

Re-Writing Cain
Race, Power, Healing Week 1
June 14, 2020

Welcome/intro/vision

So...how's everyone doing with all of this?

Let's step back and name this moment, shall we?

You've got a once-in-a-century global pandemic

That's turning into quite possibly a once-in-a-century global depression

And all of that is converging with what might be a once-in-a-lifetime tectonic shift in our country that results in a re-shuffling of the deck when it comes to issues of race and race relations in our country

If you're feeling overwhelmed or exhausted by all of this, I just want to encourage you to give yourself grace—any ONE of these would be too much to process, much less all three.

So grace for yourself, grace for other people

In the summer of 2020, we have the remarkable responsibility of stewarding all of these horrible and holy moments at the same time.

Given the magnitude of the events sweeping across our nation we decided to end our "Into the Unknown" series one week early to navigate the equal but differently 'unknown' stew of racial brokenness.

And as I kick off this series let me just state a few somewhat obvious things

First, in case you didn't know, I'm a white guy. I know this is shocking!

But I recognize that I'm speaking about this issue as a white guy who has had all the privileges of being a white guy in our culture who has attempted over the years to invest significant time and energies into understanding these issues as best I can

But I'm limited in all of this as a white guy who hasn't had the experiences many of my non-white friends have had

Secondly, I'm a white guy who is talking to a predominantly white church community with a wonderful, beautiful group of non-white people who participate in our church and we're so grateful for you and we continually long for growth in this area

But the reality is our church for now is a predominantly white community and so as I'm speaking on this issue I especially have my fellow white folks in mind

But I want to say that I'm extremely grateful for the people who have made our church community their home who are not white—you bless us with your presence and I hope that we talk about this in ways that are encouraging to you

And I'd DEFINITELY welcome any discussion or ideas or thoughts from my friends and fellow travelers in our community who are coming at this conversation from a different angle

And it's all the more reason why I'm delighted that in this season Jaime and I are alternating speaking—next week you'll get to hear from Jaime who grew up in Puerto Rico and who comes at this from a wonderfully non-white direction

Now one of the things that I love about our church community is we've worked very hard, especially in this political climate, to create a church where we've got democrats and republicans, liberals and conservatives all together in one church

Thank you all for working hard to create a community where we can actually bridge those divisions!

Now what that means is that SOME of us watch CNN while OTHERS of us love Fox News

But my friends if the only place where we're getting taught about race relations is CNN or Fox News, we're not getting anywhere near the full picture

Because neither CNN nor Fox News is talking about these issues in light of the God who so loved the world he sent his son to reconcile the world to himself and to one another

There's another option, a better way--this was a biblical agenda long before it was anyone's political agenda

And throughout the scriptures there is wisdom and power to equip anyone who is open to hearing what God might say about us and about this issue

And there's a very good reason why the Scripture has so much to say about this issue, even though many of us who grew up in predominantly white churches never heard about it

And that is because racial or ethnic issues have always plagued every nation for all time—America is not that special in that respect

If you were born before 1990, do you remember the Soviet Union? Broke up along ethnic lines.

Remember Czekloslovakia? Doesn't exist any more—broken down along ethnic lines. Remember the Rwandan genocide? Ethnic, tribal genocide

Every nation and people group throughout history has had SOME VERSION or form of ethnic brokenness, America is no different, we just have our own unique spin on it

Our weird history is that we baked our racial sin into our founding documents, we invited that demon in at the very beginning and let it run rampant for the first couple hundred years

AND THEN over the past 50 or so years we've tried to put that demon genie back in the bottle but it turns out it's much easier to welcome a demon in than to get a demon out.

And so our nation is again having to come to grips with and wrestling with our racial history
And Jesus-followers in every generation in every country, we are called to step into this perpetual fault-line throughout all of human history and bring hope, healing, and power

And so we're going to walk a four-week path through the Scriptures, starting today in Genesis
And ending in Revelation, we're going to chart a bit of a path towards healing and redemption of all this brokenness

Today we're going to start in a story that's going to sound mostly like bad news but I promise it's going to land promising and good

The story is in Genesis 4 and the quick backdrop is in the first couple chapters of Genesis God creates everything, it's all good, then Adam and Eve who are very good, made in his image
And they're given authority and power to lead creation into further flourishing and beauty

But they eat of the forbidden fruit and in so doing they introduce sin and death into the world that was originally paradise
so God removes them from paradise and tells them both that now that sin has entered the picture it's going to be a hard road ahead
and that's where we pick up the story that we're going to read today in Genesis 4

Adam made love to his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, "With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man." ² Later she gave birth to his brother Abel.

