

December 13, 2015 (3rd Sunday of Advent)

TEXT: Revelation 19:5–10

TITLE: Advent Bookends: Murder & Marriage

When people heard that I'd titled today's sermon "murder and marriage," many of them raised an eyebrow and asked with a smile, "Gee, what are you going to say about those topics?" The title "murder and marriage" does sound like a set-up for some sort of joke—like Henny Youngman's famous line, "Take my wife, please." Or the joke about the husband noticing his wife staring at a piece of paper for almost an hour. Seeing that it was their marriage license he asked her why she'd been studying it for so long. She replied, "I'm looking for the expiration date."

Today's sermon title developed because, during Advent, we are looking at the two ends of the bible—Genesis and Revelation—and seeing how the issues raised in the first book are answered by the last book. We've looked at the creation story with the promise of a future new creation; we've heard about the exile of Adam & Eve from the garden and the Revelation promise of returning home at last. Now we come to the story of Cain and Abel—the first brothers and the first murder.

When we hear about an act of violence, our initial reaction is to ask "Why did it happen?" We want an explanation for the crime. Was someone provoked or, mentally ill? Were they acting in self-defense or irrationally jealous? We want to understand, telling ourselves that if we can understand the reason for a crime, we can protect ourselves by avoiding those situations. So when we hear about Cain's murder of Abel, we ask ourselves "Why did that happen? Was it Cain's fault because of his jealousy? Had Abel provoked his brother by flaunting the Lord's preference for his sacrifice? Was God to blame for showing partiality between the two brothers? Inquiring minds want to know.

But the bible doesn't care about inquiring minds or CSI murder investigations. The early bible stories focus, not on the mind but on the soul. We've already read about the first act of human rebellion—when Adam and Eve chose to reject the ways of God and sought to be their own masters. Now we hear about the second act of rebellion—an alienation not this time between us and God, but between us and one another. The early Genesis stories are meant to describe the universal human condition—how, like Adam and Eve, we desire to be in control, to live as if there is no God, which leads us to grab the forbidden fruit and rebel against God. Then, just like poor Cain, when sin is lurking at the door, we are prone to open the door and invite it in, which can lead to crimes of passion, fits of jealousy, and sometimes the killing of our brothers. That is how the book of Genesis describes our human condition. Our desire for control led to our being cast out of the garden; then our succumbing to the temptations of sin led to a violent abdication of our role as our brother's keeper. So it goes.

So what's the answer to all this? The answer won't be found in the details of the Cain and Abel story. The answer won't be found trying to figure out why a sheep offering was acceptable but a grain offering was not. No, we need to take a step back and ask, "What sin was acted on when Cain murdered Abel?" The answer to that question was that it was the sin of looking another in the eyes and saying "I need thee not." It was the sin of denying the other's existence, literally killing one's brother or sister. To succumb to this sin brings no comfort. It only leads to isolation, banishment and fear as the story of Cain clearly demonstrates.

How often in human history have we uttered those fateful words, "I need thee not?" How often has human history been marred by genocides against those of a different race, homeland or language? Wars have been fought based on the idea of "I need thee not"; even civil wars that literally reenact the brother against brother battle of Cain and Abel. We have built internment camps to imprison the maligned others—a tactic perfected by the British in the Boer Wars of South Africa, imitated by us Americans with the Japanese internment camps, and grimly mass produced by the Germans during the Holocaust. And, if not just genocide and internment, there are similar grim legacies of slavery, of indentured servanthood, of sex trafficking, and of violating the Golden Rule by treating others in no way resembling the ways we wish to be treated ourselves.

A writer sat down on a London bus next to a person who had been a Somali refugee. The conversation moved from superficial chitchat to dark reminiscence when she asked the man what his name is. He replied that sharing a name can be quite dangerous. There was a time in Mogadishu when gunmen forced him to say his name, which consists of three parts—a given name, the name of his father, and the name of his grandfather. Knowing that his lineage would mark him to be killed, he recited a school friend's threefold name—a boy from another tribe—and because of that lie, he escaped death that day.¹

A name, a skin color, an accent—something as minor as that can provoke someone to say "I need thee not" and fall into the sin of Cain. Even today, one politician, He Who Must Not Be Named—that wild-haired, man-child candidate has suggested that entire religious groups be barred from this nation supposedly founded on religious liberty. His is the sin of Cain. Long ago the wise Jewish rabbi Hillel asked this critical question: *If I'm only for myself, then what am I?* There is something in murder, in denying the humanity of others that fundamentally destroys our own humanity. Cain panics after the Lord accuses him of murdering Abel. He was afraid that he would be alone—a vulnerable, lonely man wandering over the face of the earth. To ease that fear, the Lord puts a mark on him so that he would find peace and eventual companionship in the land east of Eden.

That is part of the brilliant answer the bible gives to the question of murder and violence. If Cain's sin is fundamentally one of broken relationships, then the antidote in the book of Revelation is one of breaking bread together, of sharing a

meal as a family, literally as a family connected not by blood or ethnicity or nationality but by a covenant of marriage. In Revelation, the heavenly choirs sing “Hallelujah! The Lord our God reigns.” And the setting for this chorus of praise is a marriage supper in which Christ, the Lamb of God, is host as the nations come together around a common table for a common meal of thanksgiving.

This image of a marriage feast is used lots of times in the bible. In Matthew 22, Jesus tells a parable saying “the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet, inviting all to come, both good and bad until the wedding hall was filled with guests” (Matthew 22:2,10). The first miracle Jesus performed in the gospel of John was when he turned water into wine at a wedding feast. At almost every wedding reception I’ve attended, I’ve sat at a table with a few people I don’t know. The etiquette is to check the number of your table assignment, sit down, and then introduce yourself to your tablemates. They may be younger or older, local or from out of state, whatever. You will be sharing a meal with them; no longer can you say to them or think of them “I have no need for you.” The human desire as old as Cain to be in control, to be on top even if it means you’ll murder or alienate others and end up alone, is countered by the New Testament example of Christ, who brings us together—around communion tables now, in fellowship groups in church and in the community, and as guests at a wedding banquet in the kingdom to come.

This same message was a part of the simple Christmas pageant the children shared with us today. When the world acted like Cain—causing Joseph and Mary to travel to Bethlehem so that all the people of the same tribe could be registered together, or when the innkeeper pushed them out into the darkness because he couldn’t be bothered to care for their needs—God had a different response in mind. When we would live alienated from God, God refused to accept that and came to us in the form of a child. When we would live isolated from one another, God laughed at our inclination, sending angel choirs to sing “Hallelujah” and guiding shepherds and kings to visit the Christ-child. We choose to shed blood and stand alone; Christ shed his blood that erases our sin and calls us together. The brokenness that came to be in Genesis is restored to what it should be through the gospels of Christ and the good news of Revelation.

In a recent book, the British rabbi Jonathan Sacks has said, “*The 21st century has left us with a maximum of choice and a minimum of meaning.*”² The meaning we need today is not a complicated answer or a long treatise. It is a simple biblical question: Do we live our lives as Cain, standing shame-faced before God saying, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Or do we live as ones waiting for that heavenly day, glimpsed even now, in which we will sit together, mixed and jumbled and equally welcomed together, at the marriage feast of the Lamb?

AMEN

¹ Cf. Nadifa Mohamed, review of [Island of a Thousand Mirrors](#) by Nayomi Munaweera, NYT Book Review.

² Irshad Manji, review of Not in God's Name by Jonathan Sacks, NYT Book Review, Nov. 8, 2015, p. 43.