

## Blood That Speaks a Better Word

Text: Genesis 4:1-16

Hymn: "Glory Be to Jesus" (*LSB* 433)

Jesus died for your sins. Good news or bad? The answer that we have learned is that it is good news. And it is. But not necessarily. It's by no means obvious that because Jesus died for your sins you should be blessed. What it means is that an innocent and righteous man died because you sin. *You* have done wrong and *He* has suffered. The righteous for the unrighteous. The innocent for the guilty.

In worldly affairs that's called injustice. It's unfair and it's wrong. It's the one thing that, generally speaking, tends to incense nearly all people. We have lots and lots of stories from recent and distant history of people who have suffered unjustly for the crimes of others. In the last several decades, DNA evidence has helped to prove the innocence of and set free thousands of people wrongfully convicted, some having spent twenty, thirty, forty years in prison for a crime they did not commit. Someone committed a rape. Someone else went to prison. It's not just those who suffered so that get angry about these things; the rest of us do, too. And rightly so—it's a deep offense to our inborn sense of what's just and right.

The first such crime was the murder of Abel by his own brother Cain. Abel's crime in the eyes of Cain? He was acceptable to God. He was righteous. And it is for his righteousness and for the fact that God accepted him and his offering, for *that*—precisely for being what he ought to have been, for doing the right thing—he was killed. There is a defense in law for people who kill in self-defense and for people who, after being subjected to prolonged periods of abuse, finally lash out in violence against their

abusers. The law looks leniently on people who do such things. But for the opposite, when the innocent are killed, and especially when the innocent are killed for their innocence, the law is extremely hard. It is unfair. It is unjust. It is infuriating.

Jesus died for your sins. Good news or bad?

Abel was a keeper of sheep. He was a younger brother, a second son of Adam. His parents—Cain's and Abel's parents—had fallen into sin through envy. The serpent provoked envy in them by pointing out to them that they are not like God but, lying to them, that they could become like God. And through envy they reached out for that which God had forbidden and rebelled against their Maker and became sinners and their offspring with them, including us.

It was the same envy that also led Cain to slay his brother, this keeper of sheep. This shepherd. This good shepherd. He was a good shepherd, in that he brought acceptable offerings to God from His flock. Much later in the law of Moses, we learn that the fatty portions are the ones that are God's: "All the fat is the Lord's" (Leviticus 3:16). Abel knew what pleased God and he did what pleased God and God accepted his offering and with the offering He accepted Abel. This is to say that Abel worshiped God as God desired to be worshiped, in humility and fear, and as Hebrews tells us, in faith (Hebrews 11:4). Because he came in faith, he was accepted. And because he came in faith and was accepted, and because his brother was not accepted, his brother was provoked to envy and slew the innocent, righteous Abel.

And the blood of Abel flowed into the ground that was cursed as a result of human sin and it cried out as an accusation against the murderer. The blood of Abel stained God's creation so that God was provoked to anger at this murder.

So, when Jesus accuses the Pharisees of being in league with people such as Cain, those who murder the righteous men of God, prophets and other messengers of God, He is accusing them of the most heinous crime you can imagine. Pharisees were famous for their clean living. They were pious to a fault. What made the Pharisees criminals together with Cain? What was it about the Pharisees that provoked Jesus to such anger, calling them serpents (another Genesis reference)?

What was it that Abel had that Cain lacked? Faith. Faith in God's promise and acceptable worship in faith. They came to God with all earnestness, yes, but faith not in God's promise and faith not in God's way of doing things, through His Son, but through their own doing. And they added to what God required their own worship, the traditions of the fathers, to supplement what God had already commanded. In earnestness and sincerity, no doubt. But these things, however earnest and sincere, if they spring up from us then they are stained by what we are, by sin.

God desires worship that He Himself has commanded. Then it's pure and holy. And when God has commanded and we act according to that, we are acting in faith in His Word and become recipients of God's grace instead of manufacturers of our gifts to God, who doesn't need our gifts. He's the giver of gifts.

What we learn first from this account of Abel's suffering is that God does indeed desire our worship and our sacrifices, but those sacrifices are to be given in faith according to God's will. Anything other than that is false worship, however Christian and holy it might look.

But we also learn what a terrible price has to be paid for the shedding of innocent blood. Cain is cursed by God and is driven away from God's presence and marked for

life. Sin is a crime against God's majesty at the best of times, but when that sin is an attack on righteousness and holiness and faith, it becomes an eternal accusation. Abel and Cain are names that will live on in the minds of God's people forever. And if you are Cain in that story, that is not a good thing. The blood of Abel, like all blood shed innocently for righteousness' sake, cries out against those who shed it. The blood of the martyrs, of the church, of the old covenant and the new.

And Jesus' blood, too, was shed innocently, because of envy. Even Pilate, the wicked and incompetent and lazy Pilate, perceived that it was out of envy that the Jewish leaders had handed Jesus over to him (Mark 15:10). Their envy against Jesus and their lack of faith in God's promise which was being delivered through Jesus led them to slay the Prince of Life. Abel was righteous because God made him so. Jesus was righteous because He was so by nature. Abel was going to die one day, anyway. But Jesus is the author of life against whom no sin could lay a claim. Therefore, when Jesus' blood was shed, those who stand against Jesus, complicit in the shedding of that blood, are under an accusation more egregious than Cain's, and more severely punished than Cain's. Cain's punishment ended when he died. Those who stand against the Son of God will suffer punishment that will never end. And Jesus died for your sins. It is your sins that took him to the tree.

But unlike Abel, Jesus was not a hapless, passive victim. Jesus came to be something greater and better than Abel, more than an example in a story to be told as a warning. The blood of Jesus that was shed mediates a new covenant that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel, because Jesus came in order to shed his blood. He came to offer Himself a sacrifice. He who was truly the good shepherd came not to

offer His sheep but Himself, not the fatty portions of an irrational creature, but the whole of Himself—all of Him, body and soul, as an offering for your sins. Therefore, what He did was to call those sinners because of whom and for whose sake He died not to be his enemies, not to stand accused, but to come and become his sheep.

The shepherd allowed himself to be slain for the sheep, so that his blood might not be an accusation but a means of reconciliation. This is why the blood of Jesus speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. It is a blood given for you, shed for you, not to *accuse* you of your sins but to *cleanse* you of your sins. Not to *stand against* you but *for* you. Not to call for your *death* but to give you *life*. This blood is not crying out from the ground but it's still flowing. Jesus still lives. And He still lives in his body. And He gives us his blood not as a piece of evidence against us but as the lifeblood by which we might live, when we receive it in the Sacrament of His body and blood.

Jesus died unjustly. But that injustice against Him was at the same time the greatest demonstration of the righteousness of God. Jesus the righteous one was righteous to the end by keeping his promise to creation and by obeying the will of the father. And so this injustice beyond all other injustices becomes an act of righteousness above all other acts of righteousness. And that act of righteousness is given to us as a gift of faith. When you were baptized in the name of God that blood washed you clean of your sins. And every time you receive that blood in the Sacrament, you are cleansed and given new life. This is the blood of the new covenant. It speaks a good word.

Jesus died for your sins. Good news or bad? Better news than we could ever imagine!

Pastor Brent McGuire  
Our Redeemer Lutheran Church