Cain's name means "to get" or "acquired" and Eve here is perhaps credited with the first words of worship in the Scriptures: with the help of the Lord I got me a man!

Abel's name literally means mere breath, passing, a vapor—which is perhaps a foreshadowing of what's about to happen to him and how he's about to be treated

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. ³ In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. ⁴ And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, ⁵ but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor.

Now we don't get all the reasons why this is the case—it could be that it's baked into the language here: "**some of the fruits**" of the soil for Cain versus the **fat portions of the firstborn of the flock**

Abel seems to bring his best—if you sacrifice the firstborn, you're trusting that more will come while you offer what you have right now to God

But maybe the best way to understand why God doesn't accept Cain's offering is in what gets exposed about Cain's heart as the story unfolds.

So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.⁶ Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast?⁷ If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it."

In the story just before this one, a serpent entices Eve to sin. Here, the only external voice is the voice of God inviting Cain to avoid sin—let's see how he responds

⁸ Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

⁹ Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

This is the line that Cain is rather famous for, and it's not a particularly good one, here's how God responds:

¹⁰ The LORD said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. ¹¹ Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. ¹² When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth."

¹³ Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is more than I can bear. ¹⁴ Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me."

¹⁵ But the LORD said to him, "Not so; anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over." Then the LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. ¹⁶ So Cain went out from the LORD's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Since I was a kid I've always enjoyed writing, when I was in elementary school I'd sometimes go see a movie and come home and write the sequel to the movie--that's how nerdy I was

And so many years ago I was pumped to get an opportunity to go to a week-long writer's workshop and one of the things that they talked about over and over again is the value of not just writing

But the more brutal work of getting revisions and doing the re-writing over and over

They said the only good thing about a first draft is that it would eventually become a second draft!

Initially this was a bit offensive to me—I hated the re-writing process in part because I often fell in love with it the first time and didn't want anyone to mess with my perfectly born masterpiece! I was going to show them how awesome I was with only one draft!

So I wrote the first draft masterpiece, gave it to my editor waiting for him to be wowed by the incredible brilliance that was contained therein!

Instead, he ripped it to shreds, red pen marks covered every page of the entire piece. I was crushed deep in my soul but I went back to work revising, revising, revising, re-submitting, shredded again, revising, revising revising

In one week I re-wrote that piece four or five times after feedback from a brutally honest editor, and by the end of the week it was a WAY WAY WAY better piece

AND more importantly, I was a better and more humble and teachable writer

The story of Cain and Abel is a brutal and gritty story. But throughout this passage, Cain has three opportunities to get things right

three opportunities to write or re-write his story in such a way that he offers a better sacrifice

but even more importantly he becomes a better, more humble and teachable person.

His first draft is the initial offering—**Cain's first draft offering falls short** while Abel is the annoying one who gets it right on his first draft—there's one of those in every class!

Now at no point in the story does God say to Cain, "why can't you be more like your brother?"

God is strictly giving him honest feedback on where Cain's offering is falling short.

And for some of us this feels unfair or arbitrary, but if it's true that Cain's offering is falling short, that his first draft stinks

it's WAY better for someone to tell him that he's missing the mark than for him to continue to write an awful story

the only thing worse than someone telling you that you missed the mark is missing the mark and not having ANYONE tell you the truth

Because the only way we actually improve is if we actually know what the mark is and we come closer and closer to hitting the mark

In fact the Hebrew word for sin literally means missing the mark—Abel knows what that mark is either intuitively or they were both told, but Cain misses that mark

And the word from God is the word from a good editor: this part of your story needs to be cleaned up, it's missing the mark.

If that's true, Cain needs to hear it or else he will continue to write variations on the same bad story over and over again

But when Cain gets the story back with red marks all over it for another draft, he gets grumpy, just like I initially did

And so God follows up with him, tends to his wounded ego, with opportunity #2:

If you do what is right, if you hit the mark, you'll be accepted. But if you don't, sin is crouching at your door to swallow you whole...you must rule over it.

