

## Am I my Brother's Keeper

Genesis 4:1-10

On April 16, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King sat in a Birmingham jail. He was there because of his role in planning a non-violent protest for basic civil rights for all. In an open letter that he wrote to the city government, he said, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."<sup>1</sup>

Our scripture wonders if this is really so? "Am I my brother's keeper?" Are we really caught in an inescapable network of mutuality? Are we tied in a single garment of destiny? Of can we live lives isolated from one another? If we can and if we do, what price do we pay? Before we look to God's Word for an answer, let us to God in prayer:

Lord, long ago a poet wrote, "As therefore the bell that rings to a sermon, calls not upon the preacher only, but upon the congregation to come: so this bell calls us all. No man is an island, entire of itself."<sup>2</sup> We are living in a time when that bell tolls for those who face frigid weather without a roof over their heads. We live in a time when millions wander around the wreckage of a city brought down by a great earthquake. We pray for them and for those on the front lines of ministry. Amen.

The story of Cain and Abel has forever confused people of faith. Both brought gifts to God. Cain, the oldest son of Adam and Eve was a farmer so he brought fresh tomatoes and corn on the cob as an offering to the Lord. Abel, the younger brother was a shepherd so he brought a lamb.

Both brothers wanted to worship God in this way. Both wanted God to receive this sacrifice with favor. But, the Bible says God had regard only for the offering of Abel and no regard that which Cain brought?

Why? Was it because God loved lamb chops but hated broccoli? Was it because God likes shepherds but hates farmers? That can't be right because scripture is alive with passages that honor the vocation of farming. God himself planted the Garden of Eden. Jesus used many times in parables stories of those who plant and harvest. So, why does God accept Abel's sacrifice but not Cain's?

Some students of scripture try to find an answer in the little pieces. Verse three says, "in the course of time" Cain brought his offering, while verse four says, "Abel brought the firstlings of the flock." For years pastors have pointed out this distinction in stewardship sermons. It is the difference they say, between writing the offering check on the first of every month instead of the last of the month when you give God what is leftover. It appears to them that Abel brought the first and so very best of what he had to

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<sup>1</sup> King, Martin Luther: Letters from a Birmingham Jail.

<sup>2</sup> Donne, John

God, while Cain waited to see what was he had lying around that he didn't need. God some say is not satisfied with the crumbs.

There maybe something to that. I do believe we are to give the best and not the leftovers of ourselves to God, but I'm always careful about trying to read too much into God's motivations unless they are clearly revealed in scripture.

We don't really know why God accepted one and not the other and neither did Cain.

Maybe that has happened to you. Maybe God has not responded to all of your religious offerings in the way that you hoped. Have you ever prayed for something that never happened? Have you ever called on God for healing that never came? Maybe you put something a little extra in the plate in hopes that God would answer a particular prayer and have wondered why and if that silence is a rejection of your worship and your offerings? Have you ever had someone then explain to you why your dreams didn't work out? Most of these explanations didn't really satisfy because they were an attempt to explain a God "whose ways are not our ways and whose thoughts are not our thoughts." God in many ways has been and forever will be mysterious.

The real spiritual question is how we respond to a God we cannot control or manipulate. When Cain discovered God had no regard for his offering, he became furious. What he did not understand and what many of us have a hard time understanding was that while God did not think much of what Cain brought or the spirit in which he brought it, he did think a lot of Cain. God did not reject Cain. He still had high hopes for him. God thought he could do better, be better than he was. Cain was not interested in that.

All he could see was red and anger clenched his fists. But, "his arms were too short to box with God" he decided he'd take it out on his younger brother Abel. So that's what he did. In a flash Abel lie bleeding and dying on the ground.

Then God did the same thing with Cain as he did with his parents in the garden. He asked, "What's going on? Where is your brother?" God knew full well what had happened, but the question was an invitation to repent and confess. Cain, though, was a chip off the old block, so he gave God the same look every parent has seen when they've caught their child red-handed. That's the look that says, "What? Who me? What are you talking about? What's the big deal?" Then Cain asked God the question that strikes deep into the soul of each one of us, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Last week I had breakfast with respected business, community and religious leaders of Springfield to talk about the needs of those who are without any permanent shelter in Springfield. It was one of those snow covered 10 degree days. Cots lined the gym where we were meeting. They had been filled the night before by those who needed emergency shelter. During that time I learned over 410 students in our school system are living without permanent shelter. That's almost 5%, but the School district believes that

it is closer to 10 because many students are embarrassed to admit they have no home. We do know 300 children are served in various homeless shelters every night. I also learned that there are a number of teenagers who are no longer welcome at home, but have nowhere else to go. I wondered, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

This week, I saw as you did unimaginable pictures of devastation and desperation in Haiti. Because the destruction was so massive, it was described by more than one reporter as a disaster of "Biblical Proportions". But, the phrase from the Bible I was thinking of is this question, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Scripture is clear. Our answer to this question does matter to God. In fact it matters a lot. When Cain saw no connection between himself and his brother, God marked him in some way so that everyone would know. When a lawyer asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life Jesus said he was to love the Lord and love his neighbor. Then the lawyer asked, "Who is my neighbor? Jesus responded with the story of the Good Samaritan.

When Jesus disciples asked him, "when did we ever see as a stranger hungry or thirsty, naked or cold, alone or oppressed", Jesus said, "As you have done it to the least of these you have done it unto me." Then he draws line: Those who answer, "Yes Lord I am my brother's keeper" will be welcomed into his kingdom, but those who do not – will not.

Next week, at our congregational meeting I am going to introduce and describe with great clarity my vision for the church, who I think we're supposed to be and what I think we're supposed to do. I'm going to preach on this throughout Lent and provide lunch time opportunities to talk about this. You're going to see it on the web-site. You're going to read about it in the Review. One of the critical pieces of this vision is our responsibility to the least of these and our answer to the question, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

This is the kind of question for which words are almost meaningless. It doesn't really matter what you say. It matters what you do. This is the kind of question that can only be answered with sacrifice and commitment. This is the kind of question that can only be answered with a checkbook or with time spent sorting food at Crosslines or working with the Well of Life. This is the kind of question that can only be answered by those who are willing to go to Haiti to work in an orphanage or support the work of a hospital. This is the kind of question that can only be answered by those who are willing to pray and pray every day for those in Springfield and for those in Haiti who have no shelter at all.

God asks you, "Are you your brother's keeper?" He is waiting to hear your answer. He is waiting to hear our response.

Let us pray:

Lord, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." Help us to fulfill our responsibility to be our brother's keeper. Grant that we may respond with commitment and sacrifice, for those who are without shelter in Springfield and in Haiti. We pray for them today and always. Amen.