

Divine Presence and Eight Conversations

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Genesis 4:1-16, 1 Jn 3:11-12; Heb 11:4; Jude 1:10,11

Introduction

Last week we began a new sermon series called *Thin Spaces: Encountering the Glory*

Throughout history there have been thin spaces in this world where the distance between heaven and earth, between the Divine and the human, between the immortal and the mortal has become thin, and heaven comes close. Spaces where the glory of God has come near to an individual— and life has forever been altered. Specifically, it is a moment in the history of an individual when they encounter the God who is by very nature and essence Love.

Our purpose in this series is to go to those places and get a fresh look at the glory of God. It is our hope and prayer that as a community of God, in this place, we will find ourselves in such a place – a thin space where the glory comes close.

Let's ask God for that together

PRAY

Last week we looked at how Moses encountered the glory of God both at the tent of meeting he set up and in the cleft of the rock.

Today we are going to look at how our vocational callings and the very work we do, may become a space where heaven comes close. Our talk today is called,

Divine Presence & Eight Conversations

Background to the Conversations

Cain as most of you know, in biblical history, is the first child born to the human race. His parents are Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve walked in the cool of the day with God, they were in perfect relationship with God, with each other and with their environment. It was their job to nurture and care for the Garden where God gave them a home. This was the first dwelling place of God with humans.

Sadly, we all know that the tale of human history takes a terrible turn when Adam and Eve betray their relationship with God, listen to the insinuations and lies of Satan -the enemy of God and choose a journey away from God.

This decision leads to alienation in every aspect of human personhood. To be alienated is to be estranged, to be in a state of hostility. Adam and Eve became alienated

- spiritually from God and in fact hostile to God,
- relationally from other people,
- physically from the created world – death and dying become part of human reality,
- and psychologically even from their own self.

Through their actions the human race became fractured people, fragmented and no longer whole. Although formed in the image of God we have become de-formed from that image.

In Genesis 3, God chooses not to desert Adam and Eve, despite the betrayal that marred all of God's good creation. Instead, he pursues Adam and Eve and gives them a great promise of a man child to come, a Messiah who will save the human race from their enemy – Satan.

The woeful pair are clothed by God. He takes an animal, skins it and clothes the couple. In this terrible act, God prefigures the future of the human race. This would have been the first time Adam and Eve saw the blood of a creature. This would have been an overwhelming experience of what the consequences of their choices would be. How terrible and grievous, beyond words. Sin entered the world, and death by sin, and so death has passed upon all people, for all have sinned. On the ground before their eyes are the consequences of sin – blood, death, horror.

And worst of all – they must leave the garden for the sake of their own well-being and leave behind the walks with God in the cool of the evening. The love of the Creator has been brutally betrayed. That which was good

is now marred and ugly. The dwelling place of God – where he walked with his creatures is filled with the stench of evil, deceit, lies, betrayal and blood.

We enter the narrative today in Genesis 4. Eve has given birth to a child. Her hope and joy are evident in how she names the child – Cain. “I have gotten a man.”

Perhaps she thinks – here is the man child I was promised.

Soon after Cain, a second child is born – Abel. The word Abel means breath, as in but a vapor or passing away.

The sons have different professions.

Cain is a laborer (awh-vad) – he works the ground.

Abel is a keeper of small cattle like sheep and goats.

CONVERSATION #1

From the fruit of their separate vocations, each decides to bring a gift, a tribute, an offering to God. It is important to note that in the historical record previous to Genesis 4 there is no history of God seeking a gift, there are no comments about the kind of gift God would want. There is nothing to indicate that God would prefer an animal gift or a blood offering over a gift from the land. Leviticus 2 speaks at length about bringing grain offerings to God. So, the type of gift would not seem to be important to God.

Notice also that both of the men on the surface have good desires. Both want to bring an offering from the work of their hands, both are seeking after God, both seem to want to do the right thing. Both obviously believe in God – they are bringing a gift to God.

Cain brings of the fruit of the ground – some of his crops from harvest.

Abel brings of the firstlings (bek-o-raw) of his flock, the first born, and specifically their fat portions which are the choicest parts of the animal.

