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Genesis 4:1-5

14th Message

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PRESENTING OURSELVES TO GOD

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

The story of Cain and Abel is among the most famous in the Bible. It has provided inspiration for artists and writers. The story has entered our language. Who does not know the phrase, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” From this story has sprung the idiom “raising Cain,” which in turn has inspired movies and songs. John Steinbeck used the story of Cain and Abel as the organizing motif for his novel *East of Eden*, spinning out the story to nearly 800 pages. Yet the original is brief: just sixteen verses. It is a masterful piece of writing. So much is covered in these sixteen verses that we will spend three weeks on them. You may wonder how we can spend three weeks on this story, but I’m wondering how I’ll be able to cover this story in only three weeks. [I wasn’t able! It took four weeks.]

This is a story about two brothers, but they aren’t just any brothers: these are the first two brothers. Furthermore, they’re archetypal brothers, representative of two ways of living life. In the previous chapter the Lord had announced that he would place enmity between the serpent and the woman, and between the serpent’s seed and the woman’s seed (3:15). Henceforth there would be two seeds: the serpent’s seed through whom Satan would work out his evil destructive purposes on earth, and the woman’s seed through whom God would work out his good constructive purposes on earth. The next several chapters show the contrast and interaction between these two seeds.

Cain and Abel are brothers, the offspring of the same parents. The narrative does everything possible to present them side by side as brothers. But at a certain point they take different directions. Physically they are the same seed, but spiritually they are different seeds. They are archetypal of these two seeds. This is why this story has such power today and has inspired so much reflection. This short ancient story still speaks volumes. In Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*, three characters are discussing this story. Says one, “No story has power, nor will it last, unless we feel in ourselves that it is true and true of us.” Says another, “Two stories have haunted us and followed us from our beginning... We carry them along with us like invisible tails—the story of original sin and the story of Cain and Abel.” Then of the latter he says, “such a little story to have made so deep a wound.”¹ We live in a very different environment than Cain and Abel, but, as Steinbeck knew, their ancient story still speaks to us because it rings true. In terms of good and evil our environments are not so different.

The first people to whom this story spoke were the Israelites. These early chapters of Genesis are their pre-history, showing what the world was like before God called Abraham to be the father of a new nation. They show what life was like when lived east of Eden. Living east of Eden humanity sank ever deeper into evil as the serpent’s seed multiplied: Cain killed Abel, the sons of God took the daughters of men to wife resulting in the Nephilim, and humanity concentrated its evil in building the tower of Babel. These stories are the backdrop for the call of Abraham. God allowed evil to spread, but only up to a certain point. Then he stepped in by calling Abra-

ham to begin a new society, a society of the woman’s seed who were to live life according to God’s design. The story of Cain and Abel was intended to be archetypal for Israel, showing the way of life to imitate and the way of life to avoid.

The story remains archetypal for us today who are spiritually the descendants of Abraham. Cain and Abel still speak. The New Testament tells us that “by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead” (Heb 11:4), and warns us, “Do not be like Cain” (1 John 3:12).

The framework of chapter 4 is a genealogy. It begins in verse 1 with the birth of Cain, resumes in verse 17 with the birth of Cain’s descendants, and concludes with the birth of Seth (25-26). In between the genealogy is interrupted twice with the stories of Cain and Abel (2b-16) and of Lamech (19-24). It is always worth paying special attention to what is inserted into genealogies: we’ll see this again in chapters 5 and 10.

Two sons (4:1-2a)

Adam made love to 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.” Later she gave birth to his brother Abel. (Gen 4:1-2a TNIV)

The story opens with a brief genealogy. “Adam knew his wife Eve.” A generation ago the NIV helped us out with the idiom, rendering it, “Adam lay with his wife.” The TNIV has gone a step further for today’s generation: “Adam made love to his wife.” As a result, Eve conceived and bore a son, the very first human ever conceived and born. In the previous chapter Adam had “named his wife Eve (*Chava*, meaning “living”), because she would become the mother of all the living” (3:20). Through his grace God allows life to continue among a humanity now subject to death. This life is procreated through the physical intimacy of a man knowing his wife, an action which also unites the two as one flesh. At times the church has been embarrassed that this is how life is produced, but there need be no embarrassment. God has ordained such intercourse both for the uniting of two as one flesh and for the procreation of life. Both results are ordained by him and are not to be trivialized by humanity.

