

Text: Genesis 4

Title: “Grace Outside the Garden: Contending for Our Souls”

(Seventh in a series of sermons on Genesis 1-11: “The Story That Makes Sense of Our Stories.”)

“The Story That Makes Sense of Our Stories.”

That is what I have been calling our current series of sermons in the opening chapters of the Bible. In Genesis 1-11 we have “The Story That Makes Sense of Our Stories.”

Like the previous chapter of the story...Genesis 3, ...the chapter before us today... Genesis 4... is also a sad story. More than sad. Genesis 4 is a dark story. The avalanche of sin is speeding up, rushing into ever deeper darkness. The avalanche is heading into death. Literally so. The first child born to the first humans murders his brother.

But as is the case with Genesis 3, so it is with Genesis 4. As we saw last Sunday, although a very sad story, Genesis 3 is full of grace. Although a sad, dark story, Genesis 4 is also full of grace. It is full of light.

Genesis 3 – grace in the garden. Genesis 4 – grace outside the garden. Over Genesis 3 we can speak the New Testament claim: “Where sin increased, grace super-abounded.” (Romans 5:20). Over Genesis 4 we can speak the New Testament claim: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it.” (John 1:5).

Notice that the story is bracketed by miracles. The story begins and ends with a miracle. The sad, dark chapter begins and ends with the conception and birth of a child. Genesis 4:1 – “Adam had relations with his wife, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain.” Genesis 4:25 – “Adam had relations with his wife again, and she gave birth to a son and named him Seth.” In a world falling apart, in a world coming under the power of death, God graces the first human couple with children. As any couple who have struggled with infertility knows, conception and birth are always a miracle. Outside the garden God is extending amazing grace!

And as we will see what is said at the birth of each child opens up the meaning of Genesis 4. Of Cain, Eve says, “With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man.” I have brought forth. I. A man. Of Seth, Eve says, “God has granted me another child [literally “seed”] in place of Abel, since Cain killed him.” God has granted me. God. A seed.

The sad and dark story of Genesis 4 is full of grace and light. As are all sad, dark stories in which the God of grace and light chooses to intervene.

Where should we focus today? There is so much in Genesis 4 that helps us make sense of our own stories. Where should we focus?

We could focus on the totally unexpected grace given to Cain the murderer. After God confronts the first person born to human parents for murdering the second person born to human parents; and after spelling out the judgment – “cursed are you from the ground”; Cain cries out (verse 13) “My punishment is too great to bear.” Too great? Too great to bear? No punishment is too great for what you did! Cain, you took a life. You lured an innocent man out into the field and you killed him. Too great to bear? Banished from the ground that sustains human life? You took life. Now you are reaping the consequences. You are cut off from what sustains life. Too great to bear?

But what is God’s response? Totally unexpected! Verse 15, “So the Lord said to him, ‘Therefore whoever kills Cain, vengeance will be taken on him sevenfold.’ And the Lord appointed a sign for Cain, lest anyone finding him should slay him.” God protects the killer

from those who would want to kill him! Yes, Cain has to leave the ground...and carve out an existence “east of Eden” (3:16) ... in the desert...”the land of Nod”. Nod means “wandering”. But he gets grace! Unexpected, unmerited, scandalous grace! God protects the murderer from other murderers. We are not told what “the sign for Cain” is. A protective tattoo (Bruce Walker) that says: “Hands off or you answer to God”? We are not told. All we know is that somehow God Himself will protect Cain the killer from other Cains who want to kill him. Incomprehensively, God bestows grace on Cain!

The tragedy of the story is the Cain’s family will forget about this scandalous grace. By the seventh generation, revenge will be the name of the game. Lamech, Cain’s great, great, great, great, great grandson will boast in killing other human beings. Verses 23-24, Lamech says to his two wives, “Adah and Zillah, listen to my voice. You wives of Lamech, Give heed to my speech, for I have killed a man for wounding me; and a boy for striking me; If Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-seven fold.” A boy merely wounds Lamech and Lamech kills him. Lamech is not even satisfied with eye for eye, tooth for tooth. He wants life for eye, life for tooth. And even that was not enough. Lamech wants 77 fold compensation.

Where in the rest of the story, in the larger Biblical story, do we hear those numbers again...7, 70? When Jesus comes to stop the avalanche. The disciple Peter will ask, “How often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” (Matthew 19:21). Peter thinks he is being magnanimous! Jesus replies, “I do not say to you up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven” (19:22).

