

“Crying Out from the Ground”
Based on Gen 4:8-16 and Matt 5:21-26
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May 22, 2022

To be clear, Cain had his reasons. I didn't want to burden the lay reader with another endless passage, so we didn't hear about Cain's reasons, but he did have them. You'll remember, I hope, how both Cain and Abel made offerings to God, and how God appreciated Abel's, but not Cain's. Cain's offering was grain or vegetables, while Abel's was meat. God prefers meat, apparently. Both brothers seem to have naturally given from what they were producing, and to have given in order to please God, so it is no wonder that when God says Abel's offering is better, Cain is angry.

How Cain gets from angry to murderous is harder to understand. The anger and the killing seem to be the very same thing in the story—Cain is “very angry” one minute and the next minute Abel is dead.

It's true that in the story, no one has ever died before. There are actually rabbinic retellings of the story where someone has to explain to Eve what it means that her son is dead—he doesn't walk, he doesn't talk, he doesn't breathe. So, maybe Cain didn't realize what he was doing in killing his brother? Maybe he didn't realize that once dead, his brother would stay that way?

But in the story it seems pretty plain that Cain kills Abel because he *wants* to kill him. Cain is just that angry.

Once he has done it, though, Cain doesn't want to talk about it. God asks him where Abel is and Cain seems to get angry all over again. This reminds me of a moment when my nephews were little. I asked one of them where the other one was. “Todd,” I said, “where's Bryant?” “Nowhere,” he replied. Pretty sure he's *somewhere*, I thought.

But Cain doesn't answer God's question, “where is Abel?” except to say, “How should I know? Am I my brother's keeper?”

I think it was the author Joseph Heller who pointed out how much the Bible loves a good rhetorical question. These questions that aren't really looking for an

answer, that hang in the air, often, as in this case, ironic, maybe more meaningful than they were meant to be. *Am I my brother's keeper?*

When you say it out loud, you can see what the problem is. The problem is that the question has an answer, and the answer is yes. Yes, Cain, you are your brother's keeper. You are responsible for your brother. Certainly at this point in the human story when you and he are the only two brothers on the face of the earth, you're his keeper. When there are only four human beings, total, and it's only a matter of months or minutes since we got kicked out of paradise and had to fend for ourselves— so yes, you four are all responsible for one another. But it's a truth that continues beyond the small human world of Cain and Abel. The very smallness of this story of our beginnings reminds us--we all are responsible for one another. Yes, you are your brother's keeper, and he is yours. You are your sister's protector and caregiver and intercessor, and she is yours.

So that thing you did, Cain, when you got angry, that was really bad. Even though there are no actual rules written out yet, you already broke the biggie. Because you literally were not your brother's keeper. You were your brother's disposer. Instead of keeping him, you threw him away.

When I was in college, I worked for a semester cleaning the cages of mice and rabbits at some kind of lab at a university. I really have no idea what type of experiments they were doing; I'm sure I should have been more curious and probably morally outraged. I was 19 or 20 and I was just there for the hourly wage. But at the lab, they would occasionally be done with a generation of mice and they would talk about essentially killing that batch, but I noticed that they never said "killing." They used the word "dispatch." "We have to dispatch those mice." "They were dispatched this morning." I always wondered, if you're ok with the ethics of it, why do need a euphemism?

So this is the story of how Cain dispatched Abel. And the thing is, like the lab scientists, Cain can distance himself from his brother's life and death all he wants to—*I'm not my brother's keeper; I don't know where he is*--but it doesn't help. God still knows that Abel is dead and that Cain killed him. The earth itself knows and cooperates with God—accepting Abel's body and giving the dead man a voice—his blood cries out to me from the ground, God tells Cain. And it's the earth that punishes Cain—"you are cursed from the ground," God tells him, "which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. It will no longer yield its strength to you."

Jesus teaches that we need to guard ourselves not only against the sin of murder but against the building anger that feeds into murder. You know you're not supposed to kill, Jesus says. But what you don't seem to understand is that anger, alienation, grudges, and insults are going to lead to killing. Like murder, these things are also going to land you in hell, Jesus says, a hell of your own making. We may never commit murder, but our insult fuels someone else's anger and the fire burns hotter until someone gets killed. It's an incredibly challenging teaching, because Jesus is essentially saying that that burning hatred and the act of murder are the very same sin. And as we are told in the story of Cain, Jesus also tells us, there is no hiding that sin.

We can sugarcoat our gut level hatred. We can claim self-defense, and we are geniuses at making those claims, presenting ourselves as the victim. From Johnny Depp to Derek Chauvin, we love nothing more than to see ourselves as the victim even when we are clearly the aggressor.

"Replacement theory" is essentially a self-defense claim. What it isn't is a theory. Theories are subject to evidence or reason. What's called replacement theory is really a deep-seated fear -- the fear that white people are being systematically squeezed out of our historical position of social dominance. The story of a deep-seated, dark-skinned conspiracy that it tells is meant to justify a lack of love for our neighbors. I could talk about the logical flaws in the idea, but in a sense none of that really matters, because what we need to remember is this-- nothing in this world can justify a lack of love for our neighbors.

We are seduced into hostility, and by extension, into murder, by arguments that insist we have to choose which neighbor to love. We couch hostility for the neighbor as an expression of concern for our own kind. So the Buffalo shooter acted supposedly in concern for white people everywhere. We who are white need to look that concern in the eye and say no. Spare me your protection, for the sake of all that is holy.

Another classic and terrible example of wrong-headed concern was last week's cruel discussion of whether or not babies held in detention centers at the Mexico border should be given formula, now that there's a shortage. Please tell me that in the United States we don't have to choose which babies to feed, and which babies we will let die of starvation. We do not need to pit one beloved baby's life against another beloved baby's life. Get more formula out there, period.

Jesus' teaching on anger is disturbing, no doubt. It's a daunting task to somehow filter our own thoughts and emotions. So maybe we keep a principle or two in

mind. I suggest two principles to you this morning. Number one, a principle of what to reject. Reject any argument that seems based on the idea that someone else's people have to die, some group of other people must be dispatched, in order for my people to live. That's not how God set up the world and it is not a rule; it's a sin.

Try "love your neighbor" instead, as a principle. When we listen to the news, when we talk about other people in our community or in our country, when we hear arguments on government spending or on immigration and international aid, we must ask ourselves, in supporting this, am I loving my neighbor? We must remember Cain and not wait until after the fact to ask ourselves the question, in doing this, Am I my brother's keeper?