

All Happy Families

Genesis 4:1-16

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The narrative of Cain and Able is a juicy story. Well known but rarely preached, it is the scripture's first death and not inconsequently its first murder. It is incomplete and tantalizing, giving us little more than vocations, relationships, and names. It is foundational for three faiths, packed full of meaning, consequence, and history.

The Book of Genesis as it comes to us today has been cobbled together from at least three sources spanning five centuries. The author of this section, which encompasses the second creation story through the flood, was very likely written around 950 BCE, during the height of Israel's power. David built up the empire, Solomon solidified it, and people found themselves secure enough to do some soul searching. Scribes in the Royal Court and Temple began to codify and synthesize Israel's oral history. They looked back in order to look forward, understanding their God by tracing the line of God's faithfulness through the tenuous reign of Saul, the disorder of the Judges, the conquest of the holy land, and the exodus.

They looked back to understand themselves too. Chapters two, three, and four of Genesis, wherein we can safely say that factual veracity is subsumed to greater Truth, extrapolated from individual experiences of humanity fundamental truths about the human condition. By telling stories about individuals and relationships, they consider why we think, act, and respond as we do.

In their remembrance, the Scribes looked back and back and back, all the way to the garden, where God walked with Adam and Eve. And then, pausing for a moment, they considered a pair of brothers, one a farmer, one a shepherd. In the Garden, the Scribes reminded us of the fundamental disorder in our relationship to God. In Cain's field, the lesson is just as poignant, though I'm afraid all too often forgotten.

"All happy families are alike," wrote Leo Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina*, but "each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."¹ The story of Cain and Abel is the original unhappy family: missing parents, brooding brothers, a God with distinct preferences, sin crouching at the door.

I've never much understood sibling relationships—I'm an only child, happily so. And being an only child—or at least being me—is the very best. I never once had a sibling hover a finger above my arm announcing repetitively that they were *not* touching me. I had the entire back seat (yes, back seat of a car!) to myself 100% of the time. No one intruded into my personal space, stole my toys, or ate my food. It was a paradise of one, with occasional check-ins from parents with whom I shared a mutual agreement: I will do my chores, and we'll leave one another alone.

I was not particularly spoiled; I was simply provided space, and by virtue of my relative independence, I developed a healthy certainty that I was indeed the center of the universe. Everything I saw was mine: my parents, my room, my yard. No competition, no struggle.

What I do know about families of four or more is that two siblings spell trouble, especially in Genesis, where the elder often finds himself displaced, outshone by the

wit, guile, and general likability of a younger brother. Just ask Easu. Or Ishmael.

That said, things start off normally for Cain and Abel. The elder takes after his father and ploughs the land, and the younger tends sheep. The elder decides to provide an offering to God. Copying big brother, the younger follows suit. Cain brings grain. Abel's offering is more elaborate, the firstlings of the flock, carefully prepared. God takes pleasure in Abel's offering. Cain feels himself rejected.

We could spend an eternity sorting out why Abel's offering pleased God: perhaps it was the effort spent dressing the offering, perhaps it was his disposition, perhaps the wafting scent.

At the end of the day, we have no idea why God looked kindly upon Abel's offering. We only know that in that moment, God preferred meat to grain. But pay close attention: despite Cain's perception, the choosing *for* Abel's offering was not *against* Cain. Like the father running to greet his Prodigal Son, leaving his elder son to till the field, God lavished one while remaining steadfast to the other.

And not unlike that other Elder Brother, the Father's love for the younger deeply threatened the elder. It physically changed Cain; his face fell. Yet still God persisted, warning Cain against the anger simmering in his chest: "Sin is at the door, waiting to overcome you, to work violence through you. You can open the door. Or you can persist. Go to your brother, reconcile with him. Your fate is not determined, you are free, but you are responsible in that freedom."

What makes this story so tragic is, I think, that choice. It could have gone another way. Cain and Abel could have been another happy family. Generic, uninteresting brothers who experienced love, jealousy, joy, and sorrow but were fundamentally bonded by their being toward one another. But Cain couldn't stomach God's generosity toward Abel. The text is mercifully sparse: Cain calls his brother; Cain kills his brother. Death enters our history, not as a sadness at the end of old Abel's life, but as an unredeemable, unnecessary act of violence. Darkness all the way back. Cain couldn't blame the devil, couldn't blame a snake or a society's ineptitudes. Cain opened the door, and he got what he wanted. Now Cain was by himself, master of his fate, and he had God all to himself.

That's the thing about being an only child—for as good as it is, you can only blame the cat so much. At some point, your parents are going to realize that the cat, who doesn't have opposable thumbs, is an unlikely candidate to have lifted \$10 from the money jar or set the curtains on fire. Your isolation exposes your wrongdoing.

