

7th Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

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*Genesis 4:1-16*

*Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, 'I have produced a man with the help of the Lord.' Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. The Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.'*

*Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Let us go out to the field.' And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' He said, 'I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?' And the Lord said, 'What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are 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 said to the Lord, 'My punishment is greater than I can bear! Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me.' Then the Lord said to him, '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. Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.*

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Today's sermon could be the shortest sermon you ever hear. It could go something like this: Cain murdered Abel. Murder is bad. So we shouldn't do it. Amen.

Now, there would be much truth to that sermon. It has certainly been preached before and with good reason. I would hope that we all agree that Cain's actions were reprehensible and that life, whether our own or another human being's, is something to be protected, cherished, and nurtured. But we're going to go a little deeper than that today. We are going to continue the practice that we began last week with our engagement with the creation stories and we are not going to compress these imaginative stories to mere ethical do's and don'ts. We are going to dig a little deeper and look at what was and what could have been. Then perhaps we will be inspired to look at our world and our lives *now* and look at what *could be*.

I would wager that most of us know the story of Cain and Abel pretty well - although, interestingly enough, in the approximately 156 Sundays in the three-year lectionary, this story does not show up once! It is a tough story to say the least. It is the first murder. It is a story of sibling rivalry and the primal tendency of human beings to compete with one another. If we were to be honest with ourselves, we could already say of the first several chapters of the Book of Genesis that we are reminded that some of the darker tendencies of the human heart haven't changed much since God formed man from the dust of the ground and woman from the rib of the man.

The story begins with a simple, innocent act of worship. Cain and his brother Abel come together to give God an offering. Cain, being a tiller of the ground, brings a bounty of his harvest. Abel, being a shepherd, brings a nice fat sheep. Unfortunately for Cain, God appeared to be in the mood for lamb chops that day. God claps his hands together with glee at Abel's offering but doesn't seem to particularly impressed with Cain's fruit.

Many people have exhausted themselves bending over backwards trying to explain why God preferred Abel's offering over Cain's and the frustrating reality is that we just do not know and, perhaps, aren't meant to know. Sometimes life just isn't fair. We sometimes have to admit that God sets the rules of engagement and we don't. That day, God was in the mood for meat. But who knows, the next day, perhaps the tables would have been turned and God's preference would be for some nice, juicy grapes courtesy of Cain. But, as the story goes, Cain doesn't wait for the next round of offerings.

Cain gets angry, so very, very angry. The train whistle blows and his face gets red and steam comes shooting out of his ears. After a while, his anger begins to mix with sorrow. God takes notice and sits down with Cain. God says, (and I am paraphrasing here) "I see that you're upset. But you have a choice. You can do well, try again tomorrow, and you will be accepted. Or, if you're not careful, sin will take hold of you but you do have the capability to master it. The choice is yours."

But, instead of continuing the conversation with God, Cain invites Abel for a walk in the fields and turns his anger toward his own blood and takes Abel's life. The verdict of God is swift but not without mercy. Cain is forced to leave the land and wander because this act of murder has literally rendered the ground beneath his feet infertile. Cain fears for his life and God places a marker on him so that no one would take his life in an act of vengeance.

Now, in my opinion, two aspects of this story are of particular interest to us this day.

First of all is Cain's anger and where he chooses to direct it. Cain is angry and none of us can blame him. Anger is a very human emotion that, in and of itself, is not a bad thing! Anger can be a necessary and, perhaps, even healthy emotion at times. Now, what we do *with* it is where things can get a little dicey. Anger is not a logical thing and we know this because it wasn't "logical" for Cain to be angry with Abel. Abel didn't do a darn thing wrong! Abel was just doing the same thing Cain was doing with the same intention. If Cain should have been angry at anyone, Cain should have directed his anger at God because, after all, it was *God* who decided to play favorites! But, instead of directing his anger at the God who instigated it, Cain finds the nearest scapegoat and Abel catches the blame. Why did Cain not get angry with God? Who knows for sure but perhaps a safe guess was that maybe Cain was afraid to be angry with God.

Which now brings us to our second point which is this: a rather superficial question is "why was Cain angry?" That's easy to answer. Cain was angry because God approved of Abel's offering over his. A deeper and much more fruitful question is this: what was it that Cain was so scared of to cause his anger to boil? You see, anger is almost always a secondary emotion. What I mean by that is this: anger is almost always a byproduct of a deeper emotion and that emotion is this: *fear*. A helpful exercise to do the next time you find yourself angry at something or someone is this - ask yourself the following question: what is it that I'm afraid of that is causing me to have anger?

That is a question that Cain never asked himself and I believe that if he had, we might have before us a very different story. What would have happened if Cain had been a little more honest with God and continued the conversation God initiated with him when God noticed that he was angry?

