

First Presbyterian Church
Genesis 4:1-16, “Rivals”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 10/5/2025

Rivalry is natural. It can bring out the best in us,
call us to a new level of competition,
push us to overcome challenges.

Life wouldn't be any fun without another person or another group
to take on in a battle of wits, strength, strategy, or organizational savvy.

Slide:



We tend to be rivals with those who we are closest to.

We have much more in common with our rivals than with those
who truly differ from us in substantial ways.

It is the large amount of common ground that makes rivalries
so intensely emotional.

And yet, when a rivalry gets heated, the language we use to describe
“the others” emphasizes how starkly different we are.

We dehumanize, demonize, minimize, vandalize and awfulize.

Rivals do not have to be enemies.
But they can become enemies.



How do rivals become enemies?

How does proximity lead to animosity?

How do friends, neighbors ... even brothers and sisters ...
end up at each other's throats?

Genesis 4 is a tale of sibling rivalry between Cain and Abel.

It begins with a description of childbirth.

And how does Eve understand it? She says,
 "I have gained a man with Yahweh."
Kind of a weird way of putting it, even in Hebrew.
 We never hear Jewish storytellers speaking of a baby boy
 with the word "man."
So that's a very unique thing...maybe Cain came out
 as an 18 year old? ...who knows.
 Sonja, I think, would be quite distraught if that happened
 in our household.
But, just like in English, the Hebrew words "Cain" and "gain"
 sound very much like each other.
 Eve has gained a Cain ... with the Lord's help.

And next comes his brother, Abel.
 There's no direct indication that they were twins,
 though they could have been.
But what we do know is that Cain is the firstborn
 and Abel is the second born.
 Cain is the one who receives the special pronouncement
 from Eve, Cain is the first human born of a woman.
Abel ... well his name is just the word "hevel,"
 which means "vapor" or "mist,"
 and in Ecclesiastes it is translated as "meaningless."

The firstborn / second born rivalries are everywhere in the Bible,
 and in our world, which you could say makes this relationship *archetypal*.

The narrator accentuates the sibling tension by continually swapping
 the order in which their names appear:
 First Cain and Able, then Able and Cain,
 then back to Cain before Able,
 but then Able before Cain.

This subtle shift in name order
 raises a question about who comes first in the family...

For instance, they are born *Cain and then Abel*, but in verse 2 we read
 that Abel became a shepherd,
 and only after that do we learn that Cain, in contrast, tilled the soil.

These children continued the vocation given to their parents
to maintain and care for the created order,
and they became specialists within that order.
Cain worked the land and Abel cared for animals.

I should note that these are both honorable lines of work
consistent with the mandate God had given to humanity.

Additionally, we learn something else here:
These brothers practiced their vocations within
a worshiping relationship to God.
Both of these men bring an offering to Yahweh.
Now note here, these offerings are acts of worship.
This is the first worship service on record.
And yet, this moment of honor,
this time of attention to God,
leads to conflict between Cain and Abel.

Have you ever seen worship practices become
a source of division among people of faith? I have.
Why does that happen?

Cain brought from the fruit of the soil an offering to the Lord,
and Abel brought from the choice firstlings of his flock
an offering to the Lord.

So you can picture, perhaps, a selection of grains and fruit and gourds,
(maybe even some coffee?) before the firstborn son, Cain,
and... the *best* tasting portions of meat
that come from the first animals
born that year before the second son, Abel.

What happens?

Well, for some reason the Lord regards Abel and his offering with favor,
but does not regard Cain and his offering with favor.

Now, I know what you're thinking:
"How did they know which one the Lord favored,
and which one the Lord didn't favor? What does that mean?"

Well, the text doesn't tell us.

It's a gap in the story, it's left for us to imagine.

We also aren't given any explicit explanation for *why* God favored Abel's offering over Cain's. So that's another gap.

So let's take a risk and fill in the gap.

Why do you think God prefers Abel's offering?

Here are some explanations:

- 1) God prefers shepherds over gardeners.
- 2) God prefers meat over vegetables
- 3) God's reasoning is beyond us—
we just don't know why he preferred Abel's offering.
- 4) There is a difference in the quality of gifts that were offered—
Cain, the first born, fails to bring the first-fruits of his crops.
But Abel, the second born, brings in the tastiest
center-cut prime rib with the most exceptional marbling
he could find on the first calf
that was born the year before.

That is, there was a quality difference between the two sacrifices.

