

Genesis 4:1-16, Romans 5:12-17, Matthew 5:17-26 – November 30, 2022 (Advent Midweek)

Naming a child is often very hard. Not always. Sometimes it's easy. You have a family name you know you're going to use. You have a close friend you know you want to honor. A name just comes to you and you settle on it right away. That sort of thing.

But more often, it's fairly difficult. This is a permanent decision. One that both you and the child will have to live with for years to come. And names are important. They're often the first impression we give about ourselves to another person. It's a lot of pressure.

When my wife and I were choosing a name for our daughter, we struggled for quite a while. Ultimately, I heard a piece of advice that helped a bit: Imagine that your child has just become a judge and the bailiff is calling out their name in the courtroom. "All rise for the honorable Emilia Ketelsen." It had a nice ring to it.

But that advice I heard also reveals something else about parenthood: we have high hopes for our children. We struggle to name them because we want them to carry this name into a life of respect and honor and achievement. A life where they pursue noble vocations and build strong character, like that of a judge in a courtroom. We want them to have a meaningful name because we want them to have a meaningful life.

As we prepare this Advent season to receive the Son of God in his birth at Bethlehem, our Advent series will look at some other sons of the Bible. Sons who foreshadowed our Lord's own birth in important ways. But, oddly, not through their successes, but through their failures.

The son we examine this particular evening is one of the greatest failures that the world has ever known. A man whose very name has become synonymous with hatred and betrayal. A son named Cain.

And yet, that name itself reveals the incredibly high hopes that Adam and Eve had for their son. Cain comes from a Hebrew word meaning "I have gotten" or "I have received." Which is why we hear Eve's statement just after he's born. *"I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord."*

But that name reveals more than just Eve's simple acknowledgement that God had given her a son. It was actually Martin Luther himself who connected the dots on this one. He noted how, during the account of the Fall, God had promised that the offspring of Eve would be the one to crush the serpent's head.

Well, now Eve has had her first offspring, and she has given him a name befitting someone she believes is a gift from God. "God has promised and I have received. God said he would send a savior and here he is." Which means it's probably more accurate to translate her statement as, "I have gotten THE man with the help of the Lord." I have gotten the promised one. The Messiah. The Savior.

Adam and Eve had great hopes for their son. And they named him accordingly. He was the man they had gotten with the help of the Lord who would crush the serpent's head and fix everything they had messed up in this world.

And then... he failed. He failed miserably. And that failure wasn't just evident in his murder of his brother. It shows up well before that. It shows up in the sacrifice that precipitated the murder as well.

You see, the text of Genesis 4 doesn't really explain why Abel's sacrifice was acceptable to God and Cain's wasn't, but Hebrews 11 gives us a fuller explanation. Hebrews tells us that Abel's sacrifice was made with faith. Abel knew that there was nothing inherently good in the sacrifice he gave, but he believed God loved him and would make it an acceptable sacrifice.

And he was right. God commended Abel and declared him righteous. Not because of his works but because of his faith.

For Cain, there was no such faith. And when his sacrifice was rejected by God, it didn't lead him to sadness or repentance or a desire to do better. Instead, it led him to jealousy and anger and violence. There was no faith in Cain's heart and so his heart turned to hate.

Which led to his second and more well-known failure: the premeditated murder of his innocence brother. Whose only crime was having faith in the Lord. Abel isn't just the first murder victim. In many ways, he's the first martyr. And like the martyrs in heaven who dwell under the altar of God asking, "How long, O Lord, until our blood is avenged?" So also Abel's blood cried rightly for vengeance after this unspeakable crime.

Can you imagine how Adam and Eve must have felt at this point? When they found out what their son had done? When they found out that Abel was dead and Cain had murdered him? That the son who was supposed to crush the serpent's head had no fallen victim, once again, to the serpent's temptation?

Sin crouched at Cain's door, ready to devour him. He had the opportunity, the warning from God himself, to beware of it. To rule over it. But in the end, he succumbed to its temptation, just like Adam and Eve.

They had to be tremendously disappointed. But I also have to think they had to feel tremendously guilty as well. The shame of the fall had come crashing down on them all over again. For they had brought this on their children. They were seeing first hand that their sin was not confined to them alone. It had been passed down to Cain. To his children. And their children. And their children. And it would continue to be passed down, throughout all of humanity.

*“Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.”* They were witnessing this spread of sin. And it's interesting, because immediately after this, Adam and Eve have another son named Seth. And then scripture says, *“At that time people began to call upon the name of the Lord.”*

The more people were born, the more sins they witnessed from each other. The more death they experienced around them. And it takes almost no time at all before humanity is crying out to God for relief. Calling on the name of the Lord for salvation.

Eve was wrong about Cain. He was not the savior who would crush the serpent's head, like she thought. But that didn't mean that God had abandoned his promise. No, the savior would still come. And he would still be an offspring of Eve.

But he would not be an ordinary sinful human, corrupted by Adam's sin and the desires of sinful flesh. He would be a new man, a new Adam. Born not of the flesh, but born of God. Conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of virgin. And not named for what Mary got, but what the Lord does. For his name was Jesus, which means, “The Lord saves.”

Instead of spilling blood, he would have his blood spilled. But his blood wouldn't cry for vengeance like the blood of Abel and the blood of the martyrs. No, his blood cries for our forgiveness. His blood cries for our pardon and peace and forgiveness. So that though we murder in our hearts and commit all sorts of other sins, we are not condemned to death. We are justified by God's grace to eternal life.

At the end of the account of Cain and Abel, Cain is punished for his crime. He was a farmer who worked the ground, but the ground will no longer yield crops for him. He must wander the earth as a fugitive and a beggar. And Cain realizes that anyone who sees him will try to kill him to seek justice for Abel's murder. And essentially, he tells God, “You might as well kill me now. I'm a dead man either way.”

But God has mercy on Cain. He places a mark on him. We don't know what the mark was, but it was something that identified him as protected by God. So that he could live out his days in peace.

We too have received a mark from God. Though we were sinners, guilty of murdering our brother in our hearts, guilty of so many other sins, God has marked us by Holy Baptism. The punishment that we deserve has been poured out on Jesus. The devil has no claim on us. No right to seek justice for our sins. For justice has been satisfied on the cross.

We may be wanderers on this earth, but we have peace with God. For the prince of peace has marked us with his own blood. That we should be called sons of God.

As a savior, Cain was a failure and a disappointment to Eve. But that just shows us why we need a savior who is more than mere sinful man. We need a savior who is the Son of God. We need a savior who is Christ the Lord. Amen.