

## **“BROTHER’S KEEPER”**

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***“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.” (Genesis 4: 8)***

Two weeks ago we heard the first story of creation. Last week we heard the second creation story and the story of Adam and Eve and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

These stories had mostly to do with the relationship between human beings and God – what scholars refer to as the vertical relationship.

Now, with the story of Cain and Abel we take up the subject of horizontal relationships.

The issue at hand is not just, “How shall we relate to God and God to us?” Once we are outside the garden, once we find ourselves living east of Eden, the relationships become more complicated and troublesome. The issue now isn’t just, “How shall we relate to God?” It is also, “How shall we relate to our brother (and sister)?”

So, let us examine the story...

### **BROTHERS IN CONFLICT**

Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden as a consequence of their free choice. They wanted to know the difference between good and evil; they wanted to be responsible for themselves and now they have that which they desired. They can go where they want to go and do what they want to do, but now, for the first time, they must think about their own survival.

You will recall that when God pronounced the consequences that go along with the freedom of choice, one of those consequences was sexual desire – “childbearing will be painful, yet you will desire your husband and he will desire you.” And, sure enough, it isn’t long before children start showing up.

First is Cain, whose name means, “produce” or “create.” Then, shortly thereafter (some traditions hold, in fact, that they were twins) comes Abel, whose name means “vapor” or “Insubstantial.” Clearly, their parents tended to favor the first born and we hear, in this, hints of stories yet to come about brothers in conflict – Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers.

The storyteller has now introduced a new dimension to the human story – horizontal conflict, brother vs. brother.

*Let’s pause for a moment to consider this new dimension.*

*The story teller is not concerned with filial relationships, as might seem the case. This story is not just a story about two guys that happened to be brothers and lived a long time ago. These are the primordial humans, beings of mythic proportions and the things they say and do will set the stage for all that follows. This is a story not so much about Cain and Abel as it about the human race.*

*Human beings are siblings, children of the same father, brothers and sisters, and they are in a state of conflict, almost from the moment of their birth. This paradox is a big part of what it means to be human: We are connected to each other, bonded by blood and destiny, and, yet, we are, almost by nature, in conflict with each other.*

*Which side of the paradox will win out? Will our commonality, the things which bind us together rule and determine our behavior toward each other? Or will we all surrender to the conflict and give in to our innate animosity and estrangement? And how, the story teller asks, will this paradoxical and conflicted relationship we have with each other affect the relationship we have with God?*

*Back to the story...*

Upon being set free from Eden it has become apparent that there are two types of work that people must engage in if they are going to survive. One is the tending of the earth and the other is the tending of livestock. So Cain and Abel divide up the work. Cain tends the earth and Abel tends livestock. Fair enough. An equal division of labor. Don’t read more into it than that. This is not a story about how the cowboys and the farmers should be friends.

So, one day they go to worship and they both bring offerings to God. Cain brings some of the produce from his garden and Abel brings the fatty portion of a lamb which he has slaughtered from his flock.

Yahweh accepts Abel’s offering but rejects Cains. We are not told why.

*Freeze frame...*

*We probably need to talk for a moment about this part of the story because we are dying to know why. Why didn’t God like Cain’s offering? What was wrong with it? Or was it Cain that God didn’t like? Is it possible that nothing Cain brought would have been good enough?*

*Scholars have tried, for centuries, to squeeze blood out of this turnip. There must be a reason. God, they say, can’t be capricious or petty. Cain must have done something to deserve this dismissal of his offering. Or maybe there was something he didn’t do. Maybe he left something out.*

*Maybe, as some have said, he didn't bring the best of his garden, only the excess that he didn't need. Or maybe he didn't act in faith. Maybe the fault was in his heart; he was trying to manipulate God in some way.*

*John Calvin and John Wesley both tried heroically to rescue God from the charge of unfairness by accusing Cain of some moral lapse that made his offering unacceptable. But, as Walter Brueggeman says, when they do this they presume to "know more than the text."*

*The fact is, we don't know why God rejects Cain's offering and, apparently, neither does the story teller. It is enough that God does reject it. Life is tough. It is often hard and unfair. Good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people. The rich get richer while the poor get poorer. The good die young. It rains on the just and the unjust. Pick your cliché. There simply is no explaining it in any way that is even remotely satisfying. It's just the way it is.*

*The question before us is not - Why is life this way? The question before us is -- How are we going to respond to life as it is?*

The storyteller tells us that Cain reacted with bitterness, anger and resentment: "So Cain was very angry and his countenance fell."

