

Genesis 4:1-16
Life Outside the Garden is Hard

There's this episode of the Andy Griffith show,
where a fancy preacher from New York,
Dr. Everett Breen comes to Mayberry
to preach one Sunday.
Of course first Gomer Pyle falls asleep first.
Next is Barney Fife.
The preacher goes on and on
about how we shouldn't hurry through life
and we ought to slow down
—it's kind of ironic
that was the message in the 50's!



But after the church service
in the greeting line the good Mayberry pastor
introduces Dr. Everett Breen to
Andy, Aunt Bea, Mrs. Johnson
and of course, Deputy Fife.
Oh reverend, they gush,
what a wonderful message.
“Yessir,” Andy nods,
“you hit the nail on the head with that one.”
“Yep,” Barney pipes up,
mind you, he's been asleep,
“that's just one subject you talk enough about, sin.”
A shocked Andy
side-eyes Barney saying,
“the sermon wasn't about sin...”

But I love that line,
 “That’s just one subject you talk enough about, sin.”
 Isn’t that the truth!
 It is the subject that keeps the church
 up and running, isn’t it?

NO!
 Really the good news
 is what keeps the church up and running,
 and we know it to be good news
 because we can see the effects of sin
 in our own, everyday lives.



In our series on Genesis,
 last week our story was,
 Adam, Eve, the snake and the fruit.
 Leaving the garden,
 meant there were real consequences
 to humanity’s newly granted independence.
Barbara Brown Taylor describes it this way,

 “[Adam and Eve] exercised their freedom
 to disobey God’s command,
 ate the fruit, and would up
 standing on the curb outside the garden
 with their battered suitcases
 lying beside them on the ground.

From the moment they left the garden,
 life was hard.
 Life was painful.
 Life was forever out of whack.

If we continue to tell the story,
that is because
it continues to be true for us.”

No sooner are the new couple
thrust into a neighborhood of fixers-uppers;
lawns with overgrown brambles and thorns
would be my guess,
no sooner are they trying to water
the red, hard clay for the tomatoes to grow
and repairing the broken porch steps,
and well now there’s the pitter-patter
of toddler feet running around.

His given name is Cain—which has,
down through the years,
left a rather acrid taste
in our mouths when we say it.

But his name, *Cain*,
comes from the word
that means “to get, to create.”
The name was given as a praise to God.¹
Cain is celebrated and well thought of
—after all he’s a first born male child—
what’s not to celebrate?
Well actually when it comes to Genesis,
first born sons
—think Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob and Esau—
don’t seem to fare well.²

The text tells us that Adam and Eve
next had a son named Abel.
Interestingly enough,
Abel’s name means,

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (John Knox Press, Atlanta, GA 1982 pg. 56)

² *Ibid* pg. 55

vapor, nothingness—
without the possibility of life.³
Which of course is a good textual clue.
They grow, as children do.
We hear nothing from the story of their life
except that somewhere along the way,
our given calling and vocation,
the one that told us
we were to care for the earth and her creation,
to take care of the land and animals,
somewhere along the way,
this meant dividing that vocation into two.
“Now Abel was a keeper of sheep
and Cain a tiller of the ground.” (Gen. 4:3)



And shepherds and farmers
don't always get along.
The one needs space with no borders
or fences or walls
to roam the herd so the cows
can find the freshest grasses.

The other needs those gates
and barriers and limits
so that the rainbow kale can grow
in between the carrots and the olives.
You can see how the tension
is already building, can't you?
It surely happened when they were just tots,
just as it does with your children and mine.
One minute it is calm and playful

³ ibid

and the next minute
 there are tears and bite marks.
 One is sometimes stronger and more assertive,
 the other more timid and relaxed.
Anyhow, they make it work
 these two bothers,
 until all of the sudden it doesn't.

This is of course where the story gets interesting.
 They both bring the best
 of what they have.
 Probably beaming with pride,
 Cain puts his prize-winning pumpkin on the altar,
 along with corn and mint
 and basil and rosemary.

Can't you see it?
 Cain's display looking like
 the first cornucopia across the altar?

And Abel, proud too of his offering,
 is hefting in the freshly cut bacon
 —err well, we aren't to kosher laws yet,
 but maybe we should say
 it is a nice cut of beef and leg of lamb.
 He's wiping his brow
 because the meat is so heavy.