God has regard for the offering of Abel but not for the offering of Cain. This regard is obviously a felt reality - because Cain is aware that Abel has received the regard of God. This is, you might say, a slight lifting of the veil between God and humankind. God reveals to Abel that he is pleased with his labors. It seems that God actually meets with Abel in some way, such that his pleasure in Abel’s work and gift are evidenced. I wonder

how often we have an expectation, or exercise faith to believe that God might choose to reveal himself to us, in the midst of our vocational work, as we offer the fruits of our own labor to God. The meeting with Moses tends to be the normative way that God would reveal his glory. Yet there is a glory about the way that God has affirmed the offering of Abel - God's glory is the weighty mattering of his nature, that is all love. Love is interposed toward Abel and clearly God reveals who he is in this beautiful act of approval and grace.

Hebrews 11:4 tells us, *“By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.”* The hallmark of Abel's offering is that it was offered in faith. Abel had faith in God's goodness not in the goodness of his offering. Abel brought a gift to God and expected that simply due to the character of God – it would be accepted. He did not seek to earn God's favor with the work of his hands. Why make the offering in the first place? The firstborn of his small cattle were being born – this gift is offered to God to say thank you for the gift of life and health for his sheep and goats. It is offered in faith believing that God was the reason for his success– not that God would be pleased with Abel, but that Abel was pleased and thankful to God!

Cain becomes very angry when God has no regard for his offering. In the Hebrew Genesis 4:5 literally says khaw-raw qayin khaw-raw meod khaw-raw. The word khaw-raw means to be hot, to be furious, to burn with anger. So the text says burning anger Cain, burning anger, very burning anger.

In his anger, the text says of Cain that “his face fell.” That word for face in the Hebrew is paw-neem. Last week we talked about the face of God – how you cannot look at the face of God and live. We considered Ezekiel, John and Moses who saw a veiled, hidden, likeness of the glory of God or the face of God and they fell to their face on the ground.

Here we see the heart of Cain being explained by the text. His face fell. He is burning with anger against God. He does not fall before the face of God. Instead, his face falls in disappointment and frustration with God.

CONVERSATION #2

God sees Cain's response. God loves Cain and God comes close. This is a thin space, heaven is going to come close to Cain.

Although Cain is angry with God, look at how tender God is toward Cain. He does not come and condemn Cain for his anger – he comes to Cain with curiosity, he comes to him gently and tenderly.

Why are you *khaw-raw*? Why are you angry and why has your face fallen?

God gives a promise to Cain

If you do well (*yaw-tab*), if you are pleasing, will you not be accepted – the word accepted here means elevated, have dignity, be exalted.

And perhaps God's choice of words is getting at the heart of what Cain is seeking with his offering. He is seeking acceptance, but what kind of acceptance, the acceptance where he is elevated and where he is exalted, where he has proven his worth.

In the face presence of God, when God is close, when God is literally speaking with Cain – rather than being on his face in the presence of God, Cain has a face that is fallen. Cain has not come to worship God, Cain has come to be acknowledged and elevated by God.

God is so kind – he does not respond in anger, remember the Name of God that he gave Moses last week – *merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin*.

God = the beautiful, God the meaning of the universe comes to speak to this arrogant creature. A mere mortal expecting the immortal God to elevate him. What Cain holds in his hand is the fruit of the ground. The power of the ground to produce that fruit comes from the Lord. He holds in his hands that which God has given him, that which God has given him for his own sustenance, for his own food, for his own life continuation – God has continued to put breath in the lungs of a race of beings who betrayed him and aligned themselves with his enemy.

Might Cain have been bringing the fruit of his labor because he felt he had something to prove – something to prove perhaps to God. God had recently sent the human race out of the garden.

Cain labors with the ground, he has produced fruit from the ground. God had recently cursed that very ground – God had warned that thorns and thistles would come out of the ground, that it would take sweat and pain to produce a return. And here is Cain showing God what he has done, what the first child born out of Eden has accomplished – look at the fruit of his labor, from this cursed ground. We do not know what was in Cain's

mind, but we do know that he expected God to be pleased with his work and when God is not he is filled with fury. He does not humbly ask what he could do differently. He is presumptuous and arrogant.

