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Now You See Me, Now You Don't

Genesis 12:1-20

Prayer: *Father, I just again, I thank you for your grace, I thank you for the blessing that you have bestowed on us, that you have given us your truth. And Lord, this amazing knowledge that we have been knitted together in our mother's wombs by our God is a contested thought in this culture today. Lord, I'm sure as we all saw the hundreds of thousands of people gathered yesterday ostensibly to protect the right of moms to take the lives of their unborn children, there certainly was a huge part of that and we recognize that there's a war going on that will only be fixed and changed by changes of heart. And so Lord, we again pray that you would equip us to be your ambassadors for that change of heart as well. And Lord, this morning we just again are opening up your book, we want to learn more and more about this journey of faith and so we are praying as we look into the life of Abraham this morning, you would be giving us your grace and your power and the presence of your Holy Spirit. Lord, as we look into your word, give us the ability to make it make sense and to make it of permanent value, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, have you ever cried out to God only to find out that the heavens in response were silent? Have you ever wondered why it is that everyone else seems to enjoy a relationship with God marked by a personal connection between them and God that you don't seem to have? Well for years, I have tried to put into words a struggle that I think hits many if not most evangelicals. It is the struggle of God's perceived absence. And I pointed out that we use the term "perceived absence" instead of just "absence," because absence of God is far more a matter of our perception than it is of actual reality. And we know from scripture from Romans 8:32 in particular that God is with us always and that nothing can separate us from the love of God. However, we also know that God is determined above all else to grow faith within us. And for God, that means training us to live lives that are diametrically opposed to the way we normally live. I mean, we walk by sight and not by faith. And it's God's goal to reverse that order in our lives, to make us into creatures who walk by faith and not by sight, and frankly that's not natural. You know, the human body is estimated to have over 100 million sensory receptors all designed to take in data from the physical world and that's how we're wired. As human beings, we were trained from infancy to trust in those things that we can grasp through our senses. If we can't see, hear, taste, touch and smell something, we have a seriously hard time believing that it's real. Well, as children of God, we are being trained to

do the exact opposite.

Last week we started a series I've entitled "Now you see me, now you don't." It's named after that game that you play with little kids. You hide your eyes, now you see me, now you don't. Well, it's my contention that God is not playing games with us at all when his interaction with us seems to include much more of his absence than it does his presence. And we looked for the reasons for that absence last week and we found it stated three of them. We said, first of all, God's absence is normative. That is to say that it's normal to be sensing God's absence more than his presence. And I pointed out that for many years, I thought I just wasn't getting it. I thought everybody else enjoyed this relationship with God where he walked with them and he talked with them and he told them he was their own. Well, that turns out not to be the case. Now you see me, now you don't, is the normal way that God operates today and it's been that way since the fall of Adam and Eve. God absolutely communicates to us in many different ways but the communication and fellowship that Adam and Eve at one time enjoyed with God is something that we can only look forward to enjoying in the next life and not in this one. And this life is now preparing us for the next one. And God is very clear that much of our struggle to connect with God is a normal part of living in a fallen world that God says is only temporary. He says in 2

Corinthians 4:17: For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. It is God's intention to grow us in things that are unseen and eternal, and that often involves struggle. And more often than not that involves God's absence much more so than his presence. So God's absence is normative.

And secondly, I mentioned that God's absence is necessary and it was necessitated by the fall of Adam. I went into detail last time that prior to the fall in the Garden of Eden, mankind and God were perfectly connected and God's absence was nonexistent. Well, the truly awful thing about the fall is that not that Adam and Eve had committed a simple act of disobedience, it's that they had fundamentally altered their nature, making it so foreign now to God's nature that the two could not be together. God remained perfect; Adam and Eve unknowingly embraced imperfection. And through that one single act of disobedience, they had now lost their perfection and they passed that imperfection on to every subsequent offspring they had, and that of course includes you and me. I mean, we are born sons and daughters of Adam. We're born flawed from the beginning, having inherited a fallen nature that now fears God. Here's the tragic side to the dilemma of our

