

East of Eden Genesis 4:1-16

This is not a story that you hear from the pulpit very often, nor in bible studies, or Sunday School classes. Perhaps that is because it doesn't appear in any of the most common lectionaries that we use to guide our preaching; perhaps it is because of the horrible ways that it has been wielded across the centuries--particularly the incredibly ugly and just plain wrong assertion by early American Protestants that the mark of Cain was dark skin, therefore allowing their slave holding activities to go unchecked. But it is such a rich story that it seems a waste not to use it. It's full of firsts: the first human conception of children, the first mention of agriculture, the first recorded sacrifice and offering to God, the first sibling rivalry, the first murder, and a curious mark that seemingly both a mark of guilt and a mark of grace.¹ It's all of the stuff great stories are made of.

I am an avid reader, it's a running joke in our house that no matter how closely I read something, only a sentence or two sticks in my head, even from stories I really loved. I repeatedly curse Faulkner over one line in *As I Lay Dying*, do the same with a few words from *Watership Down*. I cling to the moment the statue of Hermione comes to life at the end of *The Winter's Tale*, and the first time Idgie shows Ruth that she is a bee charmer in *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*. This story is no different--out of all the details in the Genesis account of the brothers Cain and Abel, there are just a few words and phrases that have stuck with me over the years. The most important of these, the one that deeply informs my theology and worldview, comes from God's conversation with Cain before Abel is killed:

“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 lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.”

You must master it...

The Hebrew verb used here is *timshel*.

If you want to get into the weeds of Hebrew, *timshel* is a Qal imperfect verb in tense and mood. Such verbs in Hebrew can be translated in one of three ways. Most often, it is in the future tense: You shall master him. But it can also be an imperative.

¹ Sibley Towner, *Westminster Bible Companion: Genesis* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 64.

That's how the NRSV and many other translations translate it: "You must master" But, it could also be translated, "You may master" In other words, it's a choice.

In John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, the character Lee makes this same discovery after years of study.

"Don't you see?" says Lee, "The American Standard translation *orders* men to triumph over sin...The King James translation makes a promise in 'Thou shalt,' meaning that [people] will surely triumph over sin. But the Hebrew word, the word *timshel*— 'Thou mayest'—that gives a choice. It might be the most important word in the world. That says the way is open." Lee continues, "Now, there are many millions in their sects and churches who feel the order, 'Do thou,' and throw their weight into obedience. And there are millions more who feel predestination in 'Thou shalt.' Nothing they may do can interfere with what will be. But 'Thou mayest! Why, that makes a man great, that gives him stature with the gods, for in his weakness and his filth and his murder of his brother he has still the great choice. He can choose his course and fight it through and win." Lee concludes, "I have a new love for that glittering instrument, the human soul. It is a lovely and unique thing in the universe. It is always attacked and never destroyed— because 'Thou mayest.'"²

We want to see Cain as the other--as not at all like us--but really, Cain is just another person whose life could have gone another way if he had made other choices. He isn't the other, he is Everyman.³

The same is true for us. Sin may be lurking at our doors, like a tiger ready to pounce and devour us, but we can make a different choice. A choice to love instead of to harm. A choice to see the evil that has been done, and then make a choice that brings life and relationship instead of further harm. A choice to see our past sins, both individual and collective, and then choose a different way--a way that answers the question "am I my brother's keeper," no. You have a much greater responsibility than that; You are your brother's brother.

Each park we have visited so far has had people in their histories who understood that choice and that responsibility, from fighting for name changes and the removal of Confederate monuments at Linn Park, to every child and young person who marched in the children's march at Kelly Ingram Park, and so many more. In some very real ways, we chose those parks because of those people and the choices they made.

² John Steinbeck, *East of Eden* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1992), 299-301.
With special thanks to the Rev. Dr. Joe Clifford, who first pointed out this translation to me and got me to read the book itself.

³ Towner, 56.

This week as I studied the history of Red Mountain, particularly that of its mining days, one piece stuck out to me as the epitome of this choice came from a place I never expected; It came from welfare capitalism.

