

**“DON’T LOOK BACK!” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul Untied Church of Christ, Taylor, Michigan, July 14, 2019**

Our first scripture lesson for this morning, taken from the Old Testament, is a searing story—literally. (*Genesis 19:15-26*) It’s an account of the flight by Lot and his family from their hometown of Sodom before it destroyed in fire and flame along with the neighboring city of Gomorrah. Sodom and Gomorrah are infamous and with good reason. In the Old Testament pages we learn that their residents were given over to lawlessness and sexual violence of the worst kind. All the norms of ancient society, including the act of extending hospitality and welcome to strangers, are violated.

The day comes when Lot and his family, the only just people left in their town, are warned by God to flee. Unbeknownst to anyone else besides Lot, Sodom is about to be immolated and destroyed. God’s word communicated by angels is clear: go and don’t look back. Lot packs up his household and with his wife and two daughters and leaves. Except just as they are about to reach the safety of distance, Lot’s wife does turn and look back. Instantly, she is turned into a pillar of salt. Her family has to go on without her.

In the annals of history, not a lot of grief has been expressed for Lot’s wife. More often than not, her fate has been treated as a footnote in a more shocking story. But I think it deserves some thoughtful attention and even sympathy.

My own interest in Lot’s wife was first piqued by a poem composed by the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova. Akhmatova (1889-1966) was born in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Ukraine. Her life coincided with two World Wars, the collapse of the old imperial Russian Empire, and the rise of the Soviet Union. Over the span of her life, Akhmatova experienced a lot of change. Much of it was devastating to her personally. Her first husband was put to death, accused of being anti-communist. Her third husband and only son ended up being arrested and dispatched to one of Stalin’s many concentration camps where they were imprisoned for many years. Akhmatova also had no shortage of friends who were arrested and killed under Stalin. Her own life was probably in danger at many times. It was a miracle that she survived.

Almost as sad for Akhmatova as a poet was the way the government silenced her. For years on end, she was not permitted to publish her work—or didn’t dare on her own account because it was sure to get her into trouble. Meantime, she had to struggle to find some way to support herself as a woman whose loyalty to the communist regime was suspect. Amid her battle for existence, as well as her intense sorrow over her family’s plight, she could only turn to her poetry writing at odd moments and late hours.

Still, showing that a calling from God is hard to thwart, Akhmatova managed to continue writing deeply and richly. At her death in 1966, she left a considerable body of poems. Among them is the poem I encountered, “Lot’s Wife.”

It is a sweet, sad, compelling poem. From beginning to end, it reflects empathy for Lot’s wife who could not resist the temptation to look back even as she and her husband and family need to trudge forward and move ahead. Given the feeling and insight that Akhmatova brings to that scene and the awful trauma and calamity that she personally witnessed and experienced, I don’t doubt that she was personally tempted to look back many times to what was and had been before war and revolution swept away any gentle life she had known.

Interestingly, Akhmatova doesn’t glamorize Sodom. But she does humanize it as a place where, before any time of troubles, Lot’s wife once sang, sewed clothes, and birthed sons and daughters. In short, despite all the terrible things that can be said about Sodom, Lot’s wife has happy memories there which make it oh so difficult to leave without at least one glance back.

Congregation, we’re human beings. There are almost always pangs of grief when we have to say good-bye and move forward with our lives. Akhmatova is simply very clear-eyed about this without being dry-eyed about it. Yes, even Sodom and the good that was once there for a young girl, a young wife, and a young mother is worthy of a tear. And Lot’s wife, who did look back for just a moment, is worthy of our tears too. As Akhmatova, who feels deeply for Lot’s wife, declares at the very end of her poem: *“Yet in my heart, I will never deny her, who suffered death because she chose to turn.”*

As I see it, congregation, the story of Lot’s wife poses a question and challenge that’s particularly important for all of us as Christians. How much should we look forward and how much back? And when should we—or shouldn’t we—do so? I love history. Always have. I am keenly aware of the philosopher George Santayana’s warning that “Those who don’t know history are condemned to repeat it.” Because of what my own mother went through and what so many church members have experienced, I am acutely conscious of the human tragedy for us when we individually lose our memory of the past due to a disease like Alzheimer’s. Our sense of personal identity can be terribly diminished and lost. At the same time, perpetual longing and nostalgia for what was can trap and ensnare us when we are actually being called as Christian men and women to recognize, affirm, and follow the leading of a God who is always doing “a new thing.” (*Isaiah 43:19*)

We need to strike a right balance between concern for past, present, and future—with special attention and emphasis on our present and our future. The real value of the past is its instructiveness—i.e., what it can teach us—for the present and future.

