

“Living With Wisdom Under God’s Just Sentence”

Genesis 4:3-7

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Epiphany Season

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Our sermon text today is Genesis 4:3-7. Listen now once more to God’s holy and inerrant word.

*“[3] In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, [4] and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, [5] but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. [6] The LORD said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? [7] If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at your door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.’”*

Thus far the reading of God’s word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in heaven loves you. Prayer...

In order to rightly understand and interpret our sermon text this morning, we have to go back to Genesis 3 for a moment.

Remember, when God set Adam in the Garden of Eden, he gave him the charge to work it and keep it.

And in his love and generosity, God gave freely to Adam of all the trees of the Garden to eat and be satisfied.

All but one, that is. Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God warned Adam not to eat of that tree, *“for in the day you eat of it, you shall surely die.”*

And then, of course, Genesis 3 tells us what happens next.

Adam fails to protect his bride, he stands by and allows her to be deceived by the serpent.

And then, in a perverted test of God's word, Adam let Eve "go first" in eating of the fruit of the tree and he watches to see what will happen after Eve ingests the forbidden food.

Eve eats and nothing bad seems to happen. She does not seem to die.

Perhaps God was not serious. Perhaps God was keeping Adam from something enjoyable, something good by this apparently false warning about the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

And so Adam takes the fruit from Eve's hand and commits high-handed sin against God by eating as well.

And Genesis 3 tells us that it was in *that* moment, only after both Eve and then Adam ate of the tree that the effect of their sin began to be felt.

As Genesis 3 tells us: *"Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths."*

As it turned out, God had been serious when he promised Adam that if he ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge and good and evil, he would die.

But God's just sentence of death for Adam and Eve had a layered meaning.

Certainly, on the one hand, their sin meant that they would experience physical death. As God told Adam that very same day: *"By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."*

And they would experience a kind of spiritual death, for later that day God would drive them out of the garden of Eden, and place a flaming sword at the entrance to the garden, preventing them from returning and eating of the tree of life.

But in the midst of God's justice, in the midst of his rightly handing down the sentence of death to Adam and Eve, God's kindness was also on display.

He promised that the seed of the woman would one day bruise the serpent's head.

And before he sent Adam and Eve out of the garden, he dressed them in clothes that were much better than fig leaves.

As Genesis 3:21 puts it: *"And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them."*

Beloved, there is such tenderness and grace from our God in this verse.

Adam and Eve, in their sin, sought to cover their shame with loin clothes made of fig leaves.

I mean, that's an incredible picture of humanity's attempt to deal with shame and sin on our own merits, apart from God.

We can sort of cover up. We can kind of pretend that our shame is taken care of.

But, in the end, loincloths made of fig leaves are the best we can do. They don't cover much, and they don't last very long.

But God, in his kindness, gives us something much better than fig leaves.

God made new garments of animal skins for Adam and Eve, and he personally clothed them with these garments so that their nakedness and shame would be covered before he sent them out into the world.

And of course, in order to for God to make garments of animal skins for Adam and Eve, an animal had to die.

So right there in the Garden, on the same day that Adam and Eve sinned and rebelled against God, he taught them about substitutionary atonement.

Adam and Eve watched and saw the animal die instead of them. And they learned, on that day, about what would be required for them to live at peace with God.

Because of their sin, they would live under the God's just and righteous sentence of death.

But, because of God's grace, he would allow another to die in their place.

Beloved, this is what it means to live with wisdom in this world.

To accept and submit to this reality that is revealed to us in the Scriptures.

To realize that what is true for Adam and Eve is true also for us.

To humbly acknowledge that we too stand guilty before God, that we too are under the sentence of death because of their sin and ours.

To accept that one day every one of us will die, and no matter what form that death takes — whether we're given one hundred years or life or our span of years is much shorter — our death, whenever it comes, will be absolutely just and fully deserved, because we are sinners too.

But to realize, and cling also to this truth by faith — that God has appointed a way of pardon and forgiveness — he has appointed that another might die in our place - so that we can be sure that, though we die, one day we will live again.