God sees Cain's frown and tells him to lighten up. "Why are you so mad? Why are you pouting?" And then he tells him, in essence, to try again. "So, you missed the mark this time. No big deal. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose. That's the way life is. If you win, great. You get what you wanted."

And then he gives Cain a warning: "But if you lose, be careful. When you are disappointed and depressed you are vulnerable. Sin is like a robber, waiting in the shadows for a time just like that. It will grab you and overwhelm you with anger and bitterness and resentment and lead you to do things – bad things – that you can't undo.

*See, it isn't a matter of figuring out why life isn't always fair. It's a matter of living successfully, faithfully, authentically in the midst of the unfairness. It's a matter of mastering our tendencies toward anger and bitterness. It's a matter of conquering the resentment that tries to overwhelm us when someone else, someone not as deserving as we are gets more or better than we get.*

*Unfortunately, even with the warning, Cain is not able to overcome his anger, his bitterness, his resentment.*

### **MURDER MOST FOUL**

The murder is accomplished in two sentences: "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."

It is as simple as it is ugly.

Directly, God asks Cain, "Where is your brother, Abel?" Cain's answer shows that he is, even now, even after committing murder, still not over his bitterness and resentment. He is impertinent, perhaps even impudent or insolent: "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?" Remember, Abel was a keeper of livestock. Cain's use of the word "keeper" is a little jab at him even though he's dead. "I don't know. I'm not the animal keeper; he is." Today we might say, "I don't know where he is. It's not my day to watch him."

But like any good prosecutor, God never asks a question that he doesn't already know the answer to. "Oh, Cain. What have you done?"

*Cain bears no remorse. Even after killing the object of his resentment he is still resentful. He is still bitter and angry. Do you see the irony, here? Because of the rejection of his offering he feels estranged, separated from God and it makes him angry. His anger makes him feel estranged from his brother, Abel. All this estrangement makes him feel so bad that he strikes out at what he sees as the cause of it all, his brother, and kills him, making the estrangement even greater. And because the estrangement is greater, so is the anger and bitterness.*

*He may not have caused his own misery but he aggravates and perpetuates it.*

In verse eleven we learn that fratricide has consequences. Cain receives the estrangement he has sought. Because Abel's blood was spilled upon the ground and soaked into the earth, Cain, who spilled that blood will be estranged from the earth.

He, a farmer, will farm no longer. The earth will not yield to his plow. He will be forced to be a nomad who wanders from place to place, foraging and bartering for his sustenance. He will be cut off from the community, an outsider, belonging nowhere and to no one.

Cain cries out that this is a death sentence. "My punishment is greater than I can bear.. and anyone who meets me may kill me."

*This was simply a description of how it was back then. You were defined not by your individual accomplishments and achievements but by your connections to other people – the family, the tribe, the nation. It was in the group that you found your meaning, your purpose and your safety net.*

*To be cut off from the group meant that every other group would see you as a threat. Seeing you as a possible threat, they would shoot first and ask questions later.*

Yahweh hears Cain's lament and shows him mercy. He commutes what was surely a sentence of capital punishment. He mitigates the consequences of Cain's heinous act.

Cain will not be killed. God marks him in some way that protects him. But such a mark, whatever it is, is a mixed blessing. It protects Cain but it also sets him apart. While it keeps people from harming him, it will also keep people from including him.

He will be alone, a wanderer and a nomad, his whole life. He leaves Eden and goes east to the land of Nod where, tradition has it, he marries and, because he can no longer farm for a living, he becomes a builder of cities.

### THE HISTORY OF THE STORY

The story of Cain and Abel is one of the most common and enigmatic in the Hebrew Bible. The fact is, after nearly three thousand years of reading and re-reading it, no one is quite sure what the point of it is.

It is part Jewish, Christian and Moslem scriptures. It appears in the Quran almost exactly as it appears in the Bible.

It contains both the first death and the first murder in the Bible. In fact, the first death in the Bible is a murder.

It introduces the notion that creation extended beyond Eden. Apparently God was also doing a creation thing in the next county – Nod -- because that's where the future Mrs. Cain is living when Cain arrived there.

