

“Home: Rethinking Life -Sin Destroys Life”
Genesis 4:1-16

As we think of sin today, I would like to invite us to consider where we begin when we speak of sin. It is much like many movies or stories that choose to begin with the end and then flashback to tell the story from the beginning so that we can understand better how we got to that point. The movie “Saving Private Ryan” offers such a great beginning. It starts with a scene of a veteran visiting the gravesites of fallen U.S. soldiers. We look at the face of the veteran and then flash back to the beaches of Normandy during WWII. We imagine that the veteran is Captain Miller (Tom Hanks) who would survive the war and end up telling the story, but the twist is that the face we see at the beginning is that of Private Ryan. The story unfolds about the mission which Captain Miller and his team are assigned to find Private Ryan:

<https://youtu.be/0HUf68gFGEE>

The beginning is brilliant because it keeps us guessing and paying attention in order to really understand the story of how we got to that point.

We have a similar situation in our Bible Story for today from Genesis 4, which is the story of the siblings’ rivalry between Cain and Abel. Cain is jealous of his brother, and instead of finding ways to heal that jealousy, he chooses to act on it. He decides to eliminate his brother, and thus we have the first murder in the Bible. Let’s listen to the story according to Genesis 4:1-16:

Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, “I have produced a man with the help of the Lord.” 2 Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. 3 In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, 4 and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, 5 but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. 6 The Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? 7 If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.” 8 Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let us go out to the field.” And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. 9 Then the Lord said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” 10 And the Lord said, “What have you done? Listen, your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground! 11 And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. 12 When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.” 13 Cain said to the Lord, “My punishment is greater than I can bear! 14 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 on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me.” 15 Then the Lord said to him, “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. 16 Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

The key to understanding the story is to flashback to where things started to fall apart. One does not go from jealousy to murder without many little decisions along the way. Before you find yourself waist-deep in a swamp, you often have warning signs: the ground is getting soft, and you start hearing water with each step you take, and then your feet get wet. This means that there were several bad choices that led to murder. These choices were things that Cain and his family justified along the way.

Remember this story of creation is very symbolic of the human patterns of struggle and of success. First, there was the decision of Cain’s parents to disobey God and to listen to the temptation of the snake. Here are some of the justifications: Why not eat the forbidden fruit? It is not going to hurt anyone. Why not be more like God? Why wait to gain the knowledge that God had? Why not make our own choices, even though there are warnings about the danger that might lie ahead? Why not trust the guidance of someone who seems to be wise? While Adam and Eve knew in their hearts that they could trust God, their egos were fooled by the worldly wisdom of the serpent. They sold their souls for the sake of power and control. Then they decided to eat the forbidden fruit, and that is when they started to feel separate from each other and from God. And that is when they end up having to leave the home they had known. Even though God assured them that they will be redeemed and not abandoned, they carried that fear of abandonment and inadequacy with them.

Then, when they had their two sons, Cain and Abel, the same fear was passed on. Somehow the offering of Abel was seen as acceptable, and the one by Cain was not. This made Cain very angry. God gave Cain the chance to accept and to try again. Cain had a choice to make: Let go of fear or act on his feelings. When he made the choice to kill his brother, he was already waist-deep in the swamp of self-pity, fear, jealousy, and anger. But even then, God gave him extra grace so that he would not be hunted and killed by others. Yet, Cain couldn’t find his way back to accepting that grace.

As we read this story symbolically, we see the same patterns in our own human experiences. I am especially interested in the slippery slope of self-justifications. One of my favorite books on the topic is *Mistakes Were Made (but not by me): Why we justify foolish beliefs, bad decisions, and hurtful acts* by Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson. The authors talk about the problem of self-justification and cognitive dissonance. Because we believe that we are “good,” we find ways to justify “bad” or immoral behaviors. We

become resistant to admitting our mistakes or flaws. They write, “Self-justification minimizes our mistakes and bad decisions: it also explains why everyone can recognize a hypocrite in action except the hypocrite.” The problem of justifying immoral behaviors is that they end up becoming the breeding grounds for hurting ourselves, others, and even God. Desmond Tutu writes, “In the Bible, depravity does not enter creation in a tidal wave of wrongness. It comes in a slow, silent leak, drip by quiet drip, until the earth is flooded...we do not veer off the rails in an explosion of error. We make a succession of uncorrected missteps, and then when we check, the good we would do seems far out of reach...What we seldom learn are the small acts of misrepresentation that paved the way for the larger lies.”

It is easy to think of sin as the big mistakes we make, but it is much harder to consider the self-justifications we make along the way. The good news of our faith is that the image of God is deep within us, deeper than any sin or distortion of who we truly are. Our work is to be intentional each day about the things that separate us from God and from love, no matter how small they might be. This is not to be done out of guilt or shame, but out of our longing for deeper love.

Macrina Wiederkehr suggests a series of questions for a daily “Examen of Consciousness”:

Have the ears of my heart opened to the voice of God?

Have the ears of my heart opened to the needs of my sisters and brothers?

Have the eyes of my heart beheld the Divine face in all created things?

What do I know, but live as though I do not know?...

Is there anyone, including myself, whom I need to forgive?

When did I experience my heart opening wide today?...

What is the one thing in my life that is standing on tiptoe crying, “May I have your attention please?” What needs my attention?

This is not to see ourselves as unworthy of God’s love. It is instead about letting go of the things that hold us back from that love. I want to invite you to practice this daily but with this prayer offered by Desmond Tutu as the voice of God speaking to us as we examine our lives:

I hear your call as you are falling.

You stumble over your own wrongdoing and topple into the
bottomless pit of guilt and shame.

But there is no abyss. It is an illusion.

There is no depth to which you can fall that is beyond my reach.
I have lived with you from the age of the ages.
The dream of you has delighted me, the fact of you pleases me.
There is a choice in every moment.
In every moment there is a chance to flourish and not to fail.
Every instant is rich with possibility.
I have not carved out the path that you must follow, we form the way together, you and I. I have destined you for good and a field of goodness lies before you.
Listen to me, and though the way may not be easy, every step and stone will lead to joy.
Turn aside to heed the voice of the tempter and faltering will mark your journey.
I trust you, my child.
Even when you have fallen the road does not end.
You can rise up from the ground and turn around.
You can repent and head for home in me.
Seek me out.
You will find me.
I have been here from eternity.
Until eternity this is where I will be.
I am waiting and you will find me. Amen