

Grace and faithfulness in the midst of human failure

Genesis 20

One of the most encouraging things for us who read the Bible is to see that great men and women of faith are not perfect. The heroes of the faith, like Abraham, Noah, Moses, David, Peter, they are all people with faults, weaknesses. None of these heroes of faith is perfect. The Bible describes men and women with all their faults. The Bible describes disorderly lives, personal, family, national failures. We see people who fall and who relapse. In short, we see people like us. And most of all we see God's faithfulness and grace to people like us. This is what we find in the passage before us this morning. We see Abraham fall, into an old sin. We see reproaches from a pagan king, a pagan man who behaves better than the man of God. Above all, we see God's grace and faithfulness at work in the midst of Abraham's failure. God acts in the midst of shame, failure, human misery and God shows grace, God brings Abraham back. He restores him. So, right away, I see that this passage has something to say to me, to you too probably because in my life there is shame, failure, human misery. In my life there is this need for grace.

Human failure

In this chapter Abraham and Sara leave Mamré to settle on the outskirts of the land of Canaan. We do not know why they are moving. The text does not tell us. And as in chapter 12 where Abraham goes down to Egypt and he says that Sara is his sister, he does exactly the same thing here in chapter 20. Verse 2: "Abraham said of his wife Sara: She is my sister." Again, he lies, he hides the truth, he asks his wife to prostitute himself and all that to save his own life. This great man of God relapsed into the same sin. Let's find out why.

Abraham misses an opportunity to witness. Here is Abraham and Sara arriving in a new region. Were they already known in this region? It is quite possible that Abimélek has already heard of Abraham, a wealthy man who has already won important battles. In any case, with his arrival in the region, Abraham has an opportunity to declare that he serves Almighty God. We have seen elsewhere how, on arriving at a place for the first time, he built an altar to publicly worship God. But there, at Gerar, there is no altar. There is no worship. Abraham has the opportunity to make himself known as a man of God. But he misses the opportunity. He misses the opportunity to testify of the faithfulness of God, to say: Here I am, servant of God." But let's find out why did he miss this opportunity? Verses 11-13 give the answer.

Abraham overestimates the wickedness of the people of the region. V.11 "I told myself that there was probably no fear of God in this place and that I would be killed because of my wife." The memory of Sodom and Gomorrah is still vivid in the mind of Abraham. He knows what man without God is capable of. So he concludes that all are as violent and cruel as in Sodom. And the irony is that in this pagan place there is more fear of God in the king than in the man of God! The irony is that Abimélek behaves with more integrity than Abraham. In verse 5 Abimélek says: "I had an honest heart and innocent hands". Verse 6 God says: "I also know that you had a heart of integrity." The pagan king acts with an honest heart while the man of God acts with a deceptive heart.

Abraham is afraid V.11

Abraham is afraid that he will be killed to take Sara his wife. The fear of man drives him to lie to protect himself. Fear of what the man could do to him pushes him to ask his wife to prostitute himself. Too bad for her. No matter what Sarah may go through, Abraham thinks only of himself.

Abraham minimizes and justifies his sin V.12

"Besides, it is true that she is my sister, daughter of my father; only she's not my mother's daughter." In other words, "What I did," said Abraham, "is not that bad because it is not entirely wrong." Abraham tries to justify his actions by saying that his lie was not really a lie.

What he says is "true" but at the same time it is false! Abraham lies while telling the truth. Abraham tells a half-truth but his intention is to deceive.

There is a particular weakness in the character of Abraham. He bears false testimony and does not seem to be bothered at all by his lie. Here's a blind spot in the character of Abraham, a sin he has learned to live with. In a situation of pressure, of fear, Abraham has blinkers that prevent him from seeing his sin.

And then in verse 13 we see two more reasons for the fall of Abraham.

V13a - At the beginning of verse 13 something is lost in this translation. A better translation from Hebrew would be, "When the gods made me wander away from my family." The name of God here is Elohim, it is one of the names found most often in the Old Testament and it is a plural name but which is followed by a verb in the singular when it refers to God. But there, the word Elohim is followed by a plural verb and that is why we can translate this sentence: "the gods" plural! So does it make a difference? I agree with the commentators who say "Yes". What difference does it make? Abimélek is a polytheist. He does not believe in one true God. For him, there are several gods. And if Abraham said, "The gods made me wander," he is, in effect, denying his relationship with the one true God. He tries to blend into the polytheistic background, to deny the God with whom he had shared a meal a few days before, with whom he entered into a covenant, the God who had always been faithful to him. Under pressure, Abraham denies God. Under pressure, Abraham forgets God. Under pressure, Abraham chooses the path of least resistance.

