

Homebreaking

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Genesis 3:22-4:16 & Luke 19:1-10
on October 19, 2025, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

I.

On Thursday night, my younger two kids and I grabbed dinner at one of their favorite spots, Dairy-O. A culinary delight! Josh was out of town, Liam was at basketball, and we needed something quick and pleasing. We settled into our table, and not a few minutes later, what appeared to be a grandmother with her two grandsons sat down at the table beside us. The two boys looked to be early elementary school-aged, one with a mop of blond curls and the other with sandy scraggly hair and dark eyes, both still in their soccer jerseys from a game they'd just played. The grandmother told the boys to sit calmly and wait while she went to the line to order. I kid you not, the moment she turned her back to walk away, those two boys started tussling. Headlocks, pushing, laughing, kicking, you name it. They were sitting on the booth side of the table, and Annabelle was right beside them giving me the "wide eye-side eye," indicating that I should intervene. I glanced around for their grandmother to no avail, noticing all the other tables who were giving them the wide eye-side eye too.

I laughed obnoxiously loud trying to get their attention – didn't work – and then intervened, "Boys! Let me guess – are you two brothers?" They paused the roughhousing just long enough to look curiously at me, squeak out a "yeah," and were back at it. By that point, Silas and Annabelle were done with their hot dogs, and Annabelle's side eye had turned into raised eyebrows, a puckered mouth, and a stealthily pointed finger. "Let's go!," she whispered loudly, as one of the boys accidentally kicked her. I looked around again for their grandmother, and not seeing her still, tried again: "I bet y'all

know you're not supposed to be fighting like that, right?" Again a pause, one brother literally on top of the other, and without skipping a beat, "no!"

"OK, well y'all enjoy your dinner!" And that's when we departed. Maybe not my finest hour!

II.

In another world, we might look at these two and all like them with a smile, a shrug, and a "boys will be boys!" But for today, we're getting underneath the too-easy explanation of age or gender to interrogate this tale as old as time, that which bears the title of today's sermon – the unraveling of relationships that threaten to break a home. As scholar Walter Brueggemann said, "To live in God's world on God's terms is enough of a problem... but to live with God's other creatures, specifically human creatures, is more of a dilemma."¹

First from Genesis, we hear the familiar story of that first family. Of Adam and Eve, whose banishment from the Garden of Eden after the utter joy of creation introduced the theme of human's alienation from God. And of their sons, Cain, "tiller of the ground" and Abel, "keeper of sheep." Now let's be clear, Genesis doesn't inherently set up the reader to assume one brother is all evil and the other is all good. Rather, "the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering," Genesis tells us, "but for Cain and his offering, the Lord had no regard." The Lord surveyed them both and chose one. *Why?* Why did the Lord favor Abel's over Cain's? Genesis gives us no clues to this inexplicable response from the Lord, then and now. We don't know, so we wonder: maybe life is just unfair. Maybe God is free to move about as God chooses.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, "Genesis 4:1-16," *Genesis*, Interpretation, p55.

But in a human way, so too are we free to choose our responses and think about our impulses. We can't always control what happens, but we can consider our response. How do we respond when we're happy, or hopeful, or inspired, or loving? And by the same token, how do we respond when we're jealous, or angry, or afraid, or hurt, or insecure, or bored? Then what do we do?

Between these first siblings who inherited the anxieties and pride of their parents, Cain made a choice. "Let us go out into the field," Cain said to Abel. And in his anger, Cain killed his brother. So when the Lord asked Cain, "where is your brother, Abel?," I imagine it was a mixture of guilt and defiance that formed these words that have echoed down the generations since: "I don't know, am I my brother's keeper?"

