

March 10 – 1st **Sunday of Lent** (DST)
Gen 4:1-16
“Enemy at the Gate”

There was once a cartoon of a man sitting on a park bench; his clothes tattered and torn, his toes coming out of his shoes—the stereotypical hobo. Beneath the picture was the caption: “No man is completely worthless—he can always serve as a horrible example.”¹

What do I want them to know?

That sin is crouching at our door

Why do I want them to know it?

Because it desires to have us

What do I want them to do?

Accept the grace of God

Why do I want them to do it?

So they can be set free from sin that leads to death and live for righteousness which leads to life.

You will find that today's message, for the most part, is pretty depressing. I'm sorry, but that is unavoidable – for in addressing this topic I am trying to be as honest as possible. Our subject is unpleasant and uncomfortable; and that is because it radically affects each of us. In case you haven't noticed, there is something horribly wrong with us and our world. In describing what's wrong with us theologians have used the imagery of sickness, the imagery of the courtroom, and the imagery of target practice. The symptoms are all around us, and I must admit, even preparing this message for today I had to rewrite it several times in order to excise my own symptoms so as to stay focused on the disease. Our current condition is clearly stated in our fifth Article of Faith (please read it with me):

We believe that our first parents were created in a state of innocency, but by their disobedience they lost their purity and happiness, and that in consequence of their fall all men have become sinners, totally depraved, and as such are justly exposed to the wrath of God.

Fifth Article of Faith

Now, I've tried to resist the temptation to delve into statistics on murder, assaults, robberies and various other crimes. To resist the testimony of a doctor describing in gruesome detail an abortion while graphically demonstrating how the tools in his hand are used to dismember the unborn. To resist using the horrible imagery of the death camps, or killing fields, or showing the haunting image of two year old James Bulger being lead out of an English shopping centre by one of the two ten year old boys found guilty of his brutal murder, an act even the judge admitted was 'evil.' Sadly, most sin occurs in anonymity. Unless it is shocking (and there is plenty that still shocks us), most of the time sin has been reduced to the realm of social justice, which progressives argue can be solved by apologizing, offering restitution and demonizing those who are the descendant from those on whom the blame for every modern ill has been laid. Yet they don't talk about the real issue – sin.

We delve into ancient story this morning and find that before there was so-called privilege, there was something called murder. As we reflect on the story of Cain and Abel this morning, I want to focus on the warning given Cain by God: *“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.”* (Genesis 4:7) Before we look at the ravages of sin, the first clause of God's statement needs to be addressed: “If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?” Commentators agree that this is a difficult

passage to translate, with the NET Bible suggesting a more literal translation is: “If you do well, uplifting.” It seems that God is offering an alternative to Cain’s being, “very angry and downcast.”

Many have speculated on why Cain’s offering was not accepted, however, when Adam and Eve had sinned, their lives were spared through God shedding the blood of an innocent animal. It is natural to assume they passed along this memory to their sons, and therefore when they wanted to worship God or perhaps offer a sacrifice for their own lapses in judgement, they would follow the pattern already given by God. Abel sacrificed a lamb, however Cain did not. He came up with his own way of dealing with God – he sacrificed some grain. God was not pleased.

Flashback to last weeks message and the axiom: *“Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.”* (1 Pet 5:6) It appears that Cain couldn’t bring himself to ask his brother for an animal to offer, or to admit that he had been wrong in offering something other than that which God had already demonstrated to be the ‘what is right’ way by which to approach him. In his pride, his being “downcast”, Cain could not humble himself so as to be ‘lifted up.’ God appears to be offering Cain a chance at forgiveness, but the moody first-born son would have none of it. Cain wanted God to accept him on Cain’s terms. And so, he was warned that sin was crouching at his door. We learn three important things about sin here, all neatly alliterated to make them memorable: Sin is pervasive, sin is persuasive, and sin is perversive (*sic*). Understand, this is not an exhaustive reflection on sin (for that we would need more time), but rather, hopefully, a concise reflection on a few aspects of sin. For to approach the cross of Jesus; to understand the work accomplished there on our behalf, we need feel the weight of sin, and have an understanding of just how detestable and destructive it is. So first of all, know that sin is pervasive.

Pervasive

It is crouching at your door...

