

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
July 15, 2018

A Community of Life

Genesis 4:1-16

You may have already noticed the text printed in today's bulletin as the Scripture for Reflection: "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18). This is one of the top verses that Bible readers turn to after mass shootings. A website named Bible Gateway has analyzed search patterns surrounding major incidents of violence over the past decade. These included the shooting at a Las Vegas music festival earlier this year, Orlando's Pulse nightclub in 2016, San Bernadino in 2015, Sandy Hook Elementary in 2012, and Virginia Tech in 2007. Among the millions of visitors to this Bible search site, the verses that saw distinct spikes in readership following these shootings were:

John 16:33: "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Romans 12:19: "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord."

Psalm 11:5: "The Lord examines the righteous, but the wicked and those who love violence his soul hates."¹

Other passages from the Psalms regularly appear as the most searched and shared texts, particularly verses that resonate with our sense of sorrow, capture our feelings of frustration, and help facilitate our mourning following incidents of large-scale violence.

This morning, we turn to another Scripture passage that intersects with the story of human violence. I don't know if this text shows up frequently in online search patterns, particularly following episodes of mass suffering. But I do know that this narrative has stood the test of time. Whether copied by scribes onto scrolls or transmitted digitally by software engineers, the story of Cain and Abel has consistently revealed deep and abiding truth about the power of sin and the presence of a life-giving God.

Here we are, just over three chapters into the story of God's creation, and violence enters the world. "And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him" (v. 8b). Like a lot of the rest of the story, this scene is presented briefly and with minimal detail. We know that Cain is dejected and angry about the fact that God accepted Abel's offering but not his, which is itself a puzzle, especially since no rationale is given for God's action. In fact, the narrator seems less interested in solving that theological mystery than in God's verbal interaction with Cain.

God warns Cain that his anger is on the verge of consuming him. "Sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it" (v. 7b). But Cain doesn't master his rage. Instead, it masters him. As one preacher puts it, "The lion of sin that has been crouching at the door leaps into action."² Like I noted, we're not told about the details of Cain's violent action. All we know is that in a remote location, hidden from the view of everyone but God, there was a murder. We don't know if Cain simply used his bare hands, or if some kind of weapon was involved.

Nowadays, with increasing frequency, the scene isn't remote. It's often a public space where people gather in large numbers. And there's a weapon involved—a gun. I realize that there are strongly held opinions and solid arguments to be made on various sides of the gun debate. So I'm not here today to issue a definitive, official Grace Baptist Church position on gun control. No doubt there's a range of opinions among you in the pews. But I do know that in a violent culture like ours, gun-related violence, particularly mass shootings, challenges us as disciples to think carefully and deeply about how our commitment to following Jesus bears upon our view of guns.

A recent opinion piece in *Christianity Today* probably captures some broad convictions that many believers, especially those in the evangelical Christian tradition, might share:

So while we support the legitimacy of owning guns, given the violence of our land and God's hatred of violence, we also see a need to regulate the purchase and use of guns. In particular, we Christians should work to ban weapons whose main purpose is to kill a lot of people very quickly, to keep guns in general out of the hands of unstable personalities, and to ensure that everyone who buys and owns guns can demonstrate they know how to use and store them safely.

Will this alone eliminate American violence? Hardly. The problem runs too deeply in our veins as descendants of Cain. Other contributors (like the glorification of guns and violence in TV and movies, to name just one) must also be addressed. Nonetheless, increased gun safety is one small step that could become the first of many that together forestall our divine destruction.³

Notice how the writer locates us all within Cain's lineage. In his classic novel, *East of Eden*, John Steinbeck says of today's Scripture passage: "These 16 verses are a history of mankind in any age or culture or race."⁴ So here is a story that says something not only about the parents, Adam and Eve, and their children, Cain and Abel, but also about the whole human family. It says something about our vulnerability to sin, our capacity for evil, and our responsibility for one another.

That's why the word "brother" is so important in this story. Seven times in this story the writer uses the term "brother." This is not the story of the murder of a stranger. Cain and Abel grew up in the same household, had the same family environment, and were exposed to the same family values across the years. Yet even such blood ties and common experiences did not shield them from the power of sin or from actions that violated their bond as fellow human beings.

