

Series: Our series of Online Worship
Sermon: The Mark of Cain

SCRIPTURE ~ Genesis 4:1-16

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." Later she gave birth to his brother Abel. 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. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

Then 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."

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.

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

The LORD said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth."

Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is more than I can bear. Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me."

But the LORD said to him, "Not so; if anyone kills Cain, he will suffer vengeance seven times over." Then the LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. So Cain went out from the LORD's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Sermon

A traveler's car broke down near a monastery late one night. With no place else to go, he walked to the monastery and explained his situation. The monks graciously invited him to spend the night, gave him something warm to drink, and even repaired his car. During the night, the man heard a strange sound. The next morning, he asked the monks about it. "We can't tell you, you're not a monk," they replied. The man was disappointed, but thanked them for their hospitality and went on his way.

Some years later, the same traveler had car problems in front of the same monastery. Once again, the monks were happy to give him a place to stay, feed him, and fix his car. And during the night, he heard the same strange noise that he had heard years earlier. The next morning, he asked again, "What was that noise I heard

during the night?” The monks replied, “We can’t tell you, you’re not a monk.” The traveler said, “All these years I’ve wondered about that sound. I’m dying to know what it is. So how do I become a monk?”

The monks explained, “First, you must travel the earth and learn to speak the language of every culture and tribe that exists in the world. Then you must do one kind deed for every man, woman, and child on the planet. Finally, you must climb to the top of the highest mountain and count the number of stars that exist in the heavens. When you have done all this, you will be well on your way toward becoming a monk.”

Undaunted, the man accepted the task. Some forty-five years later, he returned to the monastery and knocked on the door. “I have traveled the earth and learned more than six thousand languages. I have performed kind deeds for six billion people. I almost froze to death on the highest mountain, where I learned that there are more than 17 trillion stars.” The monks were amazed. “Congratulations,” they said. “You are very close to being a monk of the highest order. We shall now take you to the source of the sound.” They led the man to a wooden door, where one of the monks said, “The sound is right behind that door.” The man tried to open the door, but it was locked. “How do I open it?” he asked. “You must first memorize the Old Testament,” the monks told him. The man went into his room and, in a matter of just a few months, memorized the entire Old Testament. In return, he was given the key to the wooden door. Upon opening the door, he encountered another door made of brass. It was locked. “To receive the key,” the monks said, “you must memorize the new testament.” Frustrated, the man went back into his room to memorize the New Testament. Within a few months, he had the key to the brass door. Again, the monks accompanied him to the source of the strange and beautiful sound. After unlocking it, he found a gold door that again, was locked. The monks said, “This is the last door. But to receive the key, you must spend one year in the dungeon, with only bread and water to sustain you.” The man endured his one year in the prison. Tired and weary, he was once again taken to the source of the sound. With trembling hands, the man unlocked the door, turned the knob and opened it. Behind it lay the source of the sound. And without a doubt, it was worth all those years of suffering and pain. Want to know what it was? Sorry, I can’t tell you. You’re not a monk.

It’s frustrating when people withhold information from you, isn’t it? We want to know everything. Unfortunately, some things will remain a mystery. For example, we don’t always know why God does what he does or why things happen that we can’t explain. We don’t know when life will get back to normal. When will we have in person church again? Will we have online school in the fall? Is my job safe? Will I or anyone I know get sick? We have a faith that says we will know the answers some day, but for now, we must be content with the mystery. If that long story frustrated you just a little bit, that was a taste of the frustration I had this past week in preparing for this sermon. It’s a frustrating text because there were two questions that I want answered. But first, let’s take a look at this familiar story.

After Adam and Eve were kicked out of the garden, God blessed Eve with the ability to produce children. Before this, Eve wasn’t named Eve, the Bible just says “the woman” without her having a name. Eve means “living” in Hebrew, showing that all of humanity will come from her womb. If you think that’s strange, Adam’s name means “dust” or “dirt” in Hebrew, since God made him from the clay of the earth. Eve bears a Son and calls him Cain. Which, by the way, sounds like the Hebrew way of saying, “brought forth.” Later, she gave birth to another son, named Abel, which means, “breath” or “temporary” giving a hint to the shortness of his life. After these two come into the picture, Adam and Eve drop out of the narrative. Abel was a shepherd and Cain became a farmer. I don’t need to tell you, people of the Willamette Valley, of some of the issues that this could raise. According to the story, they were the only ones on the planet. Plenty of earth to go around. But in that area where they lived, with not much water or good soil, property could have become an issue. Water rights could have been a source of contention. We need water for irrigation. We need water for public use. We need water for livestock. We need water. We still have those fights. The Bible hints, just by stating their respective occupations, of conflicts that could be present. Like any two brothers, of similar age, I can see where they could