But FOL – behold your God. How does God respond?

God the Almighty comes to Cain the creature, in the midst of his red-hot fury against God- because he did not get his way and is tender and merciful.

“If you do well, will you not be accepted?”

In love and compassion he also warns Cain of the alternative to choosing to do well. *“if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door, its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.”*

What is God saying – sin is like a terrible beast, a dragon in your heart. It is crouching – lying in wait and hiding. We often do not see the sin in our own heart, for this very reason - it is crouching, it is both hiding and waiting to pounce on you - the victim of your own shadow self. Cain is not self-aware. Not only is the sin hiding and ready to spring, but the sin in your heart has a desire to master you. The word desire in Hebrew is tesh-oo-kaw. It means the longing or craving a man has for a woman or a woman has for a man or that a beast has to devour something. It is an absolute, uninhibited lust to have something. Sin wants to have you, it wants to completely rule your heart. Sin will use your vocation, the work of your hands that is meant to bring meaning and joy to the human race, and Satan will twist it into a means to be justified before God, before others and before yourself. Satan will freight your work with being your savior rather than a means by which you might nourish, care for and love God’s world in Jesus’ name.

God sees this horror in the heart of Cain and he comes to plead with him – you must rule over it, you must master it, you must not allow it to have you.

Cain is non-responsive in the conversation. There is no contrition, no cry for help to master the dragon within him.

CONVERSATION #3

The next time we see Cain, he is in the field with his brother and he rises up and kills him.

What an incredible tragedy. But why does Cain decide to kill his brother?

Well, the obvious answer is that sin unfurled its limbs, leapt upon Cain and Cain could not, without the help of God, rule his shadow nature.

That is the facts of what happened, but how did it happen.

What was the internal motivation?

1 John 3:11-12 explains the reason for this murder.

“For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning that we should love one another. We should not be like Cain who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous.”

The word evil in the Greek text is pon-ay-ros it means full of labors, hardships, pressed and harassed by labors.

It would seem that Cain was of the evil one, meaning of the one who is full of labors and pressed and harassed by labors. Labor was the point of weakness for Cain. Rather than being the blessing God intended, labor became the place at which Cain was attacked. Labor for Cain had become his identity. Cain forms himself solely around the work of his hands. Apart from his work being accepted, Cain did not know who he was. His shadow self, the beast crouching within his heart could whisper to Cain that he was nothing compared to his brother – not because of who his brother was as a person but because of his brother’s labors. Cain hated his brother because his brother’s work and ways were virtuous, upright and beautiful.

The first man-child that Eve got from God, the first child born into human history is a murderer, a murderer of his own brother.

CONVERSATION #4

Abel’s blood cries out to God

God is always in conversation with injustice. When injustice is done, that injustice cries out to a just God. We live and move and have our very being in God. That injustice is taken up into the life of God. The pain, the anguish, the suffering is heard by God. The love of God is a just love. We talked about this last week when God declared his name to Moses – “who will by no means clear the guilty.” One of the places that the veil is often removed and heaven comes close is in the sorrowing spaces of the world, the Son of God is among us in the faces of the poor and suffering. Find injustice and you will discover a thin space, where God comes close.

There is such a play on literary themes in this text. It is Cain who is identified in Gen4: 2 as a worker of the ground – and now it is in Gen 4:10 that the blood cries from the ground.

Cain was seeking to make a name for himself from the ground – seeking to prove his worth before God from the ground and now that very ground is the place from which the cries for help emerge. God could have simply said “your brother’s blood is crying to me.” Instead God adds “your brother’s blood is crying to me **from the ground.**”

Cain has dishonored the very ground from which he found his purpose and pleasure as a worker of the ground.

CONVERSATION #5

How does God respond? Abel, a young man whom God loves, has been viciously and brutally murdered by his brother. Abel was created by God; he is God’s special creation. Cain has senselessly snuffed out the life of Abel – even after God had warned him about the dragon within.

God goes to find Cain and in a tender way, not attacking with words but again plainly asking “where is Abel your brother?”

Cain’s heart is in his answer, first he lies