

Strange Provisions: A Sermons Series preached at Emory Presbyterian Church (Atlanta, GA)

Part 2: Hot Days and Mad Blood

(Matthew 5:21-4); Genesis 4:1-16

January 29, 2017

Our third scripture reading this morning continues in Genesis 4, verses 10-16. Continue to listen for God's word for us this morning:

Then the Lord said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed by the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer upon the earth." Cain responded, "My punishment is greater than I can bear! For today *you* have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer upon the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me." But the Lord replied, "Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance." And the Lord put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him. Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord, and settled in the land of Nod, even further East of Eden.

This is the word of God, for the people of God. **Thanks Be to God.**

This morning we are continuing a three part sermon series entitled "Strange Provisions." In the first installment of this series last week, I shared with you a bit of the essay by Bishop Jeremy Taylor, the "Shakespeare of the Divines," from which the phrase "strange provisions" is borrowed. This week's title, "Hot Days and Mad Blood," comes not from the "Shakespeare of the Divines," but from the Bard himself—Act 3, Scene 1 of *Romeo and Juliet*. Most of you, I would assume, are familiar with the story:

Two households, both alike in dignity, / In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,  
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny, / Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.  
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes / A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;  
Whose misadventur'd piteous overthrows / Do with their death bury their parents' strife.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, "Romeo and Juliet," *The Oxford Shakespeare* (Bartleby.com), <<http://www.bartleby.com/70/index38.html>>.

*Romeo and Juliet* is revered as a story in which the most passionate, ecstatic love is juxtaposed with the most tragic, unforgiving death. But what you may not remember is that the story turns on anger—upon the blind rage of a single, fatal act. In Act 3, scene 1, Benvolio and Mercutio, Romeo’s cousins and fellow Montagues, are passing the day in the streets of Verona. Benvolio warns Mercutio, “the day is hot, the Capulets abroad, And, if we meet, we shall not ’scape a brawl; For now, these hot days, is the mad blood stirring.” Sure enough, moments later Tybault, one of the Capulets, comes on the scene and, after exchanging some witty banter, challenges the boys to a fight. Romeo comes upon the scene, fresh from having secretly married Juliette the night before, and tries to talk Tybault down. But Mercutio and Tybault aren’t having it—they fight, and Mercutio, Romeo’s cousin falls. “A plague o’ both your houses!”—that part. Tybault flees the scene, only to return moments later. And Romeo says this “Alive! in triumph! and Mercutio slain! Away to heaven, respective lenity, And fire-ey’d fury be my conduct now!” Then Romeo, fire-ey’d and furious, kills his newly-minted in-law Tybault in the street, an act for which the prince orders his execution, forcing him to flee the city and leading to the tragic final act of the story. “O I am fortune’s fool!”—the famous line that Romeo wails, as he stands over Tybault’s lifeless body.

But it’s clear that Fortune was not the fool here. The feud of the Capulets and Montagues was an “ancient grudge,” but it was in those “hot days,” when the “mad blood” of both sides had reached a boiling point that the fatal acts depicted in this scene could take place. In a moment, a feud became a duel, and a brawl became a battle, and Romeo’s grief over the death of Mercutio became anger, rage, the blind fury of vengeance. In that fury, Romeo lost sight of everything else—what it would mean for his marriage, for his beloved Juliette, if he gave in. He didn’t stop to think—he couldn’t. His anger had overpowered him, even as it gave him the power and strength to kill Tybault.

So too, in the much more ancient story of an “ancient grudge” that we heard about in our scripture readings this morning. The story of Cain and Abel is a story of birth and life, family, love, hard work, and sacrifice...but it is also a story of dejection, wounded pride, anger, rage, murder, and regret. As in the story we heard last week about the Garden of Eden, and the first man and woman eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil in defiance of God’s commandment not to, this story prompts a flood of questions. Perhaps the most vexing is this: why did God “have regard” for Abel’s offering, and not Cain’s? Why did God warn Cain that “sin is lurking at the door”? Why did Cain go through with it and kill his brother? And why, after everything, does God still offer to protect Cain from those who seek to harm him through this strange provision of “marking” him?

