

On a warm day this past week, with Memorial Day behind us, I felt brave enough, or perhaps foolish enough, to put on a pair of shorts for the first time this year and walk the dog—in public. I felt good as I got going but then had second thoughts. If there was only some way I could have *warned* the residents of Herbst Road that I was going to venture out for the first time this year with my milky white legs exposed. You think I’m kidding. I really thought that my neighbors deserved a *warning* that they should not look directly at my legs in the same way scientists warn people not to look directly at a solar eclipse!

We issue warnings and hear warnings about many things. On the label of *Nytol* Sleep Aid a warning says: *May cause drowsiness*. Mmm. Let’s hope that for GlaxoSmithKline’s sake, their warning is true. Then there’s *Frankel’s Superman* costume with a label that reads: Warning: This costume does not enable flight or super strength. Well, thanks for the heads up. I wonder if somewhere along the way we might have heard a warning about Genesis 4. Warning: *God Discriminates Against Cain; Brother Murders Brother; Cain Is Cursed*; or this surprising warning: *The Lord Protects a Murderer*.

In *How to Read Genesis*, Tremper Longman, an Old Testament scholar whose books I appreciate, writes that, “Scholars have noted the account of the Fall demonstrates a pattern that is repeated in the stories that follow in Genesis 4—11. The pattern is: 1) A sin. 2) A judgment speech from God. 3) God gives a token of his grace. 4) God executes judgment.

This is how things progress in the story of Cain and Abel, according to Professor Longman: After ejection from the Garden, Adam and Eve had children. Two are named at the beginning of Genesis 4: Cain and Abel. These two children are as different as night and day. Cain is a farmer and Abel a shepherd. Though one school of interpretation argues that the story is about shepherds putting down farmers, Longman says, this is very unlikely. It is rather a story that speaks of proper and improper *attitudes toward God*. Both men bring products of their profession at the time of sacrifice. Cain brings vegetables, and Abel brings lambs from his flock. God accepts only Abel’s offering without explicit explanation, leaving [later] readers guessing. Is it because Abel’s sacrifice is bloody? Is God’s decision arbitrary?

The answer to this question is subtly presented in the text. The clues, says Longman, are the adjectives used to describe the respective sacrifices. Cain’s sacrifice of farm produce has no qualifying words. He brought inedible things. Abel on the other hand brought to the Lord “*fat portions from some of the best of the firstborn of his flock*” (Gen 4:4). Nothing is too good for the Lord. This external gift reflects the gratitude of his heart.

Cain’s apparent lack of gratitude moves to something darker. So God admonishes him not to be angry. God’s rejection of his sacrifice should have led him to change his behavior in positive directions, but his actions get much worse. The sin that was waiting to overtake him ravages his heart. Cain kills his brother, who had received God’s favor. The first recorded sin after leaving the Garden of Eden is fratricide.

Like all who do evil deeds, Cain tries to cover up his crime, but to no avail. God catches him and delivers a judgment speech: “*Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you, you will be a restless wanderer on the earth*” (Gen 4:11-12). In other words, the curse against Adam has just gotten worse with the sin of Cain.

But in spite of Cain's despicable act, God still extends a token that signifies his continued involvement with him and the sinful human race. In response to his fear that he will be destroyed by others, God marks him with a promise: "*Anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over.*" Some think that this mark is similar to tattoos that criminals were known to receive in the ancient Near East, but because it was a sign of grace this is unlikely.

The text simply does not clarify what form this mark took. What is clear is that humans continue to sin. Yet God continues to judge sin, and continues to extend his grace by remaining involved in the lives of all his creatures.

When we take this story at face value, it's possible to see a somewhat capricious God who apparently makes an arbitrary choice between the offerings of two brothers. We also see a God who stands by silently while an innocent man is bludgeoned to death by his own brother. And we have a God who refuses to do justice—who refuses to kill Cain as Cain killed Abel.

So if any of you are waiting for me to explain the God of Genesis chapter 4, keep right on waiting. I haven't got three tidy sermon points up my sleeve to explain why God does what he does in this ancient tale.

However, I can suggest that a key verse with which we should all struggle is verse 7, where God says, "*If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?*" Jewish oral tradition in this verse has God speaking to Cain in a soft voice, giving Cain a second chance. But Cain doesn't seem to want a second chance.

The verse goes on to say: "*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.*" We might say that sin was no longer crouching at Cain's door, but sin had knocked down the door and was overtaking him in a way that led to murder. So why didn't God kill Cain for killing Abel? Because God loved Cain too. And as theologian Neal Plantinga points out in a sermon on this story, *love can really mess with justice.*

And so, as he will do throughout history, God extends mercy and grace. He puts his mark on Cain. It is a mark that proclaims both guilt and grace. We have no idea what that mark was, or what it looked like. The best we can do, again suggested by Neal Plantinga, is to compare it to the mark of water on our heads at baptism, or the mark of ashes some Christians receive on their foreheads on Ash Wednesday—marks that expose both guilt and grace.

The narrative articulates the two-sidedness of the Christian life: we are in jeopardy for disobedience and yet we are kept safe. God does not let go of us, even the most rebellious ones among us. Like Cal in Steinbeck's classic novel *East of Eden*. In case you're unfamiliar...

Adam Trask settles in the Salinas Valley of California with his pregnant wife Cathy. Cathy eventually gives birth to twins, Aron and Cal. It is clear from the start, however, that Cathy does not care about the infants and leaves the household as soon as possible.

When the boys have grown Aron drops out of Stanford and joins the Army during WWI. Cal sells vegetables in a poorly run business, because he intends to present a large monetary gift to his father, but he has always sensed that his father had a preference for Aron, his brother. The housekeeper Lee tells Cal about the idea of *timshel*, that each individual can choose their own moral destiny rather than be

constrained by the legacy of their parents, and urges Cal to remember that he is a normal, flawed human being. *Timshel* is a Hebrew word from Genesis 4:7. The King James translation makes it a promise in ‘Thou shalt,’ meaning that people *will surely triumph over sin*. But in newer translations *timshel* is translated, ‘Thou mayest,’ leaving room for a choice. In other words, humans may or may not rule over sin. This discussion makes Cal feel somewhat better, and he is able to move on with his life.

A telegram arrives informing the family that Aron has been killed in World War I. His father has a severe stroke upon hearing the news, and Lee brings Cal to see his father on his deathbed. In the end Lee asks Adam to give his blessing to his son Cal before he dies. At this, Adam raises his hand and whispers the single Hebrew word—*Timshel*.

Here’s true and authentic warning: Sin is crouching at *our* door; it desires to have *us*, but *we* must rule over it. Will we? Shall we? *Timshel*. We *may* rule over it, but only by the incredible mercy and freedom and forgiveness and grace of God.

God’s warning is turned into a promise. God promises that: *Rejection Is Turned to Acceptance. Guilt Is Turned to Grace.*

We too have received a mark from God—a mark of grace.

God’s name be praised! Amen.