Eve names her firstborn Cain, saying, “I have brought forth a man with the help of the Lord.” What does she mean by this? This is the first of about five phrases in this short narrative that present challenges for the translator and exegete. For those able to read this story in Hebrew this adds further interest to a story that is already interesting enough. Those who have read Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* might know that one of these ambiguities lies at the core of that book.

Each part of Eve’s short statement presents problems. Does the verb mean acquired, brought forth, or even created? Why does she call this child a “man”? And what role does she see for the Lord? The verb is not the usual one for begetting, but it seems to have that sense here, with the emphasis on what Eve has gotten. The name she gives

her son, *Qayin*, is significant not for any intrinsic meaning but for its similarity in sound to this verb, *qanah*. We can achieve the effect by saying that she called him *Cain*, saying, “I have *gained*...” Perhaps she thought that this would be the seed the Lord had promised in the previous chapter. Though Eve does acknowledge some role for the Lord, her focus is on what she has done: “Look what I’ve gained.” She, not the Lord, is center-stage. By the end of the chapter she will have a different attitude. When she names her replacement son Seth her focus will be on what the Lord has done: “God has granted me another child” (4:25). The tragic loss of her two sons, one to death, the other to exile, will shift her focus from self to God.

The birth of Eve’s second son is given more briefly. The narrator sees more significance in his being Cain’s brother than Eve’s son. Seven times we will be told that he is Cain’s brother. His name Abel is given without any explanation. It will prove to be a very significant name, but we’ll have to wait for the story itself to illuminate the name.

Now the narrator breaks into the genealogy to give us the story of these two brothers. Skipping over their childhood, he presents them to us as adults.

Two brothers (4:2b-5a)

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 also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. (4:2b-5a)

Having started with the births of Cain then Abel, the narrator continues with Abel then Cain, Cain then Abel, and finally Abel then Cain. Switching back and forth like this presents us the brothers side by side three times: in their occupations, in their offerings, and in the Lord’s response to those offerings. It’s a skillful piece of writing. Unfortunately this skill was not appreciated when the narrative was later broken into verses. These divisions were made based on the names, so that, for example, verse 4 contains Abel twice. Instead each verse should contain both names with the order reversing each time: Abel–Cain, Cain–Abel, Abel–Cain.

Abel and Cain are presented side by side in their occupations: Abel as a keeper of flocks, Cain as a worker of the ground. One occupation is not inferior to the other. Both the keeping of flocks and the tilling of the soil will be suitable occupations for the Israelites. There is no hint of rivalry between shepherds and farmers.

Next Cain and Abel are presented side by side in their offerings. At the end of a period of time they each brought an offering to the Lord. Presumably it was the end of the agricultural year when the harvest was in and the flocks had produced their offspring.

How did they know to bring an offering to the Lord? Perhaps their parents had told them about the Lord. But even had they not, they should have known. As Paul wrote to the Romans, evidence for God is clearly visible in the universe (Rom 1:18-25). Throughout history there has been within most people an awareness of a transcendent power beyond themselves. The best efforts of Voltaire and Rousseau, of Dawkins and Hitchens have not been able to eradicate this.

In the garden Adam and Eve had easy access to the Lord for they were living in his sanctuary. Expulsion from the garden stripped them of this access. But the Lord was still accessible; he could still be

approached. Both Cain and Abel understood that he could be approached, and that it was not fitting to approach him empty-handed. They each brought a gift.

Quite naturally each offering consisted of the fruit of their occupation: Cain brought grain, Abel brought animals. Again, one is not inferior to the other. A common misinterpretation is that Abel’s offering was superior because it was an animal sacrifice. But the offering they brought did not require an animal sacrifice. Their offering was a *minhab*, a tribute offering. Later on for Israel it was quite acceptable to bring grain as a tribute offering.

How did Cain and Abel know that they should bring a tribute offering to the Lord? We’re not told, but their minds, hearts and consciences should have instructed them to do so. A tribute is a present that an inferior brings to a superior; it is an acknowledgement of that vertical space between the two parties. As created humans it was fitting that Cain and Abel bring tributes to the Lord who was their creator. As workers it was fitting that they bring tributes to the one who had given them fruitful crops and flocks.

