

When the Godless are as Good as the Godly¹

Before the Lesson: Have the poster (found at the end of this lesson plan) or the words from that poster written on a board for the Information session.

Fellowship Question: (Use one of these to break the ice, begin some discussion, and lead into the study):

Who do you know that would call themselves “spiritual but not religious”?

How does our church do good in our community by partnering with organizations that are not of our faith?

Information

In Genesis 20, we have another story that emphasizes Abraham’s humanity – including his poor judgment. We remember the story from chapter 12 when Abraham offered the Egyptian Pharaoh his wife, Sarah, saying she was his sister, in hopes of saving Abraham’s life. The writer of Genesis now gives us a similar story.

Repetition is crucial to notice in our interpretation of the Bible. There is a reason the writer or editor included two similar stories in the same book. Yes, one story is like the other – but it is vital to notice what is different. This challenges us to have conversations about similarities and differences and how those inform our faith.

- Have a class member read Genesis 20:1-7.

How God relates to the kings is one of the differences between these stories. How does God relate differently to Abimelech than he related to Pharaoh?

“This potentate is immediately given a higher moral status than Pharaoh in chapter 12: to Pharaoh God speaks only through plagues, whereas Abimelech is vouchsafed direct address from God in a night-vision.”²

In the story with Pharaoh, Sarah is taken as the king’s wife. What is different in this story?

“This time, there will be no sexual relations between Sarah and a man other than her husband; this time, God won’t stand for it.”³

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² Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 92.

³ Paul Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven’t Heard* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 47.

Abimelech repeats a question from a previous story. “Will you destroy an innocent people?”
Where have we heard that question before?

“‘Innocent’ (*tsadiq*) is the very term Abraham insisted on in questioning God as to whether He would really slay the innocent together with the guilty in destroying the entire nation of Sodom...[Abimelech] is, in effect, repeating Abraham’s question to God: will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?”⁴

Abraham has had six visits from God. He has grown in his understanding of his role and in his understanding of how God will work through him.

Let’s review the growth of Abram’s faith and his relationship with Yahweh.

[Point to the poster (found at the end of this lesson plan) or the words from that poster written on a board.]

1. In his first revelation, God speaks - “Go!”- and Abram goes toward a land he does not know.
2. In the second revelation, God shows Abram the land that he will occupy.
3. In the third revelation, God has Abram walk the land, claiming it for himself and his descendants.
4. In the fourth revelation, God reminds Abram that he will be the Father of a great nation – and Abram argues with God! Then God strengthens the promise by “cutting a covenant” (as Abram cuts a heifer, a goat, and a ram in half). Abram’s journey of faith has involved listening, seeing, walking, and sacrificing.
5. In the fifth revelation, God tells Abram to walk with him – to walk in the way of mercy, justice, and humility. God changes their names to Abraham and Sarah. The newly named Abraham shows a new sense of partnership by laughing at God’s plan and pointing out its impossibility.
6. In the sixth revelation, God comes to Abraham in the form of three visitors. Abraham and Sarah offer hospitality to these strangers. As Abraham had done in the previous chapter, Sarah scoffs at their message that she will give birth to a son. Still, the messengers insist that before the year’s end, a baby will be born in the geriatric ward.
7. As part of this sixth revelation, the lead messenger tells Abraham of Yahweh’s plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham intercedes for the people living in this city, all strangers to him except his nephew, Lot, and Lot’s family. Abraham has a newfound sense of justice and challenges God to have the same.

How does God refer to Abraham in his dream to Abimelech? (a prophet)

⁴ Alter, 93.

“That Abraham can be called upon by God, in Gerar but not in Egypt, to pray for the victim of his own making, indicates God’s growing confidence in Abraham’s reorientation of the normal sad choices reflecting self-protection and self-aggrandizement. Just before this scene, Abraham has interceded on behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah...Having proven himself as an able intercessor, Abraham will now be trusted by God as a ‘prophet.’ Confident at last in Abraham’s compassion, God advises Abimelech to have the prophet intercede.”⁵

- Have a class member read Genesis 20:8-18.

“When Abraham finally speaks up, his words have the ring of a speaker floundering for self-justification.”⁶

“Abraham’s excuses for himself are feeble and unconvincing. While he reports that he acted because Abimelech did not fear God, it is evident that (1) Abimelech did fear God and (2) Abraham feared many things more than he feared God.”⁷

In the story of the sixth visit from God, God shows up at Abraham’s tent with two other men. All three are strangers, yet how do Abraham and Sarah react? (They welcomed the strangers with a feast.)

Abraham had reason to fear the violent actions against strangers. Let’s recall how the three men of the sixth revelation were received by the men of Sodom.

- Have a class member read Genesis 19:1-11.

Repetition, again, is important to notice, in this case, repetition about the visit of strangers. Three strangers come to Abraham’s home. He responds in a generous, righteous way. Three strangers enter the gate of Sodom and they are threatened with sexual abuse.

