

Cain & Abel

Back to School: Part 6 “Cain & Abel”

Rev. Cameron D St. Michael – September 17, 2023

16th Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: Genesis 4

Reflection: Psalm 112

Greeting: Scripture helps you to be wise in seeking salvation. All scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching. Scripture equips each person to do what is good. Let us learn and continue to grow in Christ our Lord!

Prayer: God, we believe that you provide us with all that we need in this life. You have not set us adrift in a sea of ignorance but have set us on the path of wisdom. Help us that we may grow in your love and knowledge. Let us never stop learning about your mercy and grace. Give to us a spirit that is eager to always know more so that we may do more for your sake. Help us to walk in your ways and that we may always seek your truth. And give to us a heart that we may love you more day by day as we share your love with the world. And may you guide us and lead us through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Reflection: Psalm 112

Praise the LORD! Happy are those who fear the LORD, who greatly delight in his commandments. Their descendants will be mighty in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed. Wealth and riches are in their houses, and their righteousness endures forever. They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright; they are gracious, merciful, and righteous. It is well with those who deal generously and lend, who conduct their affairs with justice. For the righteous will never be moved; they will be remembered forever. They are not afraid of evil tidings; their hearts are firm, secure in the LORD. Their hearts are steady; they will not be afraid; in the end they will look in triumph on their foes. They have distributed freely; they have given to the poor; their righteousness endures forever; their horn is exalted in honor. The wicked see it and are angry; they gnash their teeth and melt away; the desire of the wicked comes to nothing. (Psalm 112 NRSV)*

We read the words of Psalm 112 and we hear of holding fast to God. That we do well when we hold ourselves secure in the Lord. What are some ways that you hold fast to God’s love and faithfulness in your daily life? What are some ways that you share God’s mercy and grace with the people around you? With friends? With strangers? What can you do this week to live out the love of Christ in your life? How can you share Christ with others? How can we join together to always learn more in God’s love and care?

Prayer: Lord, we turn to you in all things knowing that you are always there for us. Help us to continue to grow in knowledge and truth by your Holy Spirit. Help us to grow in mercy and grace through our risen Savior. As we come before you this day we bring to you the concerns and joys that we have shared aloud together. We bring before you the unspoken worries and celebrations of our hearts. May you guide us and lead us so that we know your blessing in our joy and our sorrow. We pray you will help us to grow in love through our laughter and our tears. May your steadfast love and faithfulness be our constant guide and companion. And may we always continue to grow in faith and in love, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Our scripture reading for today comes from the New Revised Standard Version Bible. Our reading for today comes from Genesis 4, the story of Cain & Abel.

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. Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch, and he built a city and named it Enoch after his son Enoch. To Enoch was born Irad, and Irad was the father of Mehujael, and Mehujael the father of Methushael, and Methushael the father of Lamech. Lamech took two wives; the name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah. Adah bore Jabal; he was the ancestor of those who live in tents and have livestock. His brother's name was Jubal; he was the ancestor of all those who play the lyre and pipe. Zillah bore Tubal-cain, who made all kinds of bronze and iron tools. The sister of Tubal-cain was Naamah. Lamech said to his wives: "Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say: I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If

Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold.” Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth, for she said, “God has appointed for me another child instead of Abel, because Cain killed him.” To Seth also a son was born, and he named him Enosh. At that time people began to invoke the name of the LORD. (Genesis 4 NRSV)*

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

We finish out our “Back to School” series today with one of the earliest narratives in the Bible. Today we look at the story of Cain and Abel. In the children’s version of this story, we often get Cain killing Abel and then Cain is gone. A case of sibling rivalry and the first murder before we quickly move on to Noah. One of the things that we get as adults is a lot of unanswered questions. I mention this because there have been countless efforts to fill in the missing sections. The truth is that the original authors didn’t think there was a reason to include them. As we step into our reading today, the first thing we might notice is a big chunk of missing time. We go directly from birth into them making an offering to the Lord. And I think this is because the important part of this narrative is simply what transpires between Cain and Abel. However, we do get another unanswered question. We are told that God had regard for Abel and his offering but did not have it for Cain and his offering. Why? We don’t know. There have been a lot of explanations over the years for why this is, but none of them are spelled out in the text of Genesis. And this raises an interesting issue. Do we actually need to fill in the gaps? The thing is, we don’t like missing information. We like to add in the missing details, to the point that we can confuse ourselves about what is actually in the Bible. And we do this more often than we would think. We add an innkeeper and animals into the nativity story. We add people mocking Noah into the flood story. We add childhood and explanations of their offerings into Cain and Abel. All because we don’t like missing info. But what if we simply let the narrative speak for itself? I think the first lesson we have to learn here is that sometimes we have to accept that the story we have is the story we need. Because this allows us to focus on the actual details of the story.

When we look at the narrative, Cain is dejected. Cain is angry. The Lord steps in and asks Cain what the problem is. Cain is told not to let anger take over, because if he does well, he will be accepted. And we get the first mention of sin in the Bible. That if Cain cannot do well, sin is the only thing waiting for him. But Cain’s resentment continues to build. His anger festers. So, Cain invites Abel out to the field. While there, Cain kills Abel. Just like that, Cain has committed the first murder. We are presented once again with questions that don’t have an answer. Did they argue? What did Cain use to kill Abel? The interesting part is that many of us will have answers to these questions. The children’s version often includes a stone being used as the weapon after an argument. But we get neither of those things here. Because the entire focus is that this murder has happened. It doesn’t really matter how or why, because the murder cannot be justified. Cain couldn’t let go of his anger and resentment and he killed his brother because of it. There is symbolism here though. Because we see a broken relationship between people. And we can see all of humanity caught up in this one act of violence. Anger

has broken the familial bond that should be between all of humanity. We then get a question from God. God asks Cain where Abel is. Cain famously asks if he is his brother's keeper. The understood answer to this question is that, yes, Cain is his brother's keeper. He is responsible for caring for his brother. He is responsible for his own actions. He is responsible for not loving his fellow man.