Sin permeates everything. It is a stain on the fabric of our lives that we cannot not wash out. The Lord says through Jeremiah, *“Although you wash yourself with soda and use an abundance of soap, the stain of your guilt is still before me”* (Jeremiah 2:22) No thought or motive, no desire or decision, no hope or happiness we ever have is not besmirched by the tarnish of turpitude. You think you are doing a selfless act yet sin is right there patting you on the back and looking around to see if anyone has noticed. Sin is crouching at the door.

Every relationship you enter into will saturated with sin. Pettiness, jealousy, selfishness, and much more are always there just waiting to pounce. Our friend gets some recognition and envy sharpens its knives. A wife is flattered or a husband flatters some other wife, and jealousy crawls out of its hole. Sin is crouching at the door.

Every invention of man that can be used for good is almost always twisted into something that can tickle the flesh. The automobile becomes a status symbol; the

aircraft a way of waging war more effectively; the internet a way to peddle pornography. No matter where we go, what we do, or why we do it – sin has already muddied the waters. It doesn't matter the time of day or the hour of night or the season under the sun, sin is there watching and waiting, it is crouching at your door.

Paul describes the pervasiveness of sin in Romans 3:10-18

“There is no one who is righteous, not even one;
there is no one who has understanding,
there is no one who seeks God.
All have turned aside, together they have become worthless;
there is no one who shows kindness,
there is not even one.”
“Their throats are opened graves;
they use their tongues to deceive.”
“The venom of vipers is under their lips.”
“Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.”
“Their feet are swift to shed blood;
ruin and misery are in their paths,
and the way of peace they have not known.”
“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

And he sums it up in the familiar Romans 3:23, *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...”*

Sin has been crouching by our doors for a very long time. God told Cain all he had to do was that which was right, but Cain, for whatever reason, chose a different path. Why he did so is a question that could be asked of any one of us. All we need is to do what is right, but we cannot. As Wesley would say, we are totally depraved. Not one part of us is not touched—stained—by the pervasiveness of sin. Even our ability to make a sound and rational decision for what is best for us is tainted and twisted due to sin's pervasiveness. We are out of tune piano trying to tune a guitar. Our pitch is already out of pitch. But not only is sin pervasive, it is also persuasive.

Persuasive

It desires to have you...

The question of Cain reveals just how persuasive sin can be; it had convinced him that only by killing his brother could his anger dissipate and peace in his life be restored. Although he appears to be incapable of humbling himself to take the life of an animal, he made the leap of logic to think that killing his brother would somehow make things right? That committing fratricide would somehow bring him back in tune with God. Remember, there was no law given at this time. Cain couldn't consult the ten commandments. Something, somehow persuaded Cain towards the unthinkable.

The word 'desire' is the same word used of the frustrated desire of a wife for her husband in Genesis 3:16, or the desire of a young man to control a young woman in Song of Songs 7:11– the NET indicates that the word has a hint of manipulation about it. Sin wants to manipulate us and it does in many ways. Sometimes through suggesting to us that we would be happy with more, that what we have is never enough. As I was typing this mom was watching *Let's Make a Deal*, and a young youth pastor had one thousand dollars in his hand, but then again, he could trade it for what's in the box. And so sin whispers to us that we need more; that bigger is better; that what we have is not enough; that we would be happier with newer.

Then there is the way sin persuades us by luring us with how good it will feel. There is no denying that sin can be fun. The writer of Hebrews says of Moses, "*He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time.*" (Hebrews 11:25). Paul points out to Titus that, "*At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures.*" (Titus 3:3) Yes, for a moment sin can be pleasurable and bring fleeting sense of happiness, but it does not last. Once the experience is over, the feeling is gone and all we can think of is how to capture that feeling again, only this time it has to be more pleasurable, and so the bar gets higher and higher.

Sins desire is to have *all of us* – all of us in the sense of our entire being, everything that we value and love. We read last week that, "*Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.*" (1 Peter 5:8) By giving in to sins allure, we put everything in our lives in danger. We risk even those we love being consumed by sins lust. It is not just me that is affected by my sin – it is my wife, my children, my family, my church, my job. Sin assures us no one will get hurt, but that is a lie. We see this in cycles of abuse; cycles of addictions; cycles of dysfunction.

The truth is, we fall into sin easily because sin is usually the easy way out. It is easier to become angry than to deal with why we are angry. It is easier to blame others rather than to get the help we need. It is easier to take what we can now, rather than patiently work towards getting for ourselves. Sin is very persuasive and it is crouching at your door and it desires to have you. Finally...sin is perverse.

