

READ

Genesis 20

REFLECT

Abraham and Sarah traveled to a new place and while they were there, they pretend to be brother and sister instead of husband and wife – sound familiar? It's the second time this plot has played out - the first was in Egypt because he thought Pharaoh would covet Sarah and kill him to get to her. He gave the same explanation in this encounter, but considering the reported ages of both Abraham and Sarah – 99 and 90, respectively – it's hard to fathom that she would have been lusted over by King Abimelech. But apparently she was and King Abimelech took Sarah into his household, a polite way of saying that he took her as a wife. God intervened that very night in a dream to Abimelech, telling him the truth of the relationship between Abraham and Sarah and even threatening death if she wasn't returned to her husband. Abimelech must have felt frightened by the whole exchange, he had been duped to believe Sarah was unmarried and then threatened for his actions built on deception. He confronted Abraham out of fear, and Abraham came clean about the whole ruse and offered his meager explanation. But then he also said that it wasn't technically a lie since they were half siblings (different mom, same dad). If we ever need reaffirmation that cultural norms were very different in the past, this story underscores it in a big way.

Just like in the previous episode of marital deceit, Abraham somehow came out on top, even after lying to a king. He received no punishment for his deceit, instead he was given wealth just to get out of the King's hair – animals, servants, and silver. It's a strange story to encounter a single time, but for it to have happened twice is simply crazy. God ends up sounding kind of like a bully in this exchange, but it's not that simple. We can't say for sure why Abraham lied like he did – he certainly knew what and who he was up against, and maybe powerful men taking women was a pattern he'd recognized (isn't it still?). Instead of seeing our loving God as a bully, we can understand that God worked to put the powerful in their place and know consequences for their uncontrollable lust.

REACT

- It's feels odd that the exact same thing happens to Abraham twice, especially because that thing that happens to him is so farfetched, but consider the world around us. When we don't learn from the past, we are doomed to repeat the mistakes we've made. In this case it isn't necessarily that Abraham was making mistakes and repeating them, but there was a culture that said rulers could do whatever they wanted without consequences. That unjust behavior paved the way for the same thing to happen again and again, as it will in our world if we don't seek to put an end to the injustice that exists today.
- Think about Abraham's admission that Sarah was his half-sister. Such a relationship in our world would not only be illegal, but seen as immoral. Ancient peoples practiced various forms of familial marriage with frequency, usually done strategically, a means to protect the family or build power. We often look to the past with rose-colored glasses, but it was a very different world than ours today with very different values and norms. While it's appropriate to learn from it, it frequently is not something we want to emulate.

RESPOND

Write a letter to God: Spontaneous prayer can be difficult for many people of faith, but we're accustomed to writing letters and/or emails. Try writing a letter to God. Use your letter to unpack whatever weighs on your hear in the moment, whether they're feelings of anger or of love; tell God about your confusion about what is happening and why it's happening, and give God your praise. God is big enough, strong enough, and loving enough to take all we can give. That outpouring of emotion can frequently help give us clarity in our own lives, clarity to see how God may be working in our lives and leading us to a great future. Because this is a written correspondence, you might want to pull it back out in a day, week, or year, remembering what was on your mind in the moment and what you have learned since.