It has been used and abused by racists and slave holders to justify their racism. The "Mark of Cain," has been defined as a punishment, a sign of guilt and shame, and proof of inferiority and it has been identified with everything from dark skin to oriental facial characteristics.

Jewish scholar Rabbi Shalom Carmy suggests that the only point of the story is that life is unfair and that sometimes things happen for the benefit of posterity and future generations that are inexplicable to us. And our role is to simply accept them stoically and without complain – unlike Cain.

If find this explanation to be wholly unsatisfactory, even somewhat cynical.

The web site awitness.org offers that this story is actually a parable about the inevitability of persecution for those who worship the true God and worship him correctly. They hold that Cain and Abel are archetypes, symbols of different religions. Abel represents those who worship the Lord, God, and worship him correctly, authentically, and righteously.

Cain, on the other hand, represents those whose worship of God is incorrect, inauthentic or unrighteous – tainted by selfish desires or other hidden agendas.

Inevitably, the inauthentic worship and offerings will be rejected by God and this will cause those inauthentic worshippers to rise up against the pious, authentic ones. This shows, they explain, how good, pious, righteous, authentically religious and spiritual people are always persecuted by those who are not.

God then mitigates the punishment of the persecutors and allows the persecution to continue because it makes the worship of those who are persecuted even more authentic, righteous and, thus, valuable.

This explanation of the story has much to commend it at the mythic and parabolic level and I find myself attracted to it but I'm not sure it mines the complete depth of meaning that is available in the story itself. I think there are yet more riches to be found, here.

### BROTHER'S KEEPER

To reach this greater depth of meaning we return to Professor Walter Brueggemann, excellent commentary on Genesis (*Interpretation Commentary, John Knox Press, 1982*).

What is the most important single word in the whole story? What is the one word without which the meaning of the story would be completely different?

Brueggemann offers that that one word is "brother." The story would not be the same if these two men were merely companions or friends or even cousins. It is the word, brother, that gives this story its gravitas, its weight, its power and, ultimately, its meaning.

Cain did not kill another man, a stranger or a companion or even a kinsman; he killed his brother.

This is a pre-decalogue story. There is no law that says, "Thou shalt not kill." And, yet, we reel at the gravity of this killing. Even without a law we know, and Cain should know, that fratricide is wrong. It defies nature and violates simple decency.

And, yet, this is not simply a story about fratricide. It is about relationships, vertical and horizontal, our relationship with God and our relationship with our brother (sister) and how they interact. To separate them is unnatural; it violates the created order. In fact, they cannot be separated except by sin, the great separator and divider.

And how is sin manifest in this story? What is the face of sin? How is it dressed and in what guise does it appear? Why as anger, bitterness and resentment.

There is simply no way we can be in authentic relationship with God and our brother/sister if we allow anger, bitterness and resentment to enter into our hearts and minds. They are destroyers. They capture us, rule over us, and cause us to do murder. Held in their grasp, we become killers.

We kill our relationships with those to whom we are bound by blood and destiny. We turn our backs on our brothers and sisters. We divide ourselves by race or accent or ancestry. We rank ourselves over and under each other according to wealth or geographical location or politics or creed.

And, eventually, not satisfied with these temporary types of estrangement, we kill not just the relationships but the people as well. We become Cain, striking out at what we think is the source and cause of our estrangement when, in fact, the source is our own anger, bitterness and resentment - our own jealousy.

But our relationships with each other are not the only casualties of this demonic possession.

We also kill our relationship with God – or at least our part of that relationship. We turn our backs on our maker. We claim autonomy as our own. We seek solace in solitude.

We separate ourselves from the source and ground of our being and give ourselves over to our utter estrangement. Like Cain, we become wanderers of the earth, marked by hopelessness and despair.

The story of Cain and Abel is a cautionary tale for the People of God.

It warns us about the dangers of anger, bitterness and resentment. It speaks plainly of the consequences of estrangement and separation which inevitably follow and morph into conflict and violence when we turn ourselves over to these human emotions and allow them to rule in our lives.

It explores the question: How shall we live in the paradox of conflict and connection that is life with other people, with our sisters and brothers and a God whose will is often inscrutable and mysterious.

And it answers the question which echoes in this story and through our lives: Am I my brother's keeper?

The answer, if we have not yet figured it out, is: "Yes."

**AMEN**