

My Brother's Keeper

TEXT: Genesis 4:1-16

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on November 16, 2025

There are many important ways a sermon can develop from the story of Cain and Abel. You could focus on the conflict over the two offerings and why God might have preferred one over the other. Or you could run with God warning Cain that stewing in his grievance over it will open the door to sin—which it very much does. I've also had a lot of people freak out about the verse after this passage when Cain not only goes into exile in the land of Nod but finds a wife there and builds a city.

The fact that there are other people in the world, at this point in time, is there in our passage—otherwise Cain wouldn't be worried that he would be driven away from home and “anyone who meets me may kill me.” But that gets glossed over by most people until the text actually says that he finds a wife and has a son in another land. For those who treat these stories literally, there should be no other people on the earth; how did Cain find a wife? It's a story about murder, but Cain's wife is the biggest problem for a lot of people.

These are not factual stories. These are stories that are designed to teach us truth about the nature of God, of all Creation, and the relationship between them. Those truths are conveyed through stories, told across millennia, much as we try to teach truths about life to children through bedtime stories. The mention of Cain's wife is the herald that says, there's already a world populated enough to build cities by Genesis 4 so don't go taking these things literally. Look for the truth within them, not factual details, dates, and times.

An important truth in this story that isn't our direct focus today, but that does inform it, goes back to God's relationship with Cain. You can rarely go wrong in your hunt for biblical truth if you zoom in on God's one-on-one relationships with the Bible's main characters—or on Jesus' significant relationships when you get to the New Testament. The truths of the Bible are very much, if not entirely, about relationships.

The first thing to notice, in the presentation of the offerings in the first few verses, is that Cain's offering is not condemned; it's just not accepted. There's a difference. If you make an offer on a house and it is not accepted, there are circumstances where you can adjust your offer and try again. The rejection of your offer is not a rejection of you as a person, nor does it cut you off from later, successful offers. And God invites that here. Cain gets upset that his offering is not accepted and God tries to talk him down, “Why are you angry?...if you do well, will you not be accepted?”

And then God warns Cain that his anger and jealousy in not having *his* offering accepted opens the way for sin to enter his life. And it does just that almost immediately after, as Cain murders his brother. But a critical truth in this story is that the cold-blooded murder of Abel, whose only crime is presenting God with an acceptable offering, does not end God's love and care for Cain. There are human consequences for him—he's clearly not going to be welcome or trusted at home anymore and is forced into exile. But in terms of God's care for him, that is as steadfast as ever.

God puts a mark on him—not like the Scarlet Letter to mark him as someone to be hated and shunned; but a mark that ensures his protection. Even way back here, in the oldest of Israel's stories about the nature of their God; God is warning against vengeance and violence, even for a murder. God does not want ground soaked with blood—certainly not with the blood of innocents; but not with the blood of the guilty either. God cares for Cain, and Cain goes on to have children and build cities with God's protection upon him.

That is oceans away from the nature of the gods as described in the myths and stories of the surrounding cultures. You will understand the importance of these earliest biblical narratives more easily if you look for the things that make them distinct from the surrounding nations, not for the things they have in common.

What is distinct in Israel's origin stories is that God's care and provision extend to the sinful as well as to the innocent. That's not an innovation by Jesus. It's right here at the beginning. Jesus simply shows us what it's supposed to look like in a human life.

We have already seen God's care for Adam and Eve, even after they transgressed God's only law and were forced out of the Garden of Eden. Again, they had consequences; the home they knew was no longer a place where they could return. But God makes clothes for them to be able to survive the harder life outside of the Garden; and in this chapter, after they lost their youngest son to murder by their eldest, and Cain's exile left their home empty; God gave them a third son, Seth, at the very end of chapter four.

All that is backdrop for the question that leapt out of this story and into the cultures where the Bible is best known, and where we find our hook into the theme of calling. When God asks where Abel is, Cain's answer is flip and dismissive: "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?" If you look back one chapter, you'll see that bad answers to these kinds of questions from God run in the family.

In chapter three, when Adam and Eve eat of the one and only tree forbidden to them, they hear God walking around in the Garden and hide, correctly assuming that God knows what they just did. Just like with Cain in chapter four, God doesn't come out swinging with accusations, but gives them an initial chance to fess up. Chapter 3:9 says, "God called to Adam and said to him, 'Where are you?'" Adam says he's hiding and makes up excuses for why that is, until God gets the truth out of him; and even then, Adam blames Eve, like she pried open his mouth and shoved the fruit in there against his will.

