

I. Intro

A. We are in Genesis today – chapter 4. This is an audible. If you had access to the sermon schedule, you'd see that I am supposed to be preaching on Ezra.

1. And indeed, I worked on a sermon on Ezra – a book that combines with Nehemiah to tell the story of Israel post Exile. It's about the Jews returning to Jerusalem, rebuilding the temple and repenting all along the way.

2. Good book. I was looking forward to learning from Ezra, but, sometimes the dog won't hunt or the plane won't fly, or whatever hackneyed metaphor you want to use.

B. I am thankful that this became clear to me early in the week. There have been times when – very late in the week – I have this sense that the Lord is directing me to a preach a different sermon than planned.

1. In the trade these get called “the Saturday Night Special.” And – to my way of thinking – they are a young man's prerogative. I am too old to stay up late working on a sermon. I have never bought a sermon from DesperatePreachers.com. But I understand why the site exists.

C. Anyway, early this week, I pivoted to Cain. So far we've looked at Gideon, Ruth, Paul, Mary, Barnabas and Joseph. We have Esther and Caleb coming up. I realized, we are focusing on people who – while not perfect – are noted for doing a lot right. And that we were not doing anything on Judas, Herod the Great, Jezebel, Satan – the Hitleresque figures. It seemed like that was a miss, and Cain came to mind.

D. And I've been thinking about Genesis 4-11 lately. It is not a happy section of Scripture. It is 8 chapters that come after Genesis 3 – after the fall – that seem to be there to persuade us that we are really broken. We cannot fix ourselves.

1. This is – of course – contested today. There are those who argue that we are good people and that with just a bit more education and technology we will fix everything. There ranks seem to be going down. As they should.

2. Anyone paying any attention to the news should realize that while there are problems that we may be able to fix, we have problems that technology and science are not going to be able to fix.

3. And anyone paying attention to their own heart should know this. In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, CS Lewis talks about the moment he seriously examined his own heart. He writes: “For the first time I examined myself with a seriously practical purpose. And there I found what appalled me; a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatreds. My name was legion.”

4. GK Chesterton made a similar point. He expressed surprise that people rejected the doctrine of original sin, arguing that it's the only doctrine that can be empirically verified.

5. I will just say, again, if the person next to you knew every thought that floated through your mind every day, they'd get up and move.

6. I am not claiming that we are all bad. We are not. We are not as bad as we can be. For starters, no matter how bad we are, we can imagine being worse. The claim is that we were made in the image of God – we are highly valued. And we are deeply loved. But we are greatly fallen.

E. So, all that to say, in this series in which we are looking at people's stories, it occurred to me that maybe we should look at someone who really makes a mess of things. And that led me to Genesis 4 and Cain, who killed his brother Abel.

II. Text: Genesis 4

A. Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, "With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man. (man-child)"¹

1. Just before this – in chapter three – we have the *proto-evangelion* - the promise that the “seed of woman” is going to crush the head of Satan. The implication is they would think that Cain was going to be the Messiah. So, verse 1 is good news. There is a moment of hope. We have the first birth - the miracle of new life.

B. Verse 2 is not so happy: Later she gave birth to his brother Abel.

1. In Hebrew Abel's name means trivial or fleeting.² A breath or a vapor. It hints to the themes of the Book of Ecclesiastes.³ Vanity of vanities. What is man? Life is short and then you die. All of that. It appears as though Adam and Eve's optimism with Cain had faded.⁴

2. They had come to realize that their perfect, beautiful, smart and innocent son had a mind of his own and a temper. With each of our children I remember that moment when their cry is suddenly different. And you think – oh, they are mad. This isn't a, “I'm hungry or need my diaper changed or scared or whatever. This is, I want you to do something and you are not doing it. And if I could I'd let you have it.”

3. By the time Abel comes along they are not quite as giddy.

C. Reading on in V2: Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. So, Cain is a farmer and Abel is a shepherd. Both noble professions. Both can be done to the glory of God.⁵

D. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor.

1. There is a lot going on here – so let’s start by noting that both men accepted the idea that God was owed honor. The term used here for offering suggests the kinds of gifts you give to a king.⁶ Gifts that recognize the king’s authority and your submission.

2. And the text reads as if these offerings were a normal part of life – that this was not the first time they had been made. You can imagine that they grew up in a home where there was an awareness that God was God: He was the giver of life. We are not his equal. We rely on and depend upon and marvel at God.

E. V5: **So Cain was very angry** - the term used for anger here suggests a festering hostility. Not a violent outburst but a slow burn - and his face was downcast. Why did God accept Abel’s offering⁷ and not Cain’s? There are a few ideas out there.

