

Just over 20 years ago, a band called The Verve Pipe released a song called "The Freshmen" that became a breakout hit for them. The song is dark and moody, and dramatizes the end of a high school relationship.

After narrating a terrible, painful choice his once-girlfriend makes at the end of their relationship, the singer croons,

"For the life of me, I cannot remember what made us think that we were wise and we'd never compromise. For the life of me, I cannot believe we'd ever die for these sins. We were merely freshmen."

But the tone of the song doesn't agree with the singer's claims of innocence. So when he admits, "We've tried to wash our hands of all of this. We never talk of our lacking relationships and how we're guilt stricken, sobbing with our heads on the floor," we recognize it for the lie the singer knows it to be.

He's seeking absolution. He begs, "I can't be held responsible, 'cause she was touching her face.' Then, as though that's not enough, he insists, "I *won't* be held responsible. She fell in love in the first place."

The Verve Pipe gives poetic expression to a deep truth we all know but, like the singer, don't want to admit: We belong to each other.

And when we enter into relationships with one another, we become responsible for each other. We'd love to believe that your bad choices are your responsibility and mine are mine and theirs out there belong only to them.

We sing, "I can't be held responsible!"

We insist, "I *won't* be held responsible!"

But we know, deep down, that it's not so simple. Relationships are messy and we have some level of deep obligation to one another.

For God's people, this is even more explicit. God has set us up as priests, intermediaries between God and the world. By choosing to follow God, we accept the privilege to represent God to the world. We'll see today that privilege comes with a heavy responsibility to bear that image well.

The good news is that we don't bear God's image alone. The one whose image we bear is with us, and always working in and around and through us to bring life and hope and healing. So if like me, you're not perfect, we can rest in God's grace.

Message

We've just kicked off our summer series, which we're calling "The Way, Way Back". Hopefully that calls to mind summer vacations, road trips and fights over who got to ride in the way, way back of the station wagon. (I know, no one drives station wagons anymore because we got SUVs and convinced ourselves they're different.) This series is all about the things we learn when we're willing to leave home - aka our comfort zones.

We're in the book of Genesis, following the patriarchs and matriarchs of our faith as they follow God on road trips of their own. We began two weeks ago with God calling Abram to leave everything he'd ever known and follow him. We marveled at Abram's faithfulness as he set out after God with no plan, only a promise. Then we saw how vital hospitality is - especially when you're on the road. God often comes to us disguised as an outsider. What do the people we meet on our journeys have to teach us?

[Scripture Slide] Today, we're going to look at one of the more embarrassing moments in Abraham's life. Turn with me to Genesis 20. As you're turning there, a little background:

Abraham has been on the road a while now, and to this point, has made several covenants with God. But we skipped over a story that happened right after the first one: Just after Abraham (then Abram) left his home and came to Canaan, a famine struck. Abram went down to Egypt. Apparently, Sarai was quite the looker, so Abram was afraid the Egyptians would kill him and take her. So he convinced Sarai to lie and tell everyone she was his sister (they were apparently half-siblings, so it was only a half lie).

Sure enough, they get there and word reaches Pharaoh, so he marries Sarai - he adds her to his harem and gives Abram a huge dowry payment. God was furious, so he sent plagues on Pharaoh's house. When Pharaoh figured out why, he was equally furious, and threw Abram out of the country.

It's a weird story, and Abram doesn't come off very well at all.

But we've covered a lot of ground since then! Abram has become Abraham and God has reaffirmed and deepened that original covenant several more times. In our story today, Abraham is on the road again, and you're going to hear some echoes of that story from Egypt. Surely by now Abraham has learned his lesson, right?

Abraham moved south to the Negev and lived for a while between Kadesh and Shur, and then he moved on to Gerar. While living there as a foreigner, Abraham introduced his wife, Sarah, by saying, "She is my sister." So King Abimelech of Gerar sent for Sarah and had her brought to him at his palace.

But that night God came to Abimelech in a dream and told him, "You are a dead man, for that woman you have taken is already married!"