Or, we could focus on what Genesis 4 reveals about the city, about human cities. Cain... driven from the ground, and “from the face of God” as he puts it in verse 14 – although that is not true... he will never escape the face of God... he will only think that God does not see him. Cain... driven from the ground and driven from the face of God...builds a city. And names it after his first born, Enoch. He builds a city for protection. And to sustain human life outside the Garden. Cain moves out of the posture of creature before the Creator...and builds a city. Cain has left the true center of life...the Living God...puts himself at the center...and builds a city. The first human city is built without any orientation toward the Creator...to live in total independence from the Creator.

And is that not the genesis of most human cities? Built without any reference to God to live independently of God. New York City was founded by people escaping religious influence. There were no churches or synagogues in New York for the first 15 years of its existence! Following the lead of the first city: designed for life without God.

Yet there is grace! In Genesis 4, there is grace for the city. God enables the “god-less” humans to make their city work! As David Atkinson notes: “Civilization begins to grow outside the Garden. Even in the land of restlessness, there is culture, there is art. Surprisingly, it is through Cain the homeless, the fugitive, the prodigal, that God’s commission to his people to work and to subdue creation begins to be established.” (The Message of Genesis 1-11, 113). The text speaks of those as “play the lyre and pipe: (4:21). The text speaks of those who forge “all implements of bronze and iron” (4:22). This is grace! That any city works is a sign of grace! Even when the city does not want God, God still gives grace to make it work. God gives creative genius to fallen humanity!

The sad fact however is, as Derek Kidner observes, “...the family of Lamech could handle its environment but not itself” (Genesis, 78). We will pick up the theme of “God and the city” when we get to Genesis 11 and the story of the Tower of Babel. And we will see how the story points to another grace: God is building a city...one that will out-dazzle all the cities of the

world!”

The most significant way Genesis 4 helps us make sense of our stories is in the way God relates to Cain. In the opening scene of the story, we find God contending for Cain’s soul...as he does for our souls. It is on this grace that I invite you focus with me.

The two brothers bring their offerings to God. The text says in verse 4 “The Lord has regard for Abel and his offering; but for Cain and his offering, He had no regard.” And the text says (verse 5) “So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell.”

Why angry? We can understand why God’s regard for Abel and his offering and not Cain and his would make Cain sad. And we can understand why God’s regard for Abel and his offering would make Cain jealous. But angry? So much as it effects his body – “his countenance fell”? Why is he so angry?

Well, at whom is he angry? At Abel? Partly. But mostly at God. Cain is angry at God. God’s regard for Abel and his offering and God’s disregard for Cain at his offering made him “very angry” at God. Why?

In order to answer that question, we have to ask another: Why was God pleased with Abel and his offering but not with Cain and his?

Throughout the centuries, the people of God have searched for some basis for God’s different responses to the two brothers. So, for example, Philo, the philosopher from Alexandria, argued that “Abel’s offering was living, Cain’s was life-less.” Josephus, the Jewish historian argued that “Cain brought the fruits of the cultivated ground and of trees, while Abel brought milk and the firstlings of his flocks. This later offering gave greater pleasure to God, who is honored by those things which grow spontaneously in accordance with nature, and not by those things which are forcibly produced by the ingenuity of covetous man.” Biblical scholar F. F. Bruce rightly called that interpretation “far-fetched” (Hebrews, 284). Another school of thought sees the distinction in the fact that Abel’s offering involved the shedding of blood. Although not espousing this view, William Barclay writes “in the Hebrew mind ...the only offering which a person can bring to God is the offering of the most precious thing that life supplies. Now the most precious thing that life supplies is life itself; and to the Hebrews blood always stands for life....If that principle be accepted, then the only true sacrifice to God in those primitive days, was a sacrifice of blood, because blood is life, the most precious thing. Abel’s sacrifice was a sacrifice of a living creature; Cain’s was not; and therefore Abel’s was the more acceptable” (Hebrews, p. 148-149).

But we need to note that nowhere in the story is it suggested that the brothers were presenting sin offerings. Both brothers simply bring offerings suitable for their vocations (Bruce, 283). Cain was a tiller of the ground, so brings what a tiller can offer. Abel was a shepherd, so brings what a shepherd can offer. Cain brings the fruit of the ground. Abel brings the best of his flock.

