

SERMONS FROM THE CROSS: Father, Forgive Them

(Luke 23: 34/Genesis 4)

Today, we look at the first word of our Lord from the cross; but the story begins long before. Come with me, back to the beginning. Adam and Eve become parents 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; she believes that she may have given birth to the crusher of the serpent's head, as promised in Eden. Adam can't be all that 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 of Adam, a fine boy in his own right. Rather than "a tiller of the ground," Abel grows up to be "a keeper of sheep." The world's first shepherd has arrived. The sons of Adam both offer sacrifices to God. God accepts Abel's sacrifice and respects it, because Abel makes the sacrifice in thanksgiving, by faith (Heb. 11:4). However, God rejects Cain's offering, for Cain does not make the sacrifice in faith. This leaves Cain furious. Jealous. Tempted.

Cain speaks words to his brother Abel, words that are kind enough to lure his brother into a field. There, in plain language, Cain kills his brother. It's the first murder. ***The first one to die because of sin is a shepherd who makes a pleasing sacrifice to God.***

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

"I do not know." It's a pathetic attempt to hide his sin, for both know that he's lying. After all, the Lord already knows all that has happened. He is not asking because He needs information; He is giving Cain opportunity to confess. But there is no confession to be heard; instead, "I don't know." It's a blatant lie: He knows where his brother is; he just can't bring himself to admit it.

Whether he admits it or not, there are still consequences: The Lord says, "What have you done? 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; the ground will no longer cooperate with its tiller.

Cain's response is telling: "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 eternal 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. Cain cannot bear his sin and punishment; so the Son of God will bear His sin and accept the punishment for the sake of Cain.

You see, 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 repentance for the penitent sinner in His Gospel.

A similar course of events takes place centuries later. This time, it's a whole mob of Cains on a murderous mission. As they lead another Abel into the countryside, there is no kind persuasion; just shouts of "Crucify Him!" In some ways, this Abel has much in common with the murdered brother in Genesis 4. He is a shepherd—He is, in fact, the Good Shepherd, who tends to the sheep of God.

And like the Abel of old, He makes a sacrifice that is pleasing to God. That sacrifice is at hand. In some ways, He is far different from Abel. He is not another sinful mortal, facing death sooner or later. He's the sinless Son of God. When Abel's blood was spilled into the ground, it cried out. When Christ's blood is shed, the ground shakes.

As this Abel 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." And with those words, it's clear that this isn't just a murder. This is a sacrifice, and the attendants are caught in a confusing who's who:

The Priest is the Sacrifice. The Shepherd is the Lamb. The sheep are the Cains below the cross. And the Abel on the cross becomes Cain.

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, uttering, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." He announces this astonishing

truth: He is there voluntarily. The Good Shepherd is laying down His life for the sheep.

And the sheep are the Cains below! He is winning salvation for those who are putting Him on the cross, and He's doing it by taking their place. He is suffering God's wrath for their sin, so that they might be forgiven. This Abel becomes Cain to save His brother! He takes Cain's place and suffers God's punishment for murder and all sin, in the hope that sinners repent and believe in Him.

And so He tells them what is going on as they nail Him to the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do."

One of the sinner's favorite phrases is "I don't know." Just like Cain, spoken in denial that the sin ever happened, trying to avoid responsibility. But have you noticed, the Lord doesn't deal in uncertainties. His Word is sure. His Law calls sin, sin. Unintentional sins are still sin. Sins that we "got away with" are still sins. Sins we don't even realize we committed are still sins. He tells us this for a purpose: So that we might know our need for a Savior.

Then He points us to the Savior on the cross, who utters these certain words: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." Knowing your sins and your sinfulness, Christ has died for you. He has taken the punishment for all of it upon Himself, so that He might give to you His holiness and grace.

Have you committed intentional sins? It is not too late: Repent, and be forgiven.

Have you faked ignorance to excuse your transgressions? Christ sacrifices Himself for this, too, to grant you genuine grace. Are there things you have done, where to this day you are unsure if they were right or wrong? Confess your sinfulness and trust in the Savior; and even though you may never be sure if a specific action was right or wrong, you can be sure that you are forgiven for all of your sins.

He promises this is true. The only way that you cannot be saved is to cling to your sin and refuse His forgiveness.

This is why Jesus' first sermon from the cross calls out, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." For His sake, you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, Abel's blood for vengeance pleaded to the skies, but the blood of Jesus for our pardon cries (Heb. 12:24). Let us rest in what Jesus has done for us with His holy, precious blood, and innocent suffering and death. Amen.