

Genesis 1-11

Cain - R - Us

Chapter 4:1-24

October 29, 2006

On Tuesday I was reading an article in the NY Times about the abundance of new wealth in Khartoum, Sudan. They showed pictures of well-dressed laughing young people eating luxurious meals in air-conditioned cafes and buying \$165,000 BMW's. Meanwhile, a mere 600 miles away the world is watching one of the worst crises of the past decade as thousands of people are being starved, persecuted and murdered. As I read the article and prepared for this message on Genesis 4 I felt outrage and I said to myself, *these are exactly the kind of people described in Genesis 4. These people are just like Cain.* Then a few days later, I was driving by Port Jeff Station where there's a tiny storefront Hispanic Church. For nearly four years I've driven by this simple, poor church and for nearly four years I've felt a little nudge from God saying, "Stop and check it out. They might need some help." And then I'd think about trying to eke out a living on Long Island as a migrant family. I'd think about the families that live in the woods only three miles from my house and the Hispanic teenagers lost in gang life – but then I'd always say, "Yea, sure, later, God." So on Wednesday I finally stopped at that storefront church and looked in the window. There were empty boxes and garbage strewn on the floor. The church was obviously closed and the pastor had left town. Now, I don't have a nice moral to this story except to say this: maybe life isn't as simple as I thought. Maybe I have more in common with those well-dressed rich young people in Khartoum. And maybe there's more "Cain" in my heart than I'd like to admit.

Perhaps that sounds depressing, but I want to jar us out of the common view that Genesis 4 contains a simple, flat, moralistic tale about good guys and bad guys. Abel is the good guy; Cain is the bad guy. And we all know we're NOT like Cain so I guess that makes us good guys, and because we're the good guys, we can go home a little more smug and secure. That's the way I used to read this story. But now I find this story much more messy and disturbing - and more hopeful and joyful - than I ever dared to imagine.

As we walk through this story we'll repeatedly find two realities that exist side-by-side: on one side there's human sin; on the other side there's God's grace and power of redemption. You know, almost every story in the Bible boils down to those two things: Sin and grace. They also stick together in us – in our marriages, our families, our schools, our work places. But here's the hope for us today: it's precisely out of the mess of human sin that God brings the glory of redemption and grace.

Look at how sin and grace intertwine in Genesis 4:

Scene #1: The story begins in chapter 4:1-2 and right away we pick up a few clues that there's something wrong with the dynamics in this family. Notice: when Cain is born, the oldest son in a culture that valued men and often devalued women, his mother cries out a note of praise and triumph, "With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man." The name Cain means "to get or to create." Then, almost as a footnote, we read in verse 2, "O, yea, and by the way, later she also gave birth to his brother Abel." Did you notice

who Abel is? He's Cain's brother. Then we learn that Cain enters the family business; he becomes a farmer like daddy. Apparently, Cain was raised as the family's shining star. These are only clues, but we will see Cain acting like a spoiled brat.

Scene #2: In verse 3, the two brothers show up for a worship service. (Read verses 3-4). Each brought an offering appropriate to his job, but we're told that "the Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor." There's nothing wrong with the material – an animal offering isn't better than a basket of fruit and vegetables, but there was something wrong with Cain. His response will reveal the heart behind his worship. Do you see how easily worship – which is all about God – can become manipulation – which is all about us? Worship is no longer a public way for us to all lay our lives down in love, adoration and joyful service; it's just another avenue to get my way. And this isn't just Cain's story; at times this is the state of our heart.

God confronts Cain about his bad attitudes. For Cain this is perfect opportunity to grow up, release some bad attitudes and allow God to change his heart. Basically, God tells Cain, "Look, it's a beautiful basket of apples and gourds, but your heart isn't into worship. So I'm giving your brother an A and I'm flunking you in Worship 101. But here's the good news: you can retake the course. I'll give you another chance." At this point Cain has a choice: he can listen to God, learn, change, and grow up; or he can throw a pity party and choose to stay ticked off. He chooses the pity party.

There's an underlying lesson for us here: don't come to Jesus if you want to stay stuck in your bad attitudes and behaviors. He loves you as you are but he won't let you stay that way. Jesus will mess with you. It's God's idea to make life a long, hard, delightful, exhilarating journey of spiritual transformation. It's part of our sinful disposition to demand that we stay stuck. God wants to "un-stick" us and sometimes that only happens through pain. God graciously confronted Cain with the painful truth about his heart condition and it pierced like a knife. Sometimes we hear the hard truth about ourselves and it hurts. About six months ago my oldest son came to me and told me something about my role as a father that pierced my heart. It took a great deal of courage on his part. Initially, I thought, "Where did this kid get so much courage and truth and love?" And then I resented the truth about my heart condition. But behind his words I saw God's invitation to wake me up from sin. Sin is like a cozy down bed on a very cold Saturday morning. You just want to stay under the covers and sleep a little longer. Just leave me alone. Sin lulls us, woos us, comforts us and when someone comes to rip us out of our cozy place – OUR cozy place where we get OUR way – we resent it, even when it's God that does the pulling. One of the most important questions of life is this: how will we respond when God starts messing with our lives? How will we respond when God starts yanking us out of our comfort places, our places of stuckness and security, and he issues us a summons to grow up?