13b - Abraham does not put to death an old sin. In this second part of the verse, Abraham reveals that this ruse, this deception, was not an idea that occurred to him in a moment of panic when he saw that the king was eyeing up Sara. Abraham does not say, "Oh no! What are we going to do? We must quickly think of a solution!" No, Abraham had planned this deception well in advance, even before arriving in the land of Canaan, more than 25 years ago: "I said to Sara: Do me the favor, in all the places where we will go, to say that I am your brother."

Abraham had already committed this same sin in Egypt with very serious consequences. He had already suffered greatly because of this same sin, but he did not remove it from his life. He didn't put it to death. Here is what the author of the Hebrews calls: "the sin that so easily entangles us." This is Abraham, the friend of God, entangled in this same sin, this same flaw.

Is it hard to recognize him here? Is it really the same man who built altars in Canaan? Is this the same man with whom God made his covenant of grace? Was it the same man who refused the money offered by the king of Sodom, who gave the tithe to Melchizedek? Is it the same man who received promise on promise, that God was going to make him a blessing for the nations but there, he becomes a

curse to the nations! Abraham had interceded for Sodom. He saw firsthand God's judgment against disobedience. Look at him now. It is really hard to accept that it is the same man.

In this situation of pressure, he behaves as if God is not to be trusted, as if God cannot protect him. If we were to discuss with Abraham, he would never say that God is not good. He would never try to convince us that God is not worthy of our trust but in the heat of temptation, he denies his God.

And what we see in Abraham, we recognize it well because we see it in us too, don't we? Let us be very slow to criticize Abraham because what we see in him, we see in us too. We miss opportunities to testify for him. We find ourselves in situations of pressure and it is the fear of man that determines our choices. We imagine the worst in the reaction of others. We fear a violent reaction if we dare to speak of God, if we dare to offer a book or offer to pray for a friend. We fear the mockery of others if we speak of our faith. It's not that we don't love God. Yes, we love him. We have experienced his grace, faithfulness and kindness for years. Yet, like Abraham, like Peter, we deny him. We try to blend in with the crowd. There is the constant danger that the sin of the past, the sin that we thought we had conquered, will re-emerge.

We accept the great doctrines of grace, faithfulness, the holiness of God. We love these doctrines, these truths. We would never say in a discussion that God is not a faithful God. We say "Amen! On Sunday at worship. Our difficulty is to live in the light of these truths on Monday morning. Our difficulty is to live by faith in God in all circumstances.

Divine grace and faithfulness.

It does not take much time in our church to know that I often say that the most important words in the Bible are the two little words "But God". We read about human failure, we read about human infidelity, we see terrible manifestations of sin and the consequences of sin. We see a very tragic picture. And then we read the words "But God". God intervenes. God acts. God transforms. The presence of God changes everything. The presence of God, the reality of God, transforms everything. And it's the case here. Let's see God's gracious intervention:

God opens eyes to the truth. V3: "So God came to Abimélek in a dream". God reveals himself to Abimélek to show him the reality of the situation in which he finds himself. Abimélek is completely unaware the gravity of what he is doing but God warns him of the evil and the consequences of the evil: "You are going to die because of the woman you took because she is married". God reveals the truth, he opens Abimélek's eyes so that he can see the danger he is in. And it is when Abimélek sees the reality of his situation, that he appeals to justice and the goodness of God. V4 "Lord, are you going to kill an innocent people? "