Time and time again throughout scripture, these stories of siblings – Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Ammon and Absalom, the elder son and the younger prodigal – are stories that invite all of us in. Those of you who are only children out here, you're not exempt from the story. All of us can envision the way that another person sparks resentment that can quickly become a runaway train. When a sibling or parent, a friend or colleague, a neighbor or an enemy, prompts us to confront conflict or tension that rises up within us, we have to consider as the Lord did of Cain: "sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it." How much of our lives are spent feeling stalked, pursued relentlessly, stealthily, by this distorting burden of anger? How much energy are we spending on all that keeps us mad, and then realizing that harboring this angry energy is still far easier than releasing it, because *then* who would we be if not mad at our brother, our mother, our colleague, our spouse? How much are we breaking within

ourselves, because we refuse to seek repair in what's broken between us: brother to sister, friend to friend, child to parent, partner to spouse, neighbor to enemy. *Am I my brother's keeper, we ask? Am I my sister's keeper? Do they belong to me? Am I somehow responsible for their well-being? Am I?*

The story ends with the Lord placing a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him. It seemed to be a mark of both guilt and grace, of disobedience and safety... one that seems to say, "I haven't given up on you." "He is protected," Brueggemann reminds us, "but far from home and without prospect for homecoming."²

III.

Stories like this one of Cain and Abel paint a picture we know to be true. For so many of us, schism has become our way of life. Alienation from family, or former friends, or even our own self has become our rule of thumb. Division has become our birthright. It's not always intentionally chosen, this way of being with other people, but it seems that all of us have people in our lives from whom we are estranged. That this is the second story of humans in scripture reminds us that this proclivity toward exclusion has always been true, but man, has it ever been so much more these last years. I think back to the stories of 2020 that punctuated our common lives, stories about toilet paper, or cloth masks, or elections, and I think that stories of family estrangement were as common as all the rest. "Oh, you have a family member who won't speak to you right now too! Welcome to the club," we'd say with a chuckle, barely suppressing our raging grief and hurt. I hope this isn't the case, but I can't imagine it's gotten much better in the years since.

² Ibid, p61.

This hot anger we feel isn't just for those closest to us, by kin or by choosing. Rather, millions of people all day long, all over the world, get incensed by strangers on the internet. We scroll, and we fume, and we rage, and we write off, and then wake up the next day to do it all over again. Sometimes that anger feels deep and profound because of the people we love. Sometimes that anger feels frivolous and distant because of the people we don't know. But sometimes that anger feels righteous and just, because everywhere we turn we see evidence of injustice against the vulnerable, harm against the oppressed. That anger churns within us, it lurks at our door. "Its desire is for us, but we must master it," says the Lord. But when God confronts us to offer us a better way, we hide like Adam and Eve. We deny like Cain. We squander like the prodigal. We try to cheat and run away like Zaccheus.

For far too long, indeed stretching back to the very beginning, we humans resist that promise of reconciliation and resurrection, nursing our grudges instead. For far too long, we choose rejection over the hope of acceptance, isolation over the gift of belonging, disobedience over the steadiness of right living. For far too long, we insist that we are overlooked when we desperately long to be seen, mistreated when we urgently wish to be loved. For far too long, we withhold forgiveness in ourselves and our relationships, and then we're like Anne Lamott says, "drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die."³

³ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*.

Oh that we could experience healing in the broken places. Oh that we could receive embrace in the excluded places.⁴ Oh that love might someday win. *But how?*, we howl into the darkest night.

IV.

This image on the cover of your worship guide is one that I keep returning to.⁵ It's delightfully ambiguous. Does this capture the moment when God introduced them, one to another? Or is this a moment of embrace as they wandered around a world, astonished in the freshness of creation? Is this a moment of stunned grief as the Lord cast them out of the Garden? Or maybe, as I've come to imagine this week, is it the moment of horror of two parents, when they learned one of their sons turned against the other, when the home they carefully made was broken in spite and violence? Genesis doesn't give us a glimpse of Adam and Eve's reaction to the news of Cain and Abel, but I have to imagine it was one of collapse and endless lament.

With that in mind, hear these words of Barbara Brown Taylor, who tells of a legend that grew out of this story of Adam and Eve. In this story, God gave Adam and Eve a cave to live in after they were cast out from Paradise – a little cave just east of Eden. There, they sat in shock for months following their eviction, repeating out loud for each other over and over every detail they could remember so as to never forget. *The shade of the trees, the warmth of the sun, the beauty of the land.* Eve offered to end her own life if God would let Adam back into the garden alone, but Adam would hear none of that. Yet Adam tried to throw himself off a cliff in his despair. When both had failed to die, they sat, lifeless and distraught, weeping, beating their breasts, begging

⁴ With gratitude to Miroslav Volf's *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, which formed much of my thinking about the sermon this week and has formed my theology for decades.

