
Two Questions

Genesis 4.1-16

A Sermon preached at Duke University Chapel on February 21, 2010 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

The Book of Genesis is always three stories. Story One is the story of everybody. Story Two is the story of Israel. And Story Three is about you. To read Genesis is to see it as everybody's story, as Israel's story, and as your own story, all at the same time. I'm going to tell the story of Cain and Abel three times, once as everyone's story, once as Israel's story, and finally as your story.

I grew up with a sister who was 3 years 4 months and 11 days older than me. When I was a boy there were two things I wanted more than anything else. One was to be an elephant. And the other was to be older than my sister. Maybe the two desires were really the same desire. It seemed in everything that mattered, like getting extra dessert and staying up late at weekends and becoming streetwise at elementary school, I was always second. And there's only so much coming second a man can take – especially a 7-year-old man.

What is it about siblings? We can't live with them; we can't live without them. If someone attacks them we're first to step in, if they're sick we can't sleep for worry; but leave us alone in a room with them and in no time we find ourselves turning from wallflowers into fireworks. I once had Christmas dinner with a friend who had his 93-year-old and 91-year-old great aunts and his 89-year-old great uncle join us for the festive occasion. The great uncle said "Pass the roast potatoes, would you" – and proceeded to help himself to a generous portion. "Stop it – put those back" snapped his older sister, "Don't be so greedy." The younger sister pleaded, "But surely, it's Christmas Day!" The older aunt was not to be deterred. Looking imperiously at her 89-year-old brother, she said 'He *has* to learn!"

This is the soil out of which the story of Cain and Abel becomes the story of everybody. A great many politicians and religious leaders talk about safeguarding or promoting or focusing on the family – but you wonder if these people have ever lived in one. The book of Genesis isn't the slightest bit sentimental when it comes to the realities of growing up with a brother. Here are Cain and Abel; the first recorded sign of trouble and straightaway Abel's blood is crying out from the ground.

In no time at all we have Noah pronouncing a curse on his son Canaan and saying he shall be a slave to his brothers Shem and Japheth. See what happens when the favoritism of a parent is added to the Molotov cocktail of sibling rivalry. I bet there's a host of us here this morning who know exactly what that feels like. Maybe your parents paid for your brother or sister to go to the private high school but they never paid for you. Maybe you were the one who always got the good grades and your parents' affirmation and your sister hated you for it.

Then a few chapters later we have Abraham and Lot, who were cousins but in one place are called brothers. We have this resonant sentence, "their possessions were so great that they could not live together." Ouch. Feel the quality of that for a moment. "Their possessions were so great that they could not live together." You ever tried sharing a room with a sibling? It's not the snoring, it's not the posters, it's not the talking while you're trying to sleep – it's "*I can't believe anyone in the world needs this many pairs of jeans!*" My sister and I became the best of friends only when she went away to college. I didn't realize we were living out the Abraham and Lot story.

And then there's Isaac and Ishmael. Anyone here got a half brother? You going to tell me that's a picnic? You're the older one and you're constantly told you should be nice to your little brother even though every time you look at him you think "It was your mother that ruined my parents' marriage. How can I not hate you? Why should I love someone who's taken away my dad's attention that used to be all mine?" Or you're the younger one and you think "I didn't choose this domestic arrangement so why do I get blamed for it? What do I have to do to be taken seriously in this house and not treated as a toy?"

And we haven't even spoken yet about Jacob and Esau, and what happens when one parent starts using a child in her maneuverings against the other. Boy does that make it yet more complicated, when you're piggy in the middle between your parents! And finally there's Joseph and his brothers, and it's as if in that story that every element in all the previous stories comes together in a volcano of fratricide and parental favoritism and an over-

inflated ego – and yet profound love. Ka-boom. If there's anyone here this morning who doesn't recognize themselves in one of these stories I'd be mighty surprised. If your life is a chaos of thinly-veiled warfare, and a desperate struggle for recognition, and love you long for but daren't ask for, and long-festering resentment, and freshly-minted fury – welcome to the land of the Bible. You'll be quite at home.

So this is everybody's story. Not everybody's story ends in bloodshed. But we've all *thought* of it. Most of us find it a whole lot harder to live the gospel in the privacy of our birth family than anywhere else on earth. Sure, evangelize the people of western China. Sure, save desperate children in the slums of Calcutta. Anything to avoid having to go home and face living the gospel with your pig-headed sister or big-headed brother. The Cain and Abel story is telling us, *live the forgiveness and reconciliation of the gospel at home or don't live it at all*. Could be the toughest part of the good news to deal with. But deal with it we have to. You know the phrase "Charity begins at home"? It usually sounds like selfishness. In this story it turns out to be an incredible challenge.

Now let's read the story again, this time as Israel's story. No one knows exactly when the books of the Old Testament came to be written down, but what's clear is that much or most of the Old Testament is a direct or coded reflection on two catastrophes. The first is the split between the southern kingdom of Judah and the northern kingdom of Israel, a split that occurred after the death of Solomon around 900 B.C. The second is the invasion of the southern kingdom and the destruction of the Jerusalem temple around 600 B.C. by the Chaldeans and the deportation of a great portion of the population to Babylon. The story of Cain and Abel foreshadows those two key events in significant ways.

