

**Genesis 4:1-16** <sup>1</sup> Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have produced a man with the help of the Lord." <sup>2</sup> Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. <sup>3</sup> In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, <sup>4</sup> and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, <sup>5</sup> but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. <sup>6</sup> The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? <sup>7</sup> 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 must master it." <sup>8</sup> Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let us go out to the field." And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him. <sup>9</sup> Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" <sup>10</sup> And the Lord said, "What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! <sup>11</sup> And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. <sup>12</sup> 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." <sup>13</sup> Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is greater than I can bear! <sup>14</sup> Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me." <sup>15</sup> Then the Lord said to him, "Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance." And the Lord put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him. <sup>16</sup> Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Genesis 4:1-16

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"My Brother's Keeper"

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The book of Genesis is the story of beginnings. The beginnings of creation. The beginnings of life. The beginnings of God's interaction with humankind. The beginnings of sin. The beginnings of history and civilization. It is neither scientifically nor historically accurate in the modern sense. Which does not, in any way, negate its importance or its beauty. Its purpose is to reveal the work and character of God. It also has a good deal of light to shed on the experience of being human. In Chapter 1, God speaks creation into being – the cosmos, the planet, all life including humankind. And God pronounces every last bit of it good. In Chapter 2, creation is recorded again, this time, God uses His hands and mud and earth. Two traditions preserved by the ancient Jews who saw truth each telling. Chapter 3 records the intrusion of sin into human life, and its consequences: toil, pain, suffering, hardship. And yet, the good God made is not gone. As chapter 4 begins, there is love and intimacy. There is birth and joy. There is connection and relationship.

But alas, there is disparity. It's as old as our sin, you see. Cain and Abel are twins, according to the scholars, because there is one conception, but two births. Fair enough. Cain is born first. His name, in Hebrew, is קַיִן (*qayin*), which is a bit tricky to translate into English. It means "acquire" or "possess", but it can also mean "produce" or "create". In English, those words have different connotations. We don't understand acquire or possess in the same way that we might understand produce or create, in that the former suggests taking or buying, while the latter suggests a more personal investment of our own energies. Hebrew doesn't make that kind of distinction. Cain gets his name from Eve's declaration that she has begotten or produced a man with God's help.

As the oldest son, Cain takes after his father. He becomes a tiller of the soil – one who produces for a living. One who creates tools, one who acquires and possesses land, one whose sweat and labor, in time, co-creates the harvest alongside His God. But also one who seems to think that he ought to possess or produce God’s favor.

Abel, on the other hand, is *הבל* (*hevel*) which is also tricky to translate from the original Hebrew. It is derived from a root meaning “breath” or “wind”. The Gesenius lexicon says it is “commonly used of anything transitory, evanescent, frail.” It may be used to mean “vapor,” implying that which is ethereal and impossible to grasp. The same word, *hevel*, embodies the central theme of Ecclesiastes, where we read, “...הַבַּל הֶבֶל הַבָּלִים...” which is commonly translated as “vanity of vanities.” [from <https://rabbidavidzaslow.com/whats-in-a-name-a-secret-about-cain-and-abel/>]. But it implies a kind of transience or fleetingness. Which makes sense. After all, Abel is a shepherd. He goes where the flock takes him. He wanders the land, dependent upon it but not tied to any one spot. Rabbi David Zaslow argues that Abel’s name implies that he has no conceit, but is very vulnerable, “spacy”, lacking street smarts, whereas Cain is consumed with acquisition. He notes that “Abel is satisfied to experience the world as it is, whereas Cain wants to build, create, and change the world around him.” On the other hand, Jeff A. Benner argues that Cain possesses character and ingenuity, whereas Abel is empty, vain, shallow, or without substance. [<https://www.ancient-hebrew.org/studies-interpretation/untold-story-of-cain-and-abel.htm>]. So while there’s always been agreement among scholars that the name reveals the character of the individual, in this case, you’ll find a wide range of opinions as to exactly what the character of each of these brothers might be.

For reasons that the text does not make clear, both brothers bring an offering to God, suggesting that worship and gratitude is built into us as creatures of our creator. Abel brings the firstborn of his flock and their fat portions. Cain comes bearing fruit. Scholars like to go on and on about how Abel brings the firstborn, but Cain brings whatever is laying around and not the first fruits of the harvest, which is why God doesn’t like it. There’s two problems with that. First of all, there’s been no law or pronouncement uttered that God expects first fruit. That doesn’t come until Moses, thousands of years later, so it’s hardly fair to expect Cain to know that. Second, scripture doesn’t say that there’s anything wrong with Cain’s offering. It’s not described as substandard or stingy or inferior in any way. In fact, what makes this story so troubling is that there’s a randomness to it that’s off-putting. It upsets our notion that God is just and fair and treats us all the same. We instinctively want to know why God doesn’t look at both offerings, say “Great! Thanks!” and let it be. The human-like partiality of God really is upsetting, and the only counsel I can give us as we dive into ancient texts like this is to be careful not to get too literal. The point here is that there is a certain randomness built into life and all of us have to cope with it. Life is sometimes arbitrary and not fair. We are all different, and some do seem to have an easier time, better luck, more opportunities, whatever.

