

April 6, 2008
Houghton Lake UMC

“Lessons from Cain and Abel”

Genesis 4:1-16

This account of Cain and Abel is a crucial story we all must know well. There are so many lessons we can learn from this sad, sad story that it must be understood deeply by every Christian disciple. It is crucial because we learn so many fundamental things about God and we learn so many things about people -- and perhaps ourselves -- from the very tragic account of Cain and Abel. The subjects we can reflect upon range from God's role in life to anger, jealousy and murder. We can learn many things about sin, unrepentance, accountability, misplaced aggression and life-long brokenness. So, first let's look at the people involved and the situation....

The principle people of the chapter are Cain and Abel, the first two sons of Adam and Eve. But, in the background we also learn of Cain's wife and the brokenness of Cain's children and descendants.

We can also make these observations:

1. We will observe that following their expulsion from the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve began to have children. Cain and Abel were the boys that were born to Eve, so these are the children remembered through the oral tradition handed down to Moses. However, unrecorded births also happened.
2. We will make the observation that daughters must have been born to Eve because Cain had a wife, who would have been his sister. The girls born to Adam and Eve were not passed down through the oral record. This is probably due to the established way the Hebrews tracked family ties through the male heirs only. When Moses, the author of Genesis, recorded the oral tradition of the Jewish people in Egypt, the knowledge of the women was already lost. It can also be argued that other children born to Adam and Eve were excluded because they did not play a specific role in salvation history.
3. We will also observe that Cain and Abel knew God in the same way that Adam and Eve knew God, because God interacted with Cain personally, face to face, in a conversation style... in other words God did not abandon the family after they left the garden of Eden.
4. Cain and Abel took direction from God and sacrificed offerings to God. This is the first time that sacrifice is mentioned in the Bible.

5. They had an idea of God's expectation and awaited God's approval. Both boys wanted God to accept their offering.
6. God was the judge of their sacrifice; God determined approval.
7. God judged Abel's sacrifice as acceptable, but rejected Cain's sacrifice
8. Cain's reaction to God's judgment was anger. His countenance fell. Cain would prove unteachable throughout the entire situation.
9. Cain's anger turned to jealousy, which turned to rage and then to murder.
10. Cain's struggle and anger towards God was then transferred onto Abel through jealousy, because Abel's sacrifice was accepted.
11. Cain did not keep his anger with God between God and him, but he turned his anger toward his brother in what we call misplaced aggression.
12. Another very powerful observation: Abel, though he died, was totally innocent. He becomes the world's first innocent victim.
13. Cain's reaction to God's second judgment was to display even more anger. Cain did not repent, but complained that the punishment was too harsh.
14. The chapter then spends time following Cain's children and grandchildren...and what we observe is more anger, hate, murder and brokenness. The sin of the father was visited unto the children throughout the generations.
15. The last observation we will make from the chapter is the statement at the end of verse 26: "At that time men began to call on the name of the Lord." God no longer walked on the earth in personal view and interaction. Sin had filled the world to the point that God did not come in a personal way to interact with humans, but humans who turned to God now approached God in the form of worship.

All of these observations are sermons in themselves, so at this point we can turn in one of fifteen different directions. We could also make a deeper investigation into God and God's reaction to the events that unfold.

Cain was told by God that his sacrifice was not accepted. Cain was given the reason for God's rejection in the judgment statement. The judgment statement becomes key to the passage and a powerful message for you and me. God was holding Cain accountable for something Cain already knew. The judgment statement is a study all of its own, and the most important part of the statement in this context is verse 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 master it." This is the basis for our entire moral life: make right choices and be blessed, or give in to sin and temptation and be rejected, paying the

consequences. Now if Cain would have done well or would have been teachable, I believe God would have forgiven all that Cain did. But, Cain refused to be teachable and he was projecting the blame for his problems onto Abel. Cain chose to be angry instead of correctable. His anger led to jealousy -- not against God, but against his brother. This was misplaced anger, but anger nonetheless, that would grow inside of Cain to the point of violence. And when Cain gave in to that anger and violence there were even more severe consequences for his actions. God stepped in at this point and said to Cain that he was in great danger. God got in his face and was attempting to bring Cain around to look at his own actions. God wanted Cain to realize his spirit and to repent. A threat to his spiritual life was not far off. Sin was just outside the door, ready to bring Cain to ruin. The Beacon Commentary says that what God said to Cain can be paraphrased like this: "You have let the fire of anger flame within; therefore, when you leave my presence, sin will take you. It is best to rule over your anger, or destruction will overwhelm you."

But Cain refused the instruction. Anger continued to well up inside him and his jealousy led to murder. The consequences of the murder were far reaching and affected absolutely everyone. Cain's anger and rage drove him to murder his brother. Cain became a murderer and guilty of his sin. Abel, the innocent one, was now dead and his death actually killed everyone that would have followed in his lineage. Adam and Eve actually lost both children, one to death and the other to banishment, again sending them into mourning. They discovered yet another way to die. According to the Bible, Adam and Eve and Cain and his descendants were forever separated.

Cain was then judged again, this time for murder, and this time more harshly. Murder brought with it permanent consequences. But, was Cain in mourning over his brother? No.

Did he care about how his actions affected everyone else? No. He complained that his punishment was too harsh and he was afraid that someone would kill him. Even then he was only concerned about himself. Sin had not only destroyed lives, it had blinded Cain to the real destruction he had caused. He was only afraid for his own life.

