

What was the first thing Adam and Eve did after they were kicked out of the Garden? They raised a little Cain. Why didn't Cain give a decent sacrifice to God? Because he wasn't Abel. How do we know Cain took a nap when he left Eden? He went to the land of Nod.

Sorry about that. I couldn't help myself. This morning we're going to talk about our Relational God again, about what his relationship with Cain and Abel has to do with our walk with him and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

GENESIS 4:2b-7

Adam made love to 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 And Abel also brought an offering—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 rule over it."

⁸ Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." 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; anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over." Then the LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him.

As we think about Cain and Abel it's helpful to consider what was going on with Adam and Eve right before they were conceived. The First Couple had been evicted from the Garden for rebelling against God, and they toiled day by day by the sweat of the brow just like we do today. And like us, they longed for redemption. They were done with being **"like God" (Genesis 3:5)**. They were over it.

And because the Lord had said their offspring would crush the head of Satan (Genesis 3:15), they waited with immeasurable anticipation for the fulfillment of his promise. It was only natural that they assumed their first-born son would be the one. They knew they deserved to be punished, but God loved them, and so he'd certainly make everything right in the next generation.

I'm guessing Eve got pregnant their first night in the wilderness.

When she **"gave birth to Cain. She said, 'With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man'" (v.1)**. A more literal translation is, "I have the Man, the Lord!" Indeed, Eve thought Cain was the one who would destroy the serpent. But, alas, this wasn't really possible, was it? For Cain had inherited a broken spirit from her and his dad, as we're about to see shortly. No, corrupt flesh cannot overcome sin. It cannot defeat death. It cannot triumph over the devil.

Adam and Eve's expectations come out in other ways as well. In Hebrew, Abel's name meant "vanity," as in poor boy; he was born second; he is not the chosen one; he's not Cain, our son in whom all our hopes rest.

As the boys grew this favoritism continued. They were trained and given work by their father. Abel was a lowly keeper of sheep, but Cain was a farmer, an agriculturalist, just like his father Adam was in the Garden. It's easy to miss this because of our exalted view of shepherds as a picture of Christ. However, in the Old and New Testaments shepherds were always at the bottom of the vocational totem pole. It was a very humble form of work. Perhaps that's why the Lord chose to use it as a metaphor to describe his ministry.

So Adam and Eve expected nothing from Abel; and he was a humble man. He had nothing except his faith in God's promise to redeem himself and his family. He believed in the Christ even before his name was revealed.

But Cain's story was very different. He got all the attention from Mom and Dad. They watched him all through his childhood and into adulthood just waiting for that breakthrough moment when his powers to defeat the serpent would be revealed. Cain was proud. But the Lord says, **"I will not give my glory to another" (Isaiah 48:11).**

We are better off to show gratitude for our gifts, that we not become proud like Cain and provoke the Lord to anger. St. Peter wrote, **"clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE" (1st Peter 5:5).**

We read, **"In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. ⁴And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, ⁵but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor" (vv.3-5).**

Obviously, the boys were taught to thank God for their success in their work with an offering. The idea of an offering for sin was not a part of the game plan yet. But these offerings which Cain and Abel brought before the Lord were to show their gratitude. Thus, the intention behind the offering was more important than the offering itself. Whether the offering was "fruits of the soil" or "the firstborn" of Abel's flock was not the issue. What mattered was the condition of one's heart.

Abel was filled with thankfulness and hope when he brought his offering to the Lord. He was thankful for his success as a shepherd and for the promise of a savior. Indeed, his act of bringing an offering to the Lord was an act of worship. On the other hand, Cain did not worship the Lord in his pride.

Pride is the antithesis of thankfulness. One cannot say, "Thank you, God, for blessing me" and then lie, and curse, and gossip, and foment dissension at the same time. All of these things spring from a pride-filled heart.

Luther wrote that when Jesus said Abel was "righteous" (Matthew 23:35), he meant that he was the beginning of the church of the pious. On the other hand, Cain, steeped in pride and hypocrisy, was the beginning of the church of the wicked.

This is important; the reformer didn't think this story was about "us and them," as in, "Christians versus the world." Because Cain and Abel were brothers, he saw their relationship as an allegory of what the church had become. Some churches preached the pure Gospel of Jesus, Good News for the nourishment of the soul, the redemption of people from the darkness of sin and death, and the revelation of the Kingdom of Light. But there were other churches which served only men's passions for power and money. That's why I tell people who search for a church not to look for the prettiest one or the most eloquent pastor. But go to the church which speaks to your heart, which heals your soul by making a relationship with Jesus real.

