

Sermon on Gen. 4:1-16

July 25, 2010

¹ Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, "With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man." ² Later she gave birth to his brother Abel.

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. ³ In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. ⁴ But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, ⁵ but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

⁶ Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? ⁷ If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it."

⁸ Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

⁹ Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

¹⁰ The LORD said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. ¹¹ Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. ¹² When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth."

¹³ Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is more than I can bear. ¹⁴ Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me."

¹⁵ But the LORD said to him, "Not so; if anyone kills Cain, he will suffer vengeance seven times over." Then the LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. ¹⁶ So Cain went out from the LORD's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

This is the Word of the Lord.

One of the things I like about living here is the frequent sight and sound of seagulls. It seems that to some of you who are natives, seagulls are more annoyance than blessing, but to me, they represent the nearby ocean, which I enjoy leaving near. When I lived north of Boston, the more seagulls I saw, the closer I was to home, and the closer I was to hearing the waves crash along the shore, and smelling the salt in the air.

Of course I am not the only one who associates seagulls with the shore. The seagull has come to represent freedom and individuality, the power and agility to fly high and dive at breakneck speeds. When seagulls are in flocks, though, they have striking behavior. They often fight with each other, are fiercely competitive, and can be selfish and jealous. If you were to tie a ribbon around the leg of a seagull, the others in his flock will peck and claw him to death because he stands out as different.

The wild goose is a different story. Their V-formation that we've all seen allows them to fly as a unit with speed. The point position is the most strenuous because it has the most wind resistance, so they take turns flying at the point. The weaker and older geese fly in the rear of the formation where flight is the easiest. And their honking may be done to encourage the weaker fliers, and communicate directions to the group as a whole. The goose, and not the seagull, is a fine example of how families can fly high together.

When we've considered the effects of Adam and Eve's first rebellion against God, we saw that breaches were created between God and humanity, among humans themselves, and between humans and creation. We also experience a breach within ourselves, since our faculties and the image of God within us has been distorted. Our physical, spiritual, emotional, and intellectual capacities are all marred by sin. We are just caricatures of who we were created to be, as if we look at ourselves in a fun house mirror. The distortion we all suffer then carries into every part of our lives. Chapter 4 shows us the ripple effect that sin had in the first family.

When you drop a stone into a pond, there is an initial impact and splash. Long after the stone has fallen out of sight, ripples spread across the water and affect everything they touch, in slight ways or significant. This also is how sin works. Cain is the first human being born into sin. Eve rejoices that God has blessed her in overcoming her tremendous birth pains. It must have been so incredible for Adam and Eve to witness this first birth,

ever. But Cain also lives out the legacy of sin that his parents conceived in him. This is the same legacy that Christ works to overcome in us today.

Verse 2 tells us that Abel was a shepherd, and Cain was a farmer. At some point they came to worship the Lord by bringing offerings from their labor. Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil, but Abel brought the fat portions from the firstborn of his flock. The main thing difference we need to note about these offerings is not that one was grain and the other livestock. The primary issue is that Cain brought just “some” grain, while Abel brought the best he had. Fat portions showed that the animals were strong and healthy. The firstborn represents the idea that God gets the first portion of our blessings, what would later be the 10% tithe, and we live on the other 90%. In other words, Abel sought to bring his best to the Lord in obedience, but Cain brought just “whatever” he had lying around. His motive was to worship by just going through the motions, instead of worshipping from sincerity of heart.

Although there are several themes in this story, one of the most important to pick up on is the kind of worship that pleases the Lord. Deut. 15 explains that we are to give to others without grudges, because when we give to others gladly he blesses us for our obedience, and ensures that we ourselves will be provided for. Deut. 16 states that when coming to worship, no one should appear before the LORD empty-handed; each must bring a gift in proportion to the way the LORD our God has blessed us. Ps. 116 explains that when we worship, we should bring a thank offering to the Lord and be sure to fulfill our pledges, so the Lord will be praised and glorified. And the idea of heartfelt worship lies behind Paul’s words in 2 Cor 9: “Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

Cain was not a cheerful giver. He was a careless, haphazard giver who may have come physically to worship, but did not bring his heart with him. Of course God saw this, and asks Cain why he’s upset that God would not be pleased with his offering. After all, God tells him, if you do what’s right, I will accept you and be pleased. God basically says, if you bring me a ratty offering, what do you expect? I’m God! Don’t I deserve your best? You have no right to be angry at me or Abel. You’re the one who’s a fault.

Then God gives Cain a warning whose power extends to us today. Verse 4 reads, “If you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door. It desires to have you, but you must master it.” God gives Cain a warning, to get his act together and be vigilant against sin. If he isn’t careful to resist sin, sin will turn around and master him.