Then what was the basis of God’s regard for Abel and his offering and disregard for Cain and his?

The text seems to point to something in Cain’s attitude that was not pleasing to the Lord. Note how the author puts it; verse 4 and 5 again: “The Lord had regard for Abel and his offering but not for Cain and his offering.” The emphasis is on the *person* before the gift. The issue is not the gift itself, but the person presenting the gift. There was something about Abel that pleased God and something about Cain that displeased God. What is it?

The writer of the New Testament letter we call “Hebrews” says – Hebrews 11, verse 4 – “by faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice.” By faith. Abel’s offering was not inherently

better than Cain's. But Abel's attitude, orientation, was! Abel offers his gift by faith. Abel offers his gift acknowledging that God is God, God is master, God has first place in all things.

OK. So what was Cain's attitude? Martin Luther (I have to quote him on Reformation Day!) pointed out that "Cain could properly and truthfully take pride in his very high nobility for he was the first to be born of humans" (*Lectures in Genesis*, 256). Luther suggests that it is possible that Eve, Cain's mother, fostered this pride of "first place." When Cain is born, Eve seems to brag. Verse 1 – "I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord." The words can also be translated, "I have gotten a man as the Lord." As the Lord creates, so I have created. As the Lord created Adam, so I have created a man, an Adam."

I. I have gotten. A man. She does not say "child." But a man. An Adam. Like the Adam the Lord has made. It is even possible that Eve's words can be translated, "I have gotten a man, the Lord."

Did Eve then regularly remind her son of his status? "Cain, my son, my man, my Adam, you are the first human being to come from the womb of a woman!" The name Cain likely means "I have gotten" or "gotten one". The name Abel is related to the word that means "no toughness, frailty". It is used – the book of Ecclesiastes: "vanity, vanity, all is vanity". Thus, from day one, Cain thought of himself as first...and is occupying first place.

And, apparently, he came to expect others to think of him as first. Cain even expected God to think of him as first.

Therefore, as Luther suggests, when Cain offers his gift to God, he was "puffed up". Cain expects God to treat him special because of his first-born status. "Of course God will have regard for me...I am Cain, the first." He comes before God not by faith, but by works, appealing to something in himself, to his human status. Abel, however, has no such status. He comes before God realizing he has no distinction to claim. He has nothing by which to obligate God. He comes depending solely on God's mercy and grace. He comes by faith.

You can see then that Cain's problem is the he has a faulty view of himself. Just as Cain assumed he had first place with Adam and Eve, so Cain assumes he has first place with God. And what makes Cain so angry is that God does not operate on Cain's system of values! God does not honor Cain's view of himself! Cain is "first born". So what? It makes no particular difference to God...and we see in the rest of Genesis. Faith is what God responds to. In the moment that God did not take regard for Cain and for his offering, Cain's self-centered world was threatened. Indeed, it was leveled. And he became very angry. God is not playing by Cain's rules.

What makes matters worse for Cain is that God did not accept Cain's view of Abel either! All his life, Cain expected Abel, "second-born", to play by "first-born's" rule. Cain had come to see himself as the center of the world. And, therefore, saw Abel as one of the orbiting planets. Cain looked at Abel as either someone useful for his own well-being or as someone who was an obstacle to his well-being. God's regard for Abel changes the playing field.

The fact is Cain never really saw Abel as a brother. Oh, he calls Abel "brother". But in his heart, Abel was never on the same level; never an equal. For Cain to truly embrace Abel as a brother, Cain has to move out of the center.

In our fallen state, we want to be the center of our worlds... and of everyone else's worlds. And as long as we keep living with that faulty view of ourselves, no one around us is a brother or a sister. They are either means to an end or obstacles in the way. Or worse yet, we do not even notice them.

But God. God does not want Cain to suffer from his faulty view of himself. So in

grace...God appeals to him to do well. Verse 7 – “...if you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up?” “Sin is crouching at your door.” God’s warning is grace. God portrays sin as a violent animal (Sidney Greidanus, 94), ready to pounce on its victim: “Go for it”, says sin; “Be the centre... be number one...you deserve the very best.” Cain’s sin is crouching at the door....”its desire is for you.” “Do well Cain,” says God. Think straight. You are not the centre. You do not have first place. The Creator is the centre. And you and Abel are equals on the circumference.