fallenness. You see, we now fear God, we now hide from God just as Adam and Eve did in the garden; but in hiding from God, we are hiding from the very purpose for which we were created. I mean we are creatures alone who possess the "imago Dei," the very image of God. You saw that in your bulletin inserts. God says in *Genesis 1:26*: *Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.* There is no other creature that God has ever created who would ever share that privilege, and consequently, we have inherited a spiritual schizophrenia. See, we were designed for worship but we fear and loathe the object of that worship. I mean we were created by God as the highest order of his creation in order to reflect back to God the glory of his creation. That's what makes us tick. I mean the longing for God is as much a part of our spiritual DNA as is our physical DNA. But because of the fall, we now have this -- this desperate fear, this desperate loathing of God himself. And if you doubt that, if you think this is maybe just an incendiary remark, consider this from God's perspective. You know, God left heaven, God came to earth as one of us and he didn't just live any old life among us, he lived a flawless, perfect life, and it consisted of his perfect adherence

to God's moral law which means that from infancy until the beginning of his public ministry he did nothing but simply perfectly obey God and love his fellow man. Once his public ministry began, the scripture says in *Matthew 9: Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction.* So now in return for this absolutely flawless life in which he did nothing but good for his fellow man, he was arrested and tried, mocked, tortured, and crucified. And as he was being tortured, Pilate asked the crowd if they would not release him, and the crowd's response sums up perfectly mankind's response to God's intervening in man's existence. You know, Pilate who wanted nothing to do with Jesus, said, "I am innocent of this man's blood." And the crowd which represented the very rank and file people that Jesus had spent his entire life loving, caring for, healing, and feeding all said, "May his blood be on us and on our children." I think I can make the case pretty well that mankind for no reason fixed its collective fear and loathing of God on the man Christ Jesus. And Jesus himself would say in *John 15: "If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. But the word that is written in their law must be fulfilled: 'They hated me without a cause.'"*

Now the gospel that we proclaim is that this same Jesus hated, tortured, executed was not the victim of circumstance; rather, he was God in the flesh come down to earth to exchange his righteousness for our sin when we place our faith in his death and resurrection. That was the price that God was willing to pay to make a way for God's absence to end. But it was an absence that was clearly necessary for both our sakes' and God's, and that leads to our subject this morning.

You see, God's absence is normative, it is necessary and it is natural. This tension between the image of God that we were designed for and the fallen image that we now possess is the natural state that we now find ourselves in. So we've gotten to the place where our greatest fear and our deepest need is one in the same. It's God. And over against this spiritual schizophrenia God is determined to grow us into a new normal, and that new normal is rooted in faith. There's a reason why God says we walk by faith and not by sight, and God is determined to grow that capacity within each one of us. And as I said last week, Peter describes the natural purpose behind so many of the trials that we find ourselves in. Peter says this, he says: *In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith -- more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire*

-- may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. What Peter's saying is your tested faith is more precious than gold. I mean it's precious to us, and it is precious to God. And God is determined to produce that precious faith in our lives and I don't know anything that tests the genuineness of our faith more than God's perceived absence. So would it not then follow that a natural part of God's plan for each of us would include significant period of time -- periods of time when the only thing that we have to go on is not what we feel but what we know. I mean, that's what faith is. *Hebrews 11* says: *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* Most important thing not seen is not a thing, it's God.

So when we look to scripture, we find many examples of God's perceived absence in the lives of his people. You know, it's very easy to look at the lives of these great saints and think that they are the exception rather than the rule, but God has a faith walk in mind for every single one of his children. Every situation in scripture is unique but so is yours and so is mine. Understand that God has a plan to grow you in your faith -- quote-- "*so that the tested genuineness of your faith -- may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.*" And by the way, God says that tested faith is -- quote -- "*more*

precious than gold that perishes though tested by fire."

So this morning, we're going to look first at Abraham's life. Abraham's the father of the faith. We're going to look at his life and if we pull back to the 10,000-foot level and with the benefit of history, we can see precisely how God is growing faith in Abraham. We see him take one step forward then two steps back. We see that pattern repeated again and again but we also see a steady progression from weak faith to father of the faith, and it's all because of God's hand on his life. And what God is doing in Abraham's life, you have to understand, he is doing in your life and my life as well. And like Abraham, we, too, take one step forward and often times we take two, three, four, ten steps back. But like Abraham, we, too, have God working in our life to produce a tested genuine faith.

