

Analyzing the First Homicide

Genesis 4:2-8

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There you have the Bible's story of the beginnings of humankind. It claims that the third human being on earth murders the fourth human being on earth. "Why," one wonders, "would they conjecture that it would go so badly so quickly?" With only a handful of people living such a simple life, how could murder come to seem like a necessary and viable alternative?

For Cain there was, after all, no mindless government t bureaucracy bedeviling his farm operation, no troublesome in-laws, no telemarketing calls just as he sat down for dinner, no long lines at the grocery store, no viruses to wipe out his hard drive (in fact, no hard-drive). All there was, in addition to his parents, was his brother Abel and Abel wasn't even a direct competitor. He raised livestock while Cain raised produce. So what are we supposed to understand that there was about being Cain that drove him to commit the first homicide?

Maybe we understand it better than we realize. Again, he was a dirt farmer with all of the related demands. Cain, for example, had to work those long tedious hours preparing the soil, digging furrows, and getting the seed in. Then came the seemingly endless need to keep chasing the birds to keep them from eating the seed. As the plants appeared there was the watering and the weeding and, of course, the arrival of rabbits and rodents to eat the new shoots. There were slugs and beetles to pick off and yet more. In short, Cain sweated in the hot tropical sun and worried a lot over his squash, turnips, onions and brussel sprouts. Then came the work of harvest and the need to find a way to store his vegetables where they wouldn't rot or become infested with worms and "what have you." It wasn't easy work. It was laced with worry over pests, drought, flood, excessive heat and excessive cold.

And then there was his younger brother Abel, whose life was so nice. Abel had everything going for him and it always went smoothly. Cain believed that Abel was becoming smug over the contrast between their two lives. When, for example, Abel's goats trampled some of Cain's vegetables, Abel blew it off saying, "Hey, they're only vegetables." ("Only vegetables???!! That stung!")

Abel borrowed Cain's rake and returned it broken with barely an apology. Cain had been ill for over a week and Abel had only come by once to check on him, claiming that he'd been too busy moving his flocks to fresh pasture. Abel had the gall to ask that Cain give him vegetables in exchange for the manure that Abel let him have after cleaning his sheep shed. True, taken individually, those seemed like very minor matters so that one would have felt

picky making an issue of any of them. But then, after awhile, you began to recognize how it kept turning out that there was always something or someone conspiring to undermine your morale, your sense of well-being and your self-worth, then the whole becomes much more than the sum of the parts. “Something is going on here that shouldn’t be,” is what it felt like to Cain.

That, then, is how Cain arrives at “sacrifice time.” He’s demoralized, resentful, disoriented and suspicious about the reasons why life is as it is for him compared to Abel’s near-perfect situation. And what he sees as Abel’s smugness and presumptuousness isn’t helping. For his sacrifice to God he brought some onions, a few zucchini, a lot of celery, a somewhat small cantaloupe and a dozen of his best tomatoes even though his tomatoes hadn’t done well at all. Abel (damn him) brought two cute little lambs, a perfect three-month old calf, and four charming, cuddly ducklings.

As he stared at the two sacrifices, Cain could almost hear God snickering at the discrepancy between the two offerings. It was just one more thing to feed his belief in God’s unquestionable bias toward Abel, and Abel’s growing advantage all across the board. Cain felt humiliated, degraded and devalued. Somewhere, albeit buried underneath the hurt, the resentment, and indignation, Cain probably did know that all the differences between Abel and him weren’t exactly inflicted upon him by Abel. But emotionally inflamed as he was, he was beyond caring about details. Whether it was fate or Abel or God who was to blame for all that boiled within him, something was going to be done. He couldn’t get at God or at fate but he could get at Abel.

“Let’s go out to the field, little brother. I have some feelings that I need to vent.” A couple hours later, as the story has it, we already had humankind’s first homicide. As you have probably figured out, Cain’s accumulation of unfocused, free-floating resentments is somewhat different from the flashes of anger that happen in the course of a day or a week because of a passing hurt or slight or injustice or stupidity. No, this is something that takes up residence in a person’s soul and spirit over a period of time, often made up chiefly of irritations, hurts, suppositions, and fears borne of insecurity, often so minor the person would be embarrassed to have anyone else know that they’re there. So they just fester and boil internally until they find their way out in incoherent or contorted ways. Thank God it doesn’t often erupt in a murder as it did with Cain, or in a suicide or in yet some other lashing act of violence. But it eventually, always does affect a person in punishing and contorting ways.

You've seen it, whether or not you recognized it as such. You may have taken the brunt of it. It is, for example, the person whose reactions are way out of proportion to what actually went wrong, or the ones who go on the attack seemingly "out of the blue," or who, in general, live as though they're under siege (which in a sense they are, but it's a siege that they've put together themselves).

It's what was going on when a man stopped in a diner for a cup of coffee. Trying to be pleasant and to make conversation, as the waitress set the coffee in front of him he said, "Looks like rain to me." The waitress snarled, "Dammit, I don't care what it looks like to you, it's still coffee." Do you see, it had nothing to do with the customer or what he said. It was, it's safe to assume, an eruption from a cauldron of unfocused aggravation, putdowns, frustrations and dissatisfactions that boiled within her.