⁵ *Adam et Eve*, Amédée Ozenfant

God to return to the place called Eden. But with great sadness, God told them it was impossible – once the word was given, even he couldn't take it back.

God didn't leave them, though. With great love, God sent angels to watch over them: singing to them, sprinkling them with scented water to refresh and renew them, guiding the animals they encountered to be gentle with Adam and Eve, but they still could not release their despair. Eighty-three days passed as they languished, grief stricken, ignoring food and water lest they accidentally sin again. In the fountain of living water God gave them to drink, they tried to drown themselves. To the thick figs God gave them to eat, they left for the crows.

Bodies stained with exposure and speechless with heat and cold, they reached their end. And finally, in desperation, Adam and Eve let God teach them how to sew. They picked thorns for needles, and pulled sheepskin to use as shirts for their nakedness. It was a big step, but the only step they could muster in all their loss: the loss of paradise, the loss of bushes and alibis to hide behind, the loss of innocence and the will to live. *They relinquished.* They let go, and let God clothe them. "Fear not," the angels sang to them that night, "for the God who created you will strengthen you."

Sure enough, God did. And Adam and Eve decided to live. They weren't free from the snake, who followed them all the days of their lives, or all the emotions that stirred within them, but they got by. No more pure peace and plenty, but with some creativity and pluck, they gathered scraps together and began to build. First, an altar; then a home. They baked bread from the wild wheat of the field. They brought five children into the world. Using all the pieces of their broken past and letting none go to waste, they created a mended mosaic of their lives.

[On that awful day when they learned of Abel's murder, when the guilt and grief of Abel's murder stopped them cold, when it triggered all the familiar despair and languishing after Eden, they persisted together where they could and relinquished to God where they couldn't.]⁶ They built a future for themselves, and for their descendants who would occupy the world outside of Eden, for you and for me.

"That is our story too," Barbara Brown Taylor says, "a story with everything human in it – promise, failure, blame, guilt, forgiveness, healing, hope. It is," as she concludes, "a story about us and a story about our God, who did not create us just once, but goes on creating us forever, putting our pieces back together so that we are never ruined, never entirely, and never for good."⁷

Siblings in Christ, know this good news today: God desires for our flourishing. Even when sin stalks us and finds us, even when anger throttles us and mangles our relationships, might we take responsibility for what's ours to hold and relinquish to God all the rest. For God's grace refuses to leave us in the night. God's love refuses to be beaten by death. God's light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not, does not, will not overcome it. The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed.

V.

The old African king was dying, when he called his people to his side. They came in droves: his many children, wives, subjects, relatives, friends, and neighbors. And he gave each of them a short, sturdy stick. "Break the stick," he tells them. Each one strains a bit, but they all snap their sticks. "This is how

⁶ This part of the reflection wasn't included in Barbara Brown Taylor's retelling, but I imagined it would be consistent with the theme she created.

⁷ With gratitude for Barbara Brown Taylor and her extended telling of one legend of Adam and Eve. This from her sermon, "Surviving Eden," from *The Preaching Life*, p174-180.

it is," he says, "when a soul is alone and without anyone. They can easily be broken." Next, he gives each of them another stick and says, "this is how I would like you to live after I pass. Tie your sticks together in bundles of twos and threes." He watches with a smile as they all arrange themselves according to his wishes. "Now break those bundles in half." They strain and try and apply muscular effort, but not a one can break the sticks. The old king smiles, "we are strong when we stand with another soul. When we are with others, we cannot be broken."⁸

Friends, in the broken places, may God grant you healing. In the tender places, may God grant you company. In the places of life, may God give us to one another. And in all things, may God heal our very hearts for joy. Amen!

⁸ As told by George Mason, *Word Made Fresh*, p94.