

Genesis 20

Chapter 20 is a retelling of the story we read in Chapter 12, in which Abraham (fearing that Pharaoh will kill him in order to steal his beautiful wife Sarah) claims that Sarah is his sister and so gives her away. This time, Abraham, again fearing for his life, gives Sarah away to King Abimelech. The setting for this story is that Abraham and Sarah are once again “aliens” in a foreign land. The implication is that because they are aliens they are at the mercy of the ruler of the land in which they are living. As aliens, they have no power and no standing and are thus vulnerable. What follows are two confrontations and a double blessing.

The first confrontation is between God and Abimelech in which Abimelech is told that he is about to die because he has stolen another man’s wife. Needless to say, Abimelech is a bit put out by this and he responds to God with the plea of innocence. He makes it clear that he has not only not slept with Sarah but that he had been told that Sarah was Abraham’s sister. And because of these two facts he seeks justice for himself, as an innocent party to this spousal transaction. What is fascinating here is that God agrees with Abimelech, that he is indeed innocent and that if Abimelech returns Sarah and asks Abraham (whom God calls a prophet) to pray for him, then all will be well. In addition, God informs Abimelech that God had protected him from sleeping with Sarah, so that both would be protected.

The second confrontation is between Abimelech and Abraham. Abimelech confronts Abraham and essentially says, “Why in the world would you do this to me and my family? Why would you lie to me?” This is a legitimate question, because it was Abraham’s half-truths that placed Abimelech in a difficult position with God. Abraham’s response was that he was being technically truthful since Sarah was his half-sister, but that the main reason he claimed Sarah as his sister was that he was afraid. It turns out that he was so afraid that even before Abraham and Sarah left on their journey, Abraham made Sarah promise that if they were ever in danger over her beauty, she would claim that he was her brother. We might wonder at this point in the story if Abraham had any faith at all in God. While his willingness to journey shows some faith, it shows just how shallow it was.

Finally, we end this story with a mutual blessing. The first blessing is that Abimelech gives Abraham back, not only Sarah, but livestock, slaves and cash. Abimelech even speaks directly to Sarah and informs her that his gift of cash to Abraham was a way of proving that they had not slept together and that she was innocent of any possible indecency. We should note the humor in the story when Abimelech refers to Abraham as Sarah’s brother and not as her husband. The second blessing is that Abraham, through prayer, “heals” Abimelech’s wife and concubines so that they can bear children. It is one more instance of God’s blessing flowing through Abraham to all people’s rather than it being a blessing only for Abraham and his offspring.

Reflection: Though it is not the central focus of the story, we ought to take note of the statement that Abraham and Sarah are aliens in a strange land. This is important because it reminds us of the love God has for displaced peoples. God protects Cain as he becomes a wondering alien. God hears the cries of God’s people in Egypt where they were aliens. God informs God’s people in the Torah that they are to care for aliens in their midst because their ancestors (meaning Abraham and Moses) were aliens as well.

Questions:

1. When have you ever felt like an alien? What did it feel like?
2. Why do you suppose God has a heart for aliens? For the stranger?
3. How might God’s care for aliens inform how we care for aliens in our midst?