

My Brother's Killer

TEXT: Genesis 4:1-17

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on August 27, 2023

The question I get asked 100% of the time when I teach this story in Bible study is, “Wait...what? Where did Cain get a wife???” That question comes up because people think they should be reading this story literally. They’ve been following along with the story: The first two people, then two sons, and then another entire population center comes seemingly out of nowhere and there’s no end of confusion.

As I spent some time talking about last week, the Bible’s purpose is to show us the truth about God, creation, and the relationship between them, as its writers understood those things. The Bible is trying to teach us truth, not facts; to provide meaning, not history; to point to wisdom, not science.

The Adam and Eve story is not literal and was never meant to be seen as such. Likewise, the story of Cain and Abel. This story has connections to the Adam and Eve story in Genesis 3, which we’ll look at in a minute, but if your greatest question about it is where Cain got his wife, then the big T Truth that the story is trying to teach likely is sitting in a corner of the room unattended.

Once I have calmed people down about Cain’s wife, the next most common question I get about this story is why God is so seemingly unfair. What was wrong with the offering Cain brought? Are dead animals really more pleasing to God than a sheaf of wheat? Is God gluten intolerant?

The answer to that is, first, we don’t know why God didn’t like Cain’s offering. Some have speculated that because the text specifies that Abel brought the first-fruits of his flock and it doesn’t say that about Cain’s offering, that Cain gave the leftovers while Abel gave his best. Maybe. But in the end, the reason doesn’t matter. Even if God just decided that burgers smelled better than toast, you don’t kill your brother because of it. God is not the problem actor here.

Shockingly, the story isn’t even centered on the murder, as awful as it was. We don’t get a long build-up to it, like we do when David sets out to kill Goliath. We don’t get a snapshot of horrific grief and rage back home once it was done. There isn’t praise for Abel’s wisdom and goodness or grieving the loss of God’s plan for Abel’s future.

The murder itself is just an early plot point to bring us to the thing that *is* centered in the story: Relationships. The relationship among family members, the relationship of human beings to the earth and to each other, and the relationship of humanity with God. That’s where all the ink is used, so there’s a good bet that the big T Truth of the story is in there somewhere, not in whatever the issue was with Cain’s offering or how the population grew fast enough to give Cain a wife.

So, consider this: One of the things I’ve noticed across a lifetime in churches, of many kinds in several parts of the country, is that the church is very quick to instruct people about what they should and shouldn’t do. Thou shalt do this and thou shalt definitely not do that. But what gets far, far less attention is the question on the minds of many people who hear such pronouncements. And that question is, “But, what if I did?” Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not bear false witness. Thou shalt not kill. But...but...what if I did? What then?

Christians are fast with instant-forgiveness Jesus answers, but thousands of years before Jesus was born; thousands of years before Moses and his brother Aaron developed a sacrificial system for the ritual atonement for sins, there were these stories of Adam, Eve, and their children, with detailed and specific examples of how God directly handled the sins of each. Our lesson, and God’s first and fulsome answer to “But what if I did?” is here—in these stories.

The later sacrificial system and its still later embodiment in Jesus on the cross are only fully understood in light of God’s first response to sin in these ancient stories. These are the foundation which shaped every understanding of

sin and atonement for Jews, and therefore for Christians, going forward. It's the Gospel message, right here in the opening, mythic truths of some of the oldest stories in the world: There is no Easter without Good Friday.

Before we look, though, one caveat. As we talk about sin and its consequences, bear in mind that sin is not the only reason bad things happen. The Bible is clear in both Testaments, including from the lips of Jesus himself, that tragic, horrible things happen to innocent people. What's almost as frustrating is that good things also happen to terrible people.

A great thing doesn't automatically mean God is pleased with what we've done any more than a bad thing automatically means someone has sinned. All that is a different sermon. These stories from Genesis 3 and 4 are about the consequences and, ultimately, the hope for the guilty; not the suffering of the innocent. With that in mind, let's connect some dots.