God works to restrain evil. V6: "So I kept you from sinning against me. That's why I didn't allow you to touch her". In verse 18 we see that God had "closed the wombs of the whole house of Abimelech". God, in his grace, intervenes to restrain evil. He sends what seems to be a bad thing, the barrenness of the whole house of Abimélek, but his purpose in sending this plague is to restrain evil. What appears to be a curse is actually a blessing. And it is imperative to understand that the evil that God restrains here is not simply that Abimélek sleeps with a married woman. There is a greater evil that God must curb and prevent. God had promised a child to Abraham and Sarah. He had promised this couple descendants as numerous as dust and stars. According to God's promise, Abraham would be the source of blessing for all nations, thanks to a future descendant who would come. God had confirmed these promises by entering into a covenant with Abraham. But with Abraham's disobedience, when he gives his wife to another, he endangers the promise of God! Sara, is she already pregnant? If she becomes pregnant, will we know if it is Abraham or Abimélek the father? It has to be Abraham. This is what God promised. God's Covenant was with Abraham. God's disobedience endangers the Covenant of God. Will God be faithful to his covenant, despite Abraham's infidelity? The answer is "yes". By love and by fidelity to his covenant, God acts to prevent Abimélek from sleeping with Sara.

God gives Abimélek an opportunity to repent, to right wrongs. V7: "Now return the man's wife". God shows that there is grace for Abimélek: "He is a prophet. He will pray for you and you will live".

And we are challenged by Abimélek's response to God's revelation. In verse 8 we see that he is quick to obey God. Look at his immediate and total response: "Abimélek got up early in the morning; he called all his servants and told them all these things; and these people were seized with great fear."

When I see Abimélek here I ask myself the question: when God speaks to me, do I react like him? When God reveals himself and warns me, am I always as quick to respond to his voice?

Then God uses this pagan king to reproach Abraham and to convict him of his sin. Verse 9 contains scathing reproaches for Abraham. "You have committed acts against me that are unacceptable. Abraham needs these harsh words to awaken him from his disobedience. But after reproaching Abraham, Abimélek acts towards him with generosity and grace. Abraham, who should have been a blessing for Abimélek, himself is blessed by a pagan king. But even in Abimélek's impressive generosity, there is a reproach for Abraham and Sara. Verse 16: "He said to Sara, I am giving your brother a thousand pieces of silver" Here is a little wink to the deception of the believing couple.

And what is the result of God's intervention? How does God's kind intervention change the situation? Abraham is restored, God brings him back from his disobedience. God takes him out of the mud and uses him again in his service.

Verse 7 - despite Abraham's disobedience, God still sees him as a prophet and Abraham will always have a role to play in blessing others: "Because he is a prophet, he will pray for you and you will live." In verse 17 we see Abraham again in fellowship with God, interceding for others: "Abraham prayed to God who healed Abimelech, his wife and his maidservants."

See the change between the Abraham we see at the beginning of the chapter and the Abraham we see at the end? He is restored. And his restoration to God begins with the words: But God!

Dear friends, our God is the God who always intervenes to accomplish his eternal purpose. He is the God who opens our eyes to the reality of our situation. For the most part, we have no grasp of the gravity of our sin. We have no real idea of its consequences, not only for ourselves but for others. God has to open our eyes. And God, in his grace, he intervenes to restrain evil. The invisible hand of God can close doors throughout our lives to keep us from following disastrous paths.

And then God gives us time to repent. He is patient, slow to anger, rich in mercy. Even with the sin that so easily envelops us, God is so patient. And God restores us after our falls. Think of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Jonah, Peter. God does not toss his fallen servants on the scrapheap. He restores them and he uses imperfect servants to show that he is a God of grace, a God who transforms messy and ruined lives.

This passage shows us that God's grace is greater than human failure. God's faithfulness is stronger than the unfaithfulness of his children. The love of God is stronger than human disobedience. God's forgiveness is stronger than human guilt.

If you are a child of God this morning, know that the God of Abraham is your God. His love for you is as great as his love for Abraham. His covenant faithfulness to you is as great as his covenant faithfulness to Abraham. His covenant of grace is just as sure. How can we be sure? Let's look at the cross of his son Jesus. The apostle Paul says in Romans 5: "But this is how God shows his love for us: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." The cross of Jesus Christ is the supreme proof of God's faithfulness and grace to sinners. This is the supreme proof that God is intervening to save people who do not deserve his salvation, people like all of us. Abraham, an imperfect man, a man with his sin, he prayed for Abimelech and God healed him. Jesus, the descendant of Abraham, the perfect man, the sinless man, he prays for people like us, he goes to the cross for people like us, and God heals them, God saves them. Glory be to God for his grace and faithfulness.