Cain also complained that he would be driven from the land, the only way of life that he knew, and he would also be banished from the Lord's presence forever. This was a very large part of the punishment he received. God responded to Cain's fear with mercy by giving Cain a mark he could not remove. The Beacon Commentary makes this observation: "The exposure of his sin changed Cain on the inside. Arrogant hate became craven fear mixed with self-pity. He would now be open to receive the very fate that he had done to his brother. He could not bear the thought. But God did not mock him. God's mercy softened the punishment. God gave him the mark and Cain went out to face a totally new lifestyle, away from God, and he went to the land of Nod, which means "the land of wandering" (according to Bible scholars) east of Eden. "He was banished to the desert to be a fugitive and a vagabond." We will make two more observations: 1) We observe that even in Cain's situation revenge was not an option. Revenge has never been OK by God under any circumstance. 2) The sin of Cain affected the lives that his children lived from that point on. The sin of the father was indeed visited onto the children generation after generation after generation.

You see, my friends, Cain had to accept his history because it could not be changed. Cain was banished from the family and from the direct presence of God, and his children never knew God personally as Cain had. They lived their entire existence in the place called Nod, a place of wandering. Cain's children would know nothing else.

We have this same thing happening today, even in this county. Because mom or dad do not seek the Lord, neither do the kids. We have children right in this county who have never come to church and have no idea who Jesus Christ really is. The sins of the parents are visited to the children to at least the third generation. And, because the parents do not know Christ in their life, the children are even farther removed from the Lord and may have an even farther journey to find the Lord.

At the end of the chapter we also find these words: “At that time men began to call on the name of the Lord.” This is a very crucial sentence because it marks when humans began to reach out to God. They found themselves alone and in need of God’s presence so they began to call on the name of the Lord. They began to seek the Lord in worship. It is most likely also the time when people removed from God’s presence began to worship idols instead of God. Humans knew that they needed God in their lives because life was bigger than they were and out of their control. They needed God to control, to lead them, to guide them, to teach them, to show them a way to have peace in their hearts. So, they either began to call upon the name of the Lord in worship or they created their own “god” to worship. Again, the sins of the father affected the lives of everyone who came behind them, generation after generation after generation.

What is it about Cain and Able and the account of the murder that we need to know for our own understanding of faith and life? We will only name a few points....

1. We need to know that after Paradise was lost the curse continued.
2. We need to know that God did not abandon the family after they left the Garden of Eden, but remained in physical contact with them, teaching Cain and Abel about sacrifice and things right and wrong. God was the teacher as well as the judge of their actions, and God continues in that role today.
3. We need to know that if we reject God’s instructions and, like Cain, remain unteachable, then sin will take over our lives and will overwhelm us as well; our choices will directly affect those who come behind us.

4. We need to know the power of jealousy and anger in the human heart -- to know that it can lead to murder -- and not allow anger to rule over us.
5. We need to understand misplaced aggression. Cain's anger with God turned toward Abel. We see this misplaced anger demonstrated in our world everyday, when dad gets mad at work and comes home and kicks the dog... or worse. We see it in road rage, physical and verbal abuse and the destruction of the family. Anger that is caused in one place overflows and is expressed in many other places.
6. We need to know that even when God was present with Cain and Abel physically, sin was still able to destroy their lives. Many people today say they will believe in God and become a Christian if God would come down right now and appear to them. The Bible tells us that when God was manifested with Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and even with Moses in the Exodus, sin continued. There were those in Moses' day who did not believe and, in fact, turned to idols whenever they could, even in the shadow of God's pillar of fire by night and the cloud by day.
7. We need to know that God judged Cain fairly, and Cain was judged according to what Cain knew and understood. God was teaching Cain, attempting to bring Cain to a place of repentance so that God could accept his offerings once again and bless him, but Cain refused to be corrected. Cain allowed sin to take over, and destruction and ruin came into his life as a result.
8. God's judgment was not so much God determining what the punishment was going to be, but actually revealing to Cain what the natural results of his sin had already caused. Sin has its own consequences. God did not have to make them up. The wages of sin is death; the natural result of sin is destruction.
9. Abel did nothing wrong, yet he paid for Cain's sin with his life. Abel was innocent and became the first innocent victim of the world in need of justice. We can often be the innocent victims of another person's sin. This sort of thing happens every day. Suffering, even death, can happen to the totally innocent. And God will be the ultimate judge of those who do the deeds. In reality, we must be accountable for our own actions and God will hold us accountable for what we do.
10. The sin of the father is visited to the children to the third generation. It is perpetuated and even amplified from father to son, mother to daughter... so be careful of the choices and decisions you make in your life. God will hold us accountable for what we teach and what we demonstrate as a "good" example. The children then have the freedom to follow or to reject our instruction. God will hold us accountable for the environment we provide for our children, and each compromise we make can come back to haunt us if we ignore a sin and claim it is "just a small thing".
11. God will not hold us accountable for the choices our children make. God set the example for Cain in righteousness and instruction, but Cain rejected God's leading and went his own way. If Cain can reject God, then our children have the ability and the God-given freewill to reject our instruction. That is why we need to surrender our children to the Lord, to live before them a life of righteousness and service and pray for them daily in support and love.

Seek the Lord while he may be found, my friends. Be faithful in the little things, and God will reward you with blessings far greater than gold. Hold fast to righteousness, prayer and hope and be public with your trust in the Lord. Let the whole world know what you stand for so that the choices they make will be their own and not traced back to your example. Live the life that others can follow and find their way to eternal life.

Let us pray.....

Thank you, Lord, for the lessons we can learn right now from God, from Cain, and from knowing the story of Adam and Eve and the great fall. Help us to know why the world is so broken, and help us be the people who point the world in the right direction. Help us be aware of the sins of our fathers and the sins we can pass on to our children and our grandchildren. Help us to be examples of righteousness and holiness, so that we can turn to our children and say with confidence, "Follow me, as I follow Christ." Help us to boldly point the world in the right direction and be living examples of what we want our kids and everyone around us to be. In your name we pray, Amen