness in our culture. We need problem solvers now and imagination makers right now! Not Bible thumpers!

I think it will help us to start talking more about the deep problem of anti-blackness in our culture and the way to solve it by making black lives matter, black is beautiful and brilliant and brown is definitely downtown!

In my first pastorate in the St. Louis area, I got to know Dana McCaulay, an elementary age African American girl who was part of a young people's group we started. Dana has her own family now; she is a lawyer, and we re-connected on Facebook a few years ago. In three gongs, this is part of what she said in the last few days.

Ring gong!

I am running out of time. My son Dylan is a big boy and I have every expectation that he will be a big teenager and then a big man. I cannot singlehandedly make this problem go away, even working right in the middle of police accountability. It will take a critical mass of people to be outraged and stop allowing this behavior to get to a place where my son, my brother, my nephews and me are as safe as they can be, and again, I'm running out of time...so yes, I need your help with this too.

Ring gong!

If you are complaining about looting and senseless violence, please know this: It is clearly understood that looting is wrong. Looting has become a bar to some of you being willing or able to hear those people. What does need to happen is that all people need to be as outraged by what happened to four Black people in the past month as they are by looting. If you're concerned about looters you can work on the IDme campaigns to identify looters so they can be locked up

Ring gong!

This morning I posted a picture of a police department kneeling outside their building. This created a disconnect for some of my friends. Let me be clear: this is not a binary issue. The only either/or I see here is supporting systemic racism or against systemic racism. The choice for some of us is life or death; the choice for others of us is comfortable or uncomfortable.

That said, I wholly believe that there are good people and allies in law enforcement and in the criminal justice system. You have all probably at one time or another seen me hug a police officer. I stand behind my support of my friends who are in law enforcement and work in the criminal justice system.

*BUT The frameworks within which these good people and allies must work are problems. Racism is built in. So, now is the time when we have been blatantly and viscerally presented with the choice: do you want to leave everything as is, knowing what results—**death!**—OR, is it time to get uncomfortable and do some deep cleaning and restructuring of our business? Do you choose “law and order” and let what happens may? Or do you choose “protect and serve “and sit down to do the work of restoring our communities into places where our police officers are included and integrated members of our communities?*

Ring Gong!

Back to Lot’s wife! Lottie! The compassionate super hero!

Who can run fast and rescue people before disaster takes them out!

Isn’t it kind of amazing that God gives her and her family a chance to leave the city before the calamity, whatever it was, struck!

Put that in a different context!.

Imagine a family in Hiroshima the night before the atomic bomb is dropped!

New Orleans three days before Katrina arrived.

Warsaw just before the Nazis closed off the Jewish ghetto.

West Africa before the first slave ship arrived.

Go! Says God.

Go! Go! Go!

Get outta here! Scrammo!

As they flee from onrushing doom—God instructs the family not to look back

Only Lottie doesn’t listen. Why?

Maybe she has a reason.

Yes, she is Lot’s wife.

She is also her two daughters' mother.

She is someone's sister.

What if she had 4 sisters and 2 brothers?

And lots of cousins.

A parent! Or both parents! Still alive.

Friends in the synagogue. A lovely neighbor who is her confidante.

So—in the confusion and chaos of the destruction, what if she turned to rush back to the city where all the people in the city were suffering undeservedly for the sins and crimes of others?

What if Tzadeket turned back to go and comfort them in their dark hour!

And the pillar of salt is a metaphor for the moment and place of her decision.

It's the holy, salty, craggy rock, outside the city, to which Tzadeket chose to return.

Did her husband want her to go back? I doubt that.

Her daughters surely did not want her to go back.

Still, she turned.

How could she leave the innocent of Sodom and Gomorrah uncomforted?

The pillar of salt is a sign of the suffering which she, in her decision, embraced and transcended in order to aid those who could not.

I want to turn toward a conclusion with a kind of personal mental slide show and an appeal:

I grew up in a 100% white community, at least the people who lived there. That doesn't mean I couldn't have been racist. It means I learned racism, one way or another, in all kinds of ways.

In a photo album of family pictures I have, there is a photo of my parents wearing black face.

When I was sixteen, in a very small one column article in my home city newspaper, I read that Malcom X had been murdered. I was relieved. I saw him as a hater, which he was not. Three years later, as the Detroit uprising was exploding a few miles from the university I was attending I devoured *The Autobiography of Malcom X* to try understand. He was, as Ossie Davis, said, “*Our shining, black prince.*”

This week, the Kansas City Star had an editorial, “Why is Kansas City Prosecuting a Witness to Police Brutality?” My mind turned immediately to a moment when, as a clergy intern in St. Louis, I witnessed a police officer beating a black man ferociously with a club in the neighborhood I was working in. On reporting it, I was pushed out of the internship, which delayed me becoming a pastor for three years.

Whatever activism on behalf of African-Americans and equal rights I have been involved in, and it’s been a lot—I choose when to be involved, which is a privilege. African Americans don’t get to choose when to be involved in a culture in which antiblackness seems to be a never ending spread of the original sin of slavery.

Racism isn’t a planetary universal. It is a unique, ugly, unrelenting reality in America.

Black on black crime is a lot more upsetting to blacks than it is too whites. So it’s just our excuse to turn the other way rather than keep a sustained focus on the real problem.

Police officers are in no way our personal enemies. It’s the uniform and the practices such as choke holds and driving while black that are our enemy. We welcome “Protect and serve” police officers.

We are at a crossroads as a nation. Trust me, this could definitely get worse. A lot worse. In the coming weeks and months—who our leaders are—at every level, national, state, local—politicians, police, clergy, business, universities, hospitals—the President—the Governor—is something you need to be involved in deciding in whatever capacity or opportunity you have—whether it’s voting, speaking out, being part of a decision, marching , creating art, giving aid—whatever it is. Let me repeat! It could get worse.

And the better road? It is rough, rocky and less traveled. But we must choose compassionate leaders with problem solving skills who are listening to the people who are suffering and suffering badly from severe problems of disease, inequality, anti-blackness, poverty, injustice.

Don't let the self-serving and the ignorant stay in charge in the burning nation.

Become Lot's wife.

Tzadeket!

Turn around!

Rush into the burning city.

Repair the world.

Amen!

Rev. Scott Myers

Westport Presbyterian Church, Kansas City, Missouri

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