

Today we look at the first word of our Lord from the cross; but the story begins long before.

It begins with the birth of two sons. When the first one, Cain, is born, mother Eve rejoices, "I have acquired a man, the Lord;" she is persuaded that God's promise is already coming true; that she has already given birth to the Savior.

Adam can't be disappointed with his firstborn son, either. Cain grows up to be a farmer, "a tiller of the ground," like Dad.

Abel is the second son, a fine boy in his own right. Rather than "a tiller of the ground," Abel grows up to be "a keeper of sheep."

Eventually, the sons of Adam both offer sacrifices to God. God accepts Abel's sacrifice, because Abel makes the sacrifice in thanksgiving, by faith (Heb. 11:4). However, God rejects Cain's offering, for Cain's motives were different. This leaves Cain furious. Jealous. Tempted.

Tempted enough to lure his brother into a field. There, the wages of sin prove to be death. Cain lashes out. The first murder is committed.

The first one to die because of sin is a shepherd who makes a pleasing sacrifice to God. Hmmm.

And now, the cover-up begins. The Lord asks Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" And Cain responds, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

"I do not know." Pretty pathetic, isn't it? God is not asking because He needs information; He is giving Cain opportunity to confess. But there is no confession to be heard; instead, we have the first pleading of the 5th. "I don't know."

Whether Cain admits it or not, there are still consequences: The Lord says, "The voice of your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground. So now you are cursed from the earth, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. A fugitive and a vagabond you shall be on the earth." Cain poured Abel's blood into the ground; so the ground will no longer cooperate with its tiller.

Cain's response? "My punishment is greater than I can bear!" He protests the consequence, but he does not protest his innocence. "I do not know" doesn't last very long before the Lord. He now speaks the truth: His sin and his punishment are more than he can bear and live. He faces death.

What does the Lord do? Along with the consequences, He speaks words of kindness. He promises protection for Cain as long as he lives. More than that, He has already promised a Savior to Cain's parents, and that Savior is for him, too.

When the Lord confronts sin, He doesn't say, "I don't know." He calls sin what it is in His Law. And He promises forgiveness to those who return to him.

A similar series of events takes place centuries later. This time, it's a whole mob of Cains on a murderous mission. As they lead this "Abel" into the countryside, there is fury and jealousy, and finally, the shout goes up, "Crucify Him!" In some ways, this Abel has much in common with the murdered brother in Genesis 4. He too is a shepherd—the Good Shepherd, in fact; and like the Abel of old, He makes a sacrifice that is pleasing to God. That sacrifice is underway at the Hill of the Skull.

In some ways, He is far different from the Abel of Genesis. When Abel's blood was spilled into the ground, it cried out. When Jesus' blood is shed, the ground shakes.

And as He is hoisted into the air for this far more excruciating death, He speaks; and His first words are astonishing: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do."

With those words, it's clear that this isn't just a murder. It's not just a mob lynching. This is a sacrifice. This is an intentional sacrifice being carried out by the greatest Priest of all time.

In the Old Testament, as priests offered sacrifices, they explained to the crowd what they were doing (cf. Ex. 24:8). This Priest does the same. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." He announces this staggering truth: He is not on that cross because they wrestled Him onto it; He is there voluntarily, at the will of His Father in heaven. He is making the pleasing sacrifice for the sins of the world. The Priest is the Sacrifice for sin. The Good Shepherd is laying down His life for the sheep.

Near the beginning of the world, Cain defiantly said, "I do not know." Centuries later, Jesus agrees. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." Nailed to the cross, He does not pray for Himself first, but for those who put Him there. He does not wish their destruction. He wants them to know the truth of divine love.

So do you see what this means for you? When confronted with sin, a favorite human answer is "I don't know," just like Cain, spoken in denial that the sin ever happened. It is easier to deny we did it than to admit we could be that bad.

People like to build a comfort zone of ignorance into carefully calculated sin. "I didn't know it was that kind of event." "I didn't know it would lead to something worse." "I didn't know it was yours when I took it." It's as if we believe that we're not guilty of sin if we can frame it to look like it was done in ignorance. In that case, the truth is not that we didn't know better, but that we've willfully planned to deceive so that we could make an intentional sin appear accidental. Sin upon sin upon sin.

There's the "I don't know" of impulsive sin. "How could you do something so wrong?" we may be asked. "I don't know" is the common response. The answer is because we are so wrong. But we don't want to "go there."

The Lord doesn't say that you're innocent until proven guilty; He doesn't say that sins done in ignorance offend Him less; He doesn't say that you can get rid of your sin by denying it happened. Sins that we "got away with" are still sins. Sins we don't even realize we committed are still sins. The Lord tells you this for a purpose: it's to humble you down to the point of accepting that your sin problem is worse than you care to admit. Your sin problem is killing you.

But look to the Savior on the cross, and listen: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." Jesus knows that you may not even know why you do the bad you do; and knowing this, he does not reject you. He prays for you as He pays for you. The priest is explaining; this blood sacrifice is to settle your account with God. This is for the forgiveness of your debt.

Have you embraced sin? It is not too late to break things off, turn to Jesus and be forgiven. Have you faked ignorance to excuse yourself? Christ died for this, too, to grant you genuine grace. Have you sinned because you truly didn't know any better? The blood of Jesus has you covered. The only way that you cannot be saved is to cling to your sin and refuse His forgiveness.

Listen. The priest is explaining the sacrifice. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do."

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St. Mark Lutheran Church, Chesterland, Ohio

Pastor Mark Matzke

"Abel's blood for vengeance pleaded to the skies, but the blood of Jesus for our pardon cries."