All of these things are present in the background of our passage this morning from Genesis 4. Adam and Eve would have taught their sons of what had taken place in the garden—how they had sinned against God, and how God had dealt with their sin.

And in that light, the choices that Cain and Abel both make are significant.

Cain was a worker of the ground and he offers the LORD the fruit of that work, but he does so without covering his tithe, his offering with the death of an animal.

No, Cain merely gives the Lord the plants of the earth - that is, vegetation, the same material that Adam and Eve made their original pitiful fig leaves from.

In effect, what Cain is doing here is rejecting God's sentence of death. By his actions, he is communicating that he does not believe that someone must die in order for him to offer both his tithe and himself to God and live.

Essentially, Cain is refusing to acknowledge his sin and, in his pride, he believes he is acceptable to God without blood being spilled on his behalf.

And in this way, Cain becomes a picture of one kind of path that human beings are capable of embracing in response to God's grace and mercy.

It is the way of pride, the way of folly, the way of hubris, and the consequences of this path are traced throughout the rest of Genesis 4.

In contrast, Abel listens to his parents' story of what took place in the garden, he wisely accepts that he, like them, stands under God's just sentence of death, and, as Genesis 4:4 tells us, Abel offered God "of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions."

The only way that Abel could offer the fat portions of the firstborn of his lambs was by putting those lambs to death.

Abel knew that, because of his sin, as well as the sin of his parents, he could not come into God's presence, he could not offer his tithe and himself, without blood being spilled, and so he humbly slew the firstborn lambs of his flock, knowing that these lambs died in his place, that these lambs bore the judgment he deserved.

And so we see here, at the very beginning of the Scriptures, the whole plan of God's redemption in seed form.

As we heard in our second Old Testament reading in Leviticus this morning, it is this same principle that led God to instruct Israel to bring an animal when they came to worship him.

In Leviticus 1, according to God's direction instruction, the Israelite worshiper would place his hands on the animal, he would impute his sins to the animal — in a spiritual sense, he would unite himself to the animal, such that the beast became his substitute before God.

And then, only after he had placed his hands on the animal, the worshiper would take the knife, and he (not the priest!) would kill the animal, and watch it die in his place.

All of these principles, of course, would reach fulfillment in the incarnation of the Son of God.

Because in Jesus, in God's kindness, in God's relentless love for the human race, and his desire to be reconciled to his people, God himself would take on flesh, and in that flesh, *he* would become the animal who would die in their place.

And so John the Baptist, the greatest of all the prophets, would rightly describe Jesus as he saw him by the banks of the river Jordan: *"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"*

All of this, these two way of relating to God - the way of folly and pride and the way of humility and wisdom are disclosed here in these words: *"And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard."*

At this point, you might expect the narrative to go a little further with Abel. You might expect that Genesis 4 would take some time now to extol the virtues of living humbly and wisely with God.

But fascinatingly, that is not what we see at all.

No, the mercy of God is greater than that. God's kindness comes after even those who are proud, even those who reject his grace.

The next verses of Genesis 4 have to do not with a conversation between God and Abel, where God lauds Abel's wisdom.

No, the next verses of Genesis 4 describe God pursuing Cain, God inviting Cain to turn from his hardness of heart and to embrace repentance.

And thanks be to God that this is the case! For all of us need the mercy of God, especially in our pride.

Here's what we read in Genesis 4:5-7: *So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. [6] The LORD said to Cain, 'Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? [7] If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at your door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.'*"

This section of the text begins with Cain's anger. He was very angry, we are told, because his offering was not accepted by God (and Abel's was).

But in his anger, in his defensiveness, in his pride, the Lord draws near to Cain, and he asks him this simple question.

*"Why are you angry?,"* The Lord asks Cain.

*Why are you angry?* I am convinced that the Lord does not ask this question to condemn Cain.

I am convinced Lord asks this question because he loves this proud and stubborn man, and he wants Cain to consider what it is he is doing, and he desires that Cain turn from the folly of his pride.

