

SCRIPTURE

Hebrews 12:18–29

¹⁸ You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, ¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. ²⁰ (For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.” ²¹ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.”) ²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³ and to the assembly^[b] of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

²⁵ See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! ²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.” ²⁷ This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸ Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; ²⁹ for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

This is the word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

MESSAGE – Word of blood

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

I don't often preach from the Epistles. The epic tales of the kings and prophets of old, or the accounts from the gospels are much easier for us to imagine and experience. In comparison, the letters of the early church are more like a textbook than a story book. They are full of instruction and explanation; useful, but not terribly dramatic – not always exciting.

But there is an image in today's reading from the letter to the Hebrews that stuck with me all week. The section that we heard contrasts the old and the new, specifically in terms of approaching God. It speaks of the way God appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai – all fire and storm and thunder – such that the people were terrified and quickly pushed Moses out front and declared him their spokesperson. ‘Talk to him’ they said, ‘and we'll wait back at camp. Moses can deal with this.’

The author then goes on to describe the new way of approaching God, made possible through Christ. He writes of the heavenly Jerusalem with the firstborn of heaven, the righteous made perfect, and innumerable angels in festal gathering. It sounds like a gala of some kind – certainly much different than Mount Sinai.

He does caution the reader though, saying that even though the invitation seems much softer and gentler we're still playing for keeps; so give thanks and offer God the reverence and awe due to him.

Buried within this message is an odd phrase. The writer speaks of Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, whose sprinkled blood speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. Now what does that mean? What does Jesus' blood have to do with Abel's blood? What's the connection?

Most of us remember the story of Cain and Abel. Cain and Abel were the sons born to Adam and Eve, and in some ways we can think of them as the first two *fully* human beings. They are the first two like us. 'Preacher go back and read your bible,' I hear you thinking. 'Adam and Eve were the first.' Hear me out.

Adam and Eve were created directly by God. Fashioned with his own hands. Once made, they spent an unspecified number of years living in Eden where they walked in the cool of the night and had long talks under the stars with their God. Adam and Eve had direct, unfettered access to God until they chose to go their own way, at which point they were banished to the wilderness where they would live under the curse of toil and labour.

This is where Cain and Abel were conceived. This is where Cain and Abel were born. Not in the walled garden, but in the wilds – in the world. Where we live. Adam and Eve were special. Cain and Abel were like us. They were fully human as we are; they had belly buttons – Adam and Eve did not.

So what happened with these first two human beings like us? At some point they made an offering to God. Cain brought some produce that he had grown. Abel brought the fat portions of the firstlings of his flock. God was impressed with Abel's offering, not so much with Cain's, and this made Cain exceedingly angry. So much so that he lured his brother out into the field and killed him there.

So why did God prefer Abel's offering over Cain's? Why was Cain disregarded? There may be a bit of a clue in the text – Abel's offering is described as the firstling from his flock, the first one born. By offering up this particular animal Abel was essentially saying 'You first, God. I'll take the next one.' He's indicating that God has priority, which seems a good thing to do when offering a sacrifice to the great creator.

Secondly, Abel offered up the fat portions of the animal. I'm not sure why, but these are the choice cuts. These are the portions that God asks for when he gives Moses instruction on how to properly prepare a sacrifice.

So, Abel gave up the best parts of his first animal. Cain offered God some vegetables. The bible doesn't say that there was anything wrong with Cain's offering, but the lack of description is somewhat telling. The image that we are left with is that Abel put some thought and effort into his offering, while Cain just kind of went through the motions. His heart wasn't in it; he wasn't really trying; he was fulfilling an obligation.

And God wasn't impressed. So Cain got angry. God responded by saying 'If you do well, you will be accepted. But if you don't, look out, man. Sin is right there and if you don't take control of it, it will take control of you.'

This further inflamed Cain, and he got more bitter, more resentful toward his brother.

Before I move on, I need to add something else. While Cain seemed to be a little slack in his efforts, we shouldn't simply say it's all his fault and leave it at that. That would be too simplistic.

Cain's story is also a lesson in the arbitrariness of existence. What I mean is that sometimes things just don't work out, and there doesn't seem to be a reason. Sometimes the universe simply comes against us, stymies us, rejects us – judges us. That's just part of being a finite, limited human being in the world.

Sometimes a tree just falls on your house. Sometimes you lose your job. Sometimes people die far too young. Sometimes bad things just happen, and there's nothing we can do about it. But the same lesson still applies.

Whether Cain deserved to have his sacrifice disregarded, or whether it was an arbitrary and unfair judgement by God doesn't really matter in this case. What is important is how Cain conducted himself in the aftermath.

Cain had a choice. He could either try harder and strive to do better and get a better outcome next time, or he could descend into self pity. He chose the latter. Cain got angry – at his brother, at God, at life. He became resentful, bitter, moody; he felt cheated and victimized. Once all of this negativity brewed enough inside him, he finally rose up and killed his brother.

