

We Live, We Love: Stories from the Beginning Adam's Family

[Genesis 4:1-16 - the story of Cain and Abel](#)

There are a few moments in my adult life that have felt to me like a snapshot of life in America—suddenly bright images of who we are, the way we get along with one another, how we think. I wonder what your list of those moments would be. For me they include the hearings on Clarence Thomas' nomination to the Supreme Court, when Anita Hill testified about his sexual harassment of her. 9/11. The OJ Simpson verdict. And now, the election of 2016.

Something important happened this week. This was not just another election. Elections always have winners and losers. But what I heard people talk about this week, and felt myself, was real grief; deep, personal fear about what our country might become. Maybe has become already. And on the side that won, a sense that after years—maybe decades—of frustration and resentment about being left out, finally they have been heard. Finally, something will change. Both sides have hardened into their own points of view; the gap between them challenges even our best intentions to practice empathy and compassion.

Ironically, I officiated at a memorial service just last weekend for a very close friend who had died the week before—suddenly, shockingly. The sense of disbelief among Jim's family and friends was not so different from what I have heard since Tuesday. I keep reminding myself of what I said in that service, what I know is true: that when something happens that feels like the ground beneath our feet has fractured, we're likely not to find God, or even comfort, in the "Why?" or "How could God this happen?" question. At times like this, there is a question that matters more:

And now, how shall we live?

God answers that question, every time we ask it. But let us not move too quickly to easy answers.

I want to go back for a moment to that Cain and Abel story that is our text this morning—because I think it tells us something about how we got here. As I said last week as we began this series on the stories from our beginning, Genesis is a book full of stories about dysfunctional families. It is especially about brothers who hurt each other: Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his eleven brothers who threw him in a hole and sold him into slavery.

This is the story of the first murder, the origin of violence and hatred among humans. It happens so early in the creation story! Just the second generation: Cain and Abel, the two sons of Adam and Eve. Cain is a farmer, a "tiller of the ground". Abel is rancher; he cares for animals. If you've any time in the prairie parts of this country, you know what was at the base of the rivalry between these two. Farmers live in orderly rows. They like their land left alone once it has been planted. They prefer regular, predictable rainfall, and careful turning over of the soil in between crops. Animals, and the people who care for animals, don't care one bit about those things, pretty much disregard fences. Sheep and cattle trample the ground until it's hard. They wander around looking for those young plants—not so they can watch them grow, but so they can eat—right now. They see the forces of nature in very different ways; they need different favors from God in order to do well.

In ancient times, before there was understanding of science and medicine and climatology, the people interpreted every hurricane, every flood, every death as the action of God, or gods. If the people were doing well, it meant that the gods favored them. If their crops failed or their child died, it was because the gods were angry. The god you prayed to was capable of both love and hate; could forgive or damn, bless or curse. The people made sacrifices, a gift to put their god in a good mood, before they asked for what they needed.

Cain and Abel, the farmer and the herdsman, each made their sacrifices. The story is told: God was pleased with Abel's sacrifice; Cain's, not so much. Which means, no doubt, that the weather favored what animals need, or perhaps that many lambs were born in a year that the crops failed. To those early humans, this must be God favoring one over the other, had heard the prayer of one and not the other. There was no other explanation. Cain, in his resentment and anger over what seems incredibly unfair, kills Abel, his brother, who got the blessing that should have been his.

Why would God favor one sacrifice over the other? Why would God bless Abel and not Cain? Hear me: God didn't. God loved both Cain and Abel equally.

I know what it says in the Bible. I also know that when the text begins to look like there are two gods, or that God has two faces, one merciful and the other punishing or unloving, that's a clue that the people telling the stories have begun to project their own fears or anger or self-interest onto the story of God. This is what we do. Then. Now. We turn God into a projection of our own angry and violent impulses.

Listen to what happens next in the story. God hears Abel's voice crying out from the ground. In every other culture's myth about the origins of violence, the victim is guilty. The one who is killed gets what he deserves. Not in our story. In this story, God listens to the voice of the victim, knows that this murder has been unjust. But God also moves toward Cain, the murderer. God marks him—not for punishment, but for protection. To stop the violence. This was God's way of warning: Hating and killing each other must stop. If it doesn't, the violence will escalate. And soon it will spin out of control.

Violence happens in many ways. Not all of them are about killing; we do violence every time we blame someone else for the fear and anxiety we feel inside of us. Demonize some group of people for taking what we thought was ours. Treat *anyone* as if their body or future or family doesn't matter. Build walls to keep others out.

Violence—in every form—has the same goal: to remove the Other, the one who has frightened us. It's the disease of the human condition. Like a virus; it spreads without our even being conscious of it. We are highly skilled, practiced, at justifying our own responses. I have reasons for my unkindness; you only have excuses for yours. But even justified violence—getting even, returning what they did first—is killing us.

Forgiveness is the only thing that can end this cycle. Not as a better sacrifice, to appease an angry God, but to break the cycle of violence and retribution that has been part of humanity, in us from the beginning. Forgiveness: a flat-out refusal to participate in blame, in the cycle that says, "It's your fault," or "Someone must pay for this." I think this is what God has been trying to show humans, God's creation, all along.

And now, how shall we live? Who shall we be now, as Americans who have lived through this election, and now face a future we didn't imagine?

We will need to learn a new kind of empathy for the days ahead. People are afraid, of real dangers. Immigrants, African Americans, Latinos, Muslims, people whose health insurance is at risk. So are the people who have felt like their jobs and their homes have been slipping away from them for a long time. We have to practice – get much better at – listening to each other, hearing each other's needs and fears, learning from one another.

Even finding common ground is not enough. It's our differences—especially the ones that make us uncomfortable and that we don't understand—that we have to see and then honor and respect. This will require getting beyond our fear of each other. Our worries about being offended or offensive. Just wanting to get along is not enough. Voting silently is not the only way we participate in our life together. When we see injustice, we have to do something. We can learn how to speak, and act, with clarity and truth and love all at the same time. Jesus showed us what that looks like.

We must learn to live like we belong to each other – like we are responsible not only for ourselves, but for each other. What would life look like if I truly believed that my well-being, my interests, my hope for the future is wrapped up in yours? That when one of us falls behind, we all do?

The stakes are high. Maybe even higher than we knew a week ago.

The truth is, we need each other. We are family, just like Cain and Abel; neighbors to those we don't know so well. We are not just responsible for ourselves; we cannot only worry about ourselves. We are all bound up together. We have the ability to both crush each other and build each other up. With that power comes a great responsibility. What would our world look like if we took that responsibility seriously?

And now, how shall we live?

Let our grief make us better, not bitter. We are followers of Jesus, the one who came out of a tomb not yelling about revenge but offering peace. God has not given up on the resolution to stay in this life with us, and to keep working—through us—for justice and kindness and love for everyone. Let us find hope and resilience in God's hope.

This week it has become painfully obvious: We have not yet learned what it means to be healed, to live in peace. Our country is broken, we are broken. But God has always done his best work when we are broken enough to let it happen. In fact, God seems to speak most often through broken things: people, communities, churches, even nations, that are broken. It's in brokenness that we can see most clearly the unfailing love of God for humanity—a love that can take even misjudgment, humiliation, defeat—and still announce forgiveness and love.

May it be so for us.

Silas Morgan, "Christian Ethics After Trump: A Letter to My Students" at www.patheos.com

Michael Hardin, *The Jesus Driven Life*, 2010

Brian McLaren, *A Post-Election Lament*, at <http://brianmclaren.net>