

“In Over Our Heads”

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Based on Brian D. McLaren *We Make the Road by Walking*, Chapter 5

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Texts: Genesis 4: 1-16; 6: 5-8; 7: 1-5; 8:1; 9: 7-17

Cain, Abel, and Noah all in the same week? The truth is that you will hear more about Cain and Abel today, but the stories are closely related. They are a collection of stories that were first passed down orally, and later written down, to try and explain many things of the world. They were not intended to be about individual people, but metaphorical for the human condition. Meanwhile, there are some attempts to discern how God played or did not play a role in the narrative. Brian McLaren says it this way:

In the ancient Genesis stories, our species was created in the image of God – to reflect God’s character faithfully in the world, both to our fellow creatures and to one another. Soon, though, we wanted to be little gods ourselves. We wanted to judge good and evil for ourselves, to decide who would live and who would die, who would rule and who would be enslaved. Consumed by the desire to grasp what others had, we became rivals of God and our neighbors. That crisis of desire has led to great shame, pain, suffering, violence, counterviolence and fear...in our lives, our communities, and our world. Today’s headlines tell the same story in a hundred different ways.

Well, isn’t that the truth? To this very moment we are still asking, “Am I my brothers’ keeper?”

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says that the human agenda is “the brother problem.” So, let’s talk about these brothers. Did you know that Cain’s name means, in Hebrew, “to get, to create”? How about that Abel’s name means, in Hebrew, “vapor, nothingness”? Had you thought about God’s role in this? When God rejects Cain’s gift? Again, from Brueggemann, “God doesn’t get out of this cleanly. Why does God reject Cain’s gift? All through the Genesis narratives, Yahweh (God) is there to disrupt, to create tensions, and evoke the shadowy side of reality.” (Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: An Interpretation Bible Commentary*, p57). And yet, in this story, Cain is given the opportunity to make a better choice. From our scripture, “If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.’ What is going on when God rejects Cain’s gift, telling the one named “to create” that his creation is not accepted? And then tells him to choose to do well?

I don’t know all of it, but I do believe that Brueggemann is onto something that also is instructive for us. He mentions that this story is to tell us that post garden of Eden (Genesis 3) people can do well. We are not fallen. Neither Cain nor any of the rest of us are the victim of any Original Sin. We can choose and act for good. So, then, how do we manage disappointment, pain, frustration, and

anger? Cain had every reason to be angry at the rejection at the hands of Yahweh (that I still can't explain), but did he have to choose murder? Do we? What choices do we have amid disappointment, pain, frustration, and anger? Richard Rohr tells us that "pain that is not transformed is transmitted." It is incumbent upon us to make good choices, life-giving choices, while feeling horrible and rejected?

What can we learn from this? How many of us are right now angry, hurt, disappointed, upset, frightened, full of rage...you name it? There are no exceptions, or few, during this pandemic. There is a baseline of sadness, disappointment and other feelings that make everything that occurs in our life even more upsetting, and the choice to do good in the face of it all is even harder than pre-pandemic. We're not murderers, but I think, if we're honest, we've thought about it – especially lately. I don't want to go too far down that road this morning, but I think you'll agree that most everyone is on edge. Even the trivial things we used to manage relatively easily have become much more of a big deal. And the results of all this pent-up anger, resentment, and frustration is possibly as bad as murder, with the common denominator, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

But the story of Cain and Abel doesn't end with the murder. It does end with "the killer seeking mercy and receiving it (see verses 13 and 14). He receives a mark of guilt and grace. In other words, the acknowledgement of guilt and the reality of grace come together in this presentation." (Brueggemann, 60). In fact, God never lets go of Cain, extending protection to the unreconciled one even to the land of Nod, to the place thought beyond protection, the place that seemed beyond humanness." (60) Said even a third way, "Biblical faith is clear: violation of the brother is a deathly act. Yet, God's will for life is at work with the one under the death sentence...God has not lost interest in the murderer or given up on him." (61)

Yet, we're still left with the problem of our brothers (and our sisters), both in our family and in our wider human family. We need to face the other, both in our small world and in our wider world. But to think we can solve all the world's problems ourselves is a little much. However, the miracle of life, the wonder of resurrection, is linked to brotherly reconciliation. The sad news is that on most days "we would choose death (see Deuteronomy 30:19) rather than face the brother." We see it every day. And we're getting in over our heads. "But" says Brueggemann, "the Gospel is uncompromising. The promises are linked to the brother and will be had no other way." (64)

Does that mean we are not only our brother's keeper, but also that we need our brother? What is justice? And for whom? Brian McLaren tells us that "unjust structures are unsustainable. [The stories from the book of Genesis] advise us that floods of change will sweep injustice away and internal conflicts will thwart arrogant ambitions. They promise that overall, justice and reconciliation will prevail over injustice and rivalry." (McLaren, 22). That leads me to the questions I ask myself every day: How, then, do I participate in that awaited end? How can I choose justice and reconciliation? What do I need to learn? What failures and mistakes do I need to own? How can I choose life and choose it daily? Sometimes I feel like I'm in over my head, just plain overwhelmed, by all the anger in the world. I can't stop that in every instance, but what can I do? What is mine to do?

I hope you're asking some of the same questions, or some I've never thought of, but the truth is that people need to make a different choice than most of us are making right here and right now in this culture. What happens to them, no matter who "them" is, affects us. We can't hide from it. We can't isolate completely. We are not self-sufficient. In short, we need other people, even the jerks, those people on the other side, and other ridiculous people! But how? We can't reconcile right away. We can't suffer injustice forever. Cain suffered

injustice, ironically at the hands of God. He made a horrible choice, displacing his anger onto his brother, rather than the person or persons responsible for the injustice. Do we still do that? Do we displace our anger? I know I do from time to time. We underestimate how much we direct our anger at someone who may be involved, but who is not responsible. It is important for us to determine who is responsible and direct our anger toward resolving the injustice and restoring justice.

These are challenging times, to be sure. We're faced with tough choices almost every day. We're tired. We're hurting. We're angry. We're sad. We're overwhelmed. And yet, we're gifted and able to make a better choice. Cain was able to make a better choice. He chose badly. Our job is to try and do better, even when we feel in over our heads.

Like everything else, one step at a time. One repaired breach at a time. One crucial conversation at a time. One relationship at a time. We indeed are each other's keepers more than we want to admit. And we rely on the keeping done by others for us. Naming that reality might be the best, first, one step.

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.