be very competitive with each other. Cain brought an offering before the Lord, some of his harvest. This is the very first offering that was ever brought to the Lord. There were no rules or regulations set forth about what to bring. Abel, not to be outdone, also brings forth his offerings, which happen to be the first born of his sheep, and giving the best parts of it to the Lord. Abel showed up Cain. And my first unanswered question was this: Why did God judge Cain because of his offering? What was it that Cain did that did not appease the Lord? Maybe he didn't bring his best stuff, maybe he did. Maybe God prefers meat over wheat. I'm not sure what it is, and I couldn't find any concrete answers. Cain was the first one to give and Abel stole the idea.

Back in college, my brother and I were both at Nebraska Wesleyan at the same time. Our mother worked at the Music building as a secretary. One day, I showed up at her office to find that my younger brother had given our mother a rose and it was sitting on her desk. For no reason. It wasn't her birthday or anniversary or mother's day. Just a cold and damp October day. So I went down to the local flower shop and got her a small bouquet of flowers, just enough to beat the rose. Now she had a nice assortment of flowers on her desk. I came back later after lunch. Not only did she have a bigger assortment of flowers, next to my bouquet, next to the rose, but there were balloons all over the place. So off to Shopko. A big teddy bear and chocolates later, mom's office was getting pretty festive, and her boss was beginning to wonder about her family. I will not be beat, I told myself. Did mom try to stop us? NOOOO.....After a whole day of competing, I think Dan won. That night, he made them a beautiful and delicious dinner with candlelight while I was stuck at work. That was the day we competed to become the favorite son. Did mom love one of us more or less because of the gifts we brought? I hope not. Which is why this scripture puzzles me. Why did God judge Cain's offering with contempt?

You know how the story continues. Cain felt jealousy and anger and resentment. He even had a warning from God. "Don't do it. Don't even think about it." Well, Cain did think about it and he did do it. He told Abel, "Let's go out into the fields." Mental note: If anyone asks you to go out into the fields, just say no. And while they were out there, Abel was slain. Later, God asks Cain, "Where is your brother?" And Cain lies. "I don't know. And he coins the classic line: Am I my brother's keeper?" And the Lord, knowing the truth, of course, punishes Cain by making him a wanderer upon the earth. Cain, the farmer, can no longer grow any crops. Cain cries out that his punishment is too much to bear. Anyone who finds him will kill him. Of course, this assumes that there are other people out there in the world besides Adam and Eve and Cain, but that is another question for another sermon - just assume that there are for right now. And the Lord replies, "No. If anyone kills you, seven lives will be taken in revenge." So the Lord put a mark on Cain to warn anyone who met him not to kill him. And Cain left and lived in the Land of Nod, which is East of Eden.

The Mark of Cain. We are not sure what this mark looked like. I looked up some art work throughout the centuries that had Cain as their subject. Some imagined a dot on the forehead. Other paintings actually put little horns on his scalp. I looked on the internet to see what I could find, and when you look up Mark of Cain, you find thousands of internet sites to choose from, and many of them kind of spooky in their interpretation. Very new ageish, some blatantly racist, and some very cultist. But in all, it says that God somehow marked Cain in some form to warn others. For centuries, this Mark of Cain was a symbol of shame and judgement. If you bore scars, either physical or emotional, because of past sins or regret, you had the Mark of Cain. You did not want the Mark of Cain. But look at the story again. The Mark of Cain is not a tattoo of judgement, but of mercy. God marked Cain, to protect him. Not to condemn him, but to protect him. It was an act of mercy and compassion - not an act of punishment. That mark would save his life - not condemn it. And so my next unanswered question was this: Why does God protect the first murderer in humanity? Why does God show a sign of forgiveness? It doesn't make sense to me. Why does God show love to someone who failed? Cain, who never apologized, never showed remorse (except for his punishment)?

And this is where we learn of God's mercy. Why did God protect Cain? I don't know, but I do know that family sticks together no matter what the record. God chose to put his arms around Cain despite the punishment

he was bound to have. The Mark of Cain shows sin, but it also shows that God loved him. I wouldn't mind having a mark like that. Amen.