But Abimelech had not slept with her yet, so he said, "Lord, will you destroy an innocent nation? Didn't Abraham tell me, 'She is my sister'? And she herself said, 'Yes, he is my brother.' I acted in complete innocence! My hands are clean."

In the dream God responded, “Yes, I know you are innocent. That’s why I kept you from sinning against me, and why I did not let you touch her. Now return the woman to her husband, and he will pray for you, for he is a prophet. Then you will live. But if you don’t return her to him, you can be sure that you and all your people will die.”

Abimelech got up early the next morning and quickly called all his servants together. When he told them what had happened, his men were terrified. -- Genesis 20:1-8

Ooooooooookay. There's a lot going on here.

First, notice that Abraham hasn't learned anything. He did the exact same thing (though he didn't even consult Sarah first - this has just become business as usual for them).

And the person who suffered was Abimelech! God comes to him in a dream and warns him his life is at stake! Abimelech immediately protests! "I can't be held responsible!"

And he's right... sort of. God reveals that - however long it's been, Abimelech hasn't been with Sarah yet, and that's God's doing. God warns him to repent - to let Sarah return to Abraham... or else!

So of course Abimelech wakes up, calls his servants and "his men were terrified".

Then Abimelech called for Abraham. “What have you done to us?” he demanded. “What crime have I committed that deserves treatment like this, making me and my kingdom guilty of this great sin? No one should ever do what you have done! Whatever possessed you to do such a thing?”

Abraham replied, “I thought, ‘This is a godless place. They will want my wife and will kill me to get her.’ And she really is my sister, for we both have the same father, but different mothers. And I married her. When God called me to leave my father’s home and to travel from place to place, I told her, ‘Do me a favor. Wherever we go, tell the people that I am your brother.’ ”

Then Abimelech took some of his sheep and goats, cattle, and male and female servants, and he presented them to Abraham. He also returned his wife, Sarah, to him. Then Abimelech said, “Look over my land and choose any place where you would like to live.” And he said to Sarah, “Look, I am giving your ‘brother’ 1,000 pieces of silver in the presence of all these witnesses. This is to compensate you for any wrong I may have done to you. This will settle any claim against me, and your reputation is cleared.”

Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, his wife, and his female servants, so they could have children. For the LORD had caused all the women to be infertile because of what happened with Abraham’s wife, Sarah.

The LORD kept his word and did for Sarah exactly what he had promised. She became pregnant, and she gave birth to a son for Abraham in his old age. This happened at just the time God had said it would. -- Genesis 20:9-21:2

Abimelech apologizes to Abraham, who explains himself. Then, in public view, Abimelech makes restitution to Abraham and Abraham prayed and Abimelech's whole family was healed (which we hadn't even realized was a thing until now!).

The end! Everyone lived happily ever after!

Okay hang on. Excuse us ever so slightly.

That's *it*?

Abimelech has to apologize, and Abraham gets off basically scott free?

Um. Yes. Sort of.

There's a lot in this story to be disturbed by. We could talk about Abraham's lack of faith - not only in God but in Abimelech. He says he lied because he thought the place was 'godless' - the Hebrew is literally that there is "no fear of God", which we know isn't true because Abimelech and his servants are terrified.

And further, because this is Abraham and Sarah's routine (kids don't know what MO means) when they travel, it sure seems like Abraham thinks he has a monopoly on God, that he's the only person who has a relationship with this God, who knows God well enough to fear God.

That's as disturbing as it is false, especially for those of us who tend to think we have a monopoly on God.

But more disturbing for the people of God should be this: Abraham's lack of faith caused Abimelech to sin. We can imagine Abraham insisting, "I can't be held responsible... he was touching her face!"

And maybe Abraham was right to be afraid. We don't know how Abimelech would've reacted if he'd known Sarah was married. Neither did Abraham. He chose deception -- not faith or trust. .

Abraham's deception paved the way for Abimelech's sin. Abimelech (nearly) committed adultery unknowingly because Abraham lied to him.. His sin was marrying someone else's wife - and Abraham and Sarah willfully hid that fact.

