

“Grounded In Hope”
September 11, 2022

Genesis 4:1-16

If I had to guess, I'd say the season was early in the fall. Somewhere near the start of the harvest. No matter how you gauge it, one of the most beautiful times of the year. In my mind, I picture the sun shining against a clear, bright, blue sky. And all appeared well. Until it wasn't.

That's how the Bible story unfolds this morning. A story not far removed from the story of Adam and Eve and their fateful, ill-advised choice to eat a piece of fruit from God's tree of life. Not long after disobeying God's command in the Garden of Eden and accepting from God the consequences of their decision, Adam and Eve conceived. Eventually, Eve bore a son and named him Cain. And not long thereafter, Eve gave birth to their second son and named him Abel.

As the Bible story goes, the population of God's created world had now doubled from two parents, Adam and Eve, to two parents and their two young sons. Sons who grew up and chose different vocations. Cain became a farmer while Abel became a shepherd. And still, all appeared well.

Until God asked both of Adam and Eve's sons to offer a sacrifice to God. Dutifully, both sons brought gifts and laid them on God's altar. Cain brought to God some of the grain he had just harvested. While Abel brought to God the very best, most prized young sheep in his flock. If you are with me in the story to this point, you might wonder, the way I sometimes do, why we tend to turn over to God the average, run of the mill parts of our lives rather than the best most beautiful parts.

In any case, God was pleased with the sheep Abel sacrificed. And God was less than impressed with whatever portion of the harvest Cain sacrificed.

What followed was a fit of rage. Or a fit of jealousy. Or a fit stoked by both. The moment Cain saw that God appreciated his brother Abel's offering and not his own, Cain lashed out at his brother and killed him. Cain's vengeance and violence reduced the world's population by one quarter, from four down to three. And I'm sure God would have figured it out anyway, but the suspect pool when it came to Abel's murder was limited.

To recount, in four chapters in the beginning of the Bible, we have gone from God creating heavens and the earth and all living things before sitting back and resting and calling it good. To today's story where God called Cain to account for his destructive act, knowing full well that Abel's blood was crying out from the ground below Cain's feet.

As Cain stood before God, the best line of defense he could come up with was the head scratching question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Everything was reasonably good in the Book of Genesis up to that question. Then it wasn’t. In that instant, it became all about who was better and who was best and who looked like they were favored in God’s eyes and who thought they were getting shortchanged by God. Until finally, Abel’s blood stained the earth. And that blood, in turn, stained Cain’s soul and spirit and gradually the entire story...

This long ago tale in the beginning of the Bible is a story we human beings can’t seem to shake, no matter how hard we try. Do you remember twenty-one years ago? When it was early in the fall. The start of harvest season. One of the most beautiful times in the entire year.

The sky was bright blue that morning, clear and sunny. And all appeared well. Then early in the morning, you and I stopped whatever we were doing to stare at our televisions. And pick up our phones. And tune in our radios. To watch two huge planes crash headlong into both World Trade towers. And a third plane crash headlong into the Pentagon. And a fourth plane, surely headed to a different destination, crash in a lonely, isolated field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

Soon the towers fell and countless ambulance and fire truck and police car sirens blared and hundreds of people ran and ran and ran to try and get away. Except for the ones who were trapped inside the buildings and the planes. It seemed like a beautiful, normal, early September morning back in 2001.

Suddenly, the world as you and I knew it came to a stop and we watched and listened in horror. On the day we’ve come to know simply as 9/11, the blood of so many of our sisters and brothers stained the ground under our feet, staining our souls and our spirits and our stories along the way.

I imagine God watched the disaster take shape, knowing full well the scope of the pain and suffering inflicted, and having a clear sense of the resulting consequences. Meanwhile, people across this country spent the days and weeks and months and years after 9/11 asking the question we’ve asked so many times in the course of our nation’s history. The same question our sisters and brothers in other lands have asked so many times over the course of their nation’s history.

It’s not a particularly bold question. It doesn’t qualify as an adequate line of defense. In fact, it’s a question that’s head-scratchingly feeble. Still, human beings turn to it over and over again. “Am I my brother’s keeper...?”

The blood of thousands in our world cries out from the ground every single day. The blood of people in Ukraine, facing the daily onslaught of bombs and missiles across their homeland. The blood of people in Saskatchewan, in the wake of recent stabbings. The blood of schoolchildren in their classrooms and black men arrested on city streets and women violated by spouses in their own homes, all of them dying for no good

reason. The blood of Christians and Muslims and Jews attacked by zealots and extremists in the middle of worship services.

It happened back in the beginning of time. It happened twenty-one years ago. It keeps on happening. In so many places, many of them places we would call sacred, we are reliving the story of Cain and Abel. Human beings are rising up against one another in vengeance, in rage, in jealousy, in ignorance. And we're destroying one another.

Don't we know the answer to the question? Don't we know it yet or why can't we learn it? Am I my brother's keeper? Am I my sister's keeper? Of course. Of course I am. Of course you are. We are, we were, we always will be. There's no point trying to fool God or fool ourselves otherwise.

If only people could stop trying to figure out who is better and who is best. Stop pitting ourselves against one another by assuming who is favored and privileged in the sight of God and who is getting the short end of the stick. Because basing our human decisions and making our human choices based on those criteria doesn't typically work out well in the end...

Cain and Abel's story is almost as old as creation itself. And all these generations later, we can't get it right. We're still stuck in the same violent, inhuman loop...

The only thing we can say with conviction and with hope is that the story is not over. Our human story is not over. And God's story is hardly over either. Human beings bear the imprint, the stain of numerous fateful, ill-advised decisions we've made over time. And we can't forget the damage we have caused, nor should we.

Yet from the beginning God has been working to bring humankind together. Do you know that after Cain killed Abel, Eve bore another son and named him Seth? A sign of hope. And Cain, in spite of killing his brother, was marked by God and protected from vengeance. Cain actually went on and raised a family of his own. A sign of hope.

We follow and we worship a God who is intent on reconciling and restoring and forgiving human beings. God obsesses about it, in fact, even when we sin and fall short and lash out until the blood of our siblings cries out from the ground.

Today is September 11, 2022. Fall is upon us and it's the beginning of the harvest season. Over the course of this morning, clouds will mostly cover the sun. Nevertheless, the sky is clear and all appears well.

It's a brand new day. A chance for a new start and a new story. Amen.