God's question to Cain is similar. God knows darn well what Cain has done and where Abel is, but God doesn't start with an accusation, giving Cain a chance to fess up; to repent; or whatever. "Where is your brother Abel?" Adam's answer was at least half true—he was hiding, just not for the reasons he gave. Cain, on the other hand is simply dismissive of both God and the question. How am I supposed to know where Abel is, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Of course, it doesn't take a degree in biblical studies to know that the unspoken answer to that question—both for Cain and for us—is a resounding, "Yes. Yes, you are. And yes, we are; and you can draw a straight line from Cain's "Am I my brother's keeper?" to the "Who is my neighbor?" question in Luke 10, where Jesus answers with the parable of the Good Samaritan.

I see this story, along with Cain's question and obvious answer as the second response in the Bible to the implicit question in Genesis 1:28 of what it means that human beings are both made in God's image and given "dominion" over what God has made. Before we've had time to greedily rub our hands together and plan to take all we want for ourselves because, by golly, God gave us "dominion," Genesis 2 pops in and says,

"Woah! Hold up there, buddy! I've given you authority, yes; but you are to exercise that authority as my representatives in the world. I'm not a 'grab it all and do what you want' kind of God, and you're bearing false witness to my nature if you treat my creation that way."

To make that point clear, God puts Adam in the garden in Genesis 2:15 and says, "Your job, human, is to serve and protect this place. Oh, and you can't just take what you want. See that tree over there? Yeah, you can eat from all the others, but you can't eat from *that* one or there will be trouble." Adam has authority, but that dominion is regulated by the values and limits set by the Creator.

That's the foundation of all the other callings God gave, to every person in the Bible and to every person ever born into this world in all times and places since. "Serve and protect the earth." God made it; we tend it: The foundational human calling. But since that first command was given in the context of a garden, people began to think that serving the earth was about agriculture.

Cain's murder of Abel steps up to say, "No...it's not just the soil and plants and creatures that you are to serve and protect. You humans, also, are part of Creation. You must serve and protect each other, in addition to the home that I have given to you and to all living things."

The human vocation; the fundamental calling of every person ever born; is to serve and protect ALL of Creation—including the people—all of them—the innocent and the guilty—and to showcase the image of God through serving and protecting all of them in every place until the end of time. In that way, and in that way only, does God's nature become known and God's name revered throughout the earth. In that way, and in that way only, are we again allowed access to the garden.

The rest of the Bible shows how hard that calling is, as people grab and fight; hoard and steal; kill and humiliate until the image of God given at Creation is buried deep under the rubble of human sin. God stirs; the prophets wail and shout God's warnings about where all of that will inevitably lead.

They are proven right. There are wars, Cains killing Abels the world over, until God decides to show up in the flesh and show us, rather than tell us, what a life of serving and protecting the world God has made looks like.

Like Abel, Jesus' innocence was too much for Cain to bear, and they crucified him.

But the crucifixion was not the last word. The tomb cannot withhold the image of God. Jesus lives; Adam is reborn, again and again, until we learn to crucify our sin rather than each other; until we learn to water the ground with showers of blessing and not with blood.

God did not abandon Cain; and God made clothes to protect Adam and Eve to help them survive the more dangerous world their sin had created; God gave them another son in recognition of the injustice that had left them bereft.

God is at this moment moving throughout the earth asking, "Where is Abel? Why is the blood of your siblings calling out to me from the bottom of the Caribbean Sea, from Gaza, from immigrant neighborhoods, from Ukraine, from El Salvador, from Broadview Detention Center, from tents in streets where people try to eke out a living, from homes for the disabled, from those starving in the midst of plenty. What. Have. You. Done??"

What we can learn from Cain is that, being dismissive of that question will get us nowhere. God knows exactly what we've done. But the hope for us is also in that story, as it was for Cain and his parents. As horrible as our sins are, and continue to be, God is still here; still loving us; still trying to guide us back once again to serve and protect the garden instead of tearing it up, root and stem.

We can in any moment of any day and in any place, choose another way. Every journey starts with one step, however small. And BonnieJean is going to come now to talk about one small step we can take toward fulfilling our calling