

**UPSIDE DOWN
THE CAIN AND ABEL STORY**

(01/13/19)

Scripture Readings: Genesis 4:1-11
Matthew 5:1-12

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” (Matthew 5:3&5)

On the second, third, and fourth Sunday mornings from September through June our adult Bible study meets in the vestry. Throughout the years we have read a number of books of the Bible—not as many as one might expect, because we read each book together and then discuss it. We have been known to spend several weeks on a single chapter that happens to speak to us.

The pace at which we have been reading the book of Genesis this year could only be described as deliberate. I don't think it would be an exaggeration to admit that we are not too far along. I find this unfortunate because I hoped to preach a series of sermons on the book of Genesis using the insights gleaned from our group discussions. The problem is that one can only preach so many sermons on the two creation stories (yes, there really are two). As you can see, anyone who would like to begin attending our Sunday Bible study will not be far behind!

Whether we know a lot or a little about the Bible, reading and reflecting on the biblical narrative can become an important part of our evolving religious faith. We read the stories together, try to understand them in the context in which they were written, and then explore their meaning, what they can teach us about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, ourselves, and life.

Biblical stories can be read in many ways. They can be read as factual accounts of something that happened long ago. If we read the Bible as history, however, we run into many troublesome passages, passages that contradict or are contradicted by modern science. This leads us to look at the Bible not only as history, but also as myth.

A myth is a special kind of story that describes how life is and how we should respond to life. A myth, like a fairy tale, may not have been historically true but, in a sense, it has always been true and will probably always be true. Biblical myths can help us discover the deepest of eternal truths about God, about life, and about ourselves. A myth may also be historically true, for eternal truths tend to find expression in the realm of space and time.

With regard to the relationship between history and myth, I find that even if something actually happened, I still need to know in what way it is helpful to me as I make my way through the tangled maze of this earthly life. For example, to know that Cain killed Abel thousands of years ago might be interesting history, but it is of little value unless the story helps me reflect on how I treat my biological brother, the brother whom I find in all the people of the world, and my inner brother, the brother whom I find within myself--the dark side, the mysterious stranger, the relatively unconscious part of myself that engages me and with whom I sometimes struggle. It can also teach us something about the psychodynamics of jealousy.

One of the themes that we have discovered in our Bible study is that God often tips our cherished notions upside down. The teachings of Jesus often contradict the collective norms of his culture and also ours. This is why the Christian gospel can bring a saving or healing message to us as individuals and also to our culture. It stands as a counter-cultural corrective to our collective mentality and also to our established religion, or at least it should. It is in this light that I see the theme of the younger or youngest child which appears and reappears throughout the Book of Genesis.

In most Semitic and Indo-European cultures, the oldest son was the most important child in the family. It was certainly true in ancient Israel. The oldest son received a birthright. When the parents died, the property was divided into equal shares. The oldest son received two shares while all the other sons received one. The daughters, of course, received nothing. If the daughters were not able to marry, they were literally left out in the cold.

When a father died, he also passed on his blessing to his oldest son. The blessing marked that child as the spiritual head of the family. The oldest son might not be the most spiritual of the children, the one most in touch with the realm of the eternal. It didn't matter. If he were the oldest son, he received the blessing. If a younger son or a daughter happened to be the most deeply spiritual, his/her gift was lost, and the people suffered because their religion remained mired in its patriarchal legalisms.

At times in the book of Genesis, Yahweh, the God of Israel, turns the cultural system upside down. One example of this is the story of Cain and Abel.

Cain was the oldest of Adam and Eve's three sons (yes, there were actually three). Cain was a farmer. Abel was younger than Cain; he was a shepherd. In Genesis 4:3-8, we read that both Cain and Abel brought their offerings before Yahweh. The Bible tells us,

Cain brought some of the produce of the soil as an offering for Yahweh, while Abel for his part brought the first born of his flock and some of their fat as well. Yahweh looked with favor on Abel and his offering. But he did not look with favor on Cain and his offering, and Cain was very angry and downcast.

The story doesn't indicate why Yahweh looked on Abel's offering with favor but not Cain's offering. It may have had something to do with the gift and how it was given. Perhaps Cain was measured in his giving; he gave "some of his produce." Abel, on the other hand, was more generous in his giving. Abel sacrifices the first born of his flock, and some of their fat as well. Perhaps Yahweh looked with favor on Abel's gift because an animal is a more sacrificial gift than a cabbage. To sacrifice an animal is a significant act, for that animal can then no longer produce or reproduce. To give up a cabbage, some of one's produce, is to give little.

If we read this story as history it tells us about two brothers of dubious historicity. After all, there weren't many reporters present to record the goings-on in the Garden of Eden. If we read the story as myth, it doesn't matter if there were two human beings named Cain and Abel, or even if there were two tribes--the farmers and the herders. The story is about us.

What part of us would be symbolized as Cain, and what part of us would be symbolized as Abel. How are we like Cain, and how are we like Abel? How would we understand this story if it had appeared to us in a dream? For example, do we, like Cain, give "some of our produce" to God? Or are we like Abel? Do we give off the top, give of our best?

The story is a lesson or teaching about stewardship--what we give and how much we give. The story also has to do with how we spend our life. What part of our life is invested in the spiritual, in the realm of the sacred? How much of our time do we spend in prayer, in meditation, in reading the scriptures, in worship, in service to others? How much of our time is wasted, filled with shallow, superficial entertainment? This story, like the story of the widow's mite, challenges us to invest in this other realm, the kingdom of God. Remember, we prepare for our entry into this realm, into the kingdom of God, after we die by investing in it, by building a relationship with it, by dwelling within it while we are alive.

