

"Abel, Shepherd at the Altar"
Genesis 4:2b-11

5 December Anno Domini 2001
Advent Midweek I
Wednesday Evening Service of the Word
Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
Emmett, Idaho
Pastor Michael L. McCoy

Grace, mercy and peace to you in the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Dear Baptized ... that is, those of you who have been carried by the Good Shepherd to the still waters of His gracious Word where He has Named you, brought you into His fold and continues to cleanse you as He has promised,

The days are growing short, and even now, in the first week of Advent, the darkness of the world's shadow lengthens. Will you not join me in the journey before us? Permit me to be your guide for a season or two. Together, we walk, not to a place, but rather, to a time. In this anticipating, pregnant season of Advent we go back so quickly and easily to the time 2,000 years ago with Elizabeth and Mary. We are mentally already "in the days of Herod, the king of Judea" (Luke 1:5); already in the distant past from Luke as we behold the years before Jesus was born and the time when a priest named Zechariah burnt incense in the Temple of the LORD.

But let's go further back. Leap across that four century gap from Matthew's Gospel to Malachi's Prophecy. Are you still with me? Stay close as we walk past Micah's Ephrathah and Isaiah's Child; Solomon's Wisdom and David the Shepherd Boy. Take care, for wide is the Exodus wilderness and narrow is the way through the Red Sea. Behold, there is homeless Joseph in Egypt's prison and then fatherless Abram on his way to the promised land. Farther on, Noah is preparing an ark and up ahead old Methuselah is growing younger with each step we take back in time. Look, Methuselah's father, Enoch is walking with God. Only a few generations left and suddenly, we will be at the right moment.

Jared, Mahalaleel, Cainen, Enosh, Seth ... there, up ahead, not far from the Garden of Eden, do you see that man? He's the one we're interested in this evening. Look at him. He's no farmer like his father and his older brother. To his parents, this man is Worthless and Caste Aside; for that is what his name means and that is how he is named. Another farmer is not needed. So, he's a shepherd who has been called to do that other task - to take heed to himself and to all the flock in which he is the guardian - to care for the oldest ram and the youngest lamb. Look, this man has approached the congregating place where the service will take place. He is a shepherd wearing a righteous robe and standing before the Altar of the LORD. Do you see what this overseer is doing? Wait. Let's stop right here for a moment.

"Now Abel was a keeper of sheep and Cain a tiller of the ground. And in the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and

his offering He had no regard.

Big brother goes first and makes his offering to the LORD. Cain is the firstborn, the farmer and the faithless one. He approaches the altar without a righteous robe for he thinks that his offering is a good work that will earn God's acceptance and favor. Cain is wrong, dead wrong. The robe in which Cain is dressed as he presents his offering is filthy, stained not from the dirt of the farmer's ground, but from the sin that leeches forth from the pores of the heart of man. Thus within the worship service there is one who is an unbeliever and the LORD has no regard for Cain's offering.

Little brother goes second and presents his offering to the LORD. Abel, shepherd of the flock, selects a particular lamb from those born within the flock he is called to oversee, a firstling consecrated for a special purpose, one set aside to be offered to the LORD. Abel believed that one was declared right with God, not by good works to appease God's wrath or by earning God's favor, but by the gracious gift of God through faith in the promised Seed of the woman. In this Savior would there be redemption and in this Redeemer was Abel's faith focused. "By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he received approval as righteous, God bearing witness by accepting his gifts" (Hebrews 11:4a). Thus within the Divine Service there stands faithful Abel before the altar and "the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering."

So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. So the LORD said to Cain, 'Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.'

Cain sought to be right with God by the keeping of the Law and now he has been severely accused by the Word of the Law. We hear the same Word spoken to the rich man who claimed to have kept the Law perfectly from his youth. Jesus replied: "'If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.' When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions" (Matthew 19:21-22). Cain went away angry; for he had great expectations.

Following the Divine Service the brothers take their leave of the holy place. To the younger, the older speaks words that bear no apparent bitterness over that gift business back there at the altar. But what one often speaks on the surface is but a sugar coating on a pill of poison ... a rose aroma wafting from a septic tank ... one of the devil's own seeking a brother to devour. "And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is not strange if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness" (2 Cor. 11:14-15).

"And Cain said to Abel his brother, 'Let us go out to the field.'" Or, in other words, "My dear little brother, let us be a synod - that is, come beloved shepherd, let us walk together in the way that leads out of this narrow place and into the open field. I certainly hold no grudge against you for the LORD's rejection of my offering. What is that to us? Come, let us leave this congregation behind and the two of us, just you and me, alone together, 'Let us go out to the field.'"

