



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Even God Can Be a Troublemaker

SCRIPTURE:
Genesis 4:1-16

May 21, 2023 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Once again, we come to one of these early Biblical myths that describes with profound insight the realities of being human. Their names here are Cain and Abel, but in the right circumstance, we find our own names in this story. So, what does this story about us mean?

It's a story about brothers and brothers have had issues for a long time. Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery. Jacob snookered Esau out of his birthright. And you know what happens with Cain and Abel.

I've told you before of the time my little brother Jim was taking a bath. The bathroom was on the second floor. He thought he was alone in the house, but I slipped in very quietly. I then began to make noises in the house. He heard me. "Tom, is that you?" I didn't say anything. Then I began to scratch on the door and make strange sounds. Scared this kid to death. When I finally broke through the door, he wasn't there. He had crawled out the window and was hanging from the awning over the front door.

Unfortunately, that was the very moment my mother came home and saw her youngest hanging off the front of the house wearing nothing but soap suds. She took one look at me with daggers in her eyes and said, "Go to your room." That was my primary form of punishment in those days. I was in my room for most of the Nixon administration.

My brother Jim is a pilot now. We have another brother, Gene, who has special needs. I was on the phone with Gene this week and told him that I was coming to visit him next month. He asked if I was flying. I said, "Yes. Maybe I'll get on the plane and I'll hear, 'This is your captain, James Are.' Gene, what do you think about that?" He said, "Brother (or

Bwuddah), you better get off that plane. Just drive."

Brothers can be hard on each other; sisters too, from what I can see. It's been that way a long time. But at least in my family, we haven't killed each other, which sets us apart from Cain and Abel.

Cain was a farmer. When harvest came in, Cain made an offering to God. The text doesn't say why he made an offering. He was just grateful, I suppose. The impulse to worship is pretty deep.

Abel, his baby brother, was a rancher. Abel also came to worship and brought his offering. It was there at church that the trouble occurred. For after church, instead of going to First Watch for brunch, Cain takes Abel out in the field and kills him. What happens between worship and murder is God. Everything was fine until God accepts Abel's offering but has no regard for Cain's offering.

Why did God do this? At the end of the day, I don't think we know. Some say the problem with Cain's offering is that he brought grain while Abel brought meat.¹ God, they say, is no vegan, but prefers barbecue. But that makes no sense, for it was God who said, "You may eat of any tree in the garden." It must be something else.

Some have said it's not what Cain brought, but the quality. It says Abel brought the "fat portions." One scholar claims, while Abel brought the best, Cain's offering was a "minimal offering."² But the story doesn't say that Cain's offering was inadequate. They brought what they had to bring. They brought the fruits of their labor.

Others say the problem wasn't in the gifts, but in the giver. John Calvin asserted that Cain's heart was not right. That Cain wasn't truly genuine.³ Well, it doesn't say that. So, unless Calvin had a conversation

1 Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis* (1972) p. 104.

2 E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (1964) p. 30.

3 Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (1982) p. 56.

with Cain himself, he seems to be stretching it a bit too far.

Of course, we have invented explanations because we don't want to believe that God did this for no good reason. But if I understand the text, that's what it teaches. The story is brutally honest about life. We want everything to be fair. We don't want to live in a world where things can happen at random. Explanations show us that the world hangs together, and furthermore, explanations give us a bit of control. We love that.

For example, we tell ourselves to work hard, do our homework, stay out of trouble and we will get a good job. But some do all of that and there is no job—or not one on which they can survive. Why does it work for one person and not another?

The doctor says, "Keep your weight down, watch your cholesterol, exercise and you will live forever." But disease can strike with unscrupulous randomness. How do we explain that?

We want there to be reasons for everything. But life does not treat us all the same. And when imbalance occurs, often explanations are silent.

Danny Martin was my best friend in third grade. One fall afternoon we met in the treehouse that straddled our backyards. "Whatcha wanna do?" I asked. "Nothing." "Do you want to throw the football?" "Nah." "Ride bikes? We could play Adam-12?" (We used clothespins to pin playing cards to our bikes so when they rubbed against the wheel spokes they sounded 'just like' a motorcycle.) "Wanna do that?" "Not today," he said.

Out of nowhere, he said, "My dad doesn't live here anymore." We looked at each other in a way kids can look at each other. Adults would have to look away, glance at the ground, but not kids. We just looked at each other. "I think it's my fault," he said. It never dawned on me that it wasn't his fault. In part because I knew him well enough to know that lots of things were his fault. But more importantly, I desperately wanted to believe that I didn't live in a world where things like this happen to kids at random. There must be fault or a purpose or a reason. But it doesn't always work that way.

The truth of this passage requires wisdom because sometimes there are injustices that we can repair. Sometimes there are wrongs that we can make right

and when that is the case, we should do everything we can to bring healing. But this passage speaks to another reality of life. Sometimes things are just not equal. If we benefit, it is not always because we have earned it. And if we do not benefit, it is not always because we don't deserve it. Sometimes life just disappoints us. Sometimes it's just the way things are and we need to be at peace with it.

Some receive blessings that others do not. Some excel at school and never need to crack a book, and others struggle and struggle and it never comes easily. Some walk through life as leaders of people and others just follow. Some can do things with a ball or a paintbrush or a guitar or a hammer and others may try but the gift never comes. It's just the way of life. There is no explanation given.

Life is not the same for all of us. We may not like that, but it is honest. Sometimes that is no big deal, but other times, it is deadly. When it hurts, our first response is to try to explain it, which often proves futile. And then the danger comes: We blame the blessed for something they have nothing to do with. We invite them out into the field.

This text does not explain to us the ways of life in God's world; it just names the reality of life in community. Life with others. And cautions us to pay attention to who we are when life disappoints us.

It is in this moment with Cain that God shows up. God says, "Why are you angry? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it."

It is clear that God's interest is not the offering, but in how Cain responds to the life he has been given. God asks, "Cain, who will you be in this moment of disappointment?" This is why I say it is a story about all of us because life is going to disappoint us. So, who will you be then?

I said in my eNote on Friday that this story reminded me of my tryouts for the school musical. We were doing "West Side Story." I tried out for the part of Tony. He had the best songs and got to kiss Maria, and everyone knew Diane would be Maria, so who wouldn't want that?

But I didn't get it. No, they gave that part to Ken Reid. Of course, he could sing like an angel without even trying. And he was beautiful. And all the girls

loved him. Of course, he got the part.

I thought: Forget it, I don't even want to be in this stupid musical. I ended up being in it, but in the moment, I wanted to say to Ken Reid, "Come, let us go out into the field." Because I wanted to blame him for something that was never his fault. Disappointment can do that to us.

If I understand the text, it names the reality that life will disappoint you from time to time. There's not

always a reason. And there is not always someone to blame, unless you wish to blame God.

So God urges us to pay attention—to make peace with what we cannot change. Don't blame others for blessings over which they have no control. No, in that moment, pay attention. Because the thing you can't avoid is that life will disappoint you. And when life disappoints, you don't want to let disappointment destroy the good that is in you.