Cain is both literally and figuratively Adam's son. He is the first biological son of Adam and Eve; but the first thing we learn about him is that Cain is a "tiller of the ground." That word in Hebrew is *abad*, the same word as in Genesis 2:15, which we saw a couple of weeks ago is most frequently translated as "serve." God places Adam in the Garden of Eden to serve and protect the earth; terms that are often translated in these spots in Genesis as "till and keep." Both those words are central to the Cain and Abel story. Cain is a tiller of the ground; a servant of the earth, like his father. And his first question to God after the murder is whether he a keeper of his brother also. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

On a macro level, the Cain and Abel story teaches that the human vocation given to Adam in Genesis 2:15, to serve and protect the earth, is not limited to dirt and plants. It's not just about growing nice tomatoes, as helpful as that is. It means to serve and protect every aspect of creation, including each other.

If you remember, Adam's job in the Garden to serve and protect the earth is the first example we get of what God meant in Genesis 1:28 by giving human beings "dominion" over all things. You can trace that theme of how God wants humans to use our power from that first chapter of Genesis all the way through to Revelation. Every successive book of the Bible gives us more and more information about what God means by "dominion," with the climax coming in the searing image of Jesus' brutal execution on a cross.

Paul calls the Cross a scandalous message, because it was. It was a clear shot across the bow to those who viewed "dominion" as imperial *power over* everything and everyone else, as opposed to *service to* everything and everyone else. That whole theme is just beginning its development here in these first chapters. Chapter one says, "dominion" and the wise reader asks, "Gee, I wonder what God means by that?" Chapter two tells us it means to serve and protect the earth. The Cain and Abel story now expands out another ring—it means serving and protecting other people, too. Killing someone because you're mad is way out of bounds.

On a more immediate level, the story of Cain and Abel is linked to Genesis 3 in the language around the consequences imposed on the parties. Before Cain kills Abel, as Cain is struggling with his emotions over God rejecting his offering and accepting Abel's, God is trying to coach him through it. God tells him basically "Don't get mad, get better." We don't know what was wrong with Cain's offering, but the implication is that the problem isn't existential. Like any coach might, God is trying to work with Cain. "Don't dwell on the failure. Practice more. You can improve. You have what it takes. You can do better."

Cain's offering wasn't sinful, and God imposes zero punishment for it. God doesn't even criticize it. The offering just wasn't up to par. But God does warn Cain that, if he dwells on the failure, actual sin is just waiting there for a foothold and will master him if he doesn't manage to master himself and learn from his mistake.

What's interesting about that warning is that it's almost exactly the wording about desire and mastery that God uses to curse Eve as she and Adam are kicked out of the Garden in Genesis 3:16. A consequence of all sin is a loss of agency. If we prove unable to master ourselves, something else will step in and fill the void.

Cain's story is also connected to Adam's curse. We've already seen that Cain took up his father's job as a tiller of the ground. But when Cain fails to master his impulses and kills his brother, God tells Cain he is "cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it

will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.” Cain then wails, “Today you have driven me away from the soil.”

Just as Cain is one generation after Adam and Eve, so his sin is next generation. He kills. And his punishment is also an added layer. As a result of Adam’s sin, growing food was going to be hard and exhausting. For Cain, it will be impossible. Remember that *adam* in Hebrew isn’t a name. It means “red earth.” To be human is to be made of earth, and the earth is what the first man is charged with protecting.

In killing Abel, Cain has failed the earth itself. He has failed the most fundamental human vocation—to serve and protect the earth. He didn’t just neglect it; he killed it. And that has consequences. The earth will not respond to him anymore. He has broken that trust. So, just like Adam and Eve could not go back to the Garden, now Cain can’t go back to his livelihood as a farmer. Even more, while his parents were cast out from the Garden; Cain is cast out from his family. He killed his brother.

In both cases—with Adam and Eve, and with Cain—their respective sins have irrevocable consequences. They can’t go back to what was, which is a fundamental truth about sin. Sin changes our circumstances in ways that we can’t undo. Even if I steal \$5 from you and then regret it and give it back—and even if you forgive me—a bond of trust has been broken that doesn’t come back with the return of the money.