As futile as it was to try and understand why God forbade Adam and Eve from eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, or why God even put the tree in the garden in the first place, so too, I think, is it futile for us to seek out the reason why God favored Abel's sacrifice over Cain's. The answer to that question is ultimately less important than the lesson we can learn from Cain's reaction.

When Cain saw that the Lord had no regard for his offering, his countenance fell, and he became angry. He was sad—downcast, crestfallen, morose—and perhaps embarrassed, too. It had, after all, been his idea in the first place to bring offerings to God. It was like he had had a great new idea for an innovative new product, but his boss gave the credit to someone else—and worst of all, to someone with less seniority. Having your hard work or your good ideas overlooked can be embarrassing and depressing. It can also be frustrating—it can make you angry.

That's not necessarily a bad thing. As psychologist Thomas Harbin explains, "Anger is an emotion...Just like any other emotion, anger is not bad. Anger isn't good, either. Anger just *is*...All emotions have their proper place in [someone's] life...And there are times when anger is an appropriate reaction to events and people." Harbin goes on to explain that anger is actually a very useful emotion, because "*anger is energy*. When you get angry, you sometimes feel a tremendous rush of adrenaline...You are less likely to feel pain. Your strength seems to increase. This potent energy can be used constructively, or it can be used to destructive ends."<sup>2</sup> Anger is a secondary emotion; it is a response to something—pain, fear, vulnerability, unpredictability, disappointment, embarrassment, shame. It can be used constructively: anger is what energizes victims of injustice to fight against their oppressors. When anger is well-adapted, it manifests in having the courage and strength to clearly express when one feels hurt or violated or sad or dehumanized, and to act in order to feel safe and whole. But when anger is maladaptive, it doesn't help fix the underlying issue. It often only succeeds in making things worse.

This is what we saw in fair Verona, when Romeo's grief and sadness at the violent death of his kinsman turns to rage and murder. It's what we see in Genesis, when Cain is disappointed that God doesn't regard his offering. We see it—and God sees it. Once again, it is the strange providence of God to lend clarity to this moment. God sees Cain's disappointment; God sees his anger. And God warns him that he can use that anger for good or for ill. The temptation to lash out is lurking at his door...it's right here, in the back of his mind. But God tells Cain, "you must master it."

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Harbin, *Beyond Anger: A Guide for Men* (Cambridge MA: Da Capo, 2000), p. 6.

We live in angry times. Anger is all around. It is often pointed to as the driving force behind the election in November. It boils beneath the surface of the ongoing protests throughout this country. This week, it boils up close to home, as we learn that the refugee families that this church and churches like it are trying to help settle here in the United States have been summarily barred from entering the country for four months. There is anger all around, but anger is a secondary emotion. Beneath the anger is sadness, and fear; a sense of violation and injustice. In this moment we can, as God tells Cain, do well, or do ill. Sin is lurking—but we are called to *master* it, to overcome it, somehow.

What does it look like to “master” anger? It is not, according to the psychologist Harbin, going to look like “winning.” “Winning” by anger is only ever a pyrrhic victory. No, “mastering” anger means recognizing and owning the its root cause—the pain, the vulnerability, the disappointment, that lays beneath it. It means acknowledging that something has gone wrong, that someone has wronged you—or they’ve at least made you feel wronged. How much different would this story look if Cain had gone with his baby brother into the field and said, “When God favored your offering, that made me sad.”

It sounds kind of ridiculous, doesn’t it? But that is precisely what it looks like to overcome sin—when one overcomes the temptation to assert power against another, and instead becomes vulnerable enough to admit, “I am wounded. I am hurt. I need help.” It’s not something we see every day. It’s hardly something we expect from this world.