I've been listening to a lot of my old jazz albums lately and I've been reminded of a difference between them and music albums of different genres. Most rock or pop albums will have about 10 or 12 different songs on them. But if you go back and look at many classic jazz albums - by Miles Davis, John Coltrane, or Dave Brubeck, and the like - you will find that there is often no more than 4 or 5 songs on each album. However, there are nevertheless 10 or so tracks because they would include multiple alternative takes of the same song. The jazz artists would include several versions of the same song, each with the same structure, the same melody, but they would play with it and improvise and make new discoveries with the same story.

I would like for us to do the same thing with today's passage. We are going to do an "alternate take" of the story of Cain and Abel. What if Cain had responded differently? Therefore, I'm going to propose an alternate reading of this text from the Stephen Fearing Revised Standard Version which - for the record - is *not* the word of the Lord but I'm hoping it will invite us to imagine how things might have gone differently.

And now, an alternate reading from Genesis chapter 4...

*Now Adam made love to his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain. A few years later, she had his younger brother Abel. Both children grew up and God gifted them with different passions. Abel got along great with the sheep so he became a shepherd. Cain always had a green thumb so he became a farmer. After a while, Cain and Abel decided to give thanks and bring to the Lord the fruits of their labors. Therefore, Cain brought some tasty fruit that had just been picked from his garden. Likewise, Abel brought the fattest sheep of his flock. When Abel gave the sheep to God, God smiled and laughed with glee! But, when Cain gave the fruit to God, God didn't seem nearly as joyful as he had been with his younger brother's offering.*

*Cain got very angry and his heart burned in his chest. He stomped off to his garden where he wept. God noticed that Cain was upset and went for a stroll in Cain's garden. God said, "you look very angry; why are you so upset?"*

*Cain fumed at said to God, "You know, for an omnipotent, supreme ruler of the universe, you sure are stupid! Do I really have to spell it out for you?! You loved my younger brother's offering but you didn't give mine the time of day! That's why I'm angry; it's not fair! I work just as hard as my brother and I want to know why you preferred his lamb chops to my Granny Smith apples!*

*God replied, "Cain, I never promised to explain to you the reason for my actions. But I did promise to love you always, even when you are sad and angry. So here I am. Let's talk."*

*Cain let out a deep sigh and there was a moment of silence. He grabbed some grapes off of one of the vines and threw them in his mouth but didn't offer any to God. After a while, Cain looked at God with tears in his eyes and said, "God, I'm still so angry and I'm just frustrated and I can't think straight."*

*God said to Cain, "that's quite alright. I created you to have emotions. I expect you to feel them."*

*Cain snapped back, "Well, I expect you to be fair!"*

*God calmly but firmly replied, "It is not my job to live up to your expectations. It is my job to be your loving God and it is your job to be my beloved creation."*

*Cain looked at the ground and shuffled his feet, "God, I just so scared. What if you don't love me anymore?"*

*God smiled softly and said, "Cain, if I didn't love you, would I be sitting here talking to you?"*

*Cain didn't reply immediately. After a second he said, "God, what if I'm just not good enough for you? What if you never accept my offerings? What if I've failed miserably? What if you forever hide your face from me? I'm so scared that I'm alone and that there's nothing I can do to deserve your love."*

*God looked gently at Cain and said, "Cain, I have loved you and I still love you and I will always love you. That much I can promise. What I can't promise is that that's always going to look the same each day. I am a God that is on the move and I'm wild and free. Now, next week there will be another offering and, who knows, I might prefer your offering over Abel's and I'll be having this same conversation with your brother in his field. Hang in there, Cain, I love you and you're still my child."*

*God reached out and helped Cain to his feet. Cain went back to work in his garden, still a little upset but not without a little hope.*

Friends, these first few chapters of the Bible remind us that God is with us for the long run. Eating a forbidden fruit or even taking another person's life cannot render God's promise to us as null and void. Now, that's not to say that our actions don't have consequences! But...God loves us as our *whole* selves! God loves the happy us. God loves the sad us. God loves the angry us. Cain forgot that. Cain's fear led to anger and Cain's anger led to murder. But this story reminds us of what could have happened if Cain had expressed a healthy dose of anger at God rather than his innocent brother.

Friends, the story of Cain and Abel is a universal story that has been played out countless times over the course of history. There have been many "alternate takes" and they don't always have to have the same ending. This story is our story and like God did with Cain, God presents us possibilities for creation. This story reminds us that the best strategy to assure that we are productive practitioners of God's creation is to have the courage to speak to the God who is intimately present with us, regardless of whether the menu of the day calls for lamb chops or granny smith apples.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.