When one human being pulls the trigger and kills multiple human beings in a single act of violence, it's a deed of death within the human family. It's one member of the human family destroying other members of the human family. In an essay on the story of Cain and Abel, author Elie Wiesel says that one of the possible lessons is Cain's responsibility for his crime. Then he goes on to say, "But there is a second lesson: Two men may be brothers and still become the victim or the killer of the other. And a third: He who kills, kills his brother."⁵

"Am I my brother's keeper?" It's a question that steps off the page and into the soul of every generation. In our text, it's a question filled with denial. You see, Cain tries to evade responsibility by accusing God of not doing his job. In the Old Testament, "keeping" is not something that human beings do to one another. Keeping, which is the same word used to describe Abel as a keeper of sheep, is what God does for human beings. God is the one who watches over, cares for, and protects people. So Cain tries to lay the blame on God for the present situation. Why does God need to ask where Abel is? If God were really

"keeping" Abel, wouldn't this murder have never happened? Or at least wouldn't God already know that Abel is dead?

In our day and time, when mass shootings have become so common, we ourselves may not necessarily react by trying to blame God or by accusing God of being blind to such large-scale suffering. But if we're honest with ourselves, and with God, I believe we do struggle with how to understand the goodness, love, and sovereignty of God in light of such deadly attacks. How do we go on affirming that God is the Creator, the giver of life, in the face of deeds that destroy so much life? How do we continue confessing our confidence that the Lord's purposes for humankind will prevail and that he cares deeply about all that he has made, especially when so many of those he has made get gunned down while simply going about their daily lives, doing ordinary things like going to school, attending a concert, or working at the office.

Or perhaps even attending church. We remember how Dylann Roof shot and killed nine people during a Bible study and prayer service at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. We remember how Devin Patrick Kelley killed 26 and injured 20 others in a shooting at the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas. These acts of violence remind us that a house of worship is no Garden of Eden, a perfect and impenetrable paradise where nothing can threaten life or disrupt the divine peace. Actually, we do well to remember that even before the Bible's second act of human disobedience, Cain killing Abel, there was the first act of human disobedience, Adam and Eve's rebellion, in the garden of God itself. So the power of sin and the destructiveness of death don't remain outside the boundaries of what we may consider sacred space.

It's no surprise, then, that church security has become an increasingly important topic, not just for discussion but for concrete action. More and more congregations are being more and more intentional and proactive about safeguarding their people. One of the primary challenges is how to implement security processes and procedures while still remaining a place that's open and welcoming to others. Yes, we want to be hospitable and receptive to the public, but we also have to be alert to the ways that can make us an easier target for violence. Large churches tend to have more resources they can devote to securing their people. Smaller churches like ours usually have to rely even more on staying informed and training volunteers in order to make our church as safe as possible. We'll hear more about these matters, particularly the importance of partnership with law enforcement, during the presentation following today's fellowship meal.

For now, we need to remember and reaffirming our calling to be a community of life. Here in our congregation, we worship and serve a God who's in the business of creating life not destroying it. He has also made us with the capacity to share in his creative work and to participate in his power to make. And yet, each day seems to bring more news of how we human beings, often through violent means, take life rather than make life. But still, our creating God is faithful and merciful. Notice that in today's text, Cain himself doesn't end up completely and absolutely separated from the presence of God. True, God doesn't remove the consequences of Cain's actions. But even in Cain's wanderings, God is still with him, demonstrating care for him and the possibility of a different way forward. In fact, Cain has descendants of his own, and the human line moves into the future, in the merciful purposes of God, the God of life.

¹ Kate Shellnut, "After Mass Shootings, Americans Turn to Four Bible Verses Most." Christianity Today website. October 2, 2017. Accessed July 11, 2018 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/october/after-mass-shootings-top-bible-verses-psalm-34-18-las-vegas.html>>.

² A. Allen Brindisi, "The Brother Question," a sermon preached at Davidson College Presbyterian Church, Davidson, North Carolina, May 29, 2005, 2.

³ Mark Galli, "God Hates Gun Violence." Christianity Today website. May 18, 2018. Accessed July 12, 2018 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/june/god-hates-gun-violence.html>>.

⁴ Quoted in Brindisi, "The Brother Question," 2.

⁵ Elie Wiesel, "Cain and Abel in the Bible." Biblical Archaeology Society website. May 21, 2018. Accessed July 12, 2018 < <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/people-in-the-bible/cain-and-abel-in-the-bible/>>.