



**“The First Mourning,” Painter: William Bouguereau
(Image of Adam and Eve Weeping
Over their Son Abel)**



**“The Continued Mourning,” Nathaniel and Cleopatra
Pendleton, parents of slain teen Hadiya Pendleton, and her 10-
year-old brother**

RESTORING THE PEACE (COMMUNITY ACTION DAY)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, June 2, 2013

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Lection – Genesis 4:1-15 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, ‘I have produced a man with the help of the Lord.’ (v. 2) Next, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. (v. 3) In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, (v. 4) and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, (v. 5) but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. (v. 6) The Lord said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? (v. 7) And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.’ (v. 8) Cain said to his brother Abel, ‘Let us go out to the field.’ And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.

(v. 9) Then the Lord said to Cain, ‘Where is your brother Abel?’ He said, ‘I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?’ (v. 10) And the Lord said, ‘What have you done? Listen; your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground! (v. 11) And now you are cursed

from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. (v. 12) When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.' (v. 13) Cain said to the Lord, 'My punishment is greater than I can bear! (v. 14) Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me.' (v. 15) Then the Lord said to him, 'Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance.' And the Lord put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

In some respects, this is a new moment on the African American Lectionary calendar. The name of the moment is new: Restoring the Peace (Community Action Day). The specificity of the focus of the moment is new; it directly addresses the need for peace to be restored in the African American community through the actions of the community. The African American Lectionary has always operated under the premise that life is fluid and if major social changes warrant, new days may be placed on the calendar to reflect these changes. However, encouraging people to become socially active is something that The African American Lectionary has done throughout its existence. So, the "Community Action Day" aspect of this moment on the calendar is not new.

The presence of this moment on the calendar represents the Lectionary team's clear sense that violence in African American and other communities has reached a tipping point and the Church can no longer ignore it or fail to take major steps to address it. This is not to say that there has not long been a need for the Church to hold candid conversations and develop church-based solutions related to the many causes of increased violence in America, especially in its urban centers. However, the problem of violence is now so pervasive, so tragic, and so consuming that the Church has no choice but to speak and act or it will become irrelevant for its failure to lead on this significant issue.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Genesis 4:1-15

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

As I write this commentary on Genesis 4:1-15, it is now three days after President Barack Obama has given his second-term inaugural address before the Congress of the United States and the American people. And while President Obama addressed a number of issues in his address, the moment that overshadowed the entire speech and that will no doubt go down in the history books as one of the most significant moments in an inaugural address by a U.S. president is the conclusion of his speech. In the audience were former U.S. House Representative Gabby Giffords, who had been the victim of gun violence outside of a grocery store in Arizona; family members who had lost a child in the Newtown, Connecticut gun shooting at an elementary school just before Christmas; and the parents of Hadiya Pendleton, a slain fifteen-year-old girl from Chicago, Illinois. Hadiya had only been back home in Chicago for less than a week after participating in President's Obama's second-term inaugural festivities in January, when she was killed as

a result of random gun violence not too far from the President and Mrs. Obama's home in the Hyde Park area of Chicago. Mrs. Obama attended Hadiya's funeral.

At the end of his State of the Union address and speaking in the voice of a campaigner or even a preacher, President Obama implored the Congress to bring to a vote legislation designed to lessen gun violence in our communities. His refrain was that these many victims "deserve a vote." (*See the video at the end of this commentary.*) There will now be a record in the history of presidential "State of the Union" addresses that gun violence was a significant problem of our era, plaguing communities across this land from mid-Western communities in Colorado and Arizona to Newtown, Connecticut, and Chicago, Illinois, from bed-and-breakfast suburban towns to urban centers and major metropolises. The address will show that it affected children and adults, the wealthy, the middle class, and most especially the impoverished, whites, and most especially black and brown peoples.

This wide-ranging and personally and societally painful violence is a visceral entry point into the text of Genesis 4:1-15, which also speaks to actual and social death. But the Word of the Lord that emerges from the text is that even in the face of death, which bears witness to the fact of our having lost the sense of what it means to be each others' keeper, there is yet the affirmation of life and peace in the text, and therefore life and peace for us and our communities. Peace can be restored because life is more definitive and determinative than death. However, this will not happen without action from each of us as members of the community.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Genesis 4:1-15 introduces us to a story that is nothing less than the story of us all. It is the (maybe too familiar) story of an older brother, Cain, and his younger sibling, Abel. More specifically it's the story of the older brother Cain who finds himself positioned on one side by his younger brother Abel and on the other by God, a God whose ways and dealings, and fundamental mystery, Cain can't quite figure out. Indeed, the mystery of God and the most basic fact that we are not God, but are creatures before God, is known through the presence of the sibling in our midst. The community is a gift to us, and we to it. We are the gift by which those in the community (our siblings, our brothers and sisters around us) receive the grace and peace of God.

