

Arts & Faith

Art and Commentary for Pentecost +7, Proper 12C by [Hovak Najarian](#)

Introduction

Greetings to everyone associated with St. Margaret's Sunday Morning Forum,
Greetings everyone,

For Sunday, July 24, 2022, Abraham is again the subject of our Old Testament lesson. The reading, [Genesis 18:20-52](#), gives us an account of God and Abraham having a conversation about the fate of Sodom. When Abraham was told that Sodom was to be destroyed, he bargained with God and it was agreed that if only as few as ten righteous people were found there the city would not be destroyed. Sunday's reading is limited to the conversation between God and Abraham. If the fate of Sodom were not known to Christians and non-Christians alike, this reading might be a cliff-hanger but as we all know, this did not end well for the people of Sodom.

Instead of offering simply a painting of God and Abraham together, the art and my commentary moves ahead to a woodcut depicting the destruction of Sodom while Lot (Abraham's nephew) and two of his daughters are leaving. Lot Leaving Sodom is an illustration from a book published in Germany in 1493 and known as the [Nuremberg Chronicle](#). The woodcut and my comments are attached to this message.

Other aspects of Abraham's life are well known. While looking ahead, I chose The Sacrifice of Isaac, from an Armenian Gospel Book to share with you. This event in Abraham's life ([Genesis 22:1-14](#)) is not scheduled to be the subject of our Old Testament reading until July 2, 2023, but because my commentary was written already, and because I plan to take a break from writing soon, I am attaching it to this email. ~Hovak Najarian

Lot Leaving Sodom, hand-colored woodcut, 1493, unknown artist. This illustration is from the Nuremberg Chronicle by Hartmann Schedel, 1440-1514

Commentary by Hovak Najarian

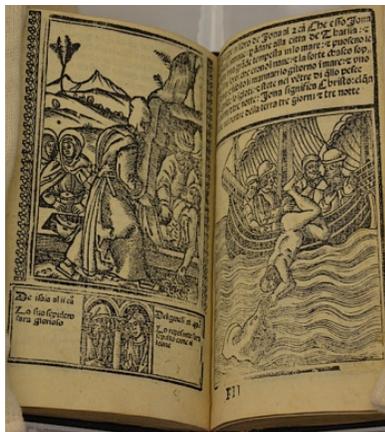
The illustration, *Lot Leaving Sodom*, shows the city of Sodom being destroyed. Fire and brimstone (solidified sulfur) are raining down, and buildings in its path are toppling and burning. Plumes of fire are rising also from structures that remain standing and soon the entire city will be gone.

On the right side of this print, Lot, the grim old bearded man with a cane, is leaving Sodom with two of his daughters. His other two daughters were betrothed to be married and along with their

husbands to be, did not believe their father when he told them the destruction of Sodom was imminent. He urged them to leave but they thought perhaps he was joking. They were left behind. Lot, himself, seemed reluctant to leave but an angel grabbed his hand and led him, his wife, and two of their daughters out of the city. They were told “Flee for your lives! Don’t look back, and don’t stop anywhere on the plain! Flee for the mountains or you will be swept away!” [Though two angels came to warn Lot of the impending doom, only one is shown in this woodcut.] The blond, curly-haired angel is holding Lot’s hand and leading him and his daughters away from the flaming city. Despite the angel’s warning, the temptation was too great for Lot’s wife. In this illustration she is standing alone in a transformed state – a pillar of salt – between the burning city and her family.



Before the destruction of Sodom, the Lord told Abraham about the wickedness of the city and that it was to be destroyed. It did not seem right to Abraham, however, that righteous people such as his nephew, Lot, who lived in Sodom would die along with the wicked. When asked about this, the Lord agreed that if fifty righteous people were found in Sodom he would forgive “the whole place.” At this, the bargaining began. Abraham asked if Sodom would be spared if forty-five righteous were found there, and the Lord said “Yes.” Abraham’s numbers of righteous people that would be required to save Sodom from destruction kept going down and the Lord continued to reply “Yes” to forty, thirty, twenty, and finally ten. The Lord agreed that if only ten righteous people were found in Sodom it would not be destroyed. “For the sake of ten I will not destroy it,” God said, but ten righteous people were not found and the city was destroyed. Lot and two of his daughters were the only ones who escaped its complete destruction.