1. Some argue that Cain brought the wrong kind of sacrifice.

a) His “fruits of the soil” was not a part of that trail of blood that began when God killed animals to provide Adam and Eve with skins - the Crimson Thread that runs through the Old Testament. It starts in Genesis and really ramps up in Exodus – first with the Passover (where they were to kill a sheep and paint the doorpost with its blood) and then with the sacrificial system that takes place at the Tabernacle – a system that was designed to drive home two points: 1) Sin is a capital offense; but 2) substitute deaths are allowed.

b) So, one theory is that Cain’s sacrifice was not the right kind of sacrifice. I don’t think this is it, in part because later on there will be a category of grain sacrifices.⁸

2. I am more in this second camp, which suggest that Cain gets in trouble in part because he didn’t offer the best that he had.

a) We are told is that Cain brought “some of the fruits of the soil,” whereas Abel brought “fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock” – i.e., the best of the best.⁹

b) Scripture will later develop the idea that what we offer to God should be our utmost.¹⁰ The first fruits. Not the last. Not what is left over.

(1) The tithe will pick up on this idea. It is to be the first ten percent – which is designed to shift the entire mindset. We think we are giving something to God. No. No, it’s all his - everything everywhere is His.

(2) His call for the first ten percent is designed to make it clear that it is all his. He doesn’t take ten percent from us. We get 90% from him – from which we are expected to make additional offerings.

(3) The suggestion is Cain has an attitude problem.

3. Which leads to the third idea: the suggestion that Cain had the capital A attitude problem. We are told that Abel offered his sacrifice by faith. Cain did not.

a) In Hebrews 11:4 we read: **By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead.**

b) The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. It's not just the sacrifice itself, but the heart of the one making it.¹¹

c) Cain comes to bargain – to buy. He does not come in humility or faith. He does not come to honor. He does not come to thank but to purchase God's favor. Which means that He is attempting to stand before God on his own merit.

d) You either think that you are a sinner and need help, or you think that you can manage this on your own. Abel comes to God in humility (recognizing God as King) and faith (believing God's promise that he was going to rescue them). Cain comes without either. He is there to strike a deal. And God doesn't make deals. This is not the way we approach him.

4. Cain makes a mess of things. And God does not accept his offering. And so he sulks. He gets angry and depressed. Not in a self-critical way. Not in the way you hurt when you disappoint someone, and you are sorry that you failed to make them happy. And apparently not in a way that leads him to change.

F. V6: Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? God never asks a question to get information. He never asks so that He can know. He knows. When He is asking a question, he is trying to help people think things through. He is trying to initiate a conversation. The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? 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."

1. The term "crouching" is used to describe leopards and cougars. Predatory animals that hide in the bushes, making themselves seem smaller and then waiting for their chance to pounce. Sin says, don't mind me. Don't worry about me. Forget that I'm even here. But it knows that it's death.

2. We had a cat. Bubba. Well, the joke was that the cat belonged to everyone in the house except to me. We have a truce in that we are both enamored with Sheri. And a couple years ago I looked out the window and saw Bubba crouching. Sneaking up behind a hummingbird. And I laughed. "Right. Nice try. Hey come look at the cat who thinks he's going to catch a hummingbird. Stupid cat. The wings on these things beat something like 100x a second. They can hover and dart. And... it was over in a flash. The hummingbird backed up unaware that the cat had crept up behind it and was crouching in wait, and it was over in a little splash of feathers.

3. God says, “sin crouches.” He personifies sin. He talks about it like it’s alive and on the prowl. Like it has a nature and a personality – one that says, “Don’t mind me. Nothing to see here. I’m trivial. Please forget I’m even in the room.” And then it waits for its chance. It’s opportunistic. God warns Cain about sin. But Cain is too proud to listen. He is mad and he ignores the warning, and so sin springs.

G. V8: **Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.** Cain lured Abel. “Come with me.” And then he killed him. It was no accident. It was not manslaughter. This was murder in the first degree.¹² Sin won.

1. I keep Cain and Abel straight by the phrase, Can killed Abel because Abel wasn’t able to defend himself. No. What we are told is that Cain killed Abel because Cain had a bad heart and a bad attitude and he ignored the warnings.

III. At this point, a number of important things will then unfold:

A. God will step in. He will ask some questions – which is where we get the famous line from Cain, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” The answer to that, is yes.

