

“AM I MY BROTHER’S (OR SISTER’S) KEEPER?”

Psalm 133; Genesis 4:1-16

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We have in this story some of the classic features of the murder mystery: the murder, a common motive, and an innocent and arbitrary action that sets the stage. Cain offers what we would expect to be an acceptable offering to the Lord: a portion of the harvest. We expect it because farming is the vocation given to Adam when they are expelled from Eden. Cain’s offering is the product of the work that God has given him to do. On the other hand, Abel watches sheep and whereas the shepherd is mentioned many times in the Bible, this is the first instance. It’s the first time we learn of God’s preference for “blood,” so his acceptance of Abel’s offering and rejection of Cain’s appears quite arbitrary. It appears unfair and thus sets the context for Cain’s anger. Jealousy drives him to commit murder

One of the things I love about this story is that it challenges our assumptions about the world and God, and so pushes us to think more deeply. We understand Cain and perhaps sympathize with him, but God’s actions surprise us. If only the Lord has received Cain’s offering as well, none of what follows would have happened. Why did God reject Cain?

The storyteller leaves us to speculate all we want, to use our imagination, because no reason is even implied. Is the story intended to set the stage for the Exodus event when the “blood of the lamb” guarantees the protection of the children of Israel or to explain the origin of the use of blood in the sacrificial system? Or maybe there’s something we’re not being told about Cain’s offering? Maybe the offering was made in a careless manner, or the quality of the food was poor, or Cain’s heart wasn’t in it? If we had a discussion about this story, we’d spend all our time on this question because we want to desperately know why God accepts some while rejecting others.

Why did God cure my friend’s cancer, but didn’t cure the five year old refugee from Vietnam? Why do some lose everything in the flood, while others escape with no damage at all? Why are some blessed with enormous wealth while so many can barely scrape together a living? Why bless Abel, whose name literally means emptiness, and curse Cain, whose name means created by God.

We don’t get answers, so we make up reasons and half-truths. We say things like: “God has a reason or a plan” or “it was God’s will, we just have to accept it.” I wonder if the storyteller doesn’t give an answer because they all sound as lame as these. There’s an honesty and integrity to this story that we often overlook. The truth is that we live in a world where God’s actions appear arbitrary. And we get tripped up by that all the time. We become bitter or angry or depressed or envious. We have all been Cain during various periods of our lives. We know what that feels like and we know that arbitrary rejection presents a certain desire to lash out. We know the truth of God’s warning: “sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.”

We can spend a lot of time wondering why life isn't more fair, but this storyteller wastes no time on it. Creator and creation appear arbitrary. More important than understanding why is the response that we make to it. We can do well with it, disregarding the sin lurking at the door, or we can "not do well with it." Please notice here, despite what reformed theology might say, sin is not inevitable. The Lord clearly expects that Cain might have behaved otherwise.

Maybe you don't like the arbitrary character of the world. Well, you might not be able to say why the world is that way, but there's something that you can do about it. There's an approach to life that stems the desire to get back or get even. The question is so powerful that it almost makes us forget our initial complaint. Our query about Cain's rejection begins to fade as we think about the irony of his question. "Am I my brother's keeper?" What was an attempt to escape responsibility for his brother Abel ends up being an indictment on his action. Had he understood from the beginning that he had a responsibility for Abel, he would never have killed him.

In our life together, we too experience the arbitrary character of the world where some are blessed and others not; where some are healed, others not; where some are accepted, and others rejected. There will always be reasons to become angry, but if we don't want that anger to get the best of us, we must acknowledge that we are our sister's and our brother's keeper, that we have responsibility for one another.

When we say "yes" to being our sister's keeper, we reject the individualism prized in our culture that defines the successful person as one who can stand on his or her own feet. When we say "yes" to being our brother's keeper we reject the victim-blaming of our culture that sees individual failures such as poverty, homelessness, joblessness as a person's own fault. We realize that the bigotries of racism and sexism can only be solved by taking more responsibility for one another, not less.

Our life together centers on being two together and not one who is separate. The health of the church, where a lot of accepting and rejecting goes on as well, depends on our determination to be with and for one another both when we are blessed and when we are cursed, both in the midst of our celebrations and in the midst of our grief. We are only one as a church when the many of us commit ourselves to caring for one another.

Notice how God sets the example in this story. Even though Cain rejected the Lord's counsel by failing to take heed of "sin lurking at the door," God does not respond with anger. Despite the harm that Cain has done to the community of the first family, God does not abandon him. After what Cain has done, he can't stay in the family, but God still takes responsibility for his safety and if you read on you will see, blesses him with many descendants.

Life together means taking responsibility for each other. To commit ourselves to this means to "do well" even in the midst of an arbitrary world, even if we were to lay the injustices at God's feet. We belong together, the accepted and the rejected. We are our brother's and our sister's keeper. To forget this is to invite even more harm into the world. To remember it is to heal the hurts that divide us. It is to bless the world. It is to honor the God who gives us life and faith and hope and sustains us in our life together. Amen.