"And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him." The faithful shepherd has been slain and the sheep are without their bishop. The blood flowed from that one who was stricken, smitten and afflicted by his kinsman as the lifeblood of God's chosen poured forth from his veins and soaked into this field of blood. The LORD, via Adam, asks Cain, "'Where is Abel your brother?' He said, 'I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?' And the LORD said, 'What

have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to Me from the ground."

Abel's blood does not speak out; it cries out! Like the herald who proclaims the news to all who will hear, the voice of Abel's blood cries out from the ground. For Abel is a prophet of God as Jesus, the Wisdom of God, says, "I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute," that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be required of this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary" (Luke 11:49-51). What does the voice of Abel's blood cry? "Vengeance! Treachery, lies, duplicity, hypocrisy, deceit, betrayal! Retaliation, retribution, pay back, vengeance."

With whom do you identify? Cain or Abel? Who are you like? Ahh yes, most certainly like Abel, for we are of the faithful who trust in the LORD God. Indeed, the righteousness that we have is the LORD's righteousness, given as a gift and declared to be ours. But do you not realize that though we are saints, declared perfect in Christ, we are also sinners who, by nature, are no different than Cain? True, but ... Do you not condemn Cain's cowardly act? Certainly, this man deserves to die! Do you not think that he deserves to be stoned by the family? Absolutely! So, could you not cast the state's hangman aside and yourself throw the switch on that little quisling named Cain?

But wait, vengeance is not ours to take. The LORD is the only one permitted to do this, "For we know Him Who said, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay'" (Hebrews 10:30). And suddenly, even if we stand listening to the voice of Abel's blood, we are at the foot of the cross. Here the Good Shepherd lays down His Life for the sheep, and not for your sins "only but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2) ... for you and me and even for Abel's murderer. Like Cain, our punishment is greater than we are able to bear. Vengeance ought to be taken out upon us and we ought to be repaid for each transgression of God's holy Law. We ought to be cast out from the Presence of the LORD.

But here is the astounding news of all history. God sends His Son to pay the price in the place of mankind. Behold Jesus takes our place under the just wrath of God. His Blood is poured out on our behalf and it does not speak of vengeance but absolution, not condemnation but forgiveness, not retaliation but redemption, not pay back but pardon. Indeed, from Christ Jesus the world now has "the sprinkled Blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel" (Hebrews 12:24). This Good News speaks of being clothed in Christ, of peace with God, joy to the world, hope for eternity, life with the LORD forever, of a conscience sprinkled clean by the Blood of Jesus.

Do you not you recall the hymn ...

Glory be to Jesus, Who in bitter pains,
Poured for me the life-blood, From His sacred veins!

Abel's blood for vengeance, Pleaded to the skies;
But the Blood of Jesus, For our pardon cries.
(The Lutheran Hymnal, #158, stanzas 1, 3)

This all sounds very much like Lent instead of Advent, doesn't it? But even from Abel, the Shepherd at the Altar, the account of our salvation leads us straight to Calvary and the cross of Christ.

However, in order to be enthroned on that altar, the Son of God must be Incarnate of the Holy Ghost - the virgin must conceive and bear the Son - the Savior must be man in order to shed His Blood -

the Ransom must our older brother whose Sacrifice of Himself will be regarded by the LORD as sufficient for the redemption of the world. As Christmas precedes Easter so Advent must come before Lent. Bethlehem's Promise must arrive before Calvary's King is crowned. Zechariah's Voice will return before the children's Palm Sunday chorus of "Hosanna" is heard. Gabriel has messages to deliver in Jerusalem and Nazareth before the Easter angel proclaims the Resurrection.

Therefore the faithful wait in joyful anticipation as our Redemption draws nigh. As the congregation of the Lord waits, the sheep listen to faithful shepherds - men like Abel, the Shepherd at the Altar, for you do realize, don't you, that he still has a message for the Church? "He died, but through his faith he is still speaking" (Hebrews 11:5). As you have this evening, continue to listen to the voices of the faithful shepherds that we will be visiting ... Noah, David, Moses, Joseph, Bethlehem's shepherd and of course, Jesus, the Good Shepherd. I invite you and yours to be here in the upcoming weeks to hear from the Shepherds of Advent and Christmas.

What will you hear from them? Holy things ... Gospel truths as you have heard this night ... Good News like this dear children of the LORD God: You are forgiven in the Name of the Father and the (+) Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.