That’s the bad news of sin of any kind. When we can’t master our impulses and get in trouble; even though our inability to master them might be totally understandable given our circumstances, there will be consequences. Many of those will be lasting, even if we’ve repented of them a hundred times over. But, as hard as all that is, both of these stories also give us hope.

While neither story allows its characters to go back; in both stories they are able to go forward. And in both stories, they go forward with God’s covering; God’s protection. Even when we end up being our brother’s killer instead of our brother’s keeper, God will keep us, even so.

At the end of Genesis 3, the naked innocence of Adam and Eve are gone. God pushes them out into the harshness of the world. That doesn’t ever change. That’s where they will live out their days. But even though they brought it on themselves; even though God had warned them of exactly this; God is ready to help them pick up and deal with the consequences. God covers them; protects them; clothes them. They are forever changed; but God still cares for them and adjusts as necessary to help them manage the new reality. They bear a son and life goes on. They teach the ways of God to their children.

It’s the same with Cain. As Cain is processing the reality that he can’t return to his family and former way of life after killing his brother, he laments to God, “Anyone who meets me may kill me.” Immediately God says, “Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance. And the Lord put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him.”

That mark is not the equivalent of the Scarlet Letter. It’s not a mark to shame him. It’s a mark to protect him. The one thing God does *not* want is the cycle of vengeance, where the killing never stops as each death requires a death in return. This is not “an eye for an eye.” This is a “stop the violence right here!”

When God puts a mark on Cain; it’s a mark that tells the world that every life is sacred, even the life of someone who has failed to see the sacredness in others. It’s a mark that says Cain is, even in the exile that God imposed, still under the God’s protection. It’s a mirror of Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden, sent out with the mark of clothing, given by God to serve and keep them.

And, just as the first thing that happened after Adam and Eve left the Garden is that they conceived Cain; so the first thing that happened after Cain left home is that he found a wife and they conceived a son named Enoch. And then Cain built a city, named it after his son, and a whole genealogy follows to close out chapter four.

Cain’s wife is not a glitch in the story to trip up literal readers. Cain’s wife is the promise that even when you’ve screwed up so badly that you can’t go back; God will help you make a way to go forward. Cain would have never had a family of his own, built a city, or be remembered for anything but the murder of his brother if he had insisted on going back home—which was a choice that he had.

He could have skulked around the outskirts of the village where his family lived, begging to be taken back. Cain might have lived out his days lurking there in the shadows, known to the growing village as that monster who killed his brother and never had a future. That dark memory could have festered, and he might have killed again. And again.

But as upset as Cain was about his loss; he recognized that his sin had consequences, accepted them, and moved forward instead of back. God protected his new life, and the biblical story of Cain ends with a growing family and the building of cities, not with an empty husk of a man wandering alone in the shadows of his past. Adam and Eve, too, moved forward, as tragically hard as that was. The rest of the Bible is the story of their descendants.

The rest of the Bible is also the story of sin and consequences, showing either the resolve and hope of people with the courage to move ahead or the despair and cycles of violence, vengeance, and regret of those mired in the past.

For both groups, God is there, trying to show that there is a way forward if people will just let go, learn what was problematic in their offering, and move on. God leads those in bondage to freedom and searches caves for God's despairing prophets. A Promised Land awaits them both; but they must choose to move in and claim it.

The church has always pointed to these stories and yelled, "Original Sin!" "Total Depravity!" But what if these are really stories about Original Hope and Total Grace? What if the nature of redemption can't ever be separated from the story of sin? What if God's salvation began with the expulsion from the Garden? What if Adam and Eve didn't fall *from* grace but *into* it?

After Jesus' resurrection, people didn't recognize him. He took on a different form. He didn't go back to what was; he went forward to what could be, given all that had come before. And so did his disciples. And so might we. If we choose. Amen.