In the story of Cain and Abel, we wonder why Yahweh looks with favor on one offering and not the other. It doesn't seem fair. Cain, instead of trying to understand Yahweh's response and learn something important about himself, about his style of giving, about his relationship with Yahweh, becomes angry. Cain externalizes the problem. He locates it outside himself. He then tries to eliminate the person he resents and of whom he is jealous. He kills Abel, as if by getting Abel out of the way, he will once again become the favored son, the only son.

In ancient Israel, it was assumed that Yahweh would favor Cain because Cain was the elder son. However, the story of Cain and Abel turns this cultural norm upside down.

Later in Genesis, we read that Abraham has two sons: Ishmael, the son of Abraham and Hagar, and Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah. Here again the birthright falls to the younger, to Isaac, who carries on the blessing and the responsibility of this special covenant with God.

A little later in the Book of Genesis, Jacob deceives his elderly father to obtain Isaac's blessing, the blessing that should have gone to Esau, the elder son. When it is time for Jacob to marry, he prefers Rachel, the younger, over Leah, the elder of Laban's daughters.

Jacob has children not only from Leah and Rachel, his two wives, but also from Bilhah and Zilpah, two concubines or slaves. Of Jacob's twelve children, Reuben, the oldest, should have received the blessing and become the spiritual leader of the next generation, but it was Joseph, the eleventh, who becomes the spiritual giant and who saves his family. In fairy tales it is often the youngest child who solves the problem and becomes the hero.

These myths, legends, fairy tales, and Old Testament stories, along with the Martha and Mary story and the Parable of the Prodigal Son in the New Testament, confront us with a surprising aspect of what it means to build our relationship with God.

Since we live our life out of what our culture values, or out of what we consider to be our strengths, it would be normal to think that we should build our relationship with God the same way. We wouldn't think of building our relationship with God around the less developed, the weaker, the shadow side of ourselves. Yet this is probably what we should do. This is what makes Jesus' Sermon on the Mount so revolutionary.

In the Sermon on the Mount, it is clear that Jesus does not value what his culture values or what our culture values. He does not value strength and power, but weakness. He says,

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

Our culture values strength, wealth, power, and pleasure. If we have these, we may be successful in the external world, the world of our daily life. But what if we grow and mature spiritually more out of our pain, out of our struggles, out of the despair that leads us to turn to God than from our pleasure and our successes? This tips our cherished notions upside down. This is the equivalent in ancient Israel of favoring the younger over the elder brother.

Many years ago, I had a dream. Dreams, by the way, are one of the ways we can come in contact or relationship with this other realm. In biblical times, dreams were seen as messages from God. Dreams come from the spiritual realm, the realm of the unconscious, and they seek to help us find our grounding in the vertical rather than the horizontal dimension of life. Dreams can guide us on the inward journey. They speak in images and symbols. They try to help us relate to the spiritual dimension of life which is both transcendent and immanent.

In my dream, I had just graduated from some course of study. A man was standing next to me; his name was Gabriel. He didn't look like an angel. Then again, what do angels look like? I believe angels often confront us in our daily life, though we don't recognize them as angels. They also confront us in our dreams.

Gabriel was there to tell me what God wanted me to do with my life. He told me I was to join one of the Roman Catholic religious orders. I was a little surprised, being a Protestant minister, but if God wanted me to do it, then I would do it. Then Gabriel asked me which Roman Catholic order I thought I should enter.

At that time in my life, I had been doing a lot of work with priests and nuns from several religious orders. I had worked with a number of Jesuits, Dominicans, and Holy Cross fathers in the programs of clinical training I conducted at Foxborough State Hospital, and I had done workshops for at least six different communities of religious women.

At that time in my life, my religion was very intellectual. I was working on my second doctorate, and I valued education highly. I told Gabriel I thought I should enter the Jesuits, the order which produces some of the top theologians, biblical scholars, and scientists in the world.

If not the Jesuits, then I should enter the Dominicans, the order of preachers, the order founded by Dominic, the great intellect of the church. I believed this was the path for which I was prepared, the path that my ministry should take.

Gabriel took me by surprise, as I suppose he did Mary and everyone else he confronts. Gabriel told me God wanted me to become a Franciscan.

The Franciscans are different from the Jesuits, who live very well and who spend unlimited money on their education, and also from the Dominicans, who are the recognized scholars of the church. Francis of Assisi emphasized poverty, simplicity, a life lived close to nature, and a suspicion of the kind of book learning that can lead us away from a personal relationship with God and the simple, humble life that flows from that relationship. Franciscans emphasize poverty rather than wealth, the simple rather than the complex, a life of prayer rather than a life of study, a life lived close to nature rather than a sophisticated, cultured life.

At the end of the dream, Gabriel gave me two beautiful, ancient, leather-bound books which I should take with me as my gift to the monastery which I was to enter. Then we got in a car and drove off together toward the monastery.

I still struggle with what my dream means. Why was this the message that I needed to hear at that time in my life and perhaps still need to hear? It was a dream that challenged my values, that turned my picture of the world, my life, and my ministry upside down. It confronts me still with the matter of what it means to be on an inward as well as an outward journey, and with the matter of how much our inner journey should shape our outer life.

What dreams or other religious experiences have you had which confronted you or sought to guide you as my dream did for me? What is the gift which, like Cain and Abel, you need to sacrifice if you are to deepen your relationship with God? Where have you been confronted by Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and his message of the importance of inner weakness, inner poverty, of pain and suffering in your spiritual journey?

In what way is God seeking to turn your life upside down?

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
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