Cain, you missed the mark the first time, but that's okay. I'm not saying you're a failure forever! I'm telling you so that you can roll up your sleeves, go to work, and do it better the next time

I want you to write a better story of your life. And that's always going to start with orienting ourselves and our lives around the God of the universe who is the greatest good

And if we refuse to align our lives around God, around the Light, we'll succumb to sin, we'll be swallowed whole by darkness

Throughout the Scripture, there are a handful of **great life works that if you get these right they produce a great life: the first is worship, the second is our own character, third is relationships**

You fill these three buckets correctly in this order, with grace and truth, beauty and mercy, you're about 85% of the way towards a great life—and it all starts with worship

Cain gets the word from God that his first draft of worship and sacrifice missed the mark

But he refuses to make his worship right, refuses to make right sacrifices which are designed by God as a gift to help align our hearts and minds and lives around the greatest good—if we don't do that, it has downstream impact!

And this exposes his character issues: he'd rather be resentful of his brother than go to work on himself

And the result is the first murder in biblical history--that's what's at stake when we refuse to worship the God who is the greatest good--we succumb to the sin crouching at our doors, we become instruments of violence and death

But even after murdering his own brother, God gives him a third opportunity to try to save his story: **"Where is YOUR BROTHER, Abel?"**

God knows the answer, this is one last bid from the great editor for Cain to repent, to turn around, to do what he can to try to salvage his story

But Cain can't do it. Even after being called out, there's no remorse or contrition or confession; Cain has worshiped himself and his ego the entire story and he's not going to stop now.

This is the first story we get in the Scriptures after Adam and Eve are kicked out of paradise because they let sin INTO paradise

and part of why it's here in all its grit and gore is it illustrates what life is like for humans once sin is running rampant over all of us

And I think it illustrates three things that are very relevant to what's happening our country as we look at 400 years of race relations

Race Relations Between the Sons and Daughters of Cain:

- 1. We miss the mark—missing the mark always has mis-shapen worship at the center of it.** just like Cain, when our worship goes wrong, everything else goes wrong between human beings

Slavery was introduced into the colonies because of our worship of money and wealth, Jim Crow was introduced because of our worship of control and power, the beat goes on

This is NOT the ONLY story being written in our country but it IS the story of race relations in our country

- 2. Just like Cain We resist to the call to make it right**—throughout our nation's history we've been resistant to the opportunities presented to us to come to terms with what we've done wrong and to do what we need to do to make things right
- 3. The consequences are we're consumed by sin: resentment, self-righteousness, violence and murder**

What happened to George Floyd is merely the latest casualty in us living out the Cain story over and over and over again on repeat

Today, as a nation, we're hearing a call AGAIN to step into the places in the American story where it has gone utterly and completely wrong and to heed the call to make it right

And I don't know how many chances we're going to get at this thing, but here's what we do know from Scripture and from history

When people do not deal with their major fault lines between each other, whether it's as small as a family or as large as a nation, it is often their undoing

And if we as a church, particularly the white church, cannot hear the call to make do right, to make things right, it might be our undoing as well

In 1992 a holocaust expert and history professor named Christopher Browning wrote a book called "**Ordinary Men**"

In it he was studying the group of about 500 men who made up the Reserve Unit 101 in Poland who committed some of the most gruesome and horrific acts in all of World War 2 against the Jews living in Poland--and to say that they stand out given how horrific as World War 2 was, that's saying something!

And the argument in the book is that these men weren't all rabid horrible murderers before the war, they weren't all voted "most likely to become genocidal maniacs" in high school.

They were as the book title suggests, ordinary men.

And they got caught up patterns of behavior that humans easily get caught up: group-think and mob-mentality, people in authority making promises and giving justification to them that they wanted to believe in

And as a result, in a troop of 500 even when they were given the opportunity to opt-out without any consequences, fewer than a dozen opted out of direct commands to do horrific things

They were all ordinary men who became horrible killers by virtue of any number of social and psychological currents swirling around them

See, we have a tendency to make a mistake we make when we read the Cain and Abel story, and that mistake is to think we could never be Cain: "I would NEVER do that."