A tribute is focused on the one to whom the gift is given: it is given in appreciation for whom the recipient is. A tribute is sacrificial: Cain and Abel both voluntarily surrendered some of their produce. A tribute is not self-interested: it is not offered in the hopes of getting something back. A tribute is given for the pleasure of the other party, but in the pleasure of the recipient lies the pleasure of the giver. A tribute is an act of worship, of ascribing worth to the other party, of paying homage to the one to whom homage is due. Our word “worship” means to ascribe worth. The Hebrew equivalent is to “give glory”; the word for glory (*kavod*) is from the word for weight. In ascribing glory or worth to God we acknowledge that he has weight.

Our call to worship this morning ties all these ideas together:

Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;

bring an offering (*minhab*) and come into his courts.

Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness. (Ps 96:8-9a)

The psalmist calls on not just Israel but all nations to come before the Lord this way. Our opening hymn continued the theme: “Praise, my soul, the King of heaven, to his feet your tribute bring.”

Had they been genuine acts of worship, the offerings of both Cain and Abel would have been worthy tributes, the one from the ground, the other from the flock. But there was a subtle difference between their two offerings. Cain brought some of the fruit of the ground, but Abel brought some of the firstborn of his flock and, even more specifically, their fatty portions. In two ways we are told that Abel brought the best of his produce. Later on Israel would be told that all the firstborn belonged to the Lord and were to be given to him. The firstborn animals were offered to the Lord. The firstborn sons were redeemed: the first generation of firstborn in exchange for the Levites and subsequent generations in exchange for a redemption price. As for the fatty portions it is hard for us in our health-conscious age to see these as the choicest parts. But if you’ve been to more traditional parts of the world you might have been offered fat as a delicacy. For Israel the fatty portions were the choicest portions which were to be offered to the Lord, for “all the fat is the LORD’s” (Lev 3:16).

“Unfair,” cry some, “how was Cain supposed to know what to bring the Lord?” But it’s of the very nature of a tribute offering that you bring the best. The offerings of Cain and Abel reflected their heart. So the writer to the Hebrews can say, “By faith Abel brought

a better offering than Cain did” (Heb 11:4). Abel’s faith was a correct understanding of the relationship between himself and the Lord. His tribute was an act of true worship. Emptying himself of self, he had eyes only for the Lord. He gave sacrificially of his best but with no thought that he was making any sacrifice because his eyes were on the Lord.

Cain withheld the best of his produce: his offering was not from the firstfruits of his crops. Why did he not bring the Lord his best? Perhaps he was too conscious of the sacrifice he was making in giving up some of the produce of his hard labor. Perhaps he viewed this as a duty which could be minimally discharged. Perhaps he thought that God wouldn’t know the difference. Whatever his reason there was one common element: self had intruded into his worship, so that it was no longer purely God-focused. It was thus no longer true worship. He had too high an opinion of himself and too low an opinion of God. He therefore did not have faith. He was not ascribing true weight or worth or glory to the Lord.

This intrusion of self into our lives is an ever-present danger. We come to Christ out of ourselves and thereby find our true selves. God puts his Spirit in us to wean us off of self and onto himself, but this is a lifetime process: our old selves are constantly seeking to reassert themselves, to reinsert themselves back into our lives.

Friday was the 500th anniversary of the birth of John Calvin. Here’s how he begins his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*:

Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other. . . . Every person, therefore, on coming to the knowledge of himself, is not only urged to seek God, but is also led as by the hand to find him.²

Knowledge of God and knowledge of self go hand in hand. Knowledge of self should propel us to seek God. Abel had a right understanding of himself and God; Cain had a faulty understanding. The one had faith, the other did not. Though the brothers were side by side in presenting their offerings they had taken different paths. They were no longer the same seed.

Sensitive now to the fundamental difference between the offerings of the two brothers and the inner state that these offerings expressed, we should not be surprised to see the Lord’s response. Still the brothers were side by side as the Lord gazed upon both them and their offerings. Upon one he gazed with approval; upon the other he did not. It was not just Abel’s offering that was pleasing but Abel himself. It was not just Cain’s offering that was not pleasing but Cain himself. The Lord saw through the offerings into the heart of the offerer. Offerings themselves are meaningless if the heart of the offerer is not right. The value lies not in the offering but in the offerer.

The Lord saw Abel’s heart. Therefore, “By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings” (Heb 11:4). “Righteous” means that God considered Abel to be in right relationship with him, to be living appropriately to their relationship. His offering was external evidence of an internal faith.

