

Raising Cain – Saving Abel

sermon digest

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Acts 4:1-20; Genesis 4:3-12; 1 John 3:11-17

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Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, Pope John XXIII, is held today in highest reverence by Jews for his outstanding efforts during World War II to rescue Jews from German persecution in Europe. Among his documented actions as a papal nuncio during the War, Roncalli supplied temporary baptismal papers to help Jews escape Nazi occupied nations; he was credited with negotiating the liberation of Jews from one of the worst Nazi extermination camps in Europe, Jasenovac in Croatia. As Pope, he ordered the revision of a Good Friday prayer in the liturgy that had long assigned guilt for the death of Jesus to the Jews. After his death, *The Catholic Herald* recorded Pope John's prayer remembering the Nazi Jewish persecution. He confessed centuries of blindness that kept us from seeing the beauty of "Thy chosen people." Then he asked God's forgiveness for Christians: "We realize that the mark of Cain stands upon our foreheads. Across the centuries our brother Abel has lain in blood which we drew, or shed tears we caused by forgetting Thy love. Forgive us for the curse we falsely attached to their name as Jews. Forgive us for crucifying Thee a second time in their flesh. For we know not what we did." Pope John perceived a connection in the Christian treatment of Jews and the story of Cain and Abel.

We are responsible. For some strange reason, the story of Cain and Abel has been ignored by the Common Lectionary that assigns biblical texts for each Sunday. Also, the story is hardly noticed in the rest of the Bible. The story-myth of Cain and Abel flows out of the Eve-Adam-Fall account in the previous chapter. These are stories Genesis addresses as beginnings. Genesis is primarily about the beginning of the Hebrew people, reaching back to the origins of things: the creation, human life, the human family, the Hebrew family, and mythical stories about origins of commonly known facts of life like human violence. The names of persons are significant. Adam is named for the soil from which he is born *Adamah*; Eve is named for her role of motherhood, *Hawwah*, "source of life." Cain is named for his vocation as farmer, "stalk" or "spear." Eve celebrates her partnership with God in creation with the birth of Cain: "I have produced a man with the help of the Lord." But, as number two son, Abel gets no special attention or affirmation; he is just born.

Abel means "emptiness, vanity," probably a reference to his brief life. Schneir Levin ("The Abel Syndrome," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 20 no 2 winter 1991-1992, p 111-114) goes so far as to suggest that Abel's name implies weakness, perhaps even defective. The text might be suggesting that Abel was disabled, one of the early members of the human family born with major limitations of body or mind. The Hebrew word for Abel is central to Ecclesiastes: "Vanity of Vanities," says *qoheleth*.

Given the order and structure of the Hebrew family, the elder son Cain has a special responsibility for his younger brother Abel simply on the basis of chronology. Older siblings are surrogate parents, born to function as role models, teachers, and protectors of the younger children, a natural family order that cuts across cultures and epochs. With one older brother, my mother was the oldest daughter in a family of ten children. I came to realize later in life that her role with her younger siblings was always more parental than fraternal especially with her sisters. We always had a parade of family visitors on holidays. Our house was home especially to our aunts and their families. On two occasions, in times of need, one the younger aunts came to live with us.

So the question which sticks to this story seems to hit the nail on the head. When confronted by God and asked for the whereabouts of his brother, Cain's cynical response has echoed down the corridors of time: "Am I my brother's keeper?" The response of Cain may be a tactical maneuver to avoid confession, answering a question with a question; but it is certainly rhetorical. The answer to Cain's question is built into the question and tied to the subtle, yet emphatic, trail of responsibility in the preceding verses. The Hebrew word for "keeper" is found in the earlier passages of Genesis 2-3, introducing the responsibility of humans for the earth as keepers, care-takers, of the Garden. We are certainly responsible for taking care of one another.

We have often noticed the ecological implications here of taking care of the garden in which we live. In an age of industrial pollution and military destruction of nature in addition to human overpopulation, even crowding out other animal species, the stewardship role of humans is both valid and contemporary. But in the confrontation with Cain, human stewardship is extended to the human family. Cain has responsibility to take care of Abel, and, yes, we are responsible for our brothers and sisters on the earth regardless of their religion, color, nationality, or any other mark by which humans distinguish and discriminate against one another. We cannot continue to live in this garden called earth in denial of problems like global

warming and social and industrial practices that turn the oceans and the soil into garbage dumps. Neither can we turn our heads away from the masses of humanity being treated like garbage by the ruling Cains of the global economic and political orders. With John Donne we need to confess: "Each man's death diminishes me, For I am involved in mankind." As was Cain.