For centuries before the printing press was invented, the text of manuscripts and books were lettered by hand but then during the early fourteenth century “block books” became popular. These were woodcuts with the text carved in relief on the same block as the art work. The illustrations and text were printed as one.

Left: Block Book, c. early 14th century, From the Library of Congress collection.

Creating a block book was time-consuming and often the text was limited. Change took place in mid-fifteenth century, however, when Johannes Guttenberg invented a printing press. Patents were unheard of in his time and soon printing shops emerged throughout Europe. With Guttenberg’s process, separate letters were brought together to form words and sentences. After words were in place they could be inked and printed in unlimited editions. If an illustration such as *Lot*



Leaving Sodom were used, the woodcut was adjusted in height, set in place with the text, and printed together.

The exact location of Sodom is not known but it is believed it was near the southern end of the Dead Sea where there are mounds of salt. Today, tourists may visit a salt formation there called “Lot’s wife.”

The Sacrifice of Isaac, illumination from an Armenian Gospel Book, 1455,
Katchartur (active 15th century)

Commentary by Hovak Najarian



A typical painting of the sacrifice of Isaac shows Abraham on a mountainside holding his son, Isaac. His knife is raised. With him is an angel that has arrived to prevent him from going through with the sacrifice by seizing the arm that holds the knife. While the angel holds Abraham's arm, it points to a ram that is caught in a nearby thicket. It is to be sacrificed in place of Isaac.

In *The Sacrifice of Isaac* illustrated here, the action is less physical than in other illustrations of this

subject. Abraham is shown here as a kneeling, gray-bearded old man holding a knife in his right hand while Isaac is bound, stretched out, and propped up before him. Katchartur, the artist, is neither influenced by the classicism that enamored his contemporaries during the Italian Renaissance, nor is he trying to achieve realism. His stylized painting has its roots in the monasteries of Armenia nearly a thousand years before his time. Though it was painted in the mid-fifteenth century, *The Sacrifice of Isaac* seems almost modern in some of its characteristics. The colors are flat, bright, and decorative. The red *background* complements the green

of the painting but it is not simply a passive area as it would be if it were a clear



blue sky. The lines within the red area are interwoven with the thicket and they echo its leaves. Flowers also are introduced in this area.

Though Abraham and Isaac receive our attention in the central foreground, two routes guide us visually to the angel. The shape of the mauve-colored area around Abraham and Isaac represents a mountainside and its left edge shares a contour with the trunk of the green thicket. As this shared edge moves upward, the contour of the mountain veers to the right, undulates like the branches of the thicket, and takes us to the angel. Another visual

route toward the angel begins at the lower left where the lowest shoot of the thicket points to the direction of Abraham's knife. The angel's finger and lower arm are slanted in line with the knife and our eyes tend to move in that direction until we come again to the hovering angel. From there, our eyes are guided by a long index finger and the direction of the angel's gaze to the ram at the left.

Though its wings are not moving, this rosy-cheeked angel is floating in air behind Abraham. The angel is not clutching the arm that is holding the knife as is often seen in paintings of this subject but instead is tapping Abraham on the shoulder to get his attention. It seems to be saying, "Over there! Abraham, look over there!" Abraham appears to be frozen by the presence of the angel behind him. An eye is looking back and perhaps he is wondering, "What is going on here?"

The ram's horns are shaped like the tendrils of the thicket in which they are caught and its slender legs rest gently on the shrub. Its bright yellow color stands out against the red and relates visually to the halos of Abraham and the angel. Yellow to a lesser degree is seen also in the angel's wings and Isaac's robe. Though Katchartur's painting is small, it gives us a very rich and colorful image.