



LESSONS IN LIVING

What We Can Learn from the Creation Myth in Genesis?

“Part 6: Cain and Abel”

A St. Andrew's Sermon
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February 15, 2026

Scripture Reading: From Genesis 4 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Eve conceived and gave birth to Cain. She also gave birth to a second child, his brother Abel. Now Abel became a shepherd, and kept flocks, but Cain tilled the soil. In the course of time Cain brought an offering to YHWH from the fruit of the soil, while Abel, for his part, brought one of the finest of the firstborn of his flock. YHWH looked with favor on Abel's offering, but had no regard for Cain's offering.*

At this, Cain was filled with rage and despair. YHWH asked Cain, “Why are you filled with rage? Why are you downcast? If you intend good, you can hold up your head; if you don't intend good, then sin is a demon haunting your doorway, and it wants you—but you can conquer it.” Cain said to Abel, “Let us go out in the field.” When they were in the field, Cain turned on his brother Abel and killed him. God asked Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” Cain answered, “I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?”

God said to Cain, “What have you done? Listen! I hear Abel's blood crying to me from the earth! You will be cursed by the earth, which opened its mouth to receive Abel's blood from your hand. If you till the soil, it will no longer give you its produce. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.” Cain answered, “This punishment is too great to bear! Since you have banished me from the soil—since I must leave your presence to be a restless wanderer on the earth—anyone I encounter can kill me!” “No!” said YHWH. “Whoever kills Cain will face sevenfold vengeance!” Then YHWH put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came across him would kill him. So Cain left God's presence, and settled in the land of Nod—meaning “Wandering”—which is east of Eden.

* YHWH represents the divine name found in the Hebrew text. It represents the Divine Mystery and, traditionally, is not pronounced. Instead, we say “God” or some other term of reverence.

Sermon

By the way, when you see words like ‘demon’ in a Jewish text, you know that a Christian has mistranslated it. That wasn't a part of their cosmology. The snake in the story is just a snake.

But Christians, who've incorporated the propaganda, then look at these ancient stories and project Christian theology on them. So, that got it off my chest. *[laughter]* Sorry about the rest of you.

This is such a strange time for all of us, of course, but to be a Christian and to use the word 'love.' When you look at the hatred and *stupidities*, the only word I can think of, that has seized this nation. You see people who are not qualified to have a vet clinic, making the decisions for the entire nation and bringing measles back into the world. What does it mean to say that we love them? Obviously, if we can't, that's a problem in using that word. At the same time, we have to understand that loving an oppressed person and loving an oppressor are different energies. They're both love.

Why is violence such a part of our lives? That's the question that haunts this myth, mythic story. When we look at the ancient stories of the world, it's the questions that we should focus on. Why are we born? Why do we die? Why can't we get along with one another? Those are what the great, great mythologies are supposed to help us understand from the inside out. It's one thing to have it explained in an essay about why things happen. But what a mythology does is walk us through the experience of it and help us understand how a human being gets to that state. And that's all of us at one time or another.

You can't look at mythology reasonably. In our story, Cain and Abel are both, at this point, married, but you have to wonder, okay, where did they find the women? Right. The story doesn't account for that. You have two people. Then when Cain says, "I can't bear this punishment. Somebody's going to find me and kill me." Again, the question is, Okay, who are you talking about? There were four people on the planet, and you just killed one of them. *[laughter]*

In Star Wars, there was a scene where three of the heroes were in this compactor. Is it Luke Skywalker? Is that the younger of the two? *[from congregant: Yeah.]* Thank you. That was a request. *[from congregant: You're doing great.]* Thank you. And so, he goes to the older of the... Who's the other? *Congregant: Hans Solo.]* Hans Solo. I probably should have worked out these details before the service started out. So, he says, "We've just been in this trash compactor, should my hair be all messed up? Should I put junk in my hair?" And Hans Solo says, "It's not that kind of movie, kid. If they're looking at your hair, we're in big trouble."

In a mythology, you're supposed to get lost in the imagery and not get lost in the details, because it's made up. But it's made up to teach a lesson. There are certain lessons that reoccur throughout human history. What a mythology does is help us walk through that and find it in ourselves. When we think we're superior to everyone else, when we look at the MAGA movement, and think that could never happen to me, we have some work to do in understanding the human heart.

You might not be that way now, but what if the clock started when you were younger and you had certain frustrations adding up and certain humiliations, and life was just too complicated for you? And, then somebody comes along and says, "It isn't rocket science. If you don't want a vaccination, you shouldn't have to get it. All these people from Harvard, they're smarty pants, using the big words to laugh at you. So just join our little club, and you'll understand it all."

