

## **When Brothers Become Rivals**

*Hebrews 11:1-6; 1 John 3:7-16*

For some weeks now, I have read to the children who come forward for Children's Lesson the story of two kings in a cave. David, the future king, who had taken cover in a desert cave to hide from Saul, the present king, who had sent war parties out into the countryside to hunt David down. By some strange coincidence, in the heat of the day, Saul, the old king, needed to get out of the sun, and he chose to rest in the very cave where David and some of his men had hidden. By all the rules governing rival kings in the ancient world, one of them should not have left that cave alive.

And David had the drop on Saul, who had wandered into a dark cave, sunblind out of the desert sun. But all David did, as Saul reclined near the crevice where David was hidden, was to cut a strip off the bottom of Saul's royal robe. I think it was sort of a souvenir for David to hold for the day until he got a royal robe of his own because God had promised David that he would become king before Saul could ever kill him. But David's conscience wouldn't allow him to hold on to his souvenir.

In the ancient world, to shred a man's robe was to publicly declare him unfit for office, and God had never given David permission to depose the old king. So, at the risk of his life, David followed Saul back into the sunlight to return to him the fringe of his robe, that symbol of Saul's authority that David had stolen from the old king in the dark of the cave. To my modern mind, it has always seemed an odd turn of conscience.

Saul was mad. He had become a ruthless murderer in his old age. The old prophet Samuel had publicly rejected Saul and secretly anointed David as the next king. So why not shred his robe? Why not kill Saul in the cave and take the throne and usher in a new age of steadfast love and justice and hope for God's people? And I think what kept David from doing that was the fact that he had learned the story of Cain and Abel, probably as a young boy on his father's sheep ranch.

Back in Genesis 4, we learn that Cain was the eldest son of Adam and Eve, the first crown prince of the human race. Cain fully expected to be king once Adam had lived out his days. Until, one day, there was a fateful worship service where God expressed preference, favor, for Cain's younger brother Abel. So Cain was stricken by the same madness that would later drive Saul to hunt David over hill and dale and into the desert. Only Cain found Abel to be much easier prey than Saul found David.

Cain did murder Abel and he did become a king of sorts, really an anti-king. Out there, east of Eden, Cain established a kingdom with no trace of steadfast love or justice or hope. His descendants built an empire based on violence and greed and lust, a regime that drove humanity into the widespread madness that led to Noah's flood. And so David, in the dark and safety of his cave, decided to risk all and throw himself on the mercy of Saul, believing that God would keep his promise and allow him to survive and become king in his own turn when God saw fit.

The point being that steadfast love and justice and hope can only thrive in an environment where human leaders are fenced in and bound by what God says about right and wrong and wise and foolish, leaders who bow to whom God chooses to wield power in a particular moment. So the old apostle John warns us in his letter this morning, *"Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as Christ is righteous. He who practices sin is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning."*

John goes on to teach that God's children are marked by the *"practice"* of what God says is right, his rules, his boundaries his fences. And which in turn should lead us to *"love one another"*, to wield power and to rule and to lead in a way that respects that standing and calling that God has called each of us to possess.

*"Not like Cain!"*, John warns us. Cain was not fenced in or bound by what God said or who God chose to play what role in his life. Cain had to be king, with or without God, and he founded a realm that was godless and lawless. Abel perished, much as Jesus would, believing that God's favor would see him even though death. The point being that if we believe God, we can afford to wait for what he's promised without grabbing what he hasn't.