Now that last one makes a lot of sense.

But I think it reveals something deeper:

- 5) As the preacher of the book of Hebrews comments on this,
he says in 11:4 that there was a difference in *motivation*
between the two brothers—
it was Abel's *faith* that made his sacrifice acceptable.

“By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did.”

And it was Abel's *faith*, his heart condition toward God, that informed him about the quality of the offering he should make.

The gap ultimately points us toward matters of the heart.

And the heart condition of Cain is revealed in his response.

Verse 5 says **“he became very angry,
and his face was downcast.”**

I know this emotion, and I bet you do, too.

When life smiles on your rival, and they receive the recognition, support,
victory, power, or promotion that you so eagerly desired,
it's a pain that you can feel in your bones.

This is not just going without. It's seeing another elevated at your expense.
It's personal.

And so Cain, like you and me and the groups we know well, becomes angry.
The feeling and the anger are not sin.
They are not things that we control – they are brain responses
to our circumstance.

But the dialog that follows reveals the dangerous potential
those emotions can unlock.

Check out what Yahweh says to Cain in verses 6 & 7:
**“Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast?
If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?
But if you do not do what is right,
sin is crouching at your door;
it desires to have you,
but you must rule over it.”**

Cain's anger is the focus here...Isn't it amazing that God isn't angry at Cain?
Yahweh just wants Cain to turn his heart toward his Creator.

The description here conceives of sin as a predator, crouching in wait,
ready to pounce if given the opportunity.
But Cain is no powerless victim for this ambusher.
With attention to the voice of Yahweh,
with *faith*, Cain can be led toward forgiveness,
Cain can rule over the dark entity around the corner.

But Cain doesn't listen to the gracious Yahweh.
He succumbs to the attack of sin,
he leans into his jealousy, he yearns for the most decisive revenge,
and he lures him out into the field.
The field is a place of solitude, a place of secrecy,
away from prying eyes.
Cain, the farmer, was a worker *of the field*, and it is *in the field* he kills Abel,
Hevel, whose life was but a vapor.

“Where is Abel ... your brother?”

There is no need for Cain to be reminded of his relationship to Abel.

It is gratuitous information.

But when rivals become enemies, we minimize our connectedness,
our similarities, our interdependence and history.

We excise everything good and emphasize everything despicable.

So watch the language you use for your rivals.

Beware the nicknames and especially the contempt they convey.

Contempt is an emotion that sociologists find easily leads ... to violence.

And Cain replies, **“I don’t know. Am I my brother’s keeper?”**

Not only does Cain lie,

he covers it up with a contemptuous

dig at Abel’s apparently preferred profession:

the Hebrew word for “keeper” also means “shepherd.”

“What? Am I the precious shepherd’s shepherd?”

It’s a tragic moment.

The gloating, the sneering, the memes, the lies

that flood into this moment are familiar to all of us.

Last week we learned about God’s invitation for humanity

to share in the task of increasing order and abundance within creation.

When we abandon God’s partnership,

when we seek to order the world around our own desires,

it leads to chaos and death.

Then the Lord announces the consequences of Cain’s hardened heart,

which parallel the consequences announced

to Adam and Eve in the previous chapter.

Catch the imagery here in Robert Alter’s translation:

“Listen! your brother’s blood cries out to me from the soil.

And so, cursed shall you be by the soil that gaped with its mouth

to take your brother’s blood from your hand.”

A farmer like Cain should be feeding the ground with water,

not his brother’s blood.

Like with Cain, sin is always, always, crouching at our door.

It desires to have us.

Your rivals are out there, ready to mock you. Ready to pull you down.

Neighbors and friends become rivals and then enemies
when we assume that there is only enough honor and abundance and love
available for one of us.
If we can't all do well, then each group must fend for themselves.

We can tell the story differently.
As followers of Christ we have to be ready to love those who seek our ill.
We have to reject the way of Cain – even when it seems
that God is blessing our rivals more than us
and we cannot understand why!

Who is the rival in your life—either an individual or a group—
who has become an enemy?
Bring them to mind, and offer them to God.
Let God know how they've hurt you.
Let God know how hard it is for you to care for them.

Your creator knows exactly what you're feeling.
People have been feeling this from the very beginning.
But the way of God's love points to an escape: it's called forgiveness.

Forgiveness begins with God forgiving you.
And then, through the surprise gift of grace,
we are freed to offer it to those we fear the most.
Those who are, often times, the ones who are closest to us.