We start with two brothers, one of whom is a keeper of sheep, while the other is a tiller of the ground. Abel is the sheep farmer, Cain the agriculturalist. Think about Israel's history for a moment. For a long time they were a wandering people, dependent on their animals for food and clothing and materials from which to make tents and shelters. They lived a hand to mouth existence, and the stories from that time are of a people very close to God – by no means always faithful, but nonetheless a people as wrapped up in God as his purpose was wrapped up in them.

But then we get a different period in Israel's history, a more settled, agricultural period where the rhythms of springtime and harvest took over from the utter dependence on God. This was a time when Israel became open to the idolatry of the worship of the Baals, because the Baals seemed more in keeping with the agricultural rhythm of the year. Now Israel was liable to feel self-sufficient and to become like other nations and forget her God. So now it becomes a little less mysterious why God rejects the offering of Cain, the fruit of the ground, and favors Abel's fat portions from the firstlings of the flock. We can see this as a warning sign to be borne out in Israel's later history, that if she gives herself completely over to the rhythm of the agricultural year she could lose sight of God.

And then let's keep going through Old Testament history to the point where Israel and Judah split apart in around 900 BC. Can we not see these two kingdoms as like the sequence of warring brothers portrayed in Genesis? All the deep distrust, endemic rivalry, scorn, fear, jealousy, murderous intent and pent-up malevolence displayed in the Cain and Abel story spills out in the rivalry between Israel and Judah, a rivalry that sends both eventually to their doom.

And then we turn to Cain's bewilderment as "a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth." Here we have a prefigurement of the Jewish existence in exile in Babylon. And even Babylon itself is anticipated in Cain's journey to a land "east of Eden." Of course we don't know where Eden was, but from the perspective of Jews in exile in Babylon in the sixth century BC, Eden was the Promised Land of Israel from which their parents had been deported. They were now east of Eden, and in the story of Cain and Abel they found part of an explanation why. They'd grown fat on the land and lost sight of God. They'd fought with their brother against God's will. And they'd been sent wandering as a result. But they found in Babylon, as Cain found in the land of Nod, that they still bore God's mark and God's hand was still on their life.

And so finally let's read this story a third time as a story about you. You and God. I have an academic friend who goes to conferences all round the country. Every year at his field's annual meeting he shares a room with the same colleague from graduate student days. As soon as they are reunited, usually in the hotel room, they ask each other the same question. "Are you living well?" Somehow that question covers everything that matters.

That's a question to ask one another on the first Sunday in Lent each year. "Are you living well?" Let's look at what Cain and Abel can tell us about beginning Lent. Remember what immediately precedes this story in Genesis is that of Adam and Eve. And in the Adam and Eve story God calls to Adam, and says, "Where are you?" "Where are you?" And here in the next chapter God calls to Cain, and says, "Where is your brother?"

"Where are you?" "Where is your brother?" These aren't just two questions for the beginning of Lent. They're probably the two most important questions you will ever be asked. And the order's important. Remember the words of Philippians chapter 2: "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." Your first duty is to save your own soul. You have no greater responsibility in life than this: when God comes to you "walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze" and says "Where are you?", do you make an eager answer, or are you skulking in the bushes hoping not to be seen? Brothers and sisters, can you answer that question right this moment: "Where are you?" Are you answering eagerly, or are you shrinking into the shadows?

And only when you've faced up to that first question are you ready for the second question, "Where is your brother?" Imagine you're standing before the Lord Jesus at his judgement seat in heaven, and he's looking at you with eyes of compassion and mercy and love like you've never seen or known before. And imagine he's saying to you the words God said to Cain: "Where is your brother?" And suddenly you realize you've got this whole salvation thing wrong. You thought it was about keeping your nose clean and hoping God overlooks your foolishness and pride. But Jesus is saying, "What about the others? Did you leave them behind? Where are they? Are they in Haiti? Are they in New Orleans? Are they on the Mexican border? Where is your brother?" Do you have an answer for him? Is your life drenched in ifs and buts and excuses and explanations? Are you standing there at the judgement seat asking for an extension as if salvation were some kind of end-of-semester assignment and if you had a couple more days you'd be ready? Where is your brother? What's your answer? There's only one answer Jesus wants. "Right here beside me."

You can live a hundred years, you can be the pin up in every dorm room in the whole of the state, you can be MVP in the Superbowl a thousand times and find a cure to the ten most dangerous diseases on the planet. But in the end, all that matters is your answer to these two questions. "Where are you?" "Where is your brother?" If you're the kind of person who doesn't find it easy to pray long prayers or hasn't the technological wizardry to keep intercession lists on your iPhone or your roommate can't cope with you meditating at 6 in the morning, I suggest you just do this. Every single day at the same time each day you sit still and let God ask you these two questions. "Where are you?" "Where is your brother?" And then answer them. Your life and your salvation depend on this.

So this is how I suggest we enter the season of Lent. Treat it first as a season for everybody, a time to reflect on families and rivalry and rejection and anger and raw feelings we sometimes don't know what to do with or how to handle. Consider it second as a time to reflect on Israel, on how God calls us and shows us the path of life and knows us better than we know ourselves and is still there for us even when we screw it up – in fact *especially* when we screw it up. And finally treat it as your time, a season directly for you, in which you have six weeks to ask yourself two questions, "Where are you?" and "Where is your brother?" – two questions that bring you face to face with God.