Our community of brothers and sisters are not our rivals; even if they are our blood siblings, they are never our rivals. Rather, these brothers and sisters are the witnesses before us of our status as creatures before God. They witness that we exist in the presence of God and that therefore we are not the center of the community. And just as we do not exist before God in competition with God but in grace (this is what it means to be a creature), so too we do not exist in the community with our brothers and sisters in competition. Those in the community are witnesses before us of God's presence, and therefore, we are for each other reminders of God's presence. I see you because God sees all of us.

In this story, that is a marker in Primeval History declared in the book of Genesis, which includes stories of the creation of the universe, the announcement of the first family, and the fall of the first family, the marker of fratricide (the act of a person killing his or her brother). From it, on today's lectionary calendar, we extrapolate lessons about what it is that leads brothers and sisters (blood and non-blood) to kill.

In the stage-setting verses, verses 1-2, we see the triangulated relationship between Cain, Abel, and God. Verses 1-2 communicate significant lessons about community and our relationship with our brothers and sisters. First, it records the gift of the challenge that is before us all, inasmuch as we all find ourselves positioned between that sister or brother with whom we see ourselves in competition. Perhaps this is the great and second original sin. We have on the one hand the God who is always a mystery before us. On the other hand we have a God whose favor we exclusively want for ourselves rather than have God share his favor, blessings, and grace with our sisters and brothers. Genesis 4:1-15 tells the story of what happens when relationships are viewed competitively, and through the lens of antagonism and therefore violence, and gives us an anthropological hint about what happens when God, faith, and religion are made to serve the interests of that competition.

Since this day on the calendar is about restoring peace in communities, we cannot stop with the marker of devouring communities (killing one's brothers and sisters) but must also take note of the solutions needed after such tragedies occur.

A solution in the text that is so obvious that it can be missed is the answer to being wrapped up in one's self and one's needs and desires. The answer to wanting anything only for one's self (God's favor, money, position, etc.), rather than sharing with a brother or sister, is understanding that "If you do well, you will be accepted. And if you do not, sin is lurking at the door [and] its desire is for you, but you must master it."

Second, there is a message for those left behind (in the text, the parents of Cain and Abel) when horrors occur. In our case, mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, and a village of kins-people are left behind when senseless violence occurs. The message for those left behind is that not even the murderer in this text is not written off by God. Punished greatly yes (hidden from God's face), but not written off. He is marked by God to ensure his survival, such as it shall be. Interestingly, in marking him, God also threatens anyone who would kill Cain. God knows that more killing is never the answer.

The cry to the community as we are called to action in this seminal moment of national violence is: Restore the Peace. Please, restore the peace! This brings us to our third solution found in the text—to master vanquishing the violence that is lurking at our doors (the doors of our hearts). How? **Help each other do well and then let all be accepted.** Our cultural resource writer for today, Yale seminarian Jamall Calloway, put forth a practical and effective formula for our consideration—practice the 5 P's:

Prayer,

Persistence,

Parenting,

Programs (church, neighborhood, state, and federal), and

Proper laws (police laws, economic laws, educational laws, governmental laws, and the law of community/village influence).”

These solutions are comprehensive, compassionate, and require that we co-labor with God as we stand as our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers. I will not belabor this point, but instead I highly recommend that you read today’s cultural resource unit for detailed explanations of each of the 5 P’s.

Challenge

God intended that we would all live in harmony by helping each other do well in life. After loving God with all of our minds and souls, we are to love others as we do ourselves. So today I make this plea: *Let every person of good will determine, this day, his or her role—no role is too small—in restoring peace to our nation. Choose ye this day whom ye will serve—the God who want us to help each other do well, or the demon of violence that lurks at our doors.*

Descriptive Details in This Passage

The descriptive details include:

Sights: A couple conceiving children; a male sheep-herder, a male tiller of soil; a person giving God an offering of fruit; a man giving God an offering of a flock of sheep; God refusing to accept Cain’s offering; Cain’s fallen and angry countenance; Cain killing his brother in a field; Cain lying about not knowing the whereabouts of his brother; a bloody patch of ground; a man wandering the earth; God’s face hidden; God putting a protective Mark on Cain; a funeral cortege;

Sounds: The crying of a child being born; parents shouting with glee over a child being born; the sound of sheep; the sound of tools tilling the earth; the sounds of a brother killing his brother; the weeping and mourning of parents at the loss of a child at the hands of another of their children; the weeping of a community as innocent people are killed; communities gathering to protest and plan to end violence;

Colors: White sheep; brown sheep; red and brown soil; brown and silver gardening tools; red blood; funeral clothing; and

Emotions: Jealousy; anger; rage; grief; and pain.

III. Material That Preachers and Others Can Use

See President Barack Obama’s 2013 State of the Union Address:
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/state-of-the-union-2013>