This is what we touched on last week when I mentioned that the conflict between Adam and the serpent is much more than a story of humanity battling a snake. This is a spiritual battle that requires us to put on the armor of God described in Ephesians 6. In that passage, Paul commands us to “be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹²For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁴Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. Be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.”

Unfortunately, many Christians today do not put on their spiritual armor every day, and in that sense they are like Cain. He ignored and rejected God’s advice to be vigilant against sin, and instead, plotted premeditated murder against his chief competitor. Just as seagulls will peck and claw to death the bird with a ribbon on its leg, Cain sought to murder his chief competitor, the one who made him look bad, the one who was the obedient, goody-two shoes and received God’s favor. Hebrews 11 attests to the fact that Abel was a man of true faith. It states that “faith is being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we do not see. ²This is what the ancients were commended for. ³By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what is visible. ⁴By faith, Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain

did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead.”

So rather than taking responsibility for his own failure and repenting, Cain blames Abel, leads him out to the fields where no one could witness or hear the crime, and murders him in cold blood. The word for killing here is used for the most violent and ruthless kind a person can commit. So we see here the first murder in human history, just one generation removed from the first sin. What grief and shame Adam and Eve must have again felt when they learned of Cain’s terrible actions.

Just as with Adam and Eve, God speaks to Cain to give him a chance to confess and repent. While Adam more or less told the truth to the Lord, here Cain tells an outright lie to the God who sees and knows everything. On top of that, he’s also sassy. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Between the lines in Hebrew, this could also be taken as, “Am I supposed to shepherd the shepherd?” Aside from having no remorse, Cain shows a terribly hardened heart that won’t even acknowledge basic care for his brother.

The impact of sin upon the first human family doesn’t just lie in Cain’s failure to worship in a God-pleasing way. The rest of the Bible teaches us that siblings are to have a special care for one another that is unlike any other relationship. This is also why Christians in the New Testament and today are right to call each other brother and sister. Whether in a biological or spiritual family, God creates a bond among siblings that is to be cultivated and cherished. This bond was so strong that the Israelites were commanded by God to care for each other’s wives and children when a sibling died. And in the New Testament, Paul’s instructions for holy living are based upon the assumption that Christians are to treat everyone with love and respect, but especially brothers and sisters in Christ.

While Romans and Corinthians explain for us some of the implications of brethren who do not live in peace with one another, here God issues the first judgment for the first murder. Just as with Adam, God says, “What have you done?” What Cain had done was to ignore God’s warning about the sin that crouches at our doors, which led to his awful crime against his own flesh and blood. While Cain played dumb, God replied that He could hear Abel’s blood crying out from the ground, the same ground that Adam had been created from. Instead of the ground yielding life and crops, it was defaced with

human blood and sin. Cain used his fields as a murder scene, instead of using it to produce crops that please the Lord. So his punishment is to wander the earth as a nomad.

This is what sin does to us. The effects ripple out to impact others, and even when we repent, there really is no way to undo the wrong. Jill used the example of the dandelion, whose seeds are carried by the wind to produce more weeds. Once the seeds are blown, there's no way to retrieve them. Cain and all of his descendants were affected by his sin. Adam and Eve and the rest of their children were impacted. Cain's life as a nomad meant that his relationships with his family were effectively ended. Cain complains to the Lord that the punishment is too harsh, which is yet another example of his hardheartedness. Cain isn't asking for God's mercy when he tells God that his sentence is too much for him to bear. He's blaming God for making the rest of his life so hard. It's God's fault that others may one day seek restitution for his murder of Abel.

While God could have struck Cain dead right then and there, He shows Cain mercy. He will be protected by the Lord just as Adam and Eve were clothed with animal skins, but he will also have to live with what's he's done. The fact of his murdering Abel will travel with him wherever he goes. That burden of memory also could be part of God's discipline for someone who is unrepentant. When verse 16 says that Cain went out from God's presence, we learn that he was expelled from God even further than his parents had been. The land of Nod may have been a certain region, but the word "Nod" means "wandering." Sin leads us to wander: we are led astray from God, from the good in our lives, from the people who love us, from the path of righteousness, and from who we were created to be.

In contrast, the Lord is our Rock, our refuge, our anchor, our home, and the One who leads us on the narrow way. Abel knew that, and brought his best to worship the Lord in sincerity. He reminds us that worship is more than just showing up. The heart of worship is all about the Lord. We come as brothers and sisters to present to him a sacrifice of praise, our thank offerings, our songs and prayers, and our bodies as living sacrifices. May they be holy and pleasing to Him, today and every day. Amen.