And then there's God.
 God who every time we try to pin down,
 somehow escapes our grasp.
 Somehow even when God is revealed,
 God is still shrouded in mystery.⁴
 For reasons unknown to us,
 God prefers the smell of barbeque
 over roasted squash.

⁴ Peter Rollins, How (Not) To Speak of God...



Arthur Miller's 1972 play, *The Creation of the World and Other Business*, sets the scene like this:

God: Young man, this is undoubtedly the sweetest, most delicious, delicate, and profoundly satisfying piece of meat I have ever tasted since the world began.

Adam: Boy, this is our proudest moment...

Cain: Lord, there's still my corn. You haven't tasted my corn.

God: Oh, I can see it is very nice. You have done quite well, Cain. Keep it up. *With which he walks into the light with Adam, and Abel fowling behind.*

Eve: *beckoning: Cain? Seeing his shock.* Darling, he loved your vegetables. Come. (Miller 90-91)⁵

The text says that Cain's countenance fell.

And who can blame him?!

My countenance would fall
and I'd burn with anger too
if the Lord favored my sister's offering
more than mine.

That's how it is,
siblings tend to be
competitive for any attention.
The rub is that we are given nothing,
not one reason
for God's capriciousness of choice.

"No reason is given in the passage
because there is none to give.
God's regard for Abel and his offering
is simply a fact of life.

⁵ W. Sibley Towner, *Genesis Westminster Bible Companion* (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 2001 pg. 56)

Such is the mysterious freedom of God.”⁶
And that is unnerving.
We’d like a predictable God,
one that seems to have a reason
to dole out divine favor,
yet what we get
is a story where God’s clear choice
falls to one brother
instead of them both.

Cain is angry and God knows it.

The Lord can tell;
just as God could tell
that the fruit had been plucked eaten.
“Why are you hiding?”
God asks Adam and Eve.
“Why are you angry?”
God asks Cain.

And before Cain can make his defense,
before he can stammer out the question
of why did you like Abel’s meat
more than you liked my vegetables,
the Lord spins Cain a sort of riddle;

“If you do well, will you not be accepted?
And if you do not do well,
sin is lurking at the door;
its desire is for you,
but you can/must master it.” (Gen.4:7)

It’s like the Lord is a giant Sphinx
or perhaps as clever and crafty
as one of his own creatures, one whose just lost its legs...
you see where I’m going with that...

“That’s just one subject you talk enough about, sin.”

⁶ Celia Brewer Marshall, Genesis Interpretation Bible Studies (Geneva Press, Louisville, KY 1999 pg.22)

This is the first naming,
the use of the word sin.
Here, "sin is not breaking the rules,
the commandments have not yet been given.
It is not missing the mark of perfection
or righteousness or godliness;
such a report card mentality
does not do it justice.
Sin is a for larger than life.
It takes on a life of its own,
and what it wills is death."⁷

"It is lurking at your door,
its desire if for you,
but you can master it."
Here's what I love about this answer.
What God is saying in essence is
sin is not passed down
through any sort of lineage.

Augustine was famous
for explaining that there was an original sin
and it was passed on
from the parents to children;
but God **is not** saying
sin **is in** you waiting to take over.
What God is saying is
sin is lurking at your door.
Its desire is for you.
Sin is again, larger than life.
That is something different.
That is a presence that is always with us,
presenting us the choice
to either let it consume us
or to, as God says,
somehow master it.

⁷ Ibid, (pg. 23)



In her book, *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation*,
Barbara Brown Taylor tells about
a conversation she had with a friend:

“The thing is,” my friend said,
“in this life, it’s possible to get away with
some of the awful stuff
we do for a long time.
We can hide it
or lie about it
and sometimes it takes years
for the fallout to catch up with us.
But in God’s life,
everything is present and revealed.
When you make a choice,
there is absolutely no delay
in feeling the consequences of it.
The moment you speak or act,
you get a full dose
of the reality you have just chosen.”

“So if I choose hate,” Taylor says,
“then my heart gets wrapped
in barbed wire right that minute,
and I can feel everyone one
of those spikes gouging me?”

“Worse than that,” her friend replies.
“All around you, crowds
of angry people you can’t see

are screaming vile things at you.

They are punching and kicking you in the dark,
because of the main consequences of hating
is finding out
how it feels to be hated.”

“The more you’re living God’s life,
though, the quicker [the consequences]
come and the worse they hurt.”⁸

In God’s time everything
is present and revealed.