Something similar must have been going on in a wife sitting near a stream looking bored, discontent and sullen while her husband was fishing upstream. Someone looking for her husband approached her and asked where he could be found. Her immediate, acerbic reply was, "Just walk along the creek until you see a pole with a worm at both ends."

It also undoubtedly accounted for the response of a husband who was awakened by his wife in the middle of the night. She said, "This time there definitely is a burglar downstairs. I heard the refrigerator door open and I can hear him eating what's left of the casserole we had for dinner." Her husband snapped back, "Leave him alone. Let him eat it. I'll bury him in the morning."

Of course some such retorts are no more than a verbal form of play, but at least as often they come forth from a free-floating mixture of hurt, of antagonism and of not feeling taken seriously. When so, any kind of release on any kind of victim will do. That's because, something like Cain, it feels as if the humiliation, or the exploitation, or denigration is coming from everywhere, maybe including from God. There are few, if any, rules when it reaches the point that one feels that way, so woe unto those who are closest and most available (like poor Abel).

This can be difficult to reverse, since it does grow into being an habitual way of seeing one's life and experience. Obviously most crucial, if one can do it, is recognizing that it IS what is going on in us. That may have to happen through someone close enough to us to risk pointing out that we're reacting to things way out of proportion to what they actually are. In the Cain story, it says that God said, in effect, to Cain, "Cain, why are you so furious about Abel? When you do well you know it and enjoy it, and when you don't, something needs to

change in you.” Cain, though, was way past accepting that, even from God. To him, Abel was unmistakably the problem, the fly in his soup, the destroyer of his well-being.

So, when you or I, like Cain, “just KNOW” that the cause of our dissatisfaction, our anger or our paranoia, is those liberals or conservatives or politicians or the ex-wife or ex-husband or an overbearing parent or thoughtless kids or carnivorous corporations or inept educators or someone else from the catalog of contemporary villains, we have major internal work to do on ourselves. For you see, at that point it is no longer about what THEY are like. It’s about what has been allowed to sicken in US.

But recognizing that that stuff is in there is just the first part. The next part is yet more difficult: breaking the habit of constantly seeing external forces and other people as robbing you and me of joy and well-being and hope. Looking outside of oneself for reasons for one’s unhappiness, agitation and discontent is so much easier and ego-satisfying than is coming to terms with one’s own fictions, fantasies and failures. But that is what is required to rid a person of the “devil’s mixture” of paranoia, blaming, resenting, and longing to punish. It demands a change in belief system. It requires a painful admitting to oneself that while it feels as if the whole problem is the villains not having done as they should, or their being so abysmally inept, or are possessed of such infuriating qualities, or are so self-serving, or have taken total unfair advantage, THAT STILL they really are NOT demonic embodiments of pure evil endowed with supernatural capacities for ruining yours or my lives. After imagining and believing otherwise for quite some time though, reversing oneself on that can be a tough hard sell to oneself. Discarding one’s cherished catalog of enemies can be extraordinarily difficult, but it can be done.

There are a couple of things that can help with this, but they aren’t easy. One, which would have been immensely helpful to Cain, is simply to quit making comparisons to others’ lives. So much discontent and resentment gets built into us human beings through mistakenly trying to get our bearings, to measure the quality of our own lives, and to understand who we are by comparing our lives and situations to that of another. It isn’t that there are no insights to be gained by observing the life around us. There are many. But comparing blessings, opportunities, sufferings and joys of others as my way of determining how I’m doing and whether I’m getting that to which I’m entitled, is an exercise in self-torture. That’s because the complexity of aptitudes, appetites, intuitions and instincts unique to each one of us, AND the tangle of things that come along to make up the joys and troubles of each of us, AND the

randomness of life's encounters that inspire or frighten us, make comparisons always false and absolutely impossible.

I'll mention only one more. Wonderfully helpful is cultivating a sense of humor about oneself. Once you determine to do it, it isn't as difficult as it sounds. That's because, something like those three examples I related a few minutes ago (the waitress, the wife and the husband), so many of the strange, disproportionate, and illogical ways and times that resentments surface really are comical. When I react, for example, to some minor inconvenience as if it were an affront to my human dignity, or treat some little interruption as if it were a second degree felony, or have the adult equivalent of the tantrum of a five-year old because I don't get my way, that's far more appropriately laughed at than taken seriously. Get into the habit, the grace, the art of seeing the humor in your rages and you'll be astounded at the difference it makes in your outlook and your demeanor.

This isn't so much a struggle for some as it is for others, but few if any of us are completely free of it. Allowed to have its way with us (as it did for Cain) it maims our relationships, dwarfs our spirits, shrivels our gratitude and eclipses the very image of God within us.

Nothing, not the taste of the most delicious resentment, the dreamed-of vengeance, no cherished fantasy of vindication, no obsession over getting the apology that you deserve, is ever worth THAT!