

The Unraveling of Creation
Genesis 4:1-16; Luke 15:11-32
The Second Sunday in Lent, (March 8) 2020
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In his novel *East of Eden*, John Steinbeck writes, “These old men believe a true story, and they know a true story when they hear it. They are critics of truth. They know that these sixteen verses are a history of mankind [sic] in any age or culture or race” (p. 304).

Today, we hear this old story, a primeval story, from out east of Eden, these sixteen verses of Genesis 4 that tell us the truth. It tells the truth about who we are and why we’ve become who we are and why the world is the way it is.

Jesus said in Luke 15, “A certain man had two sons.” Genesis says that Eve had two sons. She conceived and had a son named Cain, then a second son named Abel. Cain and Abel – two sons. If the story were rewritten in another time and place, it might have been two girls or a girl and a boy. Or maybe several kids. It could be rewritten and retold in all sorts of ways. Maybe Cain is white, and Abel is black or Latino or Asian or a sister or perhaps gay? Who knows?

Our sixteen verses from Genesis 4 tell us that Cain was the firstborn son. What’s called “primogeniture,” the right of the first-born son is the background throughout the culture of the entire Bible, but especially in these oldest stories. To put it in more contemporary language, Cain is born to privilege. Abel comes along later. Abel is a shepherd and Cain becomes a farmer. Both were good and moral and upright. There are no distinctions between them – except Cain is privileged.

To be privileged means that Cain assumed – and in that old patriarchal system – rightly assumed that he could go to college and get a good job and advance in a career. He assumed that he could get a loan, buy land, and that his kids could get into good schools. He assumed that he could improve himself and his family's standing by good, old-fashioned hard work and merit. He deserved it because he earned it. Cain is privileged and he's blind to it.

The story says that both Cain and Abel brought offerings to the Lord and for some inexplicable reason Abel's offering is favored by God while Cain's is not favored. We do not know why.

Maybe Abel brought the best part of his flock as an offering to God while Cain just made an offering? Perhaps Abel, since he is the youngest, since he is left out and left behind, not privileged, is acutely aware of his dependence on the grace of God, while Cain, accustomed to privilege, assumes too much with God? He assumed that he deserved God's favor.

We don't know for sure. We do know that Cain was very angry. "What is happening in this world?! It used to be that a man worked hard and received recognition for his hard work! In the old days, I can remember when things worked and when we had a certain order to this world. Everyone followed the rules. The law was the law and East of Eden was great. But now everything is going to hell in a handbasket! You can't trust the neighborhood anymore. We've got immigrants and blacks and Muslims moving into the area. We're not safe anymore, so I got my handgun license and I'm packing. Anyone fools with me or my family and I'll make a stand. I'm not putting up with this anymore. I'm fed up with all this

change. I was down at the bank the other day renegotiating my note on the farm and I had to talk to woman vice-president! A woman! Why is she at the bank doing man's work?"

“And this recognition and honor that Abel received, what's this about? I deserved it. I've worked for years to better myself and but because of affirmative action or because of political correctness this black guy Abel gets the recognition! I'm not prejudiced or racist, but Abel and his kind are getting loud and forgetting their place!”

There is a scene early in William Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust* where Lucas Beauchamp's neighbors say, referring to a black man, “We got to make him be a [n-word] first. He's got to admit he's a [n-word]. Then maybe we will accept him as he seems to intend to be accepted” (p. 18).

Cain is not resentful of Abel as long as Abel remembers his place. Of course, it is the place assigned by Cain and his kind. It is the place dictated by the East of Eden way of life.

For whatever reasons, Cain is resentful of Abel receiving what he considers undeserved favor. And the ancient story says, “his countenance fell.” Instead of looking up to God, he looks away from God.

Clarence Jordan of Koinonia Farm in Georgia, in the 1950's, had a delegation of deacons from the nearby white Baptist church come to see him and inform him that he was voted out of the church because he continued to bring black and white young people to church. Clarence handed the deacons a Bible and said,

“You show me in the Bible where what I’m doing is wrong and I’ll abide by it.” The deacons responded, “Don’t give us any of that Bible stuff.” In other words, we don’t want God involved in this.

That’s what Cain is doing. In his resentment, he’s turning his back on God.

God responds by saying, “Look you can do well. You don’t have to give into this destructive resentment. You have the ability to embrace Abel as your brother. But I’m warning you now, if you give into resentment, anger, and mistrust, sin is lurking at the door. Its desire is you. It wants to devour you and consume you with evil. Don’t give into it. You can overcome this. Just because your parents made bad decisions does not mean you have to.”

But Cain’s mind is made up. His heart is full of fed-up fear and anger. So, he gets together with Abel and says, “Let’s go out in the field” (4:8). Like the Older Brother in the Luke 15 parable, out in the field is where he works. Out away from the house, out away from prying eyes, away from a community that might hold us accountable.

Out of sight of everyone, out in the field Cain kills Abel. God shows up and asks, “Where is your brother?” And Cain responds, “I don’t know where he is. It’s not my job to keep up with him. What do you think this is where everyone keeps up with everyone else? Some kind of socialism? You created him to be a keeper of sheep so maybe he should keep up with himself. Why weren’t you watching over him? It’s really your fault!” (v.11).

God says, “What have you done, Cain? What have you done? Your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground. This creation is more connected than you realize – you’ve killed your brother and therefore, this very soil is worthless dirt that will blow away in the wind. Your days of farming are over. You are forever alienated from the earth. Don’t you see what you’ve done? All of creation was woven together but you killing your brother has caused it to start unraveling” (v.11-12).

