

Life in the Twilight Zone Pt. 2: Liminality & Abraham's Bargain  
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There is a fifth dimension beyond that which is known to man.  
It is a dimension as vast as space and as timeless as infinity.  
It is the middle ground between light and shadow,  
between science and superstition,  
and it lies between the pit of man's fears  
and the summit of his knowledge.  
This is the dimension of imagination.  
It is an area which we call the Twilight Zone.  
Rod Serling

### Abraham's Bargain

As Brian explained last week, the word "liminality" can be described as the state of ambiguity or disorientation in the middle of rituals. It's a place in time when a person is "in transition" and in a sense may hold no status at all. It is a "Twilight Zone" of human experience. Change is going to happen.

A couple experiences a moment of liminality when they stand in public and promise to join together in marriage. For a few moments they stand at the threshold of their vows, not having said them yet.

A volunteer is in a "zone of liminality" in the short ritual, standing at the desk in the recruiting office, pen in one hand and enlistment papers in the other. Her life and her personhood are going to change, but not until she signs the paper.

Mr. Troy Hauck, in his shop in Moorhead Minnesota is going through his familiar ritual of building another hot rod, which is basically a car made from pieces of other cars. He leans under the hood of his wife's old Chevrolet Tahoe. He has a plasma cutter in his hand. He knows that if he makes this cut in the steel structure of the vehicle it will never be driven on the road again. He thinks about the consequences for a moment. He is in the twilight zone.

During the previous hour we watched an episode of the Twilight Zone in which a six-year-old child named Anthony Fremont develops mental super-powers and terrorizes the town of Peakesville Ohio, which at the same time has mysteriously been isolated from the rest of the world. Anthony's actions are based entirely on his personal likes and dislikes. He can read minds at times. He insists that everyone adore him, smile, and think happy thoughts. He has killed a number of people. He twists nature and makes animals into grotesque monsters.

At a birthday party for a neighbor, Dan Hollis, everyone is forced to watch a violent TV program made up by Anthony.

Mr. Hollis gets drunk and blurts out his fears and frustrations, to the point where he doesn't care what Anthony is going to do to him. Hollis calls out to put an end to the horror, that someone muster up their courage and kill Anthony when he is distracted. Aunt Amy turns and reaches for the fireplace poker, then withdraws her hand.

Then Anthony points a finger at Dan and changes him into a jack-in-the-box, with his head bouncing on the end of the spring. Everyone, terrified, goes back to what they were doing, smiling and saying, "It's a good thing you did that Anthony." The scene closes and the episode ends intentionally without the usual final comment from Rod Serling, leaving the characters at a threshold, in the twilight zone, and the audience up in the air.

So now, what has put our hero Abraham into the Twilight Zone on this occasion? Let's look at Genesis 18:20-33

<sup>20</sup>Then the LORD said, 'How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin!<sup>21</sup>I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know.'

<sup>22</sup> So the men turned from there, and went towards Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD. <sup>23</sup>Then Abraham came near and said, 'Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?<sup>24</sup> Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not

forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it?<sup>25</sup> Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?' <sup>26</sup>And the LORD said, 'If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.' <sup>27</sup>Abraham answered, 'Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. <sup>28</sup>Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?' And he said, 'I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.' <sup>29</sup>Again he spoke to him, 'Suppose forty are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of forty I will not do it.' <sup>30</sup>Then he said, 'Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there.' He answered, 'I will not do it, if I find thirty there.' <sup>31</sup>He said, 'Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.' <sup>32</sup>Then he said, 'Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.' <sup>33</sup>And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place.

Our text has two "speed bumps" that can distract from the message. The first is that I believe the writer of Genesis was seeing a God of violent judgment. That's not the God that Jesus worshiped. A natural disaster, which may have been what happened at Sodom, doesn't mean God is judging the victims.

Can we say that liminality is a process that leads to change, either rapid or slow: change of status, changes within one's self? We have social conventions that assist in some of these processes: weddings, funerals, baptisms, rites of healing or last rites. I think churches should offer a rite for divorce even though that's not such a simple matter. Now we have parties to announce the gender of an unborn child. Campus Greek organizations have their initiations, as do social orders such as the Masons. For some churches the rite of confirmation has become an entry into adulthood, as is the bar-mitzvah and bas-mitzvah. "Coming out" or debutante balls for young women are still celebrated. But in an entirely different context, coming out to a non-heterosexual community still doesn't have a ritual and I wonder if maybe it should.

Abraham needs to be changed because at this point he and his wife Sarah simply don't believe that God can or will make them parents. During this spell in his life Abraham goes through adventures and he experiences doubt. We might say that each of these incidents puts him into a state of liminality, in which he is changed as a person, perhaps in subtle ways not worded in the story. Now Abraham bargains with God over the fate of Sodom.