We are siblings in a common Abrahamic religious family. The three great world religions that stem from the Genesis story of Abraham are regularly treated together these days in the struggle for religious dominance. Bless Pope John for seeing and responding to the ages of Christian history in which mistreatment of Jews was the norm for dominant Christians and their institutions. In 1973, University of North Carolina professor of religion William Jay Peck saw a connection between the myth of Cain and Abel and the treatment of Jews by the Nazi Reich (*Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, XXVIII, no. 2, pp 150ff). Peck acknowledged that for years he had thought of Hitler as a demented racist bigot, who used the Jews as a scapegoat in his grasp for world power. In this scenario, the Jews were not all that important; they were just a convenient group to aid Hitler's evil drive for power.

Peck went on to present his changed view of the Nazi death camps as a play on the religious mythology in Cain and Abel. There was something demonic about the religious ideology in the Nazi rise to power. The Jews had always viewed themselves as "God's chosen people." Following Nietzsche's philosophy, Hitler promoted the superiority of the Aryan race with a destiny to rule all of the peoples of the earth. There could not be two chosen peoples. One had to go. So the "Final Solution" of the Nazi government was more than a convenient provision to name an enemy of the people; it was pure genocide, the attempt to remove the chosen ones from the face of the earth to make room for Hitler's superior race. Peck found the root of the problem in the Cain-Abel mythology as it has been carried forward and relived in the religious history of Jews and Christians. In fact, the story was intended not as a historical event but as a paradigm for human misbehavior in all of history.

However, the Jewish older sibling of Christians is no longer the big brother. From the fourth century era of Constantine, Christians have been in control and have wielded the power of death on Jewish siblings. Peck wrote: "Auschwitz brings the Christian back to Golgotha wondering how faith could have contributed to such a horrendous miscarriage. Auschwitz seems to prove that Christianity has consistently failed to be conscious of and responsible for the deep mythic forces contained within the cauldron of its history."

Interpreters of the story have often speculated about the "mark of Cain" in Pope John's prayer for the Jews. In Genesis, the mark of Cain was actually a sign of divine protection to prevent others from killing Cain as he had murdered his brother Abel. The soil, created to support life and foundation for Cain's vocation as a farmer, became witness to Cain's murder as Abel's blood cried out from the soil. God's curse on the soil would become Cain's problem that would drive him into the city. Ironically, Jews in European history were driven off the soil, prohibited from owning land, into merchandising and banking by the dominant Christian powers, and the promise of God for Jews was always located in the soil, the land of Canaan.

For centuries the mark of Cain was erroneously identified with black skin, supposedly God's assignment of servitude to the African people; it became a popular argument for the defense of human slavery in nineteenth century America. Pope John seems to have remembered the sign of our sinful mortality imposed in ashes on the forehead on Ash Wednesday. The Jews are "our brother Abel," who "has lain in blood which we drew."

The story of Cain and Abel follows the sin of the parents as if the sons are the heirs of human dysfunction, only this time the sin is significantly more serious. Disobedience of the parents leads to violence in the sons. Worse than murder, the sin of Cain is fratricide, murder in the family, killing the brother.

We are stewards of our siblings' welfare; you are your brother/sister's keeper. Based on the Genesis view of the world, every murder, every execution, every war involves fratricide, the killing of brothers and sisters in creation. All who are made in the divine image are members of the family of God. Cain is the obvious symbol of evil, while Abel seems to occupy the role of the righteous. The Genesis story does not give us a clue as to the cause of God's acceptance of Abel's offering or for the behavior of Abel that might have contributed to Cain's hatred and murder. Hebrews 11 interprets Abel's superior sacrifice as an act of faith, while John's First Epistle addresses Cain's evil behavior in the context of our responsibility of love for one another. Abel's righteousness is affirmed by John's Epistle, but the specific details are left for speculation.

John's Epistle is addressed to Christians, brothers and sisters in the church, but Cain-Abel story goes beyond the church to the whole created order. The root evil that leads to violence and murder in human behavior stems from jealousy that erupts in hatred. As long as we can define "us-and-them" in the global neighborhood, we are going to have repetition of the Cain mutiny—"wars and rumors of wars" as stated in the Gospel apocalypse.

But John is interested in the antidote to Cain's behavior rooted in the teaching of Jesus: "we know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another." Jesus was a Jew living in a world dominated by Rome before his church came into being. His call for radical love in the hostile, Roman world was shocking: If someone needs your coat, give him the shirt off your back as well. If a Roman soldier demands that you carry his pack for the legally enforced mile, walk with him the second mile. Instead of hatred for the monstrous Roman menace, "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Through the centuries, the greatest problem Christians have had with the Sermon on the Mount is the call to radical love outside the nuclear family of faith.

If we are to love even enemies, John's questions stand: how can we harden our hearts and turn our eyes away from the impoverished brothers and sisters in our world? If we harbor hatred, how can we claim God's love? As disciples, we are called to follow Christ, who reversed Cain's and Hitler's "final solution." Rather than kill, "he laid down his life for us."