

Sermon: Rock Bottom

Series: Genesis, Over and Over Again

Scripture Reading: Genesis 4:1-16

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1 Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain,[a] saying, “I have produced a man with the help of the Lord.” 2 Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. 3 In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, 4 and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, 5 but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. 6 The Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? 7 If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.” 8 Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let us go out to the field.”[b] And when they were in the field, Cain rose against his brother Abel and killed him. 9 Then the Lord said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” 10 And the Lord said, “What have you done? Listen, your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground! 11 And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. 12 When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.” 13 Cain said to the Lord, “My punishment is greater than I can bear! 14 Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me.” 15 Then the Lord said to him, “Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance.” And the Lord put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him. 16 Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Does God have favorites?

Well, no. Of course not! God loves every one of us equally and with the same level of dedication and commitment. We are all worth the same in God’s eyes. We are all worthy of redemption, grace, and belonging.

But we cannot ignore how, in the Old Testament, especially in Genesis, we encounter stories in which God shows a preferential treatment to the younger sibling.

We see this theme starting with Cain and Abel, then continuing throughout Genesis in the stories of Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Joseph over his older brothers, and Ephraim over Manasseh.

So, naturally, for us readers, this theme shows unmistakable favoritism.

Why does God keep choosing the younger sibling for special projects and greater blessings?

I am not a parent, so I won't be speaking on behalf of parents regarding the dynamics of having a favorite child. You all who are parents can wrestle with this tension on your own.

So, my approach to this story comes from being the older brother and the oldest grandchild in the Garcia family and from marrying the youngest child and the youngest grandchild in the Trawick family.

In case you didn't know, our birth order significantly influences our personality, purpose, and how we relate to others.

When people say that opposites attract, it could not be more true for Jessie and me when it comes to our family roles and expectations. Family reunions are always fascinating, and sometimes frustrating, because we both have to adapt to each other's roles within the family system we grew up in.

I am sure many of you know what this is like.

For most of history, being the oldest child meant being the responsible one. These were the ones who held greater authority in family matters, tasked with upholding the family name with dignity and respect. They were also expected to lead and look after the younger siblings following the parents' death.

Family systems theory suggests that most older siblings identify strongly with following rules, surpassing expectations, achieving success, and receiving approval from parents and those closest to them.

If you are the oldest child, you are probably agreeing with this uncanny description. We want to be seen. We want recognition for all the hard work as we seek to fulfill those massive expectations.

So, if we assume all these things to be true, can you now imagine the level of disappointment when Cain learned from God that his offering was unsatisfactory?

From my own experience and point of view, I believe the key to understanding Cain's offense is that he likely expected what every other older sibling in all of history expected: approval, praise, and recognition from someone who greatly mattered to them.

But Cain didn't receive it.

Genesis tells us that Cain worked the ground. He brought an offering based on the role he was given within his family unit. He fulfilled what was expected of him. He did nothing wrong as far as he can tell.

So, why did God like Abel's offering more?

Does God have a softer spot for the younger brother?

Or is God trying to test something in Cain?

Several commentaries argue that perhaps there was something wrong with Cain's heart when he presented his offering to God. This argument states that Cain may have offered his sacrifice grudgingly, as an empty ritual rather than an act of genuine devotion and thanksgiving.

Other scholars answer this question by looking at the book of Hebrews, Chapter 11, verse four, where it says, "By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did." Perhaps he lacked faith.

And lastly, some commentators believe that Cain's bringing of fruit derived directly from the cursed ground showed a lack of respect for and fear of God, since God had already cursed the ground in the previous chapter after Adam and Eve's temptation. Interesting, isn't it?

While I agree with some elements of each of these theories, I find myself agreeing with Marilynne Robinson a little more. She argues that if God didn't provide an explanation for his rejection, why are we so concerned in finding one? She sees the ambiguity of the story as intentional.

It is only when we are willing to remain in the uncomfortable moment of no explanations that we will see how the story shifts its attention away from the sacrifice and more toward Cain's response.

As cruel as this may sound, what if God's rejection of Cain's offering wasn't because it wasn't good enough, but because God wanted to see how Cain would react to this tragic disappointment?

God is not interested in giving an explanation about why Cain's offering was unsatisfactory. God is more interested in how Cain deals with this situation.

So, how does he respond?

My friend and mentor, Pastor Chris Henry, describes what happens next in this story in the following way:

Cain is now filled with rage. Despite God's invitation to a moment of self-reflection and a direct, divine warning to consider carefully his next move, Cain acts with great speed. He lures his brother Abel and goes into a field, and there he commits the Bible's first murder. For those keeping track, we are only four chapters from creation.

This is where this story becomes deeply personal to many of us. We know what it's like to feel like Cain - disappointed, invisible, undervalued, angry...

We know what it feels like to watch someone else receive the promotion we wanted. We know what it feels like to see our closest friend live the life we wanted. We know what it feels like to see another person's ministry flourish while ours struggles. We know what it feels like when a sibling receives attention and support we think we deserve.

We know what it feels like when God appears to reward someone else while ignoring our hard work and faithfulness - to feel as if God had favorites.

We know the temptation to compare, to keep score, to decide that someone else's blessing must somehow be stealing from our own, that someone is more important than us.

And if we let that temptation rule our hearts, resentment begins to grow like a pest that is impossible to kill.

Notice that after God's rejection, Cain never directs his anger toward the sacrifice. He doesn't ask whether he can do something better or whether something needs to be changed.

His anger, frustration, and disappointment are automatically directed towards Abel, his own brother, flesh of his own flesh, blood of his blood.

All these feelings suddenly take on a face because it is much easier to hate and resent a face than a situation or an invisible God.

This story teaches us that both friends and strangers, loved and unknown, can suddenly become enemies if we let our resentment take hold of our lives. We cannot let life

convince us that whatever form of neglect we may feel is somehow proof that God loves us less than others.

This is why we must pay attention to what happens next in the story. God still shows great love and compassion to someone who, by all human standards, should have been punished.

The God we encounter in Genesis has a habit of disrupting our expectations.

We expect judgment. We expect vengeance. We expect God to balance the scales and give Cain exactly what he deserves.

Returning to Robinson's book, she recounts an experience she had once teaching a course on Genesis for her church in Iowa City. As they read this story of Cain and Abel, one of the folks gathered at this class raised a hand and asked, "What kind of a God would not kill a man who kills his brother?"

What kind of God would choose grace and restraint over punishment and retribution?

According to Genesis, the answer is a God whose mercy is greater than our imagination.

Cain certainly sees his guilt. He sees himself as a condemned man, a fugitive, a wanderer, someone whose future has been permanently destroyed by his own actions.

But God sees something different.

God still sees a future.

God sees a broken man who still bears the image of God.

The question was never whether God had favorites, because we could make the same argument for Cain after all of this.

The story reveals something far more beautiful: God does not give up on anyone. God does not reserve grace for the "Abels" of the world. Somehow, mysteriously, God still pursues the Cains among us, too.

The good news of the gospel is that every one of us has been Abel and every one of us has been Cain. We have all been wounded, and we have all wounded others. We have all known disappointment, and we have all allowed resentment to take root in our hearts.

Yet the God who sought Cain in the wilderness is the same God who seeks us today.

When anger, envy, and disappointment threaten to consume us, God comes, asking the same question: “Why are you angry?” Not to condemn us, but to call us back to ourselves, back to one another, and back to grace.

For in the kingdom of God there are no favorite children—only beloved sons and daughters, marked not for destruction, but for mercy.

Thanks be to God. Amen.