And then we make the same mistake when we see the horrific pictures of what happened a couple of weeks ago:

We see a police man with his knee on George Floyd's neck or we see his passive co-workers around him doing nothing to stop him

We see images of people looting

And we look with shock and horror, which is right and good. But the mis-step is to think that we would never, ever do something like any of these

But here's the truth. The truth is you and I are just a couple steps from being one of these people

We're probably just two steps away from being a looter.

I read some of the interviews from the people who were arrested for looting, they're mostly saying the same thing: "That was stupid, I know better, I got caught up in the moment."

THEY would have been appalled at themselves 4 weeks ago, but they got caught up, it's what humans do.

We're all just about 2 steps away from becoming looters

We're just about 4 steps away from being a bystander while someone behind us that we trust does something horrible to another human being

Two of the bystanding cops were rookies who trusted that Chauvin was the senior guy in charge and that he knew what he was doing

We're just about 4 steps away from being the bystander, maybe less—in fact, 'bystander effect' might be one way to describe much of the white church over the past hundred years as all around us black and brown people are being slaughtered.

And in reality, we're between 7 and 12 steps away from being the one with our knee on the neck, or Cain inviting his own brother out to the field to kill him out of resentment and anger

It's not really that long of a trip for the vast majority of us from decent human being to full of anger, rage, resentment and malice

most of us have had dreams or fantasies of vengeance against people who have hurt us that maybe weren't murderous but weren't all that far from it

The Scripture says we're all just a few steps away from being one of those people on t.v. ever since sin entered the picture, and it's true. If you don't believe the Scripture

Then take an introduction to psychology class this fall at your local community college and they'll tell you about mob mentality or group-think, or bystander effect

And if you don't believe in psychology just pick any era of history and start reading what people have done to each other throughout the centuries

And how easy it is for normal human beings to get caught up in doing things that are utterly horrific

Scripture and psychology and history all bear witness to the fact that the looting story, the by standing story, and the killing story are all not very far from all of us

And just like God's invitation to Cain and my editor's invitation to me—if this is true. If we're missing the mark or that close to missing the mark

It requires a re-write of the story, of OUR story

This is hard because we want to cast ourselves as the good guys in the story and we want to cast some other group out there as the bad guys in the story

but history and psychology and Scripture won't let us get away with that

Alexandr Solzhenitsyn was a brilliant Russian who was caught up in Stalin's arrest sweeps at the end of World War 2 and thrown into the gulag in Siberia, a miserable place

And he survived and wrote a scathing memoir that was diagnosing what a disaster Marxism and Communism was

and how governments and people can all go so horribly wrong that they can justify the mass murder of millions of people: estimated 12 million! Entire state of NC plus 2 million more!

And while he was sitting in that miserable jail cell in Siberia, he was looking for someone to blame: Stalin and Hitler were all major players in this situation and they're pretty easy to call the bad guys because they were

But he decided the world wasn't so easily divided between the bad guys here's what he came to while sitting in one of the worst jails in human history for a crime he did not commit:

The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart -- and through all human hearts.

Sin is not only crouching at our doors, it's crouching in our hearts, waiting for any opportunity to spring into action

This is what Scripture teaches. And psychology. And history.

And so last week as I was praying about all of this, I spent a few minutes admitting that I'm just a couple steps away from being a looter, a bystander or a murderer

And I asked God to do a work in my own heart to transform me inside, out, to shine an ever-brighter light so that the darkness in me might not get activate or triggered as easily as it might

Because here's the problem: If we think we could NEVER ever ever become a part of the problem, then we're either the most vulnerable to becoming part of the problem OR we already are part of the problem

And if we refuse the invitation and the challenge to order our worship and our hearts around what is right,

If we refuse to hear the call from God to grapple with the darkness that is only napping inside each of us and to bring it out into the light and write a new story

Then there's no big mystery where this story ends

Spoiler alert! It ends just like Cain and Abel

it ends like George Floyd and Ahmad Aubrey and Breonna Taylor

It ends like Emmet Till and Dr. Martin Luther King and the thousands upon thousands who were enslaved or lynched or who died on cargo ships while being trafficked

There will be more of that in the future unless we get to work first on what's lurking inside each of us—the same sin that has plagued every nation, every country, for all time, the sin of ethnic and racial hatred and brokenness.

