

Blood Accuses

In the name of him whose shed blood speaks a better word than that of Abel, dear friends in Christ: As I mentioned earlier, for our Lenten evening devotions this year we'll be exploring the various ways the Scripture uses blood and its attributed powers and abilities to communicate divine truths to us. My thought is that we'd follow this twisting trail of blood images from today, Ash Wednesday, to where it ultimately leads: to Good Friday, to Calvary and the cross on which our Savior bled and died. And since Lent is primarily a penitential season, a time for serious self examination that leads to heartfelt repentance, I thought the appropriate place to start was at the beginning, with the Scripture's very first mention of blood. There we learn of blood's power to accuse, to convict, and to condemn.

It's the familiar account of the world's first case of murder: angry Cain killing his brother Abel. It is, sadly, one of the most misunderstood and misapplied stories in the entire Bible. We know how it goes. Both Cain and Abel offer sacrifices to the Lord. Cain offers some of fruit he grows as a worker of the ground and Abel offers one of the firstborn of the flock of sheep he keeps. The Lord gladly accepts Abel's offering, receiving it with divine favor; and he flatly rejects that of Cain.

The question is: why? Why does the Lord frown upon Cain and smile on Abel? The way it's usually explained is that there is something wrong with Cain's offering. He put on the Lord's altar his leftovers, the stuff that didn't look very good, the fruit that was diseased, bug eaten, or rotten. Or maybe the offering itself was okay, the problem is that he put it there with a bad attitude: he gave grudgingly, resentfully; with anger in his heart toward the Lord who demanded a sacrifice of him. Meanwhile Abel, his pure heart desiring nothing else but to please the Lord with his best effort, selected from his flock the most perfect specimen he could find, and laid it on the altar with rapturous joy. Lovely.

The problem is the Scripture doesn't say that. It's all assumed. And it's assumed incorrectly. Such an explanation looks at the story only through the lens of the Law. There's no Gospel, no Christ in that way of seeing it – which tells you that it must be wrong because the Scriptures always point to Christ.

So, what really happened? Cain brought what he believed to be an acceptable offering to the Lord. It represented the best he could do, the fruit of his hard labor. He thought the Lord should be well pleased. And that's the problem. Sinners can produce nothing acceptable to the Lord. Our best efforts he calls worse than filthy rags. Cain has added to his other sins the pride and self righteousness of trusting that he *could* bring something to the Lord that would be acceptable. Abel, on the other hand, knows that he is a miserable sinner who stands before God under the sentence of death. That's what his sins deserve. But he also knows that in mercy God accepts the death of a substitute. In this case a firstborn, spotless lamb – which points ahead to Christ who is the ultimate sacrifice for sin. Cain wants to stand before the Lord on his own merit. Abel knows he has no merit and trusts in the mercy of God who forgives sinners for the sake of an atoning substitute sacrifice. Thus God delights in Abel's offering and has contempt for Cain's.

And prideful Cain can't stand that. Like the Pharisees who hounded Jesus in his ministry, it galls him that the Lord is merciful to humble sinners who repent and rejects the best

efforts of the self righteous. "It's not fair", he thinks. "God is not being just. Not to me; I deserve better. And not to Abel who deserves less." And since in his twisted thinking God is being unfair, Cain takes it upon himself to set the matter straight. "I will be judge, jury, and executioner. I will bring justice where God has failed." So Cain exalts his own wisdom and justice above the Lord's. And thus Cain casts himself in a role above God – which is exactly what Satan tried to do.

Ever inclined to mercy, the Lord appeals to Cain to turn from his wicked course; but Cain isn't having any of it. Instead, acting in deceit, he lures his unsuspecting brother to the field. And there he slays him; hiding his body beneath the fertile soil.

When the Lord inquires of Cain concerning his brother's whereabouts, Cain pretends to be innocent. "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" His rhetorical question betrays his guilt because the answer is yes, a thousand times yes. The Lord has placed us here to love, to serve, and to care for each other. Cain's assumption that it's not his job to look out for his brother only displays how wicked and selfish he is. And that he doesn't see it shows the blinding effect of sin's corruption that prevents us from seeing our own faults.

The Lord is left with no option but to confront Cain with his crime. "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground." What is it saying? The same thing as the souls of those who had been slain for the Word of God say in the Revelation to St. John: "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" The blood of Abel cries out bearing witness to his brother's crime. It accuses Cain and cries to God for justice. And make no mistake: the Lord hears it.

Isn't it interesting, though, that the underlying issue in this story is how one approaches the Lord in worship? The Lord's rejection of his self-righteous worship leads Cain to commit murder. We see the flip side of the same coin in the reading from Isaiah. There we have people making offerings to the Lord and going through the motions of worship with their hands covered in blood. They are guilty of murder. The blood of their victims on their hands accuses them. They have literally been caught red-handed (that's what that expression means). This results in the Lord rejecting their worship. All their solemn ceremonies he finds disgusting. To their prayers he says he will not listen. Why? It's because they don't acknowledge their crimes. They don't think they've done anything wrong, so they are not in the least bit repentant. They aren't approaching the Lord seeking his forgiveness; they are performing acts of worship seeking the Lord's approval.

How can that be? How is it they don't know they are guilty of murder? Why don't they see the blood on their hands that cries out to the Lord? The answer is that they haven't actually murdered anybody – not physically anyway, not like Cain did. No, they are guilty of murder by neglect. We're talking sins of omission here. It's that part of the explanation of the Fifth Commandment that goes "but help and befriend him in every bodily need." It's the good they haven't done for their neighbors, the injustices they've seen and not corrected, the poor and needy they could have helped but didn't, the orphans they neglected, the ones who offended them that they didn't forgive, the hungry they didn't feed, the naked they didn't clothe, the sick and in prison they didn't visit. With Cain they ask, "What? Am I my brother's keeper?" And the Lord's answer is yes, a thousand times yes. The good you don't do is murdering them. And the blood of your victims, the blood your hands drip with, cries out to the Lord day and night accusing you and begging for justice.

Blood accuses. The question I ask you to grapple with as we begin this season of Lent is this: Whose blood is accusing you?

Let me begin to answer that with one group of victims we rarely think about. I'm talking about the one third of our fellow American citizens in the age demographic 35 years and younger who were lawfully put to death, their lives snuffed out before their tiny bodies were brought into the light of day. The thing is we can't be like the people in the villages near the Nazi death camps Dachau and Buchenwald who claimed afterward "We didn't know what was going on." We do know. What will be our excuse? And yes, I know, it's a bigger problem than any one of us can take on individually. But collectively we can. We can make it a front burner issue. We can demand that our politicians address it. We can work toward making it stop. Are we? Or are we granting tacit approval by our relative silence and passivity? Are we renouncing the role of being our brother's keeper?

But bring it closer to home where charity begins: your immediate and extended family, your friends and neighbors, the people you work with, the people with whom you come into contact on a regular basis. How many of them are you guilty of murder by neglect? Whose blood lies unseen on your hands when you worship. The Lord sees it, even if you don't. And he hears its accusations.

Ever inclined to mercy, the Lord makes his appeal to you: "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause." In other words, repent, receive God's forgiveness, turn from evil, strive to do better loving your neighbor as yourself.

"Come now, let us reason together", says the Lord: "though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool" through the merits and mercies of the sacrificed Lamb of God. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!