

Blood Stained Soil

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Genesis 4:1-16

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You almost never hear a sermon about Cain and Abel. The passage is not included in the cycle of lectionary readings assigned for each Sunday, and furthermore it is a hard passage to preach on with integrity. Cain and Abel both bring sacrifices to God. For an unexplained reason, only one sacrifice is accepted and it leads the elder brother to kill the younger. I don't know why. It might be tempting to do a psychological study of this story, but the truth is, we know almost nothing about Cain and Abel and what might have motivated this horrible act of brother-murder. I could tell you that it is all just an allegory, told to explain the longstanding tension between the farming communities and the nomadic sheep-herding people, but it's not a story that should be dismissed so easily. It is a terrible tale of death in the family, of brother killing brother, and it's a drama that continues to be played out far too often in our violent world today.

So today I'm not going to focus on the two brothers, of whom we know little. We will lower our gaze from Cain and Abel's faces and instead consider the ground beneath their feet – the blood stained soil upon which we all stand. In our urban setting here, surrounded by concrete and asphalt at the corner of Penn and Highland, it is important to remember how important soil is to each of us. In biblical language we were formed out of the dust of the earth and to dust we shall one day return. Sift through the dirt and you'll find pebbles, sand, clay and organic matter from all manner of life slowly returning to its primordial form. Through sustainable farming techniques, we try to keep the soil healthy. But far too often, we kill the soil's life-potential, through poisonous chemicals and toxic waste dumped out thoughtlessly onto the ground that has no choice but swallow it on our behalf. In ancient times, the Romans used to sow salt into the fields of their conquered enemies so that nothing would grow there again.

The soil beneath us has a memory. If we allow it to speak, it can tell us whether it has been cared for or abused, and more importantly share about the things it has been forced to absorb over the years. Cain's murder of Abel is told in one sentence: *When they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother and killed him.* But three verses are devoted to the soil's testimony against Cain: *Listen; your brother's blood is crying out from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. The ground will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and wanderer on the earth.* (Gen 4:10-12) The silent soil became the chief witness against the murderous brother, and from the ground itself was judgment pronounced. No longer could the farmer expect fruitfulness from the soil; instead Cain must wander in the land east of Eden as a person who has lost the support of the very ground beneath his feet.

The earth remembers, especially when its soil has been stained with human blood. One of the most powerful descriptions of this fact happened not so far from here when Abraham Lincoln stood on the battlefield of Gettysburg and said, “We cannot consecrate – we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.”

The soil still speaks to us today. As a mixture of sand, clay, water and organic matter, it is designed to hold seeds so that life-sustaining harvests might emerge during the growing seasons. But instead we, as Cain and Abel, the feuding brothers of the human family, still sow salt and seek to kill the soil and all its life-giving potential. People bury land mines and I.E.D.’s (improvised explosive devices). We sprinkle cluster bombs from American and British jets down onto the soil. We ask the earth again and again to absorb the blood of those we murder, even as they murder us.

Violence lingers. Ask any family touched by violent crime how long that memory stays with them and how slowly, if ever, its sharp edges are worn down by time. Wendell Berry is a farmer-ethicist, who if you haven’t read anything by him before, you should look him up. Back in 1991, during the first Gulf War, Berry wrote these words: “If I kill my enemy, and his brother kills me, and my brother kills his brother, and so on and on, we may all have strong motives and even good reasons [for what we do]...And yet this is a form of behavior that we have wisely outlawed. We have outlawed it, that is, in private life. In our national life, it remains the established and honored procedure.”¹ We may say all we want about necessary evil in this world, about the impracticality of pacifism and the necessity of defending freedom if we wish to remain free. We can quote Augustine and Aquinas about “Just War” in such a way that all our violence fits into religiously-sanctioned categories. But the soil remembers, and like Cain long ago, it testifies against us whenever brother kills brother.

In the monologue from Hamlet Jamal performed for us, Claudius has murdered his brother and compares himself to Cain, with hands coated with his brother’s blood no amount of rain might wash clean. There, between the soil and the sky, Claudius doubts whether he can offer any prayer to heaven since he is still reaping the rewards of the murder, possessing his deceased brother’s wife and his brother’s throne. Like Cain and Claudius, we may hope to keep separate the things in life that involve our brothers and sisters and the things that involve God. We use a variety of names for this: the secular and the sacred; church stuff and real-world stuff. But as Cain and Claudius and you and I know too well, you can’t separate the God-stuff from the daily life-stuff.²

Everything in life involves a triangle of God, ourselves, and our brother or sister. We try to isolate God from the ethical equations of our life, to make things more manageable and palatable. So Claudius kills his brother to gain the throne of Denmark. Cain murders Abel out of resentment toward a seemingly favored younger brother. But just as the soil will not remain silent, God will not be marginalized in this way. God came to Cain, just

as God sought out Cain's wayward parents years before, and asked him, "Where is Abel?" Cain tried to deflect God by retorting, "Am I my brother's keeper?" But God cannot be dismissed so easily. The unspoken response to Cain is "Yes, you are your brother's keeper." Our ways may not be God's ways; but our ways can never be divorced from God's ways and God's demands on how we live our lives in relationship with one another.

As grim as the testimony of the soil is in this Genesis story, it is not solely a tale of doom. Such can never be the case when God is involved. In Christ Jesus, alternate endings to the story of Cain and Abel are suggested over and over again. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the elder son may not have killed the younger one; but there is blood-lust in his anger at the prodigal's return, to which the loving Father says, "Come, let us celebrate, for your brother was dead and now is alive; he was lost and has been found." (Luke 15:32) In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "If you are offering your gift at the altar and remember that you have something against your sibling, leave your gift there and go first be reconciled with your brother or sister, and then come to offer your gift." (Matt 5:23-24) That is how we are to relate to others, not in violence, revenge, in warfare's hostilities or shock and awe; because, yes, we are our brother's keeper.

The soil still cries out today. It is stained by spilt blood and our ignoring of the Sixth Commandment: Thou shalt not kill. How do we resolve this impasse between God's will and our violent ways? Every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, one answer is given to us; Jesus said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this in remembrance of me." (I Cor 11:25) The mark given to Cain long ago was merely for protection, that others might not take his life. The promise given to us by Christ long ago is for salvation, that all might be given true life. The One who knew not sin died on the cross for the forgiveness of sin. Once again soil was stained with an innocent's blood; the ground was forced to absorb more results of this world's addiction to violence. Yet as that blood was shed, words of absolution were spoken, echoing back to Cain and Abel and echoing forward to the present time: "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34)

With those words, and our truly hearing them spoken to us, the salt and dragon's teeth and blood we've sown onto the soil is removed at last. As it says in James, the ground produces a harvest of righteousness, having been sown in peace by those who make peace. (Jas 3:18) The story of the cross and the Easter resurrection absorb Cain's story and our story, with all our stains and sins and tragedies. At this table, a different tale of blood is told, so that by faith never again will brother kill brother, and the soil can rest in silent peace at last.

AMEN

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¹ Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community*, 1993, p. 86.

² Cf. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Interpretation Bible Commentary), 1982, p. 61.