Years before the Abel debacle, in the garden of Paradise, God, while Adam was hiding in shame, asked Adam where he was. Adam was accountable then only for himself. Now, in the field, God asks Cain where Abel might be. "Where is your brother, Abel?" The identifier is totally unnecessary; Cain knew Abel was his brother, he didn't need reminding. But it's repeated over and over. In the space of three verses, God refers to Abel as "brother" four times, even as Cain refuses to say his name. The author wishes to remind us seven times in 16 verses, that the two were bound to one another.

"Where is your brother?" God inquires. Cain arrogantly, defensively replies, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Had he asked me, I would have told Cain that crying was the ticket. Break down, don't mention the cat, fess up. When you're an only child, odds are you did it, but Cain chose to obfuscate. God's horror is palpable. God knows where Abel is, God has heard Abel, whom death could not quiet, crying out

for justice from the land which once yielded Cain its bounty.

So why is this story here at the beginning of our shared story? In God's question and Cain's misguided answer, we see the way things ought to have been, what life outside of Paradise was meant to be. God's is a social question: "Where is the one I have set before you, the one I have called your brother? Where is the one in whom I delight, for whom you are absolutely responsible?"

Were I setting out to tell an origin story, to explain how things got to be the way they are, I think I'd find a more upbeat one, one where Cain and Abel live full, happy lives. Instead the scribes wrote the most fundamental truth about humanity apart from God: there is a brokenness in each of us, a brokenness in the root of our being.

In his failure to account for Abel, Cain separated himself from God. These many ages later, we, in brokenness, do too. God reaches out to each of us and demands that we account for the brothers we have left behind in our race to the top. God hears their voices crying out from the land, from dark alleyways and refugee camps, from welfare lines and detention centers, from emergency rooms and unemployment offices. "Where is your brother, Church? Where are your sisters? Where are you, and what are you doing?"

The elder brother seethed when his father brought in the prodigal son, feted, and celebrated him despite his failures. Joseph's brothers were threatened by their precocious but weak sibling. That's the problem with siblings, at least as far as I can tell. They're disruptive. They intrude, bursting open our self-centered, self-sustaining narratives. They hover an inch above us and demand our attention. They show plainly that the world is not ours alone. And they remind us that their keeping is our utmost priority.

And the problem with God is that through the fellowship of Christ, we are called to be brothers and sisters to all. In order to be faithful to God, we are responsible for the well-being of God's diverse, demanding household, a household full of annoying, obnoxious, beloved siblings held to account for one another.

Cain's story is our story, it teaches us who we are all the way down, and it exposes our instinct to self-preservation and jealousy. But it also proclaims something much greater: ours is God in whom justice and mercy perfectly relate. God judged Cain, but where there was judgment, mercy followed quickly behind. God's mercy always has the last word. The mark granted Cain protection. He would never fully escape the consequences of his action, but he was given new life even where he denied his brother the same.

What we affirm week after week in confession and in baptism is that there are no only children in God's family. Everyone we meet is our brother, our sister, our kin. The waters of baptism, which signal the judgment of sin and the grace of new life, are thicker than the marrow in our bones or the blood in our veins. To your left, your right, beyond the doors of this holy place, everyone who hovers, pokes, moves us by pity or plain annoyance reminds us of the universal call of kinship in the house of God. When we stand before God, it is not to account for our greatness, for how unique and wonderful our achievements might be, but for how we have treated our kin. The question echoes from a bloodstained field East of Eden: *Where is Abel, oh Church; what have you done?*

Being an only child is nice, but it's ultimately a bit of fantasy. Mom and Dad, the cat, heck, the entire house—it's all yours. Do whatever, go wherever, pinch \$10

here, test the lighter there, trust that everything you do will be most pleasing, most accepted. But isolation, a universe of one, is not how the Triune God, eternally in fellowship, intends our fellowship to be. We're accountable for how we treat the poor, how we respond to the immigration and refugee crises. We're responsible for how we treat farmers and miners. We're responsible for one another. And that is a gift, because it means someone is responsible for you too, you whom God has called his own. We got you, and you got us. And when we fail, as we certainly will, God will not remove the mark of protection. God will chastise, will call us to account, but the God of creation, of brothers and sisters and fields and cattle, is everywhere merciful, pouring out blessing even on self-righteous sinners such as we are.

Back in the very beginning, a grown man wanted to be an only child, to have everything for himself. He acted, fatally and selfishly, and he was cursed to wander, but was marked as one of God's own. I imagine when he finally came to see God's kingdom, it looked a lot like a mini-van full of strangers whom he recognized as siblings, a van impossibly, joyfully full, a long banqueting table set into infinity, a picture of life everlasting.

Note

1 Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 1.