So why is Cain angry? Yes, in some sense, a superficial sense, Cain is angry because Abel's offering was accepted by God while his was rejected.

But what is the deeper reason? It seems to me that the root of Cain's anger is that he just doesn't like this arrangement.

The solution for Cain's problem is not complicated. The way of repentance is open to him.

All he has to do is ask Abel for a lamb as gift, or trade some of the fruit of the ground to his brother. And then kill that lamb as a sacrifice before he offers to God himself and his tithe, the fruit of the ground.

But Cain doesn't like living under the sentence of death. He doesn't want to acknowledge that he needs an animal to die in his place.

Instead of accepting God's plan to clothe him in the skins of an animal, Cain desires to cover his nakedness with fig leaves.

Cain wants to relate to God on his own terms, he wants God to accept him just as he is.

And so the Lord comes to him and he asks him to be honest about what's really happening.

God asks Cain to examine his own heart. He says to him, "*Cain, why are you angry?*"

Because ultimately, Cain isn't angry with Abel. He's angry with God.

And he has no right to that anger. God has not dealt with him unjustly. Quite the opposite, actually. God has been kind and gracious.

But in order to accept God's mercy, Cain has to bow his head to God's sovereignty, acknowledge his sin, and acknowledge that he has nothing, in the end, to be angry about.

And God is coming to Cain, in the midst of his anger, because he knows that if Cain does not repent, if he does not turn away from this path, his anger will consume him.

Indeed, sin is crouching at Cain's door. And if he is not careful, his anger and his sin will destroy him.

I want us to sit with this question for a few minutes this morning, beloved.

Because, if we're honest, many of us are angry too.

And so, I want to ask you this question. Why are *you* angry, beloved?

Some of us are angry because the world isn't going the way we want it to. The wrong people are in authority over us — whether that's the president or the governor, or our boss at work or our teacher at school.

Some of us are angry because our lives aren't going the way we think they should. We're not paid enough, or we don't get to do the work or have the calling we think we should have.

We're angry because other people seem to have it easier than we do, other people get the things we want.

Some of us are angry with our parents. We're angry because they don't understand us, or because they've let us down.

Some of us are angry with our children. We're angry because they don't seem to appreciate all we've done on their behalf, all our sacrifices. We're angry because they don't seem to give us the recognition we deserve.

Some of us are angry at our spouses. Or we're angry with our friends.

And in all those places and others I haven't mentioned, the Lord draws near to us in our anger, and he asks us this question. He says, "*Why are you angry?*"

So, why are you angry, beloved?

I think it's an important question.

Because very often our anger reveals the actual situation of our hearts.

And if we explore our anger down past the superficial things that upset us, if we go down to the bottom of things, we'll find that our anger is a kind of mirror for our hearts — that our anger reveals the parts of ourselves that we'd rather hide, the parts of ourselves we don't want anyone to actually see.

And I suspect that at the root of most of our anger, is not righteousness, but pride.

Pride because we think we deserve better than what we have.

Pride because we don't think we really ought to be living under God's just sentence of death.

Pride because we think that if we were in charge instead of God, we could do a much better job of ordering our lives the way they should go — or even ordering the world in general.

But beloved, what I want you to see is that God wants us to be honest about our anger. He can take it. We can tell him.

But then, when we're finally honest about all things we're angry about, God is right there, calling us to surrender, calling us to let it go.

In the midst of our anger, God offers his grace, offers to clothe us in our nakedness and cover our shame, offers to die in our place.

And all we have to do is bow the head.

All we have to do is acknowledge that, in the end, we have nothing to be angry about.

For God is just. And God is good. And he always has been.

Beloved, this is what is offered to you in the gospel.

If you'll only let it go, you can trade your anger for peace and contentment and joy.

But only if you can confess that God is just. And God is good. In all his works, and in all his ways.

This exchange is what was offered to Cain. And it's offered to us today.

May we be those who are wise, who, by God's grace learn to say with the Apostle:

*"Oh the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!*

*How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!*

*'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has given him a gift that he might be repaid?'*

*For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen."*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.