So God comes to Cain in the midst of his pity party and drills him with questions, "Why are you angry? Why are you so unhappy?" And then God says something very interesting about sin: "sin is crouching at the door and it desires to master you, but you must master it." Here sin is pictured like a wild animal (the same word is used for a

crouching lion ready to pounce on its prey). Sin is an aggressive force ready to pounce on us. The New Testament picks up on this theme and also presents a powerful picture of sin. Sin is not just bad stuff we do. It isn't just drinking too much or spending too much or thinking the wrong thoughts or saying harsh words to your children or your friends. Sin is a power. Sin makes us prisoners and slaves (see Romans 6:1-23). You may wonder: why do I keep going back to that bad habit or that sin? Because it's your master. Because it's like a lion that's just waiting to pounce on you. But here's the key: you must master it. In other words, we're still responsible for our sin. We're still moral, responsible human beings. Now some of you have been truly victimized by life: rape or sexual abuse or physical abuse or the divorce of your parents or a hundred other things that can wound our hearts. God has a special place in his heart for victims and the broken-hearted. But the Bible also says – and this applies to every one – you are not first and foremost a victim of life; you are a fugitive from God, a sinner. So none of us will stand before God and say, "It was my wife's fault or my husband's fault or my parent's fault. That's why I couldn't love and trust and obey you." That's what sin does it attacks us, it turns us into slaves, it's powerful and aggressive.

Scene #3 – Cain is at the crossroads now: he can cry out to God and ask for help in the battle against sin or he can stay stuck in his bitterness and anger and pity and grousing. He decides to keep grousing. So verse 8 – Now Cain said to his brother, 'Let's go out to the field.'" "In the field" implies that they will be out of range of help and that this is a premeditated act. Now remember: all of this occurs right after Cain has just exited church on a lovely Sunday morning, they've offered their best to God, Cain even heard God speak directly to him, but he leaves the worship service and he makes plans to murder his brother. Let's do a heart check: does worship change me? Am I different – more loving, kinder, gentler, more courageous, more passionate to tell others about Jesus, more in love with God, more in awe of God – because I've been in worship?

Scene #4: The heart of the story – with the mess of sin and the beauty of grace – is found right here. God comes with a question, so simple and so searing: Where is your brother? It's the second big question in Genesis. After Cain's father Adam sinned, God said, "Where are you?" It's an invitation. Now God asks Cain, "Where's your little brother, the one you were supposed to take care of?" When God asked Adam the question he was at least a little sheepish; he felt some shame. But now Cain responds with a bold-faced lie and hard-hearted sarcasm: "I don't know ... am I my brother's keeper?"

God gave Cain a chance to confess and come clean, but he's a first-class smart-aleck so God says, "What have you done?" "Listen!" Whenever you see the word "listen" it means "Pay attention" or "Look at me when I'm talking to you!" Then God says, "Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground." In the Old Testament the life of a person or an animal was in the blood. So Abel's life is crying out to God. God cares intensely about the shedding of innocent blood. Cain thought he could go to the field where no one would notice; God says, "I see your brother's blood in the ground; it's crying out to me from the soil."

So far we've just been looking at one side of this story, one category of reality called human sin. We're not quite done yet; we have one more notorious, smart-aleck, loud-mouth sinner in this passage. His name is Lamech and he's introduced in verse 19. This is the first time in the Bible when someone deviated from God's original plan for marriage. In Genesis 2:18 God had a very simple plan: one man and one woman. Now Lamech marries two women. God allows it but he doesn't endorse it. According to the Bible, every marriage arrangement that strays from God's pattern eventually creates more social chaos.

Then in verses 23-24 Lamech composes and sings a little song. It's an arrogant, pompous, violent song. We might say that this is an example of ancient Jewish gansta rap. "Adah and Zillah listen to me; wives of Lamech, hear my words..." Lamech will speak now. Prepare to listen to me, you lucky babes of Lamech. Read verse 24. A young thug thought he was tough so he cut me off in traffic but I blew him away. Lamech exalts vengeance. Don't get mad, get even. Jesus will mock Lamech. When Jesus was asked how many times we should forgive someone, Jesus told us to forgive 70x7. So rather than show revenge 77 times how about try forgiveness to the tune of 70x7?

Are we better than Lamech? Lamech slept with two women but at least he married them. In Lamech's culture if you slept with a woman you *were* married to her. By tying sex to marriage it was a way to provide for women and protect children. What about us? Are we better than Lamech? In our culture it's customary for young adults to talk about "buddy sex" or to say "I don't have time for a relationship, so of course I hook up." According to one recent study 55% of 11th graders had had sex with a casual acquaintance.¹ Are we better than Lamech? Or consider this: how many times have you been offended and hurt by someone and you struck back by hurting them just as bad or even worse? You've just chosen the way of Lamech and his great-great-great grandfather Cain.

