

A STORY-SHAPED GOD: READING GENESIS

Restraint: Cain and Abel

Genesis 4:1-16

January 12, 2025

The “genesis” of this series of sermons was a book published last March. The author is Marilynne Robinson, my favorite writer and one of our great living novelists. Dr. Robinson’s work pulses with the influence of her deeply held Christian faith. Her novels have been described by critics as luminous, filled with a holy beauty. Robinson taught for many years at the renowned Iowa Writer’s Workshop (once the academic home to Kurt Vonnegut among others) and has also written several excellent books of essays on topics ranging from natural science to American history. But this most recent book is different. The title says it all. *Reading Genesis*. This is precisely what Marilynne Robinson does for over two hundred provocative and evocative pages. As soon as I read the book, this series sprang to life. The Book of Genesis is a collection of stories. And so, for the next five Sundays, we’re going to explore five narratives, five moments in the Bible’s first book that cast light on God’s relationship to humanity and the reality of human beauty and brokenness.

We begin with brothers. The first two. The theme will be recurrent in Genesis and in my household. Two sons. Different in every imaginable way. Different from the outset. Different in interest and aptitude. Cain, the older brother, the farmer, the tiller of the soil, the worker of the land. Abel, the younger brother, the herdsman, the shepherd. Both boys present to God a portion of their labor, and in a choice clearly counter to custom in ancient culture, God accepts the sacrifice of the younger brother and refuses Cain’s gift. This too will be repeated in the Bible’s first book. The Almighty has a soft spot for younger siblings. There is no explanation for God’s decision. The act is simply stated, and God’s sovereignty remains unquestioned. The story is pointing to a different truth.

For his part, Cain is filled with rage. Despite God’s invitation to a moment of self-reflection and a direct, divine warning to consider carefully his next move, Cain acts with great speed. He lures his brother Abel into a field, and there he commits the Bible’s first murder. For those keeping track, we are four chapters from creation.

It is a critical moment in the course of human history. How will God respond? First, with a question: “Where is your brother?” What is this question? Is it an accusation simply posing as a query? Or perhaps one more chance to take responsibility for his action, to recognize the wrong Cain has done? The story points to something true about God and something true about us. Cain—the main character and now the only human character in this drama—deflects and obfuscates. *What? How should I know? Am I my brother’s keeper?* The rhetorical question represents a sad and tragic moment as the distance between God and this human creature grows. We recognize his humanity. We see it as our own.

Aware of his sinful deed, he nonetheless denies. And then, God acts. The consequence of Cain’s action will be banishment from the land now soaked with his brother’s blood. Only then, like the child whose rage turns to remorse only after required reflection, Cain releases a flood of emotion.

The nuance of the Hebrew language here is hard to convey, but its brilliance is stunning. Our translation renders his response: “*My punishment is more than I can bear.*” But an equally valid translation of the Hebrew would be: “*My crime is more than I can bear.*” And both are true. Cain now grieves his act and laments its effect. He simply assumes that the taking

of his brother's life means that his is over as well. And it is a fair assumption. In fact, one that ancient readers of this story would surely have made. But that's not what happens. On the contrary, Cain is given divine protection. If you read further in the narrative, Cain builds a city. He has a son. He becomes the beginning of artisans and shopkeepers, of commerce. Though Cain's story contains tragedy, this is not how it ends.

I realized that I have always assumed the mark Cain received was meant as a symbol of a curse. But it was Marilynne Robinson who pointed me to a deeper current in this story, where we find instead God's profound restraint in the face of human anger, vengeance, and evil. The sign of his sin is a mark of God's mercy. Robinson recounts an experience she had once teaching a course on Genesis for her church in Iowa City. Can you imagine Marilynne Robinson as your Sunday school teacher? As they read this story of Cain and Abel, one of the university students who was sitting in on the class at the church, raised a hand and asked, "What kind of a God would not kill a man who kills his brother?" It's a profound question. One that Robinson believes is "relevant to the whole of scripture."

What kind of a God would choose restraint over retribution? Answer: a God whose relationship to creation is defined by undeserved grace. God makes room for redemption. Robinson writes, "We are...to learn that mercy is nearer than justice to godliness, that mercy can release an abundance far exceeding whatever might come of attempting to impose justice."

This is a confounding conviction. It complicates all our assumptions about the nature of reality and the will of God. *Restraint*. We find it woven throughout the narrative of Genesis. We see it in the way God deals with humanity's sin at every turn. In the Garden of Eden, after Adam and Eve eat the fruit, God does not destroy them. God provides for them, an act of extraordinary grace. After the flood, despite the wickedness of humankind, God makes covenant with Noah, promising never to destroy the earth again. Divine restraint.

In the coming weeks, we will find the theme running through the stories of Genesis. Again, Marilynne Robinson has the right words. "The tacit withholding of expected punishment may be the primary point of these stories."

But why? Why would God choose mercy over justice? Why would God choose grace in the place of vengeance?

Friends, this is important. In the Book of Genesis, God is not just another character. The distance between the Creator and his creation is firmly established from the outset. This is distinct from the ancient mythologies that provided its context. The God of Genesis is absolutely sovereign. Human vision is temporal, but God's vision is unbound by time. And so, what God sees in Cain, in us, is not only a past but also potential. Not only our brokenness but also our beauty. God's demand for justice is tempered by the seed of possibility planted within us, the truth that God-given goodness is at the heart of our humanity.

If God exercises restraint, if God prioritizes mercy, we must do the same. So, what shape could this take within and among us? In an era defined by a constant rush to self-righteous judgment, could the practice of restraint offer a Godlier approach? Through the lens of divine mercy, could we see the beauty and the sacredness of those we would otherwise deem unworthy of forgiveness? Could we begin with ourselves?

Cain sees his crime and the punishment he no doubt deserves. God sees a future for this sinful, broken man. Cain is protected. Cain is given a way to start over. Listen, if you want a book of stories that satisfy our human need for retributive justice, you'll have to look elsewhere. God's response is not fair. It is merciful.

One of the most powerful books I've read in the last decade is Bryan Stevenson's memoir *Just Mercy*. Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, is an attorney who has spent his entire career defending disadvantaged clients, seeking to overturn wrongful convictions, and advocating for a more humane

judicial system. In the book, reflecting on that work, Stevenson writes, "I have come to believe that the true measure of our commitment to justice, the character of our society, our willingness to recognize the humanity of others, is not only in how we treat the powerful, the privileged, and the respected. But in how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned. No one is the worst thing they've ever done."

I wonder if we can believe that this is true, that grace can change broken people, people like us.

If our God is defined by undeserved mercy, then people of faith are not given the luxury of giving up on anyone. We simply do not get to draw the lines around God's redeeming love.

As long as I live, I will never forget the words of Orval Wintermute, my professor, pastor, and mentor, who died last month at the age of ninety-seven. I was a college sophomore, struggling with questions of how we know who belongs and where to draw lines of exclusion. Dr. Wintermute, a student of the Socratic method, listened attentively, and only after listening asked me, "Well, do you think it is possible to overestimate the love of God?"

When we draw lines that limit God's mercy, we've overstepped our limits. Redemption is never beyond reach.

Despite the accumulated baggage of the centuries, Cain is not a monster. He is a man. He represents us all. Subject to sin. Prone to wander. Fallen. Fallible. *And* deserving of mercy. Why? Because he is the creation of a loving and compassionate God. Why? Because the potential within him remains undiminished by the most heinous act of his life.

There is no overestimating God's love. This is the nature of grace. Like the gifts of this table. Ours to receive. Ours to share. Amen.

