

**“Timshel”**  
**Joseph J. Clifford, D. Min.**  
**Text: Genesis 4:1-16**  
**Myers Park Presbyterian Church**  
**October 13, 2019**

*Genesis 4:1-16*

*Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, ‘I have produced\* a man with the help of the LORD.’<sup>2</sup> Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground.<sup>3</sup> In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground,<sup>4</sup> and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering,<sup>5</sup> but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.<sup>6</sup> The LORD said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? <sup>7</sup>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.’<sup>8</sup> Cain said to his brother Abel, ‘Let us go out to the field.’\* And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.<sup>9</sup> Then the LORD said to Cain, ‘Where is your brother Abel?’ He said, ‘I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?’<sup>10</sup> And the LORD said, ‘What have you done? Listen; your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground!<sup>11</sup> And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand.<sup>12</sup> When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.’<sup>13</sup> Cain said to the LORD, ‘My punishment is greater than I can bear!<sup>14</sup> Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me.’<sup>15</sup> Then the LORD said to him, ‘Not so!\* Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance.’ And the LORD put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him.<sup>16</sup> Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD, and settled in the land of Nod,\* east of Eden.*

John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* is arguably one of the finest American novels ever written. It’s one of my personal favorites. The novel tells the story of two families, the Hamiltons and the Trasks, their lives in the Salinas Valley of California, and how they wound up there. Samuel Hamilton is a hard working farmer with nine children scraping by a life on a relatively infertile piece of land. He is good and kind and warm and wise. Adam Trask is not. We meet Trask when he comes to the valley and purchases the very best ranch with a mysterious fortune.

We learn Adam Trask’s story in a flash back. He had a brutal childhood in Connecticut, abused by his older brother, Charles, who was a farmer, a tiller of the ground. In their early years, Adam and Charles bring their father gifts. Charles gives his father a beautiful knife, and Adam gives him a puppy. Their father loves the puppy and disregards the knife—sound familiar? After that incident, Charles attacks Adam, brutally beating him, near to death. Adam escapes, which begins his journey westward. From its origin, this story sprouts from the soil of Genesis 4 and Cain and Abel.

Adam falls in love with a woman named Cathy Ames. Steinbeck describes her as “a malformed soul.” Her story is too complex to consider today, but she gives Adam two sons, Aron and Caleb—they had to have names that start with “C” and “A”! Their story also sprouts from the soil of Cain and Abel.

Truth be told, in some way, all of our stories sprout from the soil of this story, because this story is the human story. It is an origin story. Read from an anthropological perspective, it illumines conflict and violence within human history. Cain is a tiller of the ground, Abel a keeper of the sheep. In every age of human society, there have been conflicts between herdsmen and farmers over land use and land rights.

According to one scholar, “The occupations of Cain and Abel place the story squarely amid the growing tension between farmers and shepherds, between ‘settled’ tribes and nomads, who were at odds in the dry climate of the Early Bronze Age.”<sup>1</sup>

On a more personal level, this story reveals the origins of sibling rivalries—that longing for attention from the parent; in this case, attention from God. God has regard for Abel’s offering, but not for Cain’s. We don’t know why. It’s just the way it is. Family Systems Theory suggests parents have their favorites, and children know who it is. If you don’t know who the favorite was among your siblings, you were probably it! This creates tension between siblings, sibling rivalry—born of the struggle for attention from Mom and Dad. Indeed, Cain and Abel’s story is the human story.

I use Cain and Abel when teaching about emotional triangles in Family Systems. The main triangle here is Cain, Abel and God. Like most emotional triangles, one side is more conflictual than the other two. In this case, the conflictual side is between Cain and God. But Cain triangles Abel to deal with his anger with God. Like most triangled parties, Abel has no idea what hit him—figuratively and literally! Imagine what would have happened if when God asked Cain those first couple of questions in today’s story, “Why are you angry? Why has your countenance fallen?” Cain had simply responded to God, “Because you did not have regard for my offering.” Or in therapist speak of “When you do ‘x,’ it makes me feel ‘y,’ because ‘z’-- “When you smiled at Abel’s offering and ignored mine, it made me angry and sad, because you didn’t like my gift.” Perhaps Abel would have survived! Maybe we would have found out why God did not have regard for Cain’s offering. “Nothing personal, Cain, I just really love Abel’s barbecue ribs. Cole slaw just doesn’t do it for me.” Maybe today we wouldn’t waste all that energy on cole slaw—we could just focus on the barbecue. Who knows? I digress.

Of course, that’s not what happened. It’s not what usually happens in the emotional triangles of our lives. What usually happens is we end up directing our anger and frustration at triangled parties, just like Cain did. We take out our anger on the innocent. God knows we have this tendency. In fact, God warned Cain about what might happen. “Sin is lurking at your door,” God says. “Its desire is for you, but you must master it.” God senses the anger in Cain. God knows that sin is lurking at the door of his heart.

