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May 1, 2016

11 o'clock service

The Community Church of Issaquah  
Issaquah, Washington

## ***"Beginnings: Brothers and Mothers"***

Genesis 4:1-16, 25-26

C.S. Lewis in his book *The Great Divorce* tells the story of a man who gets to visit hell and see what it's like. As he's flying over it and sees the vast territory hell covers, he turns to his seatmate and asks a question:

"I can't understand. [Hell is] so empty. Was there once a much larger population?"

"Not at all," sa[ys] [his] neighbour. "The trouble is that [the people who live here are] so quarrelsome. As soon as anyone arrives he settles in some street. Before he's been there twenty-four hours he quarrels with his neighbour. Before the week is over he's quarrelled so badly that he decides to move. Very like he finds the next street empty because all the people there have quarrelled with their neighbours-and moved. So he settles in. If by any chance the street is full, he goes further. But even if he stays, it makes no odds. He's sure to have another quarrel pretty soon and then he'll move on again."

The tourist then asks, "And what about the earlier arrivals? I mean -there must be people who came from earth to your town even longer ago."

"That's right." [The seatmate said]. "There are. They've been moving on and on. Getting further apart. They're so far off by now that they could never think of coming to the bus stop at all. Astronomical distances... Millions of miles from us and from one another. Every now and then they move further still. That's one of the disappointments. I thought you'd meet interesting historical characters. But you don't: they're too far away."

Everyone is too far away. This is hell. A world that is spinning farther and farther away from its center, out into loneliness and isolation. Estrangement from one another. A self-made chasm opening up between one person and their brother.

Today we have the story of the first brothers. Cain and Abel. The beginning of brotherhood. Of skinned knees and inside jokes. Of mutual memories of childhood wonder, joy and pain. Of shared looks over parents' shortcomings.

*Brothers. Brother. Sharers of the same womb.*

Why did the Bible's writers choose the story of brothers to be the place where sin is first fully realized? Why does *murder* make its first mark among *brothers* and not strangers?

It's not the only time Scripture speaks of the brokenness of brothers. Cain and Abel merely begin the story, but it continues with Jacob and Esau, and Isaac and Ishmael, and Joseph and his 12 brothers, and the prodigal son and the elder son. All brothers. The brotherhood marked by conflict, living a post-Eden existence.

When Cain murders his brother, the fall, begun in the garden, now "drops with increasing speed for an immeasurable distance."<sup>1</sup> This is what happens when the desire to be like God, the original sin, is taken to its logical conclusion. It looks like murder—humanity claiming ultimate power over life and death, a power that belongs properly to God and God alone.

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Creation and Fall." 130.

Murder is a logical outcome of the fall. And yet, murder is a completely *illogical* outcome of the fall.

The English translation of Cain's murder of Abel doesn't convey what the Hebrew gets across. In Hebrew, the story reads: "Cain said to Abel his brother. . . . But then it was, when they were out in the field that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and he killed him." The first part of the verse is incomplete. Cain says to Abel. . . and the sentence breaks off. It's a fragment. A broken off bit right before the fatal action. The ragged edge of fallen humanity. It breaks off because there is no reason WHY sin happens. No matter all of the justified reasons why Cain deserves to be angry with his brother. (God did just disregard Cain's sacrifice with no reason), no matter what the justified reasons behind the action, the action is impossible, inconceivable. A leap. There is no *why* for sin. There just *is*. Sin just *is*.

If you have experienced sin's full trauma, you know this. The person who hurt you, you might be able to see how X led to Y led to Z in his or her life, but then you see the gaping hole between all of the reasons leading up to what they did and then the fact that they actually did it. Sin is truly inconceivable. It's anti-life. Sin is *pain*.

*Sin is pain.*

The pain from Abel's murder echoes out across God's creation. God says to Cain, "Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground!" Creation cries out against what Cain did because it's in *pain*.

Now here is where I want to go back to the beginning of the story. Because there is one person in the story we haven't talked about yet. Cain and Abel is the story of two brothers. But the brothers have a mother. *Eve*. The story of Cain and Abel begins in joy! The joy of a mother's firstborn sons! "I have produced a man

with the help of the Lord!" she exclaims. Eve, in the shadow of death and with Eden closed behind her, does something remarkable. She does something only God has done before: she forms a new human being. She brings LIFE into a world marked by DEATH. This is the moment of ruin and fall. This is when everything is supposed to be going wrong and yet here is a BEGINNING. A new beginning. Of two babies. The beginning of something never seen before: a mother's love. This is the curse and the promise at the very same time. The joy and pain of childbirth. Twice, Eve gives birth. Twice, her hips crack under the weight of new life coming into the world. This is Eve's curse: that *she loves and that love can turn to pain*. "I will multiply your pain in childbirth. In pain you will bear children." The curse AND THE PROMISE.