But Cain would not give up his infantile self-perception. And as a result, “envied God’s pleasure in his brother” (Von Rad, *Genesis*, 101). And became angry with God. God warned him....as He warns us. “Deal with your faulty view of yourself or your faulty view of yourself will consume you.”

God was contending for Cain’s soul. As He contends for our souls. God...in grace...exposes the Cain in us. God helps us see that when we think we are the center, brothers and sisters around us are reduced to objects to be used or discarded or neglected.

And here is what Genesis 4 especially wants us to see: how we view ourselves and others is a symptom of how we view God. Our attitude toward ourselves and others is a symptom of our attitude toward God. Most of the conflict in our world – be it between individuals or nations – is rooted in the Cain-ite bent in us all.

Thus the grace of the question, “where is your brother?” (4:9). In Genesis 3, grace comes through “where are you?” Now it comes through ”where is your brother?” “Where is your sister?”

“Where is your brother?” is God’s call to realize that we are not the center of our worlds. “Me first” is the language of the nursery. “I, me, mine, myself” are the pronouns of Cain stuck in infancy. Jesus comes into our world and calls us into adulthood. “You, Jesus... You are first” is the language of maturity. “You Lord Jesus... You are the center” is the language of the soul set free.

God’s question, “Where is your brother?” is also God’s call to see the person next to us as “from the hand of God” (Helmut Thielicke). Abel came from Eve’s womb. But ultimately he came from God. It was God who made Abel happen. It was God who put Abel in Cain’s life. It was God who gave Abel to Cain as an equal. But because Cain did not see God at the center, he did not see Abel as a gift. God’s question “Where is your brother?” reminds us that people are in our lives because God put them there. We can overlook them. We can hurry past them. We can use them. Or, as Helmut Thielicke expresses it, we can “run straight into the arms of God” (*How the World Began*, 201) who gives them as gifts.

And, God’s question, “Where is your brother?” is God’s call to realize that the Invisible One, the Holy Other, chooses to meet us in the brother or sister. We cannot see God. God’s question opens up the mystery that He came to us in the brother or sister.

That is why God cries out to Cain, “what have you done?” Helmut Thielicke again: “Cain not only laid violent hands upon a human being who was a burden to him and whom he regarded as an intruder; he also violated the property of God Himself” (212). That is why God takes up the cry of Abel’s blood. And that is why God protects Cain from further violence. To disregard the brother or sister – even the “nobody” brother or sister – is to disregard the God who created them, the God in whom they “live and move and have their being.”

Is this not what Jesus tells us in His parable of the sheep and the goats?

“But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. And all the nations will be gathered before Him; and

He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right and the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in, naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.' Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? And when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' And the King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.'"
(Matthew 25:31-40)

Jesus identifies with all the Abels of the world, all the "nothings." And he is telling us what he wanted Cain to understand: we meet Him in the Abels, "the powerless", in the "nobodies."

Genesis 4: If we see ourselves as Cain did, as having the right to first place; we will not see. We will not see Jesus in those He calls "brothers and sisters".

In his famous sermon entitled "The Weight of Glory", C.S. Lewis articulated this mystery. "Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself", he says, "Your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses. If he (or she) is your Christian neighbor, he (or she) is holy in almost the same way, for in him (or her) also Christ be the glorifier and the glorified, Glory Himself is truly hidden."

I think you can see that God's question "Where is your brother?" is another way for God to ask, "Where I am? Where do you think I, God, am? What you do with your brother or sister, you do with Me."

Sadly, Cain did not overcome the sin crouching at the door. He could not give up his infantile view of himself. And built a city around his infantile view of himself. And it all culminated in Lamech's infantile celebration of revenge in the city.

But God.

God does a new work of grace outside the Garden. In Eve's body; she conceives again. And in Eve's soul, her speech changes. When Cain was born the speech was: "I...I have gotten a man...Like the Lord...I have gotten an Adam." But when Seth was born, the speech was: "God...God has appointed me another seed. A seed." Light broke into the darkness. The mother of all living, regains perspective and throws herself on the promise God made in the Garden; that one day "a seed of the woman" would come and crush the serpent. Clearly...and sadly...Cain is not that seed. But God did not give up. He starts over. Seth is born. The promise keeps going.

And miracle of miracles. Verse 26 "Then humans began to call on the name of the Lord." In the city! Outside the garden. In the heart of the city! "Humans began to call on the name of the Lord."

We will pick it up there next Sunday.