Now what kind of a solution is that? Whether Abel was favoured because he genuinely tried harder, or whether he was just fortunate, the proper reaction of Cain should have been to try to learn from and emulate his brother. Cain could have chosen to try to rise up with Abel, but instead he chose to strike Abel down.

Now, in this unfair and arbitrary universe there are people who are better than me in every respect. There are people smarter, taller, better looking, richer, more influential. There are people more creative, more diligent, more articulate – should my response be like Cain's and kill them all? Would I find favour by killing off everyone who rises above me? Is that success? Maybe the success of a tyrant.

What kind of a world would it be if I were the best there was? Where would we get our poets and songwriters, our engineers and architects? How poor would the world be if we all, like Cain, killed those who were our betters?

The story of Cain and Abel was clearly an example of the worst of humanity killing the best of humanity. It was anger slaying peace, bitterness executing diligence, resentment slaughtering hope. Cain killed his brother for his virtues – because Abel was a decent guy who tried hard and was favoured by God.

And that's the story of the first two human beings. Pretty dark. Pretty dismal and disheartening.

And it's a foreshadowing of Jesus. Jesus' death is pretty much the same story. Like Abel, Jesus was an innocent man killed, not for what he did wrong, but for what he did right.

Was Jesus favoured by God? Yes. Diligently offered his very best to God? Yes. Killed by lesser men resentful of him? Yes again. So what is the message of Jesus' blood that speaks a better word than Abel's blood?

The blood of Abel speaks of bitterness, resentment, anger, and self-destructive rage. It represents the violent reaction of one who destroys what they don't understand or can't control. Abel's blood cries out from the ground and testifies to the very worst of humanity.

Abel's blood represents a history of violence. After Cain murdered his brother he was afraid of retribution from other people, so God put a mark on Cain, that whoever encountered him would not kill him, or they would suffer seven times whatever they did to him.

This began an escalating cycle of payback; if one of Cain's descendants were killed or injured, their family would exact seven times the damage done in retribution. Within five generations, Lamech would boast of avenging himself seventy-seven fold.

So if Abel's blood reveals the depravity of violence as a solution, what does Jesus' blood reveal?

Interestingly, Jesus plays the parts of both Cain and Abel in the way that he faced his own death. Jesus was Abel in that he was an innocent man killed simply for being virtuous.

But Jesus also is put in the role that Cain found himself in. Cain was angered by what seemed to him to be the arbitrary unfairness of things. His sacrifice was unnoticed; unappreciated.

In Jesus' case, he was confronted with the astoundingly unfair situation of following God faithfully all his life and yet facing a long, painful, humiliating execution as a treasonous enemy. If anyone had reason to complain, to be bitter or resentful, it should be Jesus.

So he was placed in the role of Cain, but responded in a much different fashion. Cain introduced an increasing spiral of violence into the world when he felt hard done by. Jesus did what Cain should have. He re-enacted the story but put it right.

In the face of injustice Jesus chose not to add more evil into the world. He chose to break the cycle of violence that had perpetuated since the time of Cain.

He picked up his cross, as unfair as it was, and he bore it. Why? Should we meekly accept any burden thrust upon us by tyrants? Are we not to fight injustice when we encounter it?

Whatever our response to injustice should be, it's clear from Jesus' example that killing people ain't it. Even if we think they deserve it. Probably especially if we think they deserve it – that ought to be a warning sign for us.

Just as God directed the Israelites to use different tactics in each battle they faced moving into the promised land, so too there will be different tactics needed when we encounter our own obstacles and enemies. I can't try to offer a one-size-fits-all solution to injustice.

But let's return to that curious phrase about the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. The blood of Abel speaks violence. The blood of Abel was shed because Cain responded to **his trial by** becoming sullen, angry, bitter, and resentful. The blood of Abel is a revelation that, left unchecked, humanity's base nature will kill the best within itself; we will destroy our own ideal and potential.

In contrast, the blood of Jesus speaks words of patience, hope, and redemption. Though we have it within us to kill and destroy each other, and even kill God, God does not have it within him to destroy us. His love overcomes his need for revenge.

Unfair and undeserved things are going to happen in our lives. We can waste our time shaking our fist at the sky and decrying the nature of being. We can multiply our misery and make bloody well sure that everyone around us suffers more than us.

Or we can remember that the God who loves us and who declares that he will never leave us also suffers alongside us. While we might prefer that God get rid of suffering altogether, God's response is to be together with us in our suffering. We don't go through anything that God himself doesn't feel with us.

So while the blood of Abel speaks hatred and division, the blood of Jesus speaks a better word. A word of reconciliation, redemption, and ultimately love; love for all of this glorious creation. Love for you. Love for me.

The word spoken by Jesus's blood is ultimately this: 'I am with you always, even to the very end.'

Amen.