Let's sit with this for a moment: God's people can lead others into sins *for which they will be held accountable*.

Anyone disturbed yet?

If you're anything like me, you want to kick against that. Insist that there's no way God, the almighty creator of the universe, would give humans that sort of responsibility.

We're responsible for putting pumpkin spice in everything, seven Nickelback CDs, like 500 Transformers films and that's without even getting into the history of colonialism. And God's going to trust us with the faith of other people?

Yes. This was the plan from the beginning. Humanity is created in God's image. Our role in the world from the beginning has been to serve as God's representatives. We're meant to be pictures of God for the world. Ancient peoples called this role 'priests'. The priests were a bridge between heaven and Earth. Priests represent God to the people and the people to God.

And nearly from the beginning, we've refused to bear God's image. We've refused to look like God in the world.

Which begs the question: If God's own people won't show the world what God looks like, then *how will the world know God?*

As God's chosen prophet, Abraham has been called into the tradition that sweeps back to creation. He's to be a priest, representing God to the people he meets.

But when he meets Abimelech, Abraham doesn't represent God. He lies. So Abimelech doesn't know God. And the consequences are life-and-death.

Who can't relate to Abraham? Who among us hasn't been a place where we know the right thing to do but instead of being God's image, we choose to be an image of something else?

Mystic and theologian Thomas Merton calls these false images our Shadow Selves. Our shadow self is a false self we create, one that lives between us and the world. We use our shadow to protect us from the world around us. Maybe we're afraid, so our shadow self uses worry or keeps us detached or distracted from the cares of the world. Maybe we're angry, so our shadow is prickly, challenging the world around us, Or maybe we're ashamed, so our shadow works hard to earn love from people around us ; or, like Abraham, we lie to put on a convincing face for the people around us.

Our shadow self is ultimately a lie. We lie to ourselves, we lie to each other. And while we are hiding behind our shadow selves, we cannot image God to the world.

Let me put it another way: God sees right through our shadow selves (Merton says they're 'invisible to God'). And God created you so that the world could see the you God created and loves.

As long as we hide behind our shadow selves, we lie to the world about who God is. And those lies have devastating consequences because the world needs to know the God who loves them and has rescued them.

God has entrusted us with showing the world who God is.

That would be a terrifying enough thought in a vacuum. But we're not in a vacuum. We're real people who all have shadow selves who have lied to the world about who God is. None of us has been a perfect image of God.

In other words, we're all like Abraham in this story.

What do we do when we've failed to be good priests to the world around us?

Notice God wasn't content to let Abraham fail. God intervened in the story to save Abimelech from committing unknowing sin. What we perceive as an unfair resolution - God sending Abimelech to Abraham -- is an invitation to restitution. When Abimelech comes to Abraham, Abraham has to face his sin, to apologize to Abimelech *and then Abraham has to offer sacrifice for him*. Abraham has to fulfill his priestly duties for the very person *he* wronged.

Can you imagine how awkward that moment was, when God exposed Abraham's true self and he had to stand in the harsh light of truth and then do the very thing God created and called him to do in the first place?

Friends, I know many of you here can relate to Abimelech. You've been hurt by people who claim to represent God. You bear some deep wounds from those who were supposed to be priests of your creator and instead they acted out of fear, anger or shame and hurt you.

God has brought you here today in part so we can apologize to you. On behalf of the Church, on behalf of all of us who fail in big and small ways to bear God's image well, I'm sorry. And I hope today is a step toward healing for you.

You're here among a bunch of Abrahams. None of us is perfect. But we're all learning to see our shadow selves. We're all learning to live in the light of God's truth. We're still not perfect, but we're getting there. And there's a place for you here, too.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus is our perfect high priest, making us all priests of God.

1. When in the last week have I represented God well?
2. When in the last week was I living out of my shadow self?

3. When in the next week might I be tempted to live out of my shadow self?
4. How can I choose to be who God created me to be this week?

Assignment + Blessing

We can be held responsible. But God is making us new!