

On a warm day this past week, I felt brave enough, or perhaps foolish enough, to put on a pair of shorts for the first time this year and trim bushes in our front yard—in public. It felt good as I got going but then I had second thoughts. If only I had *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 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 all kinds of things. Forty-eight years ago, Jayne’s father *warned* her about marrying that *yahoo* (and I quote). On Wednesday of this past week, it was 48 years! And I’m so glad she didn’t listen to him. But I digress.

There’s also a warning on the label of *Nytol* Sleep Aid that says: *May cause drowsiness*. Ok! Let’s hope so, GlaxoSmithKline! Then there’s the *Superman* costume made by Frankel’s with a label sewn into it that reads, *Warning: This costume does not enable flight or super strength*. Well, thanks for the heads up. I also wonder if somewhere along the way we should have heard some sort of *warning* about Genesis 4. *Warning: God Discriminates Against Cain; Brother Murders Brother; Cain Is Cursed*. Or instead, maybe this surprising warning: *God Extends Grace to a Murderer*.

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

Here’s how things progress in the story of Cain and Abel, according to Professor Longman: After ejection from the Garden, Adam and Eve had children. These kids are named at the beginning of Genesis 4: Cain and Abel. These two boys 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 that's a bit of a stretch. It's rather a story that speaks of proper and improper *attitudes toward God*. Both men in time bring products of their profession to offer to the Lord. Cain brings vegetables, and Abel brings lambs from his flock. God has regard only for Abel's offering without explicit explanation, leaving us latter day readers guessing. Is it because Abel's offering is bloody? Is God's decision arbitrary?

The answers to these questions are subtly presented in the story. Longman says the clues are in the adjectives used to describe their respective offerings. Cain's gift of farm produce has no qualifying words, so he likely brought inedible things. Abel on the other hand brought to the Lord "*of the firstborn of his flock and their fat portions,*" some of the best, says verse 4. Nothing is too good for the Lord. Abel's external gift reflects the gratitude of his heart.

Cain's apparent lack of gratitude becomes something darker. So, God admonishes him not to be angry. God's rejection of his offering should have led Cain to change his behavior in a positive direction, but his actions get even worse. The sin that was waiting to overtake him ravages his heart. Cain kills his brother, because Abel 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: "*And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth*" (Genesis 4:11-12). In other words, the curse against Adam has just gotten worse with the sin of Cain.

In spite of Cain's despicable act, God still extends a token that signifies his continued involvement with him and the sinful human race. Because God is afraid that he will be destroyed by others, God marks him with a promise: "*If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.*" 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 of the story simply does not clarify what form this “mark” had. 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 because Cain killed Abel.

So if any of you are waiting for me to fully 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 asks, *“If you do well, 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.

Verse 7 goes on to say: *“And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, and you must rule over it.”* We might say that sin was no longer crouching at Cain’s door, but sin had broken 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’s a mark that proclaims both guilt and grace. We have no idea what that mark was, or what it might have looked like. The best we can do, is to compare it to **the mark of water on our heads at our baptism,** or perhaps **the mark of ashes some Christians receive on their foreheads on Ash Wednesday—marks that expose both guilt and grace.** The narrative of

Genesis 4 demonstrates the two-sidedness of the Christian life: we are in jeopardy for our disobedience and yet we are kept safe. **God does not let go of us, even at our most rebellious moments.**

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 someday he intends to present a large monetary gift to his father, but he has always sensed that his father had a preference for Aron, that is, his father had a higher regard for 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. It represents the concept of free will and the idea that humanity holds the power to overcome sin, trauma, and even destiny. The Lord says to Cain, "*sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, and you must rule over it.*" The King James Version of the verse makes it a promise in **'Thou shalt'** language. **"Sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be its desire, and thou shalt rule over it"** suggesting people *will surely triumph over sin*. But in newer versions *timshel* is translated, **'Thou mayest,'** leaving room for a choice. In other words, humans may or may not triumph over or 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 a single Hebrew word—*Timshel*.**

Here's a true and authentic warning: **Sin is crouching at *our* door; it desires to have *us*, but *we* must fight against it and 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.**

By God's amazing grace, the Creator's warning to Cain is turned into a promise. **God promises that rejection becomes acceptance, and that guilt is turned to grace.**

In verse 14 Cain says, "*Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground, and from your face I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.*"

Then in the next verse the Lord says to him, "*Not so! If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.*" ***And the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest any who found him should attack him.***"

It was the mark of grace.

We too have received such a mark from God.

We've been given the mark of his grace.

God bless this simple witness to his word! God's gracious name be praised!
Amen.