Eve. She whose name means "The Life-Giver." The two whom she delights in, whom she nursed, whom she stayed up with through the night, *both* of whom she held inside of her for nine months, one kills the other. If there is pain in the world, this is it.

Ask anyone: the pain of losing a child tests the limits of the pain a human can experience. This pain is part of our beginning stories. This pain is front and center in Genesis, our story of our beginnings.

Last summer I toured Pearl Harbor. On one of the ships was a museum and in the museum was an exhibit about a Japanese kamikaze plane that had crashed onto a U.S. warship during WWII. The pilot had been on a suicide mission to try to do damage to the ship, but something had gone wrong, his plane had hit the deck without doing much damage the ship, and he had been killed, but his body wasn't destroyed like they usually are with suicide missions. The majority of the men on ship had wanted to unceremoniously dump the body overboard. But the captain, William Callaghan, said no. Instead, he had the crew sew a Japanese flag together out of bits of

fabric, they wrapped the body up, the Marines gave a rifle salute, and they committed his body to the ocean.

Next to this story in the museum was a Japanese figurine of a mother wrapping her son in her arms—a gift from the Japanese pilot’s family for the respect shown to their son’s corpse. During war, bodies become just bodies. They become the “enemy” or a “casualty” or a “target.” But listen to the story of Cain and Abel. Listen to the earth crying out with Abel’s blood. Listen to Eve’s pain, the pain of that figurine in the museum. Every body is a son. Each of these bodies, killed by violence—American bodies or Japanese bodies, black bodies or Hispanic bodies, male bodies or female bodies—is a son or daughter. Each has been carried inside a mother’s womb for nine months. Each has been the delight to some mother’s eyes. Each, inside of themselves, have held a mother’s joys and hopes and love.

When they die, a mother is left behind with a grief unlike any other grief in human experience. Eve, after the murder of one son and the banishment of the other, gives birth once again. She names him Seth, “Granted One”—the one granted in place of Abel because Cain killed him. Seth then has a son and names him Enosh, a name which means “mortal.” The generations after Abel are marked by his murder. The one in place of. The mortal one. The one who is able to die and break a mother’s heart.

**What a curse.** *Love and death.* Death that was never meant to be here in the first place. Death that entered through us.

Brothers killing brothers. Mothers left behind.

In Durham, North Carolina where I lived while I went to divinity school, the homicide rate was crazy. In fact, murder had become so common that the newspapers had stopped reporting those who had died. Think about that. Death had

become so commonplace that a mother’s traumatic loss wasn’t worth recording publicly. Around that time, one Christian woman felt called to start praying at the site of where each murder happened. At first, she would just go with a few other people. But then one day, a mother of one of the murdered boys called: why are you doing this? She asked. Why didn’t you let me know! This was my son! I want to be there. So now, the woman calls the mother of the murdered one before she goes, and she listens to a mother’s grief. And now, though the rest of the world might forget this son’s death, there is at least a small group of people who hold candles, say prayers and remember.

This is what the church does. We go to the site of Eve’s pain, and we pray. We stand and we wait for eternal life. Life that springs up everlasting.

We wait because we need the life that comes only from God. We need the life that is at the center of the garden. We need the curse to be broken. It is more than we can bear.

Let’s listen even closer. We must stand and listen to Eve’s cries. Stand and listen to the cries of ground that has soaked up the blood of the murdered. Stand and listen because another mother will bear life in a world of death. Because another mother’s murdered son will be born into the world and will walk among us and will take upon himself the estrangement and death and sin of the world. Listen, because LIFE is coming in a world bound to death. Because the rock will scrape away from the front of the tomb, and the curse will be broken.

This is joy. That love has won the war caused by pain. That God has done what we could not do. Our sorrow has turned to dancing. Eve’s curse has become Eve’s joy! Bearing a child no longer has to end with death. Enosh, the mortal one, will no longer be our name. A child has been born to us, and we shall call his name Emmanuel. God with us. The curse has been broken. God has

raised the Son from the dead. Love has breathed salvation back into us. The glory of a mother's only Son. Thanks be to God. Amen.