If we get frustrated enough, that can be a temptation. And we're much better healers of the world wound if we can find that wound within ourselves. In the Genesis story, we're learning how humankind fell out of balance with nature. It's not the story of a God who gets mad and punishes a seventh-generation kind of stuff. That's the vessel through which the myth is expressed.

But the truth of the human condition is we are expressions of the creative principle of the universe, whatever that is. It may be a being; it may be a process. When we tune ourselves to our first principles, we're capable of being loving, happy, and peaceful throughout our lifespan. When we tune our hearts to secondary matters, that's not so easily done.

So, we're asking the question can we love our own species? Can we love humankind at its worst? That doesn't mean you don't have to fight. It doesn't mean that you have to cooperate with the oppressive aspects. But can you understand where people are coming from?

The first thing to know about this story is that the words 'Cain' and 'Abel' mean something in Hebrew. 'Abel' means 'field.' So, he represents the hunter-gatherers. 'Cain' represents the Canaanite culture of the agrarian culture. One way to understand this sacrifice that they make and the fact that one passes and the other fails is that each bring the fruit of their own efforts. One of them brings a brisket, and the other brings carrot sticks.

In that culture, and in the Islamic version of the mythology, the person just brings a handful of grass. What I believe it's trying to teach us is that as important as the phase of moving into an agrarian culture can be, it also throws us out of harmony with nature in a sense. When you raise crops, you're no longer taking nature at face value. You're cutting up the soil. You're destroying the topsoil. Now, all of a sudden, you can save grains, which means some people are rich and some people are poor. When you have some people that are rich and some people are poor, that means you need violence to protect your stuff.

I believe that's the kind of insight that the mythology is trying to help us experience. That as long as we see the world as belonging to everyone, which is the natural state of human being, if you were just looking logically at the world, you'd say, "Okay, this belongs to all of us equally. We need to figure out how to share it fairly." But once you have a vested interest in the stuff you've already piled up, once hoarding becomes a part of your identity, at some point you're willing to kill to protect it.

There's a political cartoon that I loved. I think I've mentioned a couple of times where it shows dinosaurs talking with one another and the asteroid comes in the atmosphere. One of the dinosaurs turns to the other one and says, "Oh no, the economy." Were you watching the news and talking about the Epstein files this week when one of the Trumpsters threw a tantrum and said, "Well, look at the Dow Jones." You've got a room full of people that an attorney general should be protecting. But what she's protecting is the rich from the poor. That's what happens to a property-based system.

When you base your ethics on property rights, at some point human rights disappear, if you're different. If you're from Venezuela and your president, just hypothetically, and your president

decides that he or she wants the oil, then it's perfectly logical to kill without due process to get your property rights.

When we look at racism in the United States, it's very important to realize that it began with greed, not hatred. It began with exploitation, and this sense of privilege that you can use other people to get what you want. Property rights are not evil in themselves. But if they ever become more important to you than human rights, then welcome to MAGA. Welcome to ruthless capitalism.

What you can't see when you measure by property rights is that the state is violence by its nature. That can be necessary violence, but if you have a law and you punish people for breaking the law, what undergirds that is violence. A loving heart can see that poverty is violence, even though it's completely legitimized by the property rights people. They're measuring by the wrong standard.

And, I know you've never heard me say this before. But we cannot get out of any problem we have as humankind within the strictures of capitalism. We can use parts of it, but the problem is we have property rights and not human rights. You have to decide which of those you're going to serve.

So, Cain, after this tragedy happens, God shows up in the story as a very human being, doesn't know where people are, has to ask what have you done? He says, "Where's your brother?" And Cain says, "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?" Are we our sister, brother, sibling? Do we owe anything to each other as human beings? Am I my brother's keeper? Am I my sister's keeper? Is humankind my family?

Part of what the story is trying to tell us is when we want to punish the people who are bringing this misery into the world, again, we need to fight against it. We need to protect people from it. At the same time, when we think that we're not of that species, it's harder for us to bring the healing to the world that it needs. We have to understand that hatred is its own punishment. You can be the most powerful person in the world. You can have more money than you can count and still stay up all night on Twitter, because people are ticking you off, making you feel worthless.

And, the truth is in capitalism, you *are* worthless. Because what's not recognized is your intrinsic worth. Capitalism is a golden dumpster. It's all show. But if you think about your life and the times when you've been the happiest, they probably won't be times when you made a good investment. You'll think about simple moments with other human beings, and it's that tie that binds you to other people, other animals, to the web of life, where you can recognize your true value.