So far we've explored the bad news side of our two realities. How does God respond to the reality of human sin? First, God judges sin. In verses 11 and 12 God issues a curse on Cain: the ground will be even more resistant to his farming techniques and, even worse, he will now be a restless wanderer on the earth. So Cain (see verse 16) is sent away into the land of Nod. This is the impact of sin on our lives: we're cut off from God, we become cut off from deep community with other human beings and we become cut off from our true selves. We become wanderers. We don't have roots that we need to live well and live deeply. We're rootless human beings. Our sin puts us under a curse.

But here's the amazing good news: God doesn't just leave us in the state of curse. God doesn't just leave us in the land of Nod, the land of wandering. Do you know where Nod is? Nod is all the times and places where we can't find God or even ourselves. Nod is the land that seems beyond hope or beyond redemption. It's the places where we feel weak and lost and helpless. When your marriage seems hopeless, when your children ignore you, when your parents abuse you, when your life is falling apart – that's the Land of Nod. Now here's the amazing thing: God pursues Cain into Nod. The God who calls

¹ See **On Paradise Drive**, by David Brooks, pages 165-166.

the world into being does not stop calling this broken man named Cain. God's pursuit of us and God's love for us is what the Bible calls grace.

How does grace manifest itself? Most Bible scholars talk about two kinds of grace: there's common grace and there's saving grace. Common grace is just that – it's common to every person on this planet. God showers it indiscriminately on the just and the unjust (see Matthew 5:43-48). Look at verses 17-22 for a picture of common grace. Notice verse 17. Do you realize the sheer grace of this scene? Here's Cain, the one who made a mess of his life, and what's he doing now? He's making love with his wife and they're having a baby. And then he's building a city. He's going out the construction site to work while his son grows up and Cain is so proud of him that he names the whole city after his son Enoch. Does Cain deserve this? No, he deserves death. He shed innocent blood, but God is so patient.

As a new Christian I often pondered this question: If sin is so bad then how do you explain all the goodness in the world? The Bible says that although we're sinners we also we're still image bearers of the good and glorious God. We reflect his glory and creativity. So in verses 19 we're introduced to the children of Lamech, the great-great-great grand children of Cain. One of them is a father of livestock. One of them is named Jubal (we get the word Jubilee from him) the father of musical instruments. Then there's Zillah's son Tubal-Cain "who forged all kinds of tools out of bronze and iron." Do any of you like tools, drool over tools, collect tools? Here's your hero – Tubal-Cain. And then there's Tubal-Cain's sister Naamah, a name that means lovely or beautiful. She's just a lovely person, a sweet, kind beautiful woman. Do you see all the goodness and energy and creativity in these verses? God's good creation allows for all of this. Music, art, dance, tools, construction, technology, sound, songs, beauty, feminine goodness and masculine goodness, farming and gardening and then feasting on it all – it's all good. God smiles on it. And showers common grace for all these descendents of Cain. Do you see how unfathomably good and kind and patient God is? He could be destroying us off the face of the earth on a yearly basis. Instead, God allows the arts to flourish and music and poetry.

That's common grace – and you live and breathe it's the air we breathe every second of our lives. (Examples). Then there's God's saving grace. In verse 13 Cain cries out, "My punishment is more than I can bear ... and whoever finds me will kill me." Now notice what God does: he promises to protect Cain. I hope we see how totally unexpected this is. Cain is a pampered, spoiled brat. He's uses worship to get his way. He's petty and sulky. He's violent; he murdered his younger brother in cold blood. And now he asks God for protection and God volunteers to be his protector. He places a mark on Cain as a sign of judgment (because Cain's sin should be judged) but also a sign of God's presence and grace. Now God makes a pact with Cain: You're a mess but no one's going to mess with you. What Cain should have done for his little brother, God now does for Cain. This is astounding mercy and grace, and it literally comes from nowhere – undeserved, surprising, and free.

All of this prefigures and foreshadows what followers of Jesus call “the Gospel” or the good news. Sin cannot and will not be ignored. We are no better than Cain - which means that we stand under a curse as well. But here’s the amazing thing: sin moves the heart of God not just to judge and condemn us but to save us and renew us and cleanse us and love us and embrace us. Last week I shared a verse from the New Testament which says, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.” In other words, when Jesus died on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our sin. Every sin was placed upon him. And then he gave us a new mark. Listen to Ephesians 1:13 – “When you believed, you were marked with him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.”

This is incredibly good news. When we turn from our sin, when we place our trust in Him, we don’t become better than everyone else, but it certainly changes us in four ways:

1. We become incredibly grateful – We’re amazed and in awe at what God has done for us. 1 John 3:1.
2. We become liberated – The New Testament says that the blood of Jesus speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. Remember the blood of Abel was crying out in judgment. The blood of Jesus cries out “I love you” and “I forgive you.” If you’re holding on to sin and guilt and condemnation, let them go.
3. We become accepting towards others – we can move towards people not away from them.
4. We become committed to sharing grace and justice.

We’ve been exploring sin and grace. Sin has a hold on us. It has the power to overtake us and to judge us. It places us under a curse. If you think you’re beyond it or if you assume that you don’t have to battle it every day, you’re mistaken. But there’s something greater than our sin: the grace of God. Do you know that amazing grace this morning?