In 1907 US Steel acquired Tennessee Coal and Iron and, in part to stave off anti-trust questions, named southerner George Gordon Crawford its new president. He inherited quite a mess. The Birmingham branch had two main problems that he could see--low grade iron ore, and an “unreliable and unstable workforce.”⁴ Knowing that “good health, good spirits, and safe working conditions were essential to peak output,” his solution to the second of those problems was to create the “most advanced, comprehensive company welfare system in the South.”⁵ Workers, both black and white, would have the best schools and the best health care in the county, stable, sanitary housing, community gatherings, and opportunities to better themselves. And he was right--in a little more than 20 years, labor turnover in the mines on Red Mountain declined from 400 percent per year to a little more than 5% annually.⁶ Compared to much more drastic measures that put workers in danger in order to increase productivity these are certainly better choices, they aren’t specifically the ones that I hear “Thou mayest” in--those come from the women who took this corporate policy and turned it into caring concern for families in the camps by advocating for workers and their families, educating them, living among them, and serving with all they had, women like Winifred Collins, Sue Berta Coleman, and Mary Dolliver.

Winifred Collins was hired by George Crawford to head the Department of Social Science, the only female executive in an all male industry.⁷ Though she faced opposition both because of her position and because of the cost of the welfare program, she excelled, hiring “well-trained, college educated teachers for the camps in a time when most teachers in the South had only a high school diploma.”⁸ She insisted not only on strong academic subjects for all students, but also for art, music, health classes, and home training, and for black heritage programs in the colored schools--a thing unheard of at the time. This was more than just compulsory education--there were pageants, festivals, and competitions, conscious choices to build community.

⁴ Sterne King, 11.

⁵ Pamela Sterne King, “Rich and Rugged: Red Mountain of Jefferson County, Alabama and the making of the South’s most important industrial district,” (Birmingham, AL: US Steel Corporation, 2004), 17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷ *The Journal of the Birmingham Historical Society*, 1981, p. 27.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Sue Berta Coleman, the first black community supervisor, took her role equally seriously, taking it upon herself to make sure that the rural workers being brought in from the Black Belt of Alabama and Mississippi to fill labor shortages were able to make the transition from sharecroppers and day laborers to urban community members smoothly and without being made to feel lesser than. When they struggled to keep their yards clean or to understand why such things mattered in an urban setting, she set up beautification contests instead of turning them in to the company for not following rules. Soon there were also competitions for the best garden, the best grades, the finest needlework, the fastest relay team, teaching neighborliness and community involvement without offending or alienating anyone. Her methods worked so well that they spread to other communities on the mountain as well--changing not only corporate policy, but the quality of life on the mountain as well. She did all of this while also teaching kindergarten, holding story hours for the children, and doing well baby checks with the company pediatrician.

Mary Dolliver stayed equally as busy building education programs and community events in her community as well. Her ability to articulate her actions as an extension of her theology that struck me this week:

I don't think many people have had the experience of loving like I was able to love [in my job]...It's a religious concept to me, because that is what religion is really. It's love thy neighbor as thyself," and these people allowed me to do that. They needed it, and there I was, this old maid, all this love pouring out of me. It was the greatest opportunity any woman ever had to express that feeling.

Oh that we might all make the choice to approach our work the way these women did on that mountain. To take everything we know, and everything we are, everything we enjoy, and give it away.⁹

Cain's failure cost his brother his life and left Cain marked and alone, wandering, communityless, in the land of Nod, east of Eden. We have the freedom to make a different choice--to choose our sibling's well-being over our own sin, hurt and greed. We can make those choices not only in our personal lives, but in our work, in our communities. And while we may feel like we are out here wandering in the wilderness when we do, the truth is that we are never alone, for there is nowhere, not even east of Eden, that God is not there with us. Just like so many before us, we can choose a better way, together. Ways that cultivate growth and care for creation. Ways that move from

⁹ Journal, 41.

corporate policy to community care. Ways that see all God's children not as stray sheep to herd, but as siblings to love.

We must. We will. We may.

Timshel.

Amen.