Like Abraham and Sarah, Lot offers the messengers hospitality. How does Lot’s hospitality compare to that of Abraham’s and Sarah’s hospitality? (unleavened bread vs. a feast)

The men of Sodom were deserving of God’s judgment because of their hatred and abuse of those “not from here,” the aliens, the strangers.

“The author develops this illustration in relationship to 18:1-15. Both chapters share the basic thematic link of hospitality, which should not be narrowly conceived, as if it were a matter of putting out a welcome mat. Hospitality involves a wide-ranging image, revealing fundamental relationships of well-being for individuals and society. Abraham shows hospitality in exemplary

⁵ Borgman, 47.

⁶ Alter, 94.

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982), 178.

fashion. Lot follows suit to some extent, but he fails at a key juncture. The people of Sodom show no sign of what hospitality entails at all.”⁸

Back to our current story – Abraham had witnessed how inhospitable people could be. He assumed that Abimelech would also be inhospitable and violent, as were the men of Sodom. Abraham created a scheme that protected him (and seemed to enrich him, as well). Abraham’s fear of being harmed and his lust for wealth were not what God needed in a prophet. Yet God gave Abraham grace.

“The supposedly lustful foreigner is the one who fears God. Abraham won’t demonstrate such a ‘fear of God’ to God’s own satisfaction until the story’s climax (22:12).”⁹

“What Abraham fears is that Gerar, without ‘fear of God,’ will prove to be another Sodom. In Sodom, two strangers came into town and immediately became objects of sexual assault. ... In the event, he is entirely wrong: Abimelech is a decent, even noble, man; and the category of ‘Sodom’ is not to be projected onto everything that is not the seed of Abraham. On the contrary, later Biblical writers will suggest how easily Israel turns itself into Sodom.”¹⁰

“Abraham, far from suggesting that God has directed him to a promised land, stresses to the native king that gods have imposed upon him the destiny of wandering.”¹¹

“Unlike Pharaoh in chapter 12, who bestows gifts on Abraham as a kind of bride-price, the noble Abimelech offers all this bounty after Sarah leaves his harem, as an act of restitution.”¹²

“...echoing in reverse the first story where Pharaoh had expelled Abraham, the king here invites the couple to stay in his land.”¹³

“Sarah is here noticed, and given significance – though she will not be truly significant in this culture or her own until she bears a child. But Abimelech does what he can, naming Sarah as one to be vindicated. Sarah can now ‘lift up her face’ – a more literal reading of the word vindicated.”¹⁴

What has Abraham learned from this episode of playing off Sarah as his sister?

(Hospitality/kindness to strangers is key to being a righteous person; God can speak to and through non-Israelites; God cares for the “outsider,” evidenced by God assigning Abraham as an

⁸ Terence Fretheim, *Genesis*, The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 473.

⁹ Borgman, 47.

¹⁰ Alter, 94.

¹¹ Alter, 95.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Borgman, 48.

¹⁴ Ibid.

intercessor and God's healing of Abimelech and his people; Abraham has much to learn about being a blessing to all nations; God works though as well as in spite of God's chosen instruments, etc.)

Transformational Exercise

In the story of Abraham and Abimelech, who is the more righteous?

What does that say to us about our personal righteousness?

What does that say to us about the Church's righteousness?

"Throughout the ages, nonchosen people have often had a profound sense of justice and truth, and they have often been teachers of the community of faith regarding such matters."¹⁵

"The emphasis on exclusivity as a function of God's inscrutable will for Israel is pivotal and persuasive. This is not a subpoint or a minor motif; it is key to the whole biblical witness... Yet it is precisely this extraordinary emphasis on Israel's exclusive election and its indisputable insider status that makes it so surprising to come across a number of Old Testament texts that prominently feature *outsiders* of one kind or another. In this context, an 'outsider' is any person or group that has not been especially chosen by God to be the vehicle of the world's restoration and reconciliation. Remarkably, there are several narratives where outsiders are not only explicitly presented as such, but where they are in a variety of ways actually shown to be superior to God's elect, the insiders."¹⁶

God is always at work, reconciling the world back to God's original dream. Sometimes, God works through insiders who identify as "Christians." Often, God works through "outsiders" who identify as members of a different faith group or even as "spiritual but not religious." If we are paying attention, we can see this reconciling action as we read the headlines or listen to the newscast. God is offering compassion, justice, freedom, and salvation every day in many ways. This week, practice paying attention to God's work as outsiders, even, are instruments of God's grace.

[Close in a prayer something like this:] *We thank you, God, that you revealed yourself to us most fully through Jesus Christ. We thank you that Jesus established a community of faith that became the Christian Church. We who are "insiders" are your partners in bringing the world to "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We celebrate that your grace is demonstrated not only through our church and our sister churches but through people and organizations that do not bear the "insider" labels. Give us eyes to see how you are working all the time, all over the world, in all kinds of ways. Amen.*

¹⁵ Fretheim, 483.

¹⁶ Frank Anthony Spina, *The Faith of the Outsider: Exclusion and Inclusion in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 9f.

Abraham's Faith Journey

Belief

Trust

Obedience

Partnership

Intimacy

Righteousness

(A. Hospitality)

(B. Justice)

Stewardship