Later in Israel some understood this connection between offerer and offering but others did not. David, even after his dual sins of adultery and murder, remained a man with a right heart. As he sought to get right again with the Lord, he understood that the state of his heart was more important than any sacrifice he might bring:

**You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.
My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart
you, God, will not despise. (Ps 51:16-17)**

A few centuries later it was the people of Judah who were wondering how to get right with God again:

**With what shall I come before the LORD
and bow down before the exalted God?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousand rivers of oil?
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? (Mic 6:6-7)**

Micah told them that none of this was what the Lord was really after. What the Lord wanted was an inner state of heart as evidenced by how his people treated both one another and himself:

**He has shown all you people what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God. (Mic 6:8)**

Micah’s contemporary Isaiah was much more blunt with the people: “Stop bringing meaningless offerings!” (Isa 1:13). Meaningful offerings flow from hearts of faith. Therefore, seemingly insignificant offerings can be much more meaningful to the Lord than the most ostentatious ones, as illustrated by the story of “the widow’s mite”:

As Jesus looked up, he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. “Truly I tell you,” he said, “this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.” (Luke 21:1-4; cf. Mark 12:41-44)

You men who were at this year’s Men’s Retreat may remember a story, a modern parable, told by our speaker Reed Jolley. It struck me at the time, and I came across it again in Tim Keller’s book *The Prodigal God*.

Once upon a time a gardener grew an enormous carrot. He presented it to the king, saying, “This is the best carrot I’ll ever grow; I give it to you as a token of my love and respect for you.” He turned to leave. But the king discerned the man’s heart and said, “I own the land next to yours; I’ll give it to you to garden as well.” One of the king’s nobles saw this and thought he could do better. The next day he brought the king a beautiful horse, saying, “This is the best horse I’ll ever raise; I give it to you as a token of my love and respect for you.” The king discerned his heart, thanked him, took the horse and dismissed him. When the noble was perplexed the king said, “The gardener was giving *me* the carrot, but you were giving *yourself* the horse.”³

The intrusion of self diminishes the meaning of any offering we bring to the Lord. The surrender of self gives meaning to anything we bring. Of course, when we surrender self we surrender any concern about the value of what we bring. It is only when self intrudes that we are so concerned. Because Cain was thinking of self his response is not too surprising.

One angry brother (4:5b)

So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. (4:5b)

The narrator shows us only Cain's response; there is no need to show Abel's response. How did Cain know that the Lord did not look with favor on himself or his offering? Some have tried to read between the lines by saying that the Lord caused fire to fall from heaven and consume Abel's offering but not his own. It's unnecessary to read this into the story. All Cain had to do was look over at his brother Abel. There he would have seen a worshiper with his gaze upon the Lord, giving himself and his best to the Lord with no thought of self. If Cain had any conscience he would have realized a gulf both between himself and God and between himself and Abel. But rather than choose the path of humble repentance, he chose the path of anger and resentment. In that moment he was estranged from his brother Abel, and further estranged from God. In that moment he identified further with the seed of the serpent, an identification that had begun with his choice of offering.

The entire scene is effectively captured by Annie Vallotton, the Swiss artist who drew the 500 or so line drawings for the *Good News Bible* back in the 1970s. In the background stands Abel beside his altar, gazing up into heaven with his eyes on the Lord. His outstretched hands express his surrender to the Lord. In the foreground stands Cain beside his altar. His arms are folded in on himself, his eyes are on his brother, and his face wears a thick scowl. This simple drawing captures the profound dynamics of these three verses.

If Abel, with his limited knowledge, knew how to approach God in faith, how much more should we to whom the Scriptures have revealed so much more about God and about ourselves. Abel knew the Lord as Creator and as the one who had prospered his flock. We know him as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who emptied himself and surrendered himself so completely to his Father to deliver us from sin and death. We know him as the one who has put his Spirit in us to deliver us from ourselves, to remake us into the image of God in Christ, that we might become our true selves.

We no longer bring offerings of grain or lambs. Instead we present our whole selves to God as those who have been brought from death to life (Rom 6:13). This surrender of ourselves is our true worship (Rom 12:1).

Both Cain and Abel presented their offerings to the Lord, but only Abel was really presenting *himself* to the Lord. By faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead. Let us not be like Cain.

*The LORD bless you
and keep you;
the LORD make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
the LORD turn his face toward you
and give you peace. (Num 6:24-26)*

1. John Steinbeck, *East of Eden* (New York: Penguin, 1986 [1952]), 350-352.
2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) §1.1.1, 35-37.
3. Abbreviated from Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 60-62.

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