So let's take a look at Abraham's life. Now, right from the start I can certainly see people thinking, well, if I had the advantages that Abraham had with regard to faith, hey, I'd believe like he believed. I mean it's easy to go to scripture and come away from Abraham's story thinking that if anyone had a personal relationship with God, well then Abraham did. And he did. But we have to understand the pattern that God laid down in the way he dealt with Abraham and that pattern doesn't really yield itself to just a

casual reading of scripture. Did God meet with Abraham? Well, yeah, of course he did, on more than one occasion. Did God actually speak to Abraham? Yes, he did, again, on more than one occasion. So no doubt, Abraham had some amazing connections to God. But what God asked of Abraham was way beyond anything he's ever asked of you or me. Abraham was living this life of a pagan, he was in Ur of the Chaldees when he had his first confrontation with the living God. This is *Genesis 12*. It says: *Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."* So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan.

So I just want to you picture what's going on in Abram's life. At seventy-five years of age, Abraham picks up and he leaves every single trace of his family and history and he takes off for literally parts unknown. Now why did he do that? Well 'cause God

appeared to him. God appeared to him and he told him to. But you know, it's amazingly easy to just dismiss how hard this must have been for Abraham. I want to you to imagine, put yourself in Abraham's shoes and I want you to imagine last night God told you he wants you to go to a central part of Mexico. He wants you to go to a place where you know nobody, to a place where people are sometimes kidnapped, raped, beheaded, there's no law, there's no protections, there's just God's instruction for you: Get up and go. It would have to be a pretty powerful voice to get you to move in that direction, hey? Well, God provided that voice. And Abraham in response to that voice provides his first act of faith. Now if we look at Abraham's life as a case in point of now you see me, now you don't, we can see the pattern beginning here and it repeats itself throughout Abraham's life. Abraham receives this amazing input from God. Now you see him. But then it's followed by these extended periods of times where God is growing Abraham's ability to trust him in his absence. That's the now you don't phase of Abraham's training. And we see this right from the beginning. I mean Abraham appears -- I mean God appears to Abraham and it's a big deal. I mean he tells him to leave but he doesn't tell him where he's going to wind up. And God reconnects with Abraham in Canaan and he tells him he's going to become a great nation but then his journey takes him to Egypt. And it's not because God has appeared to him and it's not because God is

whispering in his ear pointing out directions, I want you to make a left here, go here, go here, go here. It's because of something far more prosaic. *Genesis 12* says: *Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land.* Abraham is starving. God is perceptively absent. So we start following Abraham's journey of faith and we discover that it contains lots of details, lots of detours, lots of difficulties. And if you pan back and look at the big picture, what you see God doing here is precisely what you would expect. He asserts himself into Abraham's life and then he pulls back. And sometimes Abraham takes one step forward, sometimes he takes two steps back. And when he enters into Egypt, he takes two big steps back. This is verse 11. It says: *When he was about to enter Egypt, he said so Sarai his wife, "I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, "This is his wife." Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake."*

Well, Abraham gets caught in a lie about Sarah. And before you come down on Abraham, ask yourself if you've ever been in a situation where the possibility exists of somebody murdering you in order to take your wife. That's the kind of pressure that Abraham is under. And under that pressure Abraham adds deceit to the lie,

and he does that by telling half lies. I mean what he actually said was half true because Sarah was his half sister. And so we're panning back and we see Abraham, he starts out with this incredible burst of faith, he just leaves and takes off. Now he's hit his first speed bump. And from Abraham's perspective, he has seen God and now he has not. See, he's in Egypt not because of some instruction from God but because life itself has forced his hand through a famine. And now that he's in Egypt, he sees circumstances, that is the beauty of his wife Sarah, the interest of Pharaoh, that's what's starting to guide his hand. And so from Abraham's perspective, God -- where's God? God's absent. And he chooses foolishly with that kind of perspective. But God was never absent from Abraham. And we see that in his reaction to this bad decision. I mean, we look at this now from God's perspective. God allows the natural consequences of Abraham's actions to play themselves out, and right from the start it's an unfolding disaster. *Genesis 12:15 says: And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels.* I'm picturing Abraham starting out with this half truth, he says this little lie and he sees this develop and he sees it unfold, and he's seeing a disaster in front of his eyes, and he knows that it's half his -- his half truth that