Perverse

You must rule over it.

When God created mankind he gave mankind dominion over all of creation. We see this in that it was given to man to name all the animals, and though not stated, it was given to man to name the trees, the fish, the stars – everything. To name something was to convey not only knowledge of the thing named, but also a measure of authority over the thing named.

However, sin perverts. Whereas man once had easy mastery over all of God's creation, here now is something man must struggle to have mastery over – in fact, sins desire is to rule over man. You see, sin perverts the natural order of God's creation. Sin is ugly,

but it can look so irresistibly beautiful. Sin is foul, yet it can taste so deliciously sweet. Sin is dischord, yet can sound so wonderfully soothing. Sin can feel so incredibly comforting, yet it lies at the root of everything wrong with our world.

The words of the Lord to Judah equally apply to our day:

Look up to the hilltops. Take a good look.

Is there anywhere you have not committed perverse acts *in the company of other gods?*

You sat on the side of the road, offering yourself to lovers; like a desert nomad *you waited, patiently.*

Even the land itself is tainted by your prostitution and wickedness.

That is why *I have* held back the rain, why the spring rains have not come.

But you still look and act the part of a prostitute—unfazed, unashamed.

Jeremiah 3:2-3

Everything sin touches it perverts, it twists and bends, it colors and corrodes. All of creation has in some way been torn and twisted by the ravages of sin. It is sin that has marred the *imago dei* on the soul of man. It is sin that perverts the creation of male and female. It is sin that has perverted God's intention for marriage and the family. It is sin that has corrupted the union between a man and his wife; between children and their parents. All that God created had been described as very good, yet by Genesis 6 God's heart was grieved by the sinfulness of man—by the perversion of the natural order.

Sin's greatest victory is our ignorance of its existence. We look around at the world and we know that all is not well. The evidence is too great, the cries of the victim's blood, like Abel's, cries out from the ground and it cannot be ignored. And so we foolishly declare we will do something about it, oblivious to the fact that every plan, every scheme, every new policy, law or program, is already out of tune. A government leader devises and writes up some new bill or new policy, but sin is right there, peaking over his shoulder, whispering at how he or she can arrange this wonderful concept into something from which they will reap some benefit – financially or professionally.

We try and solve the ravages of sin, even as sin ravages us. We think if we just get the right education; bring about the right social conditions, level the playing field, raise the minimum standards and enact the right laws we can all get along with each other and this strange thing that besets us will disappear and everyone will live happily ever after.

The more pervasive, persuasive and perversive we see sin, knowing it to be utterly and totally repulsive to God; the more we see it as an ugly blight that taints and putrifies all of creation – then and only then, can we begin to be in awe of the grace and mercy and love of God. Only in seeing the foulness of sin can we be amazed at forgiveness; that God can remove from us this awful affliction.

If sin isn't much, then neither is the gift of salvation or the mercy of God. If sin isn't all that bad maybe we can handle it ourselves if we read the right books, or follow the right advice or meditate in the right way. If we don't see sin as it truly is, then maybe we can

handle it without God. If we don't acknowledge sin exists then we have no need for a cross.

Rather than being offended by Paul's honest and raw description of what sin has done in us, to us and through us, we need to embrace what we have become so that we might cry out to the only hope we have.

Isaiah once wrote, *"Though grace is shown to the wicked, they do not learn righteousness; even in a land of uprightness they go on doing evil and regard not the majesty of the LORD."* (Isa 26:10)

When we try to tune our lives to that which is already out of tune, the result will always be dischord. But there is another way. You see, what my efforts are powerless to do, God has done for me. Where sin has increased, grace has increased all the more.

The hymnist notes:

Marvellous grace of our loving Lord
Grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt
Yonder on Calvary's mount outpoured
There where the blood of the Lamb was spilt

Grace grace God's grace
Grace that will pardon and cleanse within
Grace grace God's grace
Grace that is greater than all our sin

Sin is crouching at our door and it desires to have us, and through grace it will not have mastery over us. "For sin shall be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace." (Rom 6:14) Join me in singing our praises and thanks to God for His wonderful grace.

Endnote

¹ Maxie Dunnam, *Going on to Salvation*, Revised Edition: A Study of Wesleyan Beliefs (p. 33). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.