There’s an interesting twist in what God says next in the story. Forgive me while we wade into the weeds of the Hebrew here, but I think you’ll find it interesting. The NRSV translates the Hebrew, “*Its* desire is for you, you must master *it*,” implying sin desires Cain and he must master sin. But there’s a problem with that translation in the Hebrew. The Hebrew word for sin is *חַטָּאת* (CHATayt). That noun is feminine in gender. But the pronoun attached to “desire” *תִּשְׁוֹקָתוֹ* (TSHUkatah,) and the verb translated “master,” *תִּמְשַׁל* (TIMshel) are both masculine. That means they can’t be speaking of sin—because that word is feminine. So they must be speaking of Abel. God’s warning would better be understood, “Sin is lurking at your door. “His desire is for you”—that is “Abel’s desire. He loves you. He’s your younger brother.”

Then come’s “*timshel*.” It’s translated, “you must master it.” But again, the relative pronoun is “him.” The verb’s meaning is linked to responsibility, to governance, to those who are in charge of things. In other words, “He’s your little brother. You’re responsible for him.” So the Joe Clifford translation of this verse might be, “Sin is lurking at your door, Cain. Abel loves you. You must care for him.”

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<sup>1</sup>Jean-Pierre Isbouts, “Cain and Abel’s Clash May Reflect Ancient Bronze Age Rivalries,” National Geographic, April 10, 2019. Cited here: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/people-in-the-bible/cain-abel-reflects-bronze-age-rivalry/>

There's another issue in the translation in the tense of the verb. The pew Bible translates *timshel*, "you must master." It is in the Qal imperfect verb tense and mood. Qal imperfect verbs can be translated in one of three ways. Most often, it is in the future tense: You shall master him/care for him. But it can also be an imperative. That's how the pew bible translates it: "You must master/care." It could also be translated, "You may master/care for him." In other words, it's a choice.

Which brings us back to Steinbeck's *East of Eden*. Not only does the novel grow from the soil of this sordid story, the essence of the novel is contained in this very verse, particularly in how the word *timshel* is translated. At a critical moment in the story, Adam Trask's helper, Lee, a Chinese butler of sorts, who basically raised the Trask boys, Aron and Caleb has a fascinating conversation with Adam and Samuel about this verse. After spending years with the elders of his family, who actually learned Hebrew in order to determine the best translation of the word, *timshel*, Lee shares his wisdom with Adam and Samuel, pointing to different English translations of the Bible:

"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.'" Steinbeck concludes that section, "Lee's voice was a chant of triumph."<sup>2</sup>

God's questions in today's reading, "Why are you angry?" "Why has your face fallen?" "Where is your brother?" are ever before us. As with God's question in last week's reading from Genesis 3- "Where are you?" --God doesn't need to ask these questions; it is we who need to be asked that we might respond. In the midst of the emotional triangles of our lives, in the midst of sibling rivalries, or rivalries between nations, God asks, "Where is your brother? Where is your sister?" God's question calls us to recognize we are our brother's keeper. We are family. We have a responsibility to one another, to love one another, to care for one another. Some would translate this as a command—you must do this. That's how John understood it as revealed in our NT reading this morning. 1 John 3: "Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." It can be a command. Others might see it as a future promise—you will do this—there will come a day when we will actually care for one another as brothers and sisters in the family of God. Through the character, Lee, John Steinbeck suggests the choice is ours— "Thou mayest." Each and every day, we make our choices. In a conversation with my colleagues Dale and Millie this past week, we wondered, "What if it's all three?" Isn't this the tension that defines our lives?

Back in 2011, I heard the group "Mumford and Sons" for the first time. They played a song called, "The Cave" on the Grammy Awards and I was hooked. They offered a unique sound, a sort of alternative-folk-rock vibe with banjos and horns and feverishly strummed guitars accompanying passionate complex lyrics. The next day, I downloaded their first album, "Sigh No Moore." I loved the popular songs on that album, the title track, "The Cave," "Little Lion Man," and "Roll Away Your Stone,"—an Easter anthem if ever there was one. On that album there was a song that never really made it big. But the minute I saw it, I knew Mumford and Sons were my kind of group. It was entitled, "Timshel." Can you believe it? A

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<sup>2</sup> <http://timshel.org/timshel.php>

song named after an obscure Hebrew Qal Imperfect masculine singular verb in Genesis 4:7. It was the offertory today in Celebrate and we will hear it in a moment here in the Sanctuary.

It turns out Marcus Mumford is a huge fan of *East of Eden*, just as taken by *timshel* as Steinbeck and I, and I hope you after today. In the lyrics of the song, we hear a powerful interpretation of God's warning to Cain, "death is at your doorstep, and it will steal your innocence, but it will not steal your substance." The song goes on to quote Lee's words: "You have your choices, and these are what make man great, his ladder to the stars." But what really grabs me is the chorus. "But you are not alone in this; and you are not alone in this, as brothers we will stand and we'll hold your hand, hold your hand." It illumines the greatest difference between us and Cain. We have each other. We are not alone in this. As sisters and brothers, we must stand, we will stand, we may stand together. Timshel.