started it. Well, into this picture God comes literally to the rescue. Verse 17, it says: *But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife.* And so we see right off the bat two different principles at work here. God is actively growing Abraham's faith by his perceived absence but he's also protecting him and behind the scenes, he is clearly present. You might say where was God when hunger drove him to Egypt and where was God when Pharaoh suddenly took an interest in Sarah? Well, the answer is God was hidden right there beside Abraham. See, in the midst of God's perceived absence, we find God actually coming to Abraham's rescue. God's silence pushes Abraham in a direction that would teach him a great deal about God's faithfulness. You also have to realize that God is protecting the covenant promise that he made with Abraham that he would become a great nation. And again, that has implications for your life and mine. You see, however we fit into God's plan is going to determine how he develops our own personal life of faith. You know, Abraham had some extraordinary interventions by God but that's because God had some extraordinary plans for Abraham. That doesn't mean that God's discipline wasn't simultaneously at work shaping and molding Abraham's life of faith. And what follows from this half lie is an extremely unpleasant experience for Abraham. *Genesis 12:18* says: *So Pharaoh called Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was*

your wife? Why did you say "She is my sister," so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife; take her, and go." And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him, and they sent him away with his wife and all that he had. See, the experience launches Abraham on a faith journey that includes many, many steps forward and many steps back. That's no different than yours or my faith journey as well. You see, God is always at work, God is always disciplining.

Donald Grey Barnhouse once described the work of the Holy Spirit by describing the ice skaters at Rockefeller Center. And he said, he pointed out the very wealthy could hire professional skaters who would linger some 10 to 15 feet behind, just skating alongside their client and they would be watching, just keeping their eye on them, making sure that they never stumbled. And if they started to stumble, they would zoom forward, grab them by the arm, steady them, get them centered, get them all straightened out and then they'd go back to their original place. Barnhouse was saying that's how the Holy Spirit works in our life. He lingers behind until we start to stumble, and then he comes rushing forward, and he grabs us and steadies us and then once we're steady, he goes back. This is what we see happening in Abraham's journey. And Abraham's journey is playing itself out before Pharaohs and kings. Our journey is plays itself out before bosses and co-workers and relatives and friends, but the process is the same. Now you see

God, now you don't.

I spoke last week about my own experience in which God overwhelmingly asserted his presence in my life at first. I said God spoke directly into my life, but then he did exactly what he did in Abraham's. He backed away. And I began to feel God's absence. And I also had my share of stumblings and one of my deepest stumblings happened some 36 years ago. Just to give you some background and history, this is the septic tank story to those of you who've already heard it. Our twin boys Dan and Ben had just been born 10 weeks premature and they were in Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in New York City, they were growing a bill of a thousand dollars a day. And by the way, we had no insurance and a house to lose. So as a family we were in one of the worst economic circumstances we had ever been in, work wise as well. Doesn't it seem that when things start to go south, they go south in groups? We had a series of setbacks economically and it was all capped by a lovely appearance of the Department of Health who informed us that our septic system had failed and that we were going to be required to replace it. Now we had recently moved from California, I didn't even know what a septic system was. And by the time I had figured it out, I knew that the money that was required to fix it was way beyond anything that we had. And so I figured if I could pour my life savings into everything that we had into repairing it, we

could come close but we would be short by a thousand dollars. I had gathered and gotten quotes from everybody and we could scrape up what we could but we were short a thousand. So I gathered our family together and basically what I said was, look, God is faithful and this is not a want, this is not a color television, a new car, this is a septic system. Nobody wants a new septic system. It's a need. And God has promised that he would take care of our needs. So I am certain God is going to supply. I don't know how he's going to do it but he's going to do it. And I fully expected that God would provide by giving me the work that I needed during that winter to be able to make up the difference but wouldn't you know, work dried up completely. Now the Department of Health said I had until the spring to get the system fixed but by then if I didn't, I'd be liable to a \$250 a day fine, so we knew we had to do something. So we had spent our life savings doing what we could but as I said, we're still a thousand dollars short. And I was sure God would provide and I was certain that he would provide the means, and he didn't. Now you see me, now you don't. And so months went by and economically things went from bad to worse and so did my faith. I began to think this is a joke. What in the world is going on? I knew -- I know now but I didn't know then, I was in the middle of a now you see me, now you don't moment. And try as I might, I could find God nowhere. I mean I didn't know if I should go to a bank and try to get a loan. I mean