We read that because the Lord did not look upon Cain's offering with favor, **"(He) was very angry, and his face was downcast" (v.5)**. His disappointment was palatable. His whole body revealed his anger. His heart was filled with pride, for he knew that he was "the one." Mom and Dad had been telling him that all his life. So why was God indifferent to his offering? And why did he favor Abel's? This was very disconcerting. Had God changed his mind? Was there a chance that Abel would displace him as the savior?

One of the advantages Christians have over the world, is that we know that everything is going to be okay. We do not fear death. We are not filled with anxiety over our work, our home, our family. For we see how the Lord has adorned the lilies of the field, and that if he so adorns them, he will adorn us even more so! (Matthew 6:28-30)

But the world is filled with heartache and suspicion. There is no promise of a better life, of deliverance from one's enemies, of peace of mind. And the insanity rages all around. That's where Cain lived. He did not have faith in God. He believed in him, but belief is not the same as faith, for **"the demons also believe, and shudder" (James 2:19)**. Cain did not have faith; he did not cling to God's promise to save him from the darkness he held in his heart. And so his offering was empty works.

The Lord said to Cain, **"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 rule over it" (v.7)**.

Cain didn't have faith in God, but God still had faith in him. Isn't this our story too? Everyday we're beaten down by the world and our own wickedness to take hold of the lie that God is distant; that God doesn't care; that God doesn't hear our prayers. But God **"stands at the door and knocks" (Revelation 3:20)**, and knocks, and knocks until he bleeds; he bleeds from his hands and from his feet; he bleeds from his brow on which sits a crown of thorns; and he bleeds blood and water from his side which was pierced.

Blood and water: Blood our Lord shed for our sins; sins he absorbed into his own flesh that you and I would not bear God's punishment for our rebellion against him. Water: Our Lord brought us home, into his mansion in heaven (John 14:2) with the blessed water of baptism, our seal, our guarantee that we need not fear anything for **"neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39)**, that we would live forever with a clear conscience (1st Peter 3:21).

About sin, the Lord said to Cain, **"its desire is for you."** He personified it; as if sin has a mind and will of its own. And indeed, it does. The Lord warned Cain that it laid at the door of his heart; like a wild beast that had fallen asleep, it waited to complete its mission with a simple nudge.

As Luther aptly pointed out, we have free will, the free will to obliterate our relationship with God. We already belong to him; we were created to live in his care. But sin is sweet, and its bitter aftertaste we easily forget.

Thus St. Paul wrote that **"we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— ¹³for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. ¹⁵For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" (Romans 8:12-15)**

If only Cain had recognized his foolishness! If only he had cried out, **"Abba! Father!"** How many times have I looked at past decisions I've made and asked

myself, “Why didn’t I come to the Lord before I did that thing? Why didn’t I use my tongue to call on the Lord instead of uttering a wicked word?”

“Abba! Father!” I think we should begin each day, perhaps every hour of the day, perhaps every conversation with those two words.

The story of Cain and Abel continues, and it only gets worse. Cain killed his brother and buried him in a field. God confronted him, and he denied knowing anything about his brother’s disappearance. **“Am I my brother’s keeper?”** he asked. Jesus said, **“by your own words, I will judge you” (Luke 19:22)**. And Luther said, “the more the wicked excuse themselves, the more they accuse themselves.” The answer to Cain’s question was, “Yes, of course, you are your brother’s keeper!”

This confirms what I said in the beginning, that sinful flesh cannot save itself; Cain couldn’t even find it in his own heart to preserve his brother’s life. Even so, the Lord continued to be Cain’s God and his Lord; despite Cain’s outright rebellion and hatred for him, the Lord preserved his life and gave him descendants.

The riches and the depths of God’s love and mercy are immeasurable.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this week when we feel the nudge of sin, let us quickly come to the Lord to receive help, saying the two most important words we will ever know, **“Abba! Father!”**

This week let us pray for a humble heart, that we might be like Abel, lifting up before the Lord our prayers, our offerings, and our acts of service in faith and love.

And this week let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.