One of the big challenges which Jesus faced in his own ministry was a Jewish community often more absorbed by the past than concerned with the present and future. Folks were always reflecting on the glory days of King David more than a thousand years before. In looking ahead to the future, they just wanted to get back to that. Their whole vision of the future was shaped by that.

What got Jesus in trouble with Jewish authorities is that he was shaking it all up. As God's servant and son, Jesus proclaimed a much more inclusive vision of God's kingdom whereby even the Great Temple of Jerusalem would be a house of worship for all nations. (*Isaiah 56:7; Matthew 21:13; Mark 11:17*) He was also calling fellow Jews to think more dynamically about God's word so that they would not be caught up in stilted, rote teaching from the past. Open your minds and have a bigger heart too, he preached again and again. As Jesus also declared, "I come not to abolish the law but to fulfill it." (*Matthew 5:17*)

Sometimes Jesus had to deliver shock therapy for those stuck in ruts. We have a sampling of this shock therapy in our gospel lesson for this very morning. There we see Jesus talking with a couple of guys who insist that they can't join with him as disciples without going home first to say goodbye to their family or bury their father. (*Luke 9:57-62*) Both seem like perfectly reasonable and responsible things to do. But Jesus who has a strong intuitive sense of people can read these two guys like a book. Whatever their declared intentions may be, turning back will leave them hanging back for good. In fact, in the case of the one man there's no indication that his dad is even on his deathbed. It could be years before he buries him. What does Jesus say in response? "Let the dead bury themselves!" (*Luke 9:60*) In other words, let's not make fidelity to family and the demands of religious ritual for the dead an excuse for avoiding what God calls us to do now. Although Jesus in the first glance of the moment may seem so irreverent, he is actually encouraging greater reverence in these men for those things in faith that really matter. Yes, "Come, follow me," Jesus says. (*Matthew 4:19*) Without even saying so aloud, he adds: *Don't look back—or if you do, make it a very short glance, so you don't end up as another pillar of salt!*

In my own reading of history, I have found myself sometimes reflecting the fate of Jewish families caught either in Nazi Germany or in one of the many countries which Hitler's armies occupied. By the mid-1930s it was becoming clearer what Hitler was up to. Most

were trapped without opportunity to leave. Yet there were some who could have left and didn't. Why not? It turns out that ties of family, home, language, and nation were just too strong to let go. Then too, there was all the uncertainty about what might lie ahead elsewhere and doubts about any welcome they might receive as refugee Jews. In fact, many other countries did turn fleeing Jews away. Ultimately, like Lot's wife, these men and women looked back to their homes, their good memories, and local history and were immobilized to their peril.

Yes, sometimes it's just not a good idea to look back. Or, if we do so, it's best not look back too long. There's a lesson for us here in our own lives, as well as in our church life together. We all need to be careful about getting too caught up in memories of past glory days. Instead, our feet need to be firmly planted on the path of the present, heading to the future. It's okay to grieve, shedding a tear or two about what is lost and left behind. Maybe even many, many tears, as in the case of Anna Akhmatova and so many other twentieth century men and women who saw so much they loved and cherished swept away by war, tyranny, and holocaust. But then we need to dry our eyes and look clear-eyed with faithful, trusting hearts towards what God is preparing for us now for the future. That's the way Jesus lived, as he took up his own cross. That's also the way Jesus called us to live—with hearts and minds open to the present and future in God, with God.

Congregation, let me end this morning with a somewhat lighter story. In 1971 the singer Ricky Nelson, who was second only to Elvis Presley in the number of hits songs scored in the 1950s, was invited to join in a rock n' roll revival concert at Madison Square Garden in New York City with the likes of Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, and Bobby Rydell. Like his fellow singers, he reached into his old hit bag to perform "Hello, Mary Lou," "Travelin' Man," and a couple of other oldies but goodies. Yet then he and his band began performing more recent songs. This drew some loud boos from the audience who came expecting just the old stuff. Nelson ended up walking off the stage and not returning for the concert's finale.

Later, however, Ricky Nelson explained himself and his feelings in a song that he wrote called "Garden Party." While acknowledging the disappointment of his audience nostalgic for the old stuff, he concluded his new song by declaring that "If memories were all I sang, I'd rather drive a truck." Folks, there's nothing wrong with truck driving, but it's good to be able to sing new songs and do new things, particularly when it's with Christ and for God. Even as we remember, cherish, and honor the past, may we as God's people always put one foot ahead of the other and move forward now and towards our future. **Amen.**