it had been months after I had promised my family that God was going to come through for us and he didn't. So I didn't know what I was going to do. And so I had this taste of Abraham's mindset, God was absent, heaven was silent, and I had grown bitter and cynical about God. And with that mindset, one day I went out to the mailbox and I'm walking down to the mailbox and I walk in, and there's a little envelope in there, and it's from one Peter Borromeo who was a good friend who I had known in California. We had been back from California for two and a half years, I hadn't had any contact with anybody in California for well over a year and a half, and I -- Peter Borromeo? I opened it up, and there's a little piece of paper in an envelope and I open it up, and it says, "Dear Tom, I know God will bless you as he has blessed me," and inside was a check for a thousand dollars. I just start to weep. I was just at the mailbox and I felt the weight of not having trusted God. And so I came back and I showed it to Janice and she was incredulous. We were both incredulous. And I called my friend Peter up who I hadn't spoken to in a year and a half and some of you have heard this story before but, you know, I called him and I said, "What possessed you to do this?" And he said, "Well, it's interesting. I had just been laid off from my job and I was asleep and literally in the middle of the night I was awoken by an incredibly powerful force that just said, 'Get up and write a check.' So I said -- and I thought, okay, I'll write him a check,

I'll write him a check for \$100." He said, "and it was so powerful, it said a thousand dollars." And he said to me on the phone, he said, "Brother, I love you but I don't love you a thousand dollars." And he said, "I literally had no choice and no peace until I wrote that check." Now what do you think that did for me? What do you think that did in terms of my faith journey? It wasn't the money. The money was important -- wasn't important, what was important was God asserting himself as the God who hears and answers prayer. And what God was doing thousands of years ago in Abraham's life he was doing right then, right there in mine. I was stumbling, he was asserting his presence, so now I saw him. As soon as I was back on my feet, it was now you don't. Because we walk by faith and not by sight.

As we examine Abraham's life, we see this pattern repeat itself. God has revealed himself powerfully to Abraham, he's telling him to move out and then God pulls back and Abraham falters. God then asserts himself to Pharaoh and Abraham's faith continues to grow. And so we follow Abraham's faith through this falling out that he next has with his nephew Lot. You know, Abraham's group and Lot's group has both grown so enormous that they're quarreling now over the rights for grazing for their animals. And again this quarrel takes place in God's perceived absence. So I want to get you to see, God's not having a garden discussion with Abraham about what

to do with this conflict. He's simply involved in a conflict. But through the conflict we begin to see faith at work in Abraham. *Genesis 13* says: *And there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock. At that time the Canaanites and Perizzites were dwelling in the land. Then Abram said to Lot, "Let there be no strife between you and me and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen, for we are kinsmen. Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right, or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left."* Abraham has clearly grown in his faith. I mean he's now giving Lot the option to choose the choice land and he basically says I will take whatever is left, trusting in God for the results. Well, that kind of choice is not something unique to Abraham. You see, God presents us frequently with opportunities to either trust him or trust our talent, our ability and our influence. Abraham chose wisely because his trust was not in his resources, not in the resources he's obviously giving up but in God as his ultimate resource. But you don't have to be Abraham to experience that kind of decision. Do you go with what is safe and obvious or what sometimes appears dangerous but is clearly the will of God? Abraham chose God's best. Lot chose the choicest land. What happens to him, he winds up getting kidnapped. And after Abraham rescues Lot, God meets with him again and gives him this vision of the future in *Genesis 15*. It says: *After these*

things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus." And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

So we think what an incredible vision and what an incredible promise, what an amazing faith we're starting to see in Abraham. Abraham's words would be repeated by Paul as the centerpiece of the righteousness that comes through faith. In *Romans 4*, Paul says: *For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."* Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness. It's this righteous faith that God is growing in Abraham. Now Abraham for years now has had repeated encounters with the living God. He has seen God's presence and he has absolutely felt deeply his absence. And he's

grown enormously in his faith journey, but no journey is a straight line success and Abraham is no exception.