And God continues, “You are doomed to be a fugitive on the earth. No family, no kin, no one you can count on, no place to call home. The rest of your days you will be looking over your shoulder” (v.12b).

Cain said, “This is too much! Kill me now and let it be over with. But to wander and never, ever trust anyone again. That’s too much. I’m alienated from the earth, I’m alienated from you, and now you’re sending me into no-mans-land, where I will be hunted down” (v.13).

“No, not so. I’m putting a mark on you,” God says. “It is both a mark of guilt and a mark of grace. Yes, everyone will know who you are and what you did but no one may kill you.”

The story ends with Cain leaving God’s presence and going forth in the Land of Nod, the Land of Wandering, east of Eden.

What do we do with this old story?

Let us see if light from the Luke 15 Parable of the Prodigal Son helps us. The parable from Luke is not an exact counter story and does not go point by point in contrast with Genesis 4. But the light of the Prodigal story might help us see a little better the Genesis story.

Notice the rivalry between the brothers in Luke 15. The older brother resents the way the younger brother is received upon returning home. Some of it is that the prodigal already received his inheritance and blew it in the far country. Now that he's returned home, besides all else, he's going to start using up resources and cutting into the eventual inheritance of the elder brother. The elder brother is angry and refuses to go into the house where there is community and relationships. He prefers to stay out in the field, on his own. In his argument with his father, he never refers to his brother as his brother. It's "this son of yours" while the father keeps using "your brother" language. The father refers to the younger brother as "my child" even though when the younger son claimed his inheritance, (another way of saying, "Old man, I want now what you're going to leave me in your will. You're as good as dead to me."). Then the younger son runs off to a far country, further cutting all ties with the family. Each son, each in his own way, redefine their relationships with their father and each other. Identities change. The order of the family changes.

But for the father relationship is everything, which means that though things change, and the terms of the relationship change, his love never changes. He is always flexible. He cannot force the younger son to do what he wants and he cannot force the older son to do what he wants even if that's the way it used to be and always was, and he cannot force their identities to change back to the way they were when they were little, but he can always love them.

In the Cain and Abel story, Cain is inflexible. He does not love his brother Abel enough to be adaptable to the changes that come with Abel being favored.

The big difference between these two stories, is that the New Testament shows us a God, in the father-figure of this parable, who never gives up loving while also never gives up reconfiguring. That's our model and our hope. We want to be the kind of a church and the kind of people who never give up loving and never give up reconfiguring.

One more story: my friend Stan Wilson, who preached here two or three years ago, tells the story of when he was 11-years-old going with his father to his father's hometown of New Albany, MS to see his father's best friend, Bro. Pete, the pastor of the First Baptist Church. So, they could visit uninterrupted, Bro. Pete had arranged for Stan to go fishing with one of the elder members of the congregation, a kind old man who loved to fish.

All went well except 11-year-old Stan couldn't help being curious about the elder man's walk. He dragged one leg behind him. When they all got in the car after picking up Stan, Stan remembers, "On the way home, as the sun went down, I asked Dad and Brother Pete about the limp, and I soon realized there was a story behind it. Brother Pete paused and looked at dad before telling me there had been an accident. Then there was a further pause before finally Dad and Pete looked at each other and told me the outlines of a local legend. In the 1920s there had been a lynching in New Albany, and this man had been part of the 'lynching party.' Since that date, every member of the lynching mob had 'come up lame' in one way or another. Some were injured in accidents, others were debilitated by illness, but

every member of that lynching party suffered some kind of physical affliction, and the whole town new this.”

Stan continues, “I remember one last detail. I must have asked how Brother Pete came to be associated with this man because he told me that sometime in the 1950’s, while my grandfather was a deacon at First Baptist, this man had shown up in church. He had lived ‘a hard life,’ of drinking and carousing, and sometime in the 1950’s he came to church on a Sunday night looking to make a change. After some counsel and encouragement by the membership, including my grandfather, he eventually ‘walked the aisle,’ and had been a member in good standing ever since.”

Stan and I have talked about this story. It is interesting that no one ever asked the old man about his participation in the lynching and murder of a black young man in the 1920’s. It was unspoken and unnamed. No one talked about it though everyone knew. Even when he became a Christian and joined the church, his confession of sin was generalized to include a “hard life of drinking and carousing.” The church did not hold him accountable.

We know some of this same kind of silence here in Nacogdoches. No one wants to talk about the lynchings in our history. The older folks, both white and black, do not want to talk about lynchings because of the shame and the younger people don’t talk about them because they don’t know about them.

I don’t know. I wonder if the mark of Cain, might be one of God’s ways to call us to ask questions, speak the truth and bring to light things that have been covered over in the dark?

Nancy Hastings Sehested spent ten years as a chaplain in a men's maximum security prison in North Carolina. The men in prison said that they had the mark of Cain and that they'd never be rid of it. Nancy helped some of them see that the mark of Cain is also a mark of mercy – a mark of guilt but also a mark of grace and mercy. Perhaps the mercy mark is that it calls us to talk, to bring to light things hidden. When brought into the light perhaps there can be justice? Maybe we are marked so in speaking there might be forgiveness, reconciliation, reparation, and healing (see Nancy Sehested, *Marked for Life*, p. 166)?

There is much in these old stories and there is much we don't know what to do with. But we do know there is much that we need to talk about and ask questions.

Meanwhile, we all live toward Good Friday. There, from the Cross, we will be embraced. The question is will we be ready to be embraced?

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.