

Are you comfortable with the Bible? Do you find within its pages a healing balm that soothes your soul? Do you find there words of life that calm and guide the days of your life? If you answer “yes”, you join literally legions of fellow pilgrims on the way of life. If, however, you do not struggle with your answer, if your affirmation of the beauty and deep meaning you find in the Bible is not tainted at least to some extent by the admission that some of it is deeply troubling, some of it just doesn't make sense, you are out of step with those who put the Bible together one story, one psalm, one bit of wisdom at a time. Although there are obviously those passages that heal our souls and give us guidance in the night, there are those passages that seem designed to unsettle or at least to give voice to the unsettling and even tormented dimension of life. And such an unsettling, such torment is not a testament to our unbelief but to our desperate desire to believe, to find the way of faith in spite of the headwind of life that periodically shakes us to our very core.

Lent in the Christian church is designed to serve just that purpose. Rather than humming us into a gentle sleep, the weeks of Lent, if we are paying attention, hold up a mirror to the struggle for faith and faithfulness that claim our energies. Lent, which surprisingly simply means “spring”, walks us in a very deliberate way toward the Cross and bates us into the dark deliberation of “why”. Why the Cross? How did humanity, confronted with the love and simple humanity of the one we call “Jesus” ever get to that point? And how, given the unfinished nature of who we know ourselves to be, did we get to where we are today? Rather than merely looking back 2000 years to point a finger of blame, we look around us and within ourselves. Rather than ignoring the rage and enmity in our world in hope that it will go away, we turn to look it in the face. Rather than merely pushing down deep within ourselves our unsettling questions and doubts that, try as we might, won't go away, we name them in the presence of God and own them.

The soul searching of Lent is not out of step with the faith of the Bible. As a matter of fact, a distinctive aspect of Israel's faith experience is just that, wrestling, struggling for and with faith. Israel's very name, first given in the story of Jacob's wrestling match with the mysterious stranger at Jabbok, literally means one who struggles or wrestles with God. Israel's religious heroes, far from flawless specimens of humanity that somehow float above the crowd, do not, in Karen Armstrong's words, achieve enlightenment effortlessly or with the calm serenity of a Buddha. “Salvation was [and is] a painful, difficult process” [*In the Beginning*, 4].

Genesis, in particular, that book of beginnings, that book over which far too many lines in the sand have been drawn, struggles with and tries to make sense of the struggle. Just as most other cultures have evolved a myth of a golden age at the dawn of time, Genesis' stories of creation and a blissful Garden of Eden represent the “near-universal conviction that life was not meant to be so painful and fragmented” [Armstrong, 22]. Deeply aware that things are not as they should be, face to face with humanity's separation from God and one another, the stories of Genesis ask “How did we get this way? And How do we find our way back to God and one another?” The stories of Genesis, then, are about Everyman, Every woman, everyone who has the courage to look within and without and acknowledge that things are not as they should be, especially if one is going to take seriously a profound commitment to a God of love and power. Genesis, you might say, does not still our questions. It engages them.

**We struggle with the unfairness of life.** Enter Cain and Abel. If you ever doubted whether their story like that of their parents should be interpreted as deeply symbolic myth, look at their names. Cain literally means “to get, to create.” It was given to him at birth by his mother in praise to God. Abel, on the other hand, means “vapor, nothingness,” without the possibility of life. Cain, in other words, represents the vitality of life while Abel is dismissed—a situation that is reversed in Christian scriptures where Cain is equated with evil (I John 3: Jude 11) and Abel, with faith (Hebrews 11:4). Further notice that when Cain is exiled in punishment, he is sent to the land of Nod, literally, the land of wandering.

Because we so quickly want to put ourselves at ease with the passage, we traditionally interpret it as a teaching about obedience and get to work on showing how Cain or his offering were at fault. But note that the story's narrator does not give us a reason. Although there might be an indication here of the historic struggle between the pastoralist and agriculturalist, no basis is given for God's preference of one offering over the other. All that the story tells us is that both men come before God bringing their best; and inexplicably, God rejects one and accepts the other. If we are going to be faithful to the text, we, like the narrator, must resist every temptation to somehow pin the blame. “There is nothing here,” Brueggemann goes on to say, “of Yahweh preferring cowboys to farmers. There is nothing here to disqualify Cain” [p. 56].

All that the narrator gives us in resolving the riddle of Cain and Abel is the riddle with which the early

biblical writers struggled, the freedom of God to choose as God will choose. It is the riddle that confronted Moses at the burning bush. "I AM WHO I AM" [Ex. 3:14]. It is the riddle that confronts us as we, like the ancient storytellers struggle to make sense of life. This God, who would not be contained in a box, who cannot be trapped in our ironclad statements of dogma, this God was and is free to be out ahead of God's people, acting in new and surprising ways. Yet, more troubling, this God, who in early Israelite thinking, directly controlled every aspect of human life from the rising of the sun and the descent of rain to human birth, joy and suffering, loss and death, was a puzzle. We know that the psalmists and Job wrestle with these perplexities; so do the storytellers of Genesis. How do we square up profound belief in the God of steadfast love with the obvious and seemingly inescapable unfairness of life? How do we deal with our sense of helplessness before the suffering of innocents in Syria, in the Horn of Africa or in the long term unemployment of good, hardworking people in our own nation? How does our faith in God square up against the unfairness that we know to be a part of the human condition? How does our faith in God square up against unfairness and loss when it hits close to home?

**We are response-able.** We often focus on the dynamic between Cain and Abel, and brother strife is a recurring theme in the biblical story from Cain and Abel to Ishmael and Isaac to Jacob and Esau to Amnon and Absalom. How we respond to our brother or sister in the face of life's inequities is critical. Looking more closely at the story, you might even say our response to our brothers/sisters and our response to God are indivisible. Noting Cain's displeasure over the rejection of his offering, God quizzes him, "Why are you angry? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door . . . but you must master it." Be sure that we are not met here with the consequences of the fall of the parents in the previous chapter. Cain is not fated to his poor choice of behavior. He has the choice to "do well," to "master" the sin lurking at his door. But he does have a choice and how he chooses will mark him for the rest of his life.

That we have a choice is good news. Life's unfairness and dissension with our brothers and sisters can enrage or depress us, and leave us consumed with rage or bitterness. Or we can choose a better way. We can respond in care for our brother, our sister who are wounded by what life has thrown at them, We can travel the path of reconciliation. We are not helpless victims. As Victor Frankl, author of *Man's Search for Meaning*, discovered as a prisoner in Hitler's concentration camp, when we feel that life has taken all other choices from us, we can resort to the one freedom we have left. We can choose how we will respond. We can nurse our wounds; we can hurl the hurt of our disillusionment at the world; or we can resign ourselves from the hurtful melee and become a part of God's healing presence in the world.

Will we do it? As we gather now to God and one another at Christ's Table, let us reflect on the enabling presence we encounter here. And let us go forth responding in kind.