B. Then God will issue another curse.¹³ Cain will squeal, and God will adjust it slightly.

C. Then Adam and Eve will then have another child: Seth, who will be the line forward – the line that will lead to Abraham and then David and eventually to Christ. Cain’s line will unfold into a series of particularly evil and wicked people.¹⁴ Indeed, you will see two lines of people who are at odds with each other.

IV. There is plenty that we might talk about here.

A. We need to note that there is no such thing as small sins. We are foolish to think that we can tame sin or that it is manageable. Anger needs to be identified and addressed before it spills out. If we play with fire we will eventually get burned.

B. We could talk about our need for friends who are close enough and wise enough to help us navigate life because they can see some of the things that are lying in wait for us that we cannot.

C. We could talk about how destructive envy is – which is a theme that will be developed in a variety of ways in the Bible. Jealousy and bitterness will show themselves in many people in this book: Saul who envies David; The Pharisees who envy Christ; Demas who envies Paul. And Jesus will speak against it.

D. There is a lot in Genesis 4 to reflect on. Let me note two things:

E. I’d like you to note how lovingly God approached Cain. He went to him early, while there is still a chance to turn things around. And he approached him with care – not as cosmic police officer. Not barking out commands, “How dare you get uppity with me!” He appears to try to help Cain figure out what is going on in his own heart.

F. And let me note that God gives us tools to avoid that – the Sabbath in which we are to rest and reflect, confession – in which we are to own our sin, agree with God that we have a problem, and the sacrament of holy communion. It is the visual sermon we find at the Table, where the bread and the cup are there in place of Christ’s body and blood.

G. As I mentioned in the opening, in God’s providence, two lines develop in Genesis 4. Cain will have a line – which is all bad. But Adam and Eve have another son, Seth, who will be the line through which we get Abraham, and Isaac – and eventually David and Jesus. Who will not just:

1. be our guide by way of his example.
2. And be our guide by way of his teachings;
3. He will be our savior by dying in our place.

H. A sermon series that examines the lives of Gideon, Ruth, Paul, Joseph, Cain – there is value there. We can learn by what others do right and do wrong. And we are fools if we do not learn from them.

I. But the Gospel is not this I do. It is this He did. We focus on the fact that God did send the seed of woman. It took a lot longer than anyone expected. Genesis 4 makes it clear that Adam and Eve were hoping that the promised savior – the Seed of Woman who was going to fix the mess they’d created - was their first born. It was not. It took many generations before – in the fulness of time, God sent his Son. But send him he did. And so, while we can learn from Ruth and Mary and Esther and Caleb and others. And we can and should learn from Cain – to not approach God as He did. What we rely on – the person we rest in - is Jesus.

J. Join with me in prayer as we prepare to come to this table.

¹ If we were reading this in Hebrew you would realize that Cain’s name (qayin) sounds like another Hebrew word – the one for create (qanah). So, there is a bit of pun here. Perhaps the first ever. (When two different words make the same sound they are called a paronomasia).

² The Hebrew word here is *hebel*.

³ Ps. 144:4; James 4:14

⁴ We have no idea how much time transpired between Cain’s birth and Abel’s. The population of the planet appears to have doubled – but, as noted, we cannot say that for sure because there are a lot of other people who will become part of the story.

⁵ Some suggest that “tilling the ground” – which was related to the curse, was a lesser occupation. But there is no reason to think that. Both are noble. The point appears to be that there was a bit of a division of labor.

⁶ The Hebrew term is *minchab*.

⁷ The word that is used here is used of gifts given to superiors – especially kings. The expression is “to express recognition of authority and submission to that authority.” (Jim Bordwine, Studies in Genesis 1 – 11, Sermon 22: The Doctrine of the Sacrifice (part 2).

⁸ Later on God will establish grain offerings – as a way of thanking God for the provision of food. There is nothing wrong with grain offerings, but it was not the right offering for the occasion.

⁹ The phrase in Hebrew is a bit elaborate. “He brought the fattest of this firstlings of his flock.”

¹⁰ Exodus 34:26.

¹¹ We will see this same principle later in Scripture – where God will say to the Jews that he does not want their sacrifices, even if they are being offered in the correct way, because their hearts and lives are so far from him.

¹² The term used for murder here (*harag*) is a particularly brutal term.

¹³ It should be noted that this curse was limited to Cain – and was not passed on to future generations as the earlier curses were.

¹⁴ The New Testament will even use his name in that way. Jude 11 talks about how bad things will be for false teachers by stating, “Woe to them! They have gone the way of Cain.” And John writes, “Cain was of the evil one and slew his brother. And for what reason did he slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother’s were righteous.” (I John 3:12)