There’s no record that Abel gloats or revels or crows about his achievement. Honestly, we don’t even know how the brothers knew that God liked one offering and not the other. Which says to me that the problem isn’t really the gift. The problem is the giver. Cain may feel some anger, but I think what the scriptures are really describing is a sense of rejection. Scripture says that his face falls. He is literally downcast by this. Cain cares what God thinks, and God knows it. God responds to him, is concerned, helps him name his own feelings, thereby communicating clearly that God understands Cain. God then reminds him that this one moment is not the end-all-be-all of their interaction and places a choice before him. The lesson says “if you do well, will you not be accepted?” which is really NOT a great rendering of the Hebrew. It would be better translated as “If you ARE well...” In other words, if you take a healthy stance, if you learn from this, grow from this, master this, you will find what you need. But if you don’t, if you let this consume you, it will be to your ruin.

Beloved, that choice is before us to. Architect and inventor R. Buckminster Fuller used to say that there is absolutely nothing about a caterpillar that tells you it's going to be a butterfly. You can't know by looking a person, or a situation, or a moment in time, all the possibilities for what may yet be. All Cain needed to do was see that things are bigger than this.

But he gets stuck, and he makes the wrong choice. He lets it eat him from the inside out. He kills his brother, and even the soil can't take the rot that has been buried beneath it. "Where is your brother?" God wants to know. To which Cain, the acquirer, the possessor, the producer and keeper of things, the one consumed with consuming, has the audacity to ask, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Am I my brother's keeper?

No.

Because your brother is not an animal in cage, or a prisoner in a cell, or pretty pot on a shelf. No, you are not your brother's keeper.

You are your brother's *brother*. You are connected. Related. Siblings. You share blood. You share humanity. You share a common parent in God. No wonder the ground cries out. The very thing that sustained them both is corrupted and contaminated. It will no longer sustain. Cain is cut off from the land, banished from his home and sentenced to wander. To which he responds, "My punishment is greater than I can bear." But Jeff Benner rightly points out that the word translated "punishment" there is אָוֹן (avon) meaning both sin, iniquity or guilt, and the consequences of those things. So it's just as possible that Cain is expressing remorse – that his guilt is too great to bear.

[<https://www.ancient-hebrew.org/studies-interpretation/untold-story-of-cain-and-abel.htm>.]

But even then, God does not abandon him. It's often said that the Hebrew Scriptures teach law while the gospels preach grace, but that's not true. Jesus claims to fulfill the law, and here we see that God marks a murderer with a sign of grace. Cain will not wander alone, nor will God hide his face as Cain fears. God protects him. As to the mark, we have no idea what that is. I can only guess it's the same mark that touches Moses' heart, and David's, and Paul's, and countless others who God has used in spite of their sin and the suffering they've caused.

If we look at verse 17, which was not a part of our scripture lesson, it says, "Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch; and he built a city, and called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch." Which is significant, because the root word of Enoch is אָח (chek) which references the palate, roof of the mouth, or gums. Which sounds pretty weird, but what it points to is a baby, learning the world with its mouth as babies do, lacking teeth, needing nourishment in the form of milk. [<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/2441.htm>.] Enoch means initiation, the start of something, the first lesson in an education. [from "East Of Eden And The City Of Beginning" by Maxie Dunnam, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).] In other words: beginning.

Which brings us full circle. Because that, you'll remember, is the Genesis theme. And that is why this remains an Easter lesson. Cain begins again. He rebuilds. At long last, he learns, he grows, he produces good fruit – at least for awhile, until it goes bad and the great flood wipes it out. Yet even then, the rainbow promises God's abiding presence and live-giving love. New beginnings always come.

I don't know about you, but this week has been a hard one for me. As I watched the conviction of Derek Chauvin, I felt grief. Grief for George Floyd and his family, of course. But also for the ruin that has encompassed so many lives, including those four officers. I have felt grief that it's so hard to have a conversation; I grieve the loss of basic reason and compromise. I grieve that too often these things are reduced to memes and soundbytes that serve only to ratchet up our fear and distrust for one another. I grieve the noise and the rancor. I grieve that the inertia of history continues to drive the systems around us, and it's not my fault or your fault or any ONE's fault, but it does place a burden on my heart to change it, and I feel grief that this is somehow threatening. And it doesn't make us evil or

racist or hateful to acknowledge that our systems reflect our human imperfections. I am not my brother's keeper. I am my brother's brother. My sister's sister. Siblings by the blood of Jesus. They say that sparks always bring fire. But we can choose the fire. It can be the fire of hate, fueled by fear, by jealousy, by tribalism, burning hot and angry in our spirits. Or it can be the fire of passion, fueled by faith, by love, by goodwill, burning hot and hopeful in our spirits. Like MLK Jr., I do still have a dream – a dream that we can use our resourcefulness, our ingenuity, our best selves, to build a city of new beginnings; of child-like faith, friendship, and opportunity; a greener Enoch, a just and compassionate Enoch, an Enoch that lives and prospers in peace. May God make it so. Amen.