

The Assurance of Things Hoped For

Hebrews 11:1-6; Genesis 4:1-16

Years ago, I took a Hebrew class at seminary in which we worked on the passage that was our Scripture Lesson this morning, the story of Cain and Abel. And our professor, Dr. Gordon Hugenberger, startled us all by remarking that he didn't think that Adam and Eve gave their second son the name Abel at his birth. "Why not?" We all wondered. "It says right here his name was Abel." Hugenberger answered, "Do you know what Abel means in Hebrew? It means breath! No Hebrew parents in their right minds would name their son Breath or Wisp!"

He went on to tell us that the word, Abel or hevel in Hebrew was the word Solomon used in the second verse of Ecclesiastes when he wrote "*Vanity of vanities, all [of life] is vanity.*" The word there is "hevel" and what Solomon literally wrote is something like, "*A breath, a breath, all of life is a breath.*" He wasn't saying life is vain, certainly wasn't saying that life is meaningless although some translations put it that way. In God's economy, life is anything but vain and meaningless.

What Solomon was saying was that life is fragile. Beautiful, precious, and fragile. Hugenberger thought that Abel was the name his grieving parents gave their second son after he was murdered by his older brother. After Cain had been banished over the horizon, they poetically remembered Abel as a breeze who had blown through their lives and was gone. And the point Solomon meant to teach in Ecclesiastes is that we battle for these lives, we struggle and labor to cultivate time and place, love and relationship and a single change in circumstance, a shift in the wind, can bring it all crashing down in a moment's time.

Now there was a tragic rhyme and reason to Abel's murder that can escape us if we don't stop and think about it. At that stage of history, their father, Adam, was the king of a small but aggressively growing human community that, even after the Fall, was improvising some way to multiply and fill and subdue and dominate the earth. And, at the time Moses wrote this story, all his readers would have understood that, when it came to power, the eldest son, Cain, was next man up. Anything happens to the old king, and Cain becomes the first man of the up and coming human community.

And everything went according to plan until one day it fell to Adam's oldest boys to lead the human community in whatever sort of worship they used to offer God from outside the garden from where they'd been banished. Cain was a landowner and he brought an offering of crops and produce from his field to lay before the Lord. Abel was a herdsman who brought sacrifices from the animals in his flocks and herds.

And God showed some sign of pleasure in Abel's offering that he didn't show for Cain. Some theologians have speculated that the "*firstborn... fat offerings*" Abel offered were more pious

and orthodox than the sheaves and baskets that Cain laid on the table, but John Calvin says absolutely not! It was a matter of the heart, said Calvin.

Our Call to Worship this morning tells us that it was: *“By faith [that] Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain...by faith Abel was commended as righteous when God showed acceptance of his gifts.”* The point being that when it comes to worship, and making an offering is worship, it’s not the “how big” or “how much” of the gift that God looks for so much as the heart from which the gift sprang. Gifts delight people when something from the giver’s heart is expressed in the presentation. Now Cain had plenty to give and probably gave plenty. But where was his heart? What was he thinking about? What did his gift express?

Cain’s name in Hebrew literally means “Getter” as in “Go-Getter”. As the eldest human son, Cain had been born and bred to lead and rule. But it appears that somebody, somewhere missed a step. Somehow, Cain got to the front row of the human parade without ever learning that God was looking for something more, something different than motion and talent and attainment. God was looking for the love and gratitude that arises in our hearts when we know we don’t have the whole package, when we know that God rules our destinies and the best we can do is believe a promise, look for help, and follow directions.

Abel was faithful in a single worship service. And that became his life story. Abel found favor from God and he paid for it with his life. It is a legacy that should remind us of Christ. Think about it! The thing Jesus did that mattered the most was an offering! He offered his Father a sacrifice that pleased him, satisfied his justice against human sin. Hebrews tells us about Abel that *“...although he is [long] dead, he [still] speaks to us [today].”*

And his message is that a grateful, faithful heart offering pleases God more than all the sound and fury and accomplishment of human brilliance. A word about Cain: God let Cain live, left a door open for Cain to go far away and learn something in banishment that might straighten and brighten his bent and stormy heart.

But all we ever hear of Cain is that he continued to be a go-getter. He founded a city and became the father of a civilization that soon outpaced and outshined his father Adam’s more modest and more faithful realm. But we never hear anything about Cain’s heart.

Abel’s life story, on the other hand, speaks of little else. He trusted and worshiped and gave to God without ever being or doing anything else the world would take for big. It follows that you can build a city and name it for your family, you can even found a civilization, and never manage to please God. Or you can learn the lesson at the heart of Abel’s gospel that, *“without faith, it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists, and that he rewards those who please him.”*