No sooner does Cain hear God say to him
that he can choose how to handle his anger,
than Cain handles his anger,
the wrong way.

And this is the story of our lives.

Day in and day out,
we can choose—not whether we sin or not,
but we can choose to contain
and master its desire for us.

Cain murders Abel

and because God’s time is present
and things are always revealed,
God can hear Abel’s blood
crying out from the ground.

The very ground that Cain tills
and loves and takes care of.

The Lord wants Cain to tell the truth,

God gives Cain a moment
to do the right thing;
where is your brother Abel?

And sadly, Cain’s reply is said in anger,
How should I know what my brother is up to?
How should I know
what he is doing or where he is?

⁸ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation* (Cowley Press, Cambridge, MA 2000, pg. 35-36—*mainly a conversation about hell that I have adapted for this sermon*)

If he is your favorite, you should know...
Those famous words,
“Am I my brother’s keeper?”



We want to shout, yes, Cain you are!
Stand up man,
tell the Lord what has happened.
Tell the Lord that sin had its way with you
and now you don't know
up from down and right from left
and though you've washed your hands,
you brother's blood
has stained every part of your life.
Tell God you feel
that barbed wire wrapping around your heart.
But Cain doesn't.

God's judgment is swift and harsh.
“And now you are cursed from the ground,
which has opened its mouth
to receive your brother's blood
from your hand.
When you till the ground,
it will no longer yield to you
its strength;
you will be a fugitive
and a wanderer on the earth.” (Gen. 4:11-12)

The punishment is great.

You can feel Cain's shoulders sag,
his lips tremble,
his heart breaking.

And in this moment he is truthful
—he cries out that the punishment
is too much for him to bear.

The full weight of his anger,
his fratricide,
and now his separation from the land
and from God is too much.

“My punishment is greater than I can bear!
Today you have driven me away from the soil
and I shall be hidden from your face;
I will be a fugitive and wanderer
on the earth and anyone who meets me
may kill me.” (Gen. 4:13-14)

“That's just one subject you can't talk enough about, sin.”

It is so hard for us to master sin.

In the New Testament,
this story is told of two brothers and father.
One who stays at home
and another who selfishly demands his inheritance,
and wastes it all.

But he's welcomed home
and the older brother is left
with anger gouging his heart.
It is the father who says,
“You have always been with me,
everything I have is yours,
please come in to the party.”

Or it is the story of laborers in the vineyard,
who at the end of the day
are shocked to receive
the same pay

as those who've only worked an hour.
Anger gripped their hearts.
The vineyard owner replies,
 "Friend I am doing you no wrong
 ...Am I not allowed to do
 what I choose
 with what belongs to me?
 Or are you envious
 because I am generous?" (Matt. 20:13,15)

Or is it God saying to Cain,
 Mind your own business
 and mind it well.
 I choose to accept Abel's offering;
 that's my business.
Your job is to do well before me
 and be a brother to Abel.
 This you can do;
 now let's get on with it.
 Never mind the spotlight on Abel.
 Both of you are mine."⁹

Life outside the garden is hard.
 It is fraught with pain,
 heartache, murder, sin
 —sin that is larger than life
 and lurking at our doors.
 Its deathly desire is for us.

These stories first of our beginnings,
 are not literal wooden stories about particulars
 but rather grand stories of truth
 that may have happened
 but then again are always happening.

Cain is overwhelmed by his punishment.
 As were his parents.
 And though God is capricious in this story,

⁹ Celia Brewer Marshall, Genesis Interpretation Bible Studies (Geneva Press, Louisville, KY 1999 pg.26)

God shows grace and mercy
even to a murderer.

Just moments before,
at the dawn of time,
God clothed Adam and Eve
as they left garden.

And just as Cain now prepares to wander,
God marks Cain as his own.
God claims even Cain.

God who chose Abel's offering,
now chooses Cain—
Cain who feels as if his life is over,
finds a wife and is blessed with children.
Life outside the garden,
though hard,
continues.

The God who is revealed
remains shrouded mystery.
The story will continue with Cain,
and, with Adam and Eve
who have another son, Seth.

The line will lead from Seth to Noah,
and the human spirit will flourish and fail.

Yet this mysterious and gracious God
continues to clothe us
and marks us as his own.

Perhaps *that is one subject* you just can't talk about enough.