Something we get from this that we might not have seen before is mercy. So often we focus on this part of the story, where Cain kills Abel and is then punished. And we sometimes think of the mark he gets as part of his punishment. But it is actually part of God's mercy. When Cain feels that his punishment will be too much, God shows mercy. Cain is afraid that now that he will be driven out of the presence of God that someone will kill him. Interestingly, this goes against the very idea of a life for a life that we see later in the law. Instead, a life has been taken and a life has been spared. And I find this interesting because it highlights the mercy that God has. Cain is given a mark so that nobody will kill him for what he has done. Cain then leaves and settles in the lands to the east. This isn't a literal place but a name for wandering the land. He takes a wife, and we begin to hear of his descendants. But all of this gives us more questions that we do not have answers to. And I think the issue is that these questions only need answered if we are taking this account literally instead of as a symbolic narrative about the human condition. One question we might have is who it is Cain is worried about. Aside from Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel are the only named people at this time. There's not anyone out there for Cain to worry about yet. But the story presupposes that there are other people. This also comes into play when we ask where Cain's wife came from. We could invent a bunch of explanations if we take this story literally, and we could begin to rewrite the Bible for that purpose. Or we could simply accept that the narrative is teaching us a moral lesson about humanity and let the details be what they are.

This is highlighted more when we hear about the descendants of Cain. They are the descendants of people who live in tents and have livestock. They are the ancestors of those who play musical instruments. They have made all kinds of bronze and iron tools. Figuratively, this explains where those things came from, and even shows that good things came from the line of Cain. That God's mercy protected Cain and that born of that mercy is music, tools, and food. But literally, we run into an issue here. Because this is all leading into the flood narrative. In a literal sense, none of those people can have descendants that matter because they are wiped out in the flood. But I think what is easy to miss is that Genesis is often answering questions about how we got to where we are today, and often speaks using figurative language. And we see that here as well as a lead into the flood. When we get to the end of the genealogy of Cain, we leave Cain and Abel behind for good and move on to Seth, whose line we will follow to Noah. But we get a reminder of the increasing violence of people with Lamech, who is more violent than Cain. And we might draw on numeric symbolism to tell this part of the story. Cain was to be avenged seven times, and seven is a number of completeness. From that, we might say that if anyone attacks Cain, he will be avenged completely. When Lamech says it

will be 77 times for him, he is basically saying that he will be avenged utterly and completely. This could be him signifying that he was completely justified in his killing. But what it tells us is that violence continued to grow, and it does so until we reach the situation we see in the flood narrative.

Seth becomes a replacement for Abel, and eventually leads to the flood which restores humanity back into a familial relationship with each other. Noah becomes our common ancestor and we are called to remember that not only are we family, but we are called to be our brother's keeper after all. We are called to understand that violence is not the answer, but that God's grace and mercy is there for us even in our most broken state. We learn from Cain and Abel that letting anger fester will always lead to sin. We can learn from Cain and Abel that resentment can cause us to lose sight of what is right and good. We learn that God's love outshines our bitterness and frustration. And we learn that sometimes we don't have to know everything if we know what matters. As we end this series, I want to encourage you to revisit the stories you know best and see what God may be teaching you today that you never knew was there. I encourage you to read scripture with eyes ready to read words you might have missed, with a mind ready to learn lessons you may not have noticed, and a heart ready to be filled with unexpected love. I pray we may all experience God's steadfast love and faithfulness when we open our Bible ready to learn. And may we always be ready to discover the love of Christ in new and unexpected places, so that we may encounter our Savior anywhere and everywhere. Amen.

Prayer of Confession and Pardon: God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

Offering: If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

Lord's Prayer

Dismissal with Blessing: May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Current Series – Back to School

Our current series is going to be taking a look at lessons we may have learned in a children's Sunday School or Vacation Bible School. But did we learn everything about the story that we need to know? What more can we learn now as adults? Each week we take on a new lesson as we go back to school!

Next Week: A new series will begin next Sunday.

Prayer List

Rev Angie Lee	Bishop Frank Beard	Our Conference	Our Healthcare Workers
Patti Corder and the Greenup	Ambulance Crew	Eric Veach	Ed & Verna Titus
Henry Catey	Jake Kiser	Cindy Cisney	Tricia Adkins
Don Stewart	Ronnie Winstead	Lauren Stewart	Tom Finley
Laura Carlen	Rosie Chancellor	Chuck Hogan	Brittany Gilbert
Phil Hawickhorst	Ray Carr	Alice Sherwood	Richard Durham
Kathy Hanks	Steve Carlen	Emily Blade	Tim Schnauz
Donna Carlen	Ernie Peters	Jess Shoot	Stanley Kiser
Corine Howard	Don Gilmore	Shirley Jester	Connie Brown
Marsha Overton	Linda Carlen	Michael Nichols	Paul Cox
Taylor Waldorf	Harriet Tucker	Becky McGuinness	Janet Yokum
Donna Farley	Gary & Mary Winterrowd	Leo Smith	Sue & Bob Smyser
Larry Thompson	Evelyn Sue Icenogle	Greg Williams	Martha Roberts
Charlie & Charlotte Baxter	Paul Schulte	Lavon Figgins	Kara Newton

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