Oh, did I say, "Bargains with God??"

Nobody bargains with God, right?

Isn't that a sin?

Bargaining is what two people do when each wants something the other has.

Did Abraham know his place here? Was God telling him he wasn't really the person he thought he was? Was Abraham in a state of disorientation, in the middle of the ritual that God had put him in, not yet crossing the threshold of trust? Was God's promise literally "too much to hope for?"

He had just been reminded that in his old age he would still become the father of a great nation --an impossibility and yet the heart's desire of most people of that time --much more powerfully than in today's age.

For a person of that age, this was the dream of all dreams, when survival itself had a lot to do with being part of a family, creating a family, on a planet that was thinly populated compared with the present time.

Having children in primitive times was so important that some scholars speculate that this drive has gotten into our genes. It was a matter of survival. We are wired to reproduce, although we are coming to a fuller understanding of our diversity and being "child-free" is also a gift, and gaining recognition on our now over-populated planet.

In early Hebrew times the word that was used to describe having generations follow a person carrying the same name was... salvation. Some anthropologists speculate that humans along with other animals are not just "wired" to reproduce, but wired to reproduce their own genes to the exclusion of others.

Sometimes it helps if we can put a label on our own feelings of disorientation at times: when we lose someone close to us, when we marry, when we divorce, when a child is born, when a child is born unexpectedly, when we get twins when we were expecting one. Whether a life-changing event is the result of a decision or whether it seems that God has thrown us off a cliff, we may find ourselves in the Twilight Zone for a time.

Scripture and history both have examples of disoriented people; people who had been touched by God. Jonah, who told a storm-tossed ship's crew to throw him over the rail in order to stop the storm; Peter, who babbled about building huts for Moses and Elijah when they appeared with Jesus; Martin Luther, who when thrown to the ground by a bolt of lightning cried out, "Save me Saint Anne! I will become a monk!"

So, back to Father Abraham which brings us to the second speed bump. Sodom is toast, so to speak. Let's shed a small parenthetical aside first and let the Bible interpret the Bible instead of some prejudiced preacher doing that. The "sin of Sodom" is laid out specifically in the sixteenth chapter of Ezekiel and there's plenty of material there to indicate it's

something other than what our popular culture assumes it to be. I'll just state here that Ezekiel had a lot to say about inhospitality, arrogance, and neglect of the poor, the widows and orphans in the land of Sodom.

So Abraham is insane, bargaining with God. But is he really bargaining? Perhaps I've mistitled my sermon. When people bargain, each has something the other wants. In Abraham's case, he had nothing to offer God nor did he attempt to do so.

Ordinarily a person in distress will grasp at straws trying to find something to offer God as bargaining material and it's a stretch because it seems that God owns everything already, so the only desperate ploy is a change in behavior. "God, I'll stop offending you if you will please get me out of this mess."

Now that would be a valid offer if two requirements could be fulfilled. One is that we know with any accuracy what genuinely offends God, and the second is whether we have the willpower to stop doing these things for the rest of our lives.

No. Abraham has neither of these pretenses. His is only the power of persuasion. He's going to do the audacious thing: risky and possibly fatal in the ancient way of thinking. Nobody bargains with God. Nobody tells God what to do. But Abraham is concerned for his nephew Lot, Lot's wife and two daughters who live in the city. And Abraham is also in the Twilight Zone because God has either told him a humungous lie or has made

him and Sarah, an aged and childless couple, the impossible parents of a huge nation of people. How is this going to play out? What to do? Both Abraham and Sarah are shocked to the point of unbelief, not quite yet willing to trust God.

In early December of 1958, in a one-room schoolhouse in Kansas the teacher handed his eighteen students, grades one to eight, a Sears Roebuck catalogue each. He said, "Each of you pick out one thing that you want. That will be your Christmas present from me, subject to your parents' approval." And he did. The kids got expensive clothing, winter coats, shoes and boots, musical instruments, and one tabletop-sized working model steam engine, which I kept until I was in my fifties.

What if, as an adult, a person was offered anything they wanted to have --their heart's desire, and it was delivered? That's what Abraham was promised, and coming to trust that promise changed his life, not because he got something he wanted but rather because he was now witness to the powerful love and the great patience of God, and in the process of that change a disoriented Abraham stammered out to God his concern for whoever in Sodom were good people and not deserving of destruction. Abraham's bargain came to fruit, but on God's terms. Lot and his daughters were saved.

And God left Abraham standing, unharmed, and Jonah didn't get drowned, and Peter didn't get slapped down for his mouth, and you and I are not going to be injured or even made to feel

small by a God who is not offended when we talk to her, whether we are in our right mind or whether we are in the Twilight Zone.