Now Abraham once again meets with God who's about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Not once, not twice, but six separate times he challenges God to lower the number of righteous men that would prevent Sodom from being destroyed. *Genesis 18* says: *Then Abraham drew near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it?"* You follow this dialogue and you say Abraham, the chutzpah that Abraham demonstrates is astounding. God says no, and he says how about 45? He says not for 45 will I destroy it. He says, would you believe 40? Would you believe 30? Would you believe 20? Would you believe 10? And each time Abraham is saying, look, please don't get upset with me. But if you gave me 30, you're going to give me 20. If you gave me 20, you're going to give me 10. What we see here is Abraham negotiating with the God of the universe because he has become a mighty man of faith. And from that height he goes right back to the same behavior we saw right at the beginning. After Sodom is destroyed, Abraham begins to journey once again and he finds himself in the territory of King Abimelech telling the king the very same half lie he told at the beginning. *Genesis 20* says: *From there Abraham journeyed toward*

the territory of the Negeb and lived between Kadesh and Shur; and he sojourned in Gerar. Then Abraham said of Sarai his wife, "She is my sister." And Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah.

Sort of like duh. You would have thought by now Abraham would have learned his lesson but he hasn't. And the God who has been absent once again becomes present. He steps in to rescue Abraham, Sarah and the covenant and once again it is very unpleasant for Abraham. The first time it was with Pharaoh in Egypt, the second time is with Abimelech, and in both cases Abraham abandons his faith and he tries to rely on his own cleverness. And we've seen God intervene in Abraham's life repeatedly. We've also seen God clearly withdraw allowing Abraham to make choices, some of which are not good at all. And in both of these instances, God is clearly leaving Abraham up to his own bad decision. No one's whispering in his ear. No one's telling him what the right thing or the wrong thing to do is. God is clearly absent in these instances but he's not absent in the way we might think he is absent. In both instances he allows Abraham's bad decisions about Sarah to backfire in his face, but in both instances God swoops in to protect Abraham and Sarah from Abraham's bad decision. Abraham lies to the Egyptian authorities and Pharaoh's about to take her as his wife. What does God do? He strikes their whole household with plagues. In Abimelech's case, Abraham makes the same bad decision to lie about Sarah and God appears to Abimelech in a dream, and says, you touch

Sarah and you are a dead man. In Genesis 20 it says: *So Abimelech rose early in the morning and called all his servants and told them all these things. And the men were very much afraid. Then Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, "What have you done to us? And how have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not be done."* And Abimelech said to Abraham, *"What did you see, that you did this thing?"* Abraham said, *"I did it because I thought, 'There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.'" Really? I mean really, Abraham? God has led you all of these years, he's spoken to you repeatedly, he has shown you his faithfulness, and all you can think about is saving your skin when God abandons you once again. Abimelech gives Abraham a gift and sends them on their way. And I love the way he puts it. If you just read it, it's not that obvious. He says: *To Sarah he said, "Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver. I don't think he said it that way at all. He says, to Sarah he said, "Behold, I have given your "brother" a thousand pieces of silver. It is a sign of your innocence in the eyes of all who are with you, and before everyone your vindicated."* Abraham has grown enormously, but it's always been one step forward and two steps back, and this is clearly two steps back.*

Now next week we're going to look at Abraham's life at the point where God's faith building program finally reaches its desired goal. And we'll look at the key ingredient I haven't spoken about yet but it's the key ingredient that God uses to get him there. And so we are going to leave Abraham in the middle of a mess of his own making. But you know why this blesses me? Because it makes Abraham, the father of the faith, real. And it blesses me to know that my God is infinitely patient. And it encourages me to know that my God will not abandon me when I mess up badly as Abraham messed up badly. God responds as he's done repeatedly. And just like that stumbling skater, he comes alongside, he grabs ahold, he steadies, and then once having steadies, he pulls back. But he also lets the consequences of Abraham's bad decisions do their work as well, because Abraham is living out now you see me, now you don't, and we get to see it unfold. And if you're one of his sheep, it is unfolding in your life as well. So pray God for the grace to see it. Let me conclude with this scripture. *In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith -- more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire -- may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.* Let's pray.

Father, I thank you for your word. I thank you for Abraham. I

thank you for this story that I can so easily identify with. Having had a faith walk that has consisted as well of one step forward and two steps back, I understand exactly where Abraham is. I see your hand upon him. I see you asserting yourself into his life and then pulling back and I see that in my own life as well. And I pray for each of us sitting here that we would all begin to see those patterns in our own lives, that we would sense God's presence and God's absence and know that the absence is always one of perception, it's never one of reality. I thank you, God, for your presence and I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.