Now I promised you some good news at the end and here we are: the good news is that Abel offers a good sacrifice that is right, that is pleasing, that is acceptable, that is life-giving

There IS a way to order our hearts and our lives and do the work on our character such that we're aligned with the greatest good in the cosmos, which is God

And the result of that is we're becoming the kind of people that God intended us to be in the first place—image-bearers, rightly ordered around God

A friend of mine on social media last week said this, “What if the question isn’t what should I be doing but rather who should I be becoming?”

That’s character formation, that’s dealing with the darkness inside each of us and growing to become children of the light.

Good news: sacrifice that pleases God. Good news, you and I can go to work aligning our lives and motives and actions in such a way that God delights in them and that blesses you and everyone around you, including across racial and ethnic lines.

There is an invitation to break the cycle of Cain and to instead participate in God’s redemptive story

To live a life that is a perpetual, living sacrifice before God, where we’re constantly orienting and re-orienting ourselves over and over again rightly before God

And that’s the catch, isn’t it? We so easily and so regularly get out of line with God. We so easily and so regularly get caught up in lesser and smaller things.

Our lives aren’t the good sacrifice all the time, selfishness and ego and the allure of other gods like money or approval or applause draws us in all the time

And so here’s what we need: we need someone who will show us the way. We need someone who will live the life of perfect sacrifice, perpetually, always

And who will both show us how this could look and then who will be gracious to teach us how this should look

And that’s the story of Jesus. Jesus is the one who lives a life of perpetual orientation around God, perfectly, all the time, at every turn, never once losing himself to other lesser gods

The result is the most magnificent life ever lived that has impacted more lives than anyone else in human history

And do you know where a life of perfect sacrifice led him, always perfectly aligned with God his perfect Father? To a cross. To a murderous death.

Jesus is the perfect Abel who is killed by an angry mob full of the sons of Cain who all turn on him in a tremendous demonstration of mob mentality

But here’s how good Jesus is and how good God is—Abel’s blood cries out in accusation against Cain

But do you know what Jesus’s blood does? It cries for grace and mercy for the sons and daughters of Cain, you and me: forgiveness, grace and inviting us again this morning to follow him in offering a life of right sacrifice.

Calling us for the first time or for the million and first time to follow him into a life devoted to worshiping God and the subsequent transformation of our character

Because the reality is, as a nation and as individuals, we're caught up in the vicious cycle of the Cain story along racial lines, and that story has been moving in our country for over 400 years and it's got a ton of inertia and we're all caught up in it

We've missed the mark: it starts with worshipping all the wrong things: money, power, privilege, convenience, self-

And God comes to us and graciously tells us that we've missed the mark because if we have, indeed, missed the mark, it's really, really, really great for someone to tell us, we need to know it

And if we resist the call to re-write this story, we know where it ends: violence and bloodshed.

We're talking about a path towards healing along racial lines and today is week one and we're starting with the work that we need God to do inside each of us

And so today's TAKE-WITH prompts:

Break the cycle of Cain along racial lines with right worship and humble character.

Cain's story starts with worship that misses the mark. He refuses to orient himself around the greatest good, around God, and the results are violence and murder

So Jesus comes along and when he teaches his followers to pray he starts with coaching us how to worship, coaching us to orient our hearts and lives around God

Earlier this morning we had a diverse group of people from our church praying the prayer that more people across more languages and cultures have prayed than any other prayer--the Lord's prayer

And the Lord's prayer starts with Jesus coaching us on how to start with right worship and I want to invite you in a minute and then throughout this week to use this prayer as a springboard:

"Our Father, who is in heaven. Hallowed, ____, ____, ____, holy, blessed, wonderful is your name.

YOUR kingdom come, not mine, not my political parties, not our country's kingdom, YOUR will be done across racial lines in my own heart, in our county, in our state, in our nation, and all over the earth as it is in heaven.

As we pray this prayer, we confess that in order for God's will to be done along racial lines is going to require the continually work of the Spirit to change our hearts and to push back the shadows that lurk in each of us.

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