

Scripture

The story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4 is so familiar that I hope you will grant me some liberty in telling it to you this morning so that we can, perhaps, experience it anew.

The scripture says that the man - Adam - knew the woman, Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to her firstborn son, naming him Cain. Already we see the storyteller setting us up. This name, Cain, is derived from the Hebrew word *qanah* which means "to get" or "to create." It is a name full of possibility. Next Eve bore a second son and named him Abel. In Hebrew Abel is actually *hevel* - it means nothingness - vapor.

And now that the scene is set, we move to the meat of the story. Abel becomes a shepherd - and Cain a farmer. They both work hard at their tending and tilling. And when it came time to give thanks and to worship, they both brought an offering from their labor. Cain brought fruit from the land that he had worked and Abel brought the first born of his flock.

The scripture says that God had no regard for Cain's offering, but looked favorably on that of Abel. And in that moment, Cain's face fell - he was deeply hurt and become incredibly angry.

The Lord asked Cain, why have you become so angry? If you do right, then you will be accepted. But if you do not, then Sin is crouching at the door - like a wild animal it waits - and its desire is to rule over you. But you may master it.

That verb - *you may* - it is the one from our Call to Worship this morning - *timshel* in Hebrew. (tone of voice: you will clean your room!) It can be translated as you *will* - which is a command - you *will* master it. It can also be translated you *shall* - as in a promise - you *shall* master it. Or as John Steinbeck asserts in his beautiful book, *East of Eden*, the verb can be translated as you *may*. You may master it. Or you may not. There is a choice.

Sin is crouching at the door, God says to Cain - it is ready to pounce. But you will...you shall...you may master it.

Cain went out walking and talking with his brother Abel. And in a moment of red-hot anger and jealousy and hurt, he rose up against him and killed him. Cain - the one full of possibility to create, kills his brother Abel...the one who was like a breath and then gone.

God called out to Cain. With sadness, God called - Where is your brother Abel?

How should I know? Am I my brother's keeper? Cain replied.

What have you done? God says. Your brother's blood cries out from the ground - and now the ground which you have served and loved and tilled will no longer produce for you. It

has received your brother's blood from your hand and will give no more to you. You will be a fugitive and a wanderer - never feeling the same connection to the land, to place, to home.

In anguish, Cain cried out - no - no - my punishment is too great. I cannot bear it. Surely if this is what happens, anyone who finds me will kill me. My life is as good as over.

No, my child, God says. I will put my mark on you.

What is this mark? A mark of protection? A mark of guilt? A sign of grace? Of presence?

God placed God's mark on Cain - so that anyone who approached him knew that if they sought vengeance on Cain - if they killed Cain - their punishment would be worse by seven fold.

And so Cain walked away from the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod - a word that means wandering. Cain lived wandering East of Eden.

Who is your favorite?

I don't know whether it is age or stage or just something Ben and I are doing to our kids - but they are obsessed over favorites right now. Who's your favorite child is a persistent question in our house! When I answer none of you. Or all of you...usually the follow up question is, well then who is your favorite child right in front of you? Or your favorite child with brown eyes? Or your favorite child who is 9?

And it's not just us. They want to know from their grandparents too - Granddaddy - who's your favorite child was practically the first question out of their mouths upon seeing him again for the first time in months. It's Marty too - and after this sermon - any of you may get a question trying to trap you into saying that one Lattimer kid is your favorite.

I actually think this question is embedded deeply within each of us. We may not necessarily phrase it as wanting to be the favorite. But I think we all want to be known and loved - to be valued and cherished.

So I think Walter Brueggemann is onto something when he says:

"[This] narrative is not for moral instruction. [Instead] It enables us to reflect on the enigmatic situation in which we are set." In other words, this story is not about how it is wrong to murder - we all already know that - but if we take time to dig deeper, there is more to be revealed here about who we are, what life as a human is like, and who God is in relation to us.

Preferences

Each of us knows intimately the feeling of rejection. It takes our breath away, brings stinging tears to our eyes, makes our stomachs drop, and the world spin. It can cause us to feel like we don't know where firm ground is to place our feet. It can come in little ways - like not getting chosen for kickball on the play ground or having the family dog always

choose your sibling's bed to sleep in. And rejection comes in large ways as well - like when we are afraid someone we love does not love us back.

Repeated rejection can seep into us - and wreak havoc by causing cycles that can last generations.

Cain experiences deep rejection from God. From one he loves and worships and values. And maybe God has real preferences. Maybe God has favorite children and is unfair. I don't know. But I do know that the EXPERIENCE of Cain - and sometimes our experience as well...is that God has preferences. Cain's EXPERIENCE is that God has rejected him. And it hurts. It is devastating.

That kind of hurt often leads to anger and depression and grief and fear - rightfully so. Those are hard feelings. Big feelings.

And in that place - the scripture says sin is crouching - waiting - wanting to pounce. This image of sin is like a hungry animal - I feel like we should all capitalize the word in our Bibles - this uppercase Sin is a force - powerful and lethal.

But the sin is not the anger or the depression or the fear. Cain's sin is not his feeling hurt or rejected or angry. Cain's sin is aggressive force. Cain sins when his anger erupts into violence.

It is a sin that hovers all around us today.

And we may choose to overcome it. Equally we may choose not to. But we may choose to overcome it.

There is a path other than violence. Modes of being in the world that make space for the hurt and anger that accompany rejection. Ways of seeing one another with grace for the wounds that can cause us to wound others. Space to be made within ourselves and our own hearts to recognize the fire that burns in our hurt.

Hope - in the deepest of conflicts - there is hope for healing because there is choice.

John Steinbeck writes, "There are many millions in their sects and churches who feel the order "do thou" and throw their weight into obedience. And there are millions more who feel predestination in thou shalt, nothing they may do can interfere with what will be. But Thou mayest! ...Think of the glory of the choice!...This is a ladder to climb to the stars, it cuts the feet from under weakness and cowardliness and laziness...Thou mayest."

Rabbi Sasso's Conclusion

In the beautiful book that we heard during the Children's Time, Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso includes a note to adults who are reading this story with children. She reminds us that none of us escape seeing what happens when anger goes awry. Cain and Abel's story

offers us an opportunity, Rabbi Sasso writes, to discuss positive ways of dealing with the common feelings of hurt, anger, jealousy and rejection...And then maybe we can begin to imagine what the world would be like without violence.

She invites adults and children alike to wonder - how do you act when you are angry? Do you ever wish you could act differently?

What might Cain and Abel have said to each other to have made things different?

How might you remember - in the days and weeks and years ahead - that you have a choice...thou mayest.

Maybe we can begin to imagine a world without violence. And maybe as Rabbi Sasso suggests, imagining might be the beginning of making it so. Maybe imagining is the beginning of healing.

Thou mayest...Amen