But this is what Jesus is exhorting his disciples to do in the passage from the Sermon on the Mount that we heard this morning. “You have heard it said, ‘you shall not murder’ ...but I say to you, everyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be liable to judgment.” Theologian Daniel Napier argues<sup>3</sup> that here, Jesus is not just talking about “everyone who gets angry,” but rather “those who go on being angry,” who “retain” their anger, who choose to hold onto enmity towards another person because it makes them feel powerful. Jesus goes on to identify two other kinds of people who will be liable to judgment for their sins: those who insult other people, demeaning and dehumanizing them; and those who call others “fools.” As Napier points out, to be called a “fool” in Jesus’s time was devastating. As it says in the Psalms, to be a *fool* is to be a person that says that there is no God.<sup>4</sup> In Proverbs, the fool is the antithesis of the wise person; they’re someone who has no regard for any of the commandments of God. To call someone a “fool,” then, is to call them absolute evil. It would be like

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel Napier, “Jesus’s Way Beyond Contempt and Anger: Part One,” *Austin Graduate School of Theology: Christian Studies Blog*, <<http://info.austingrad.edu/christianstudies/jesus-way-beyond-anger-and-contempt-part-one>>.

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 14:1

comparing someone to Hitler. And Jesus says that thinking of someone this way, calling someone such a thing, is sinful.

Sin is lurking at our door in those moments that we feel vulnerable and hurt and angry with what our politics and our world and our community and our lives are giving us. We can be tempted to hold on to that anger. But the consequences of holding that anger, and using it to lash out, can be quite dire. Those consequences can ripple out and infect every aspect of one's life. In the story of Cain and Abel, Abel's blood infects the ground. From that moment on, Cain, a farmer, could not work. He lost his job, because the ground refused to bear him fruit.

But he also lost his support system, as well. In the ancient near-east, extended families often lived together, or at least nearby one another in compounds. Cain would no longer be welcomed there. The story ends by saying that he went to dwell in the land of "Nod," which means "wandering." His anger forced him to leave his parents, to leave his profession, to wander and worry about hot days and mad blood and the possibility of someone wreaking vengeance upon him. "My punishment is greater than I can bear!" he cries to the Lord. "O, I am fortune's fool!"

How fortunate, then, that ours is a God of strange provisions. Yes, ours is a God of judgment, who passes judgment not just on the murderers, but those who hang on to anger—who don't just "get" angry, but who "are" angry. God judges those who insult and demean other people, and those who accuse others of being absolutely, irredeemably evil. God judges each in turn, but there is a strange provision in that judgment, too. It is the strange provision voiced by the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, who taught us the true meaning of grace: to love one another, even as he loved us: to be vulnerable to one another, even as he was vulnerable for us; to walk with one another, even when we are fugitives and refugees in the land of wandering, just as he walked with the outcasts and the refugees too.

The text tells us that Cain went away from the presence of the Lord, that he settled even further east of Eden. He had a bunch of kids, and it even says he built a city—the first city that we hear of in this primeval history. Things didn't turn out too bad for him, after all. They certainly turned out better than for that poor fool of Fortune, Romeo. Perhaps what made the difference was that Cain was not bound to the inexorable fatality of blind fortune, but was rather guided and protected by the strange provision of a God who loved him.

Cain may have gone away from the presence of the Lord, but, as the Psalmist reminds us, “God’s steadfast love endures forever.”<sup>5</sup> And as the Apostle Paul reiterates, “there is no surer demonstration of the love of God than this: that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”<sup>6</sup> The love that God has for us is fierce—it may even be angry. When Cain voices his fear of being killed, you can almost hear the indignation in God’s reply: “Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance!” We can hear the anger, even the rage, in God’s threatening response. But it is a threat that is never acted upon. It doesn’t need to be. It has the desired effect: Cain can go on living in the assurance that God is, despite everything that happened, still on his side. Even a wanderer, even a fugitive, even a refugee, can make their way in this world, by the provision of God.

And that is good news for us here today, in this time of great anger and frustration and fear. Sin is lurking at our door; in some cases, anger, insult, and hatred may have already entered in and taken up residence. But God’s strange provision in Christ is to shed light on the dangers of allowing these feelings to take us over and distract us from the work we have been called to join God in doing. So let us not grow weary in our love for one another, or our care for the poor and outcast, the homeless and the refugee. Let us marshal the emotions God has given us to do well and not ill. Drawing upon the strength and wisdom of God in Jesus Christ, let us be faithful disciples, that justice and peace may flourish in this land where we wander. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Psalm 136:1.

<sup>6</sup> Romans 5:8.