Do you remember when someone was being interviewed for a position in the Trump cabinet, law enforcement, and they were asked what habeas corpus means, and they didn't know. Let that soak in for a moment. One of the top law enforcement agents in the country doesn't know what habeas corpus means. A foundational element of human rights. That if you arrest somebody and an advocate says what is your proof, what is your evidence, what are the charges? The state has to pursue that. State violence is much more dangerous than any form of terrorism. It's no wonder

that plutocrats want you afraid of your neighbor, but not of the people that represent the rich over and against the poor.

God says Abel's blood is calling to me from the soil. Do you remember when we looked at the beginning of this, where the word 'Adam' and the word 'blood' and the word 'red' are intertwined? That reemerges here. Human beings are tied to the soil. When we are violent, it damages us without any other punishment there is. Because when you cannot feel love, when you cannot feel empathy, when you cannot feel compassion for your human family, you are alone. You are alone in the world. When you look at other people as competitors or as furniture in your drama, you are absolutely alone. It is only empathy for people who are different from you that widens your world into a community.

So, you will have to answer that question, are you your sister's keeper? Are you your brother's keeper? Are you the keeper of your human family? Are you going to protect people even if they give nothing to you? The answer in the MAGA movement is 'no.' You owe nothing to your human family. The answer in capitalism is 'no.' We have to realize that doesn't make capitalism evil. But it means if we surrender our agency to an economic system, we will do evil, we will do violence.

Spoiler alert, the right answer is 'yes.' If you're going to even pretend to follow Jesus Christ, you have to say 'no' to MAGA. Period.

The final thought I'd like to share with you today is also very important, and that is the mark of Cain is not a punishment, it's a protection in the story. Cain has done the unspeakable. But God wants to assure Cain that he still has worth. There's still possible redemption.

That doesn't always happen. There are times when people are so dangerous, you have to deal with them as a threat. But when you can stop and listen to the human heart and try to understand why somebody would get that lost and that confused, it's not hard to understand that in the United States. We are propagandized from the cradle to racism, sexism, classism. It's the rare individual who can step out of that and see their human family.

In this story, we are all the descendants of Cain. Abel isn't around to have an offspring. So, the mark of Cain is a symbol of the need for redemption for all of us. I spend a lot of time in resistance to the MAGA movement, but I'm not going to spend one second hating anyone in the movement. Resistance, yes. Hatred, no. Because the truth is, I could have been there if I hadn't been loved in the way that I was loved, if I didn't feel safe the way that I feel safe.

Violence is its own punishment. So, anyone who cares about their own human heart will keep it out of their inner sanctum. You cannot turn this world around overnight. It may not be turned around in our own lifetime, but you can make of your heart a paradise, if you do not allow hate to enter, if you'll only save room for love, for compassion. Again, that doesn't make all your decisions for you. We have to resist oppression. We have to protect people that are in danger. But can we keep our heart open in that process?

I've always loved mythology my whole life. The theology that I was taught, even in seminary, is so ridiculous. It's ridiculous. Nobody knows if there are three gods, two gods, four gods. Using what we don't understand to try to explain what we do understand is bad religion. That's not what Jesus was doing. But to realize that by walking through these stories, as childish as they can seem, helps us understand in our own heart how we fall into cruelty, how we fall into simple answers. And the more you realize you're capable of that, the stronger you will be in resistance, the more of a healing agent you will be in the world.

At your essence, you are an expression of the creative principle of the universe. Not surprisingly, sometimes you calibrate your heart to something else for a while, and you get lost, and you fall. These stories are teaching us the way back.

Think of a time when you were so happy and at peace, and just spend time with that memory until you can feel in that memory your calling to be creative presence in the universe. But you have to know that you are your sister's keeper, your brother's keeper, defender of your human family. So that you can say 'no' to the golden dumpster of MAGA capitalism, and say 'yes' to the paradise of a living, loving heart.

Well, that's my struggles with the text. We'll take a moment for you to think how you would have preached it.

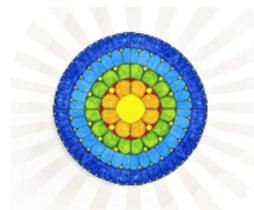
Benediction

You can be an oasis in the storm for people who are not going to be able to find their bearings any other way. We don't have to wait for a better world to come along before we can be the agents of a better future.

So as you go out, remember, every conversation you have is an opportunity to shed your light. And when you're off balance, all you have to do is just go into neutral. It happens to all of us. But to realize that when you do have a kind word to say, the world is very thirsty for that.

So please know your creative expression of whatever brings us all into being. And then when you remember that and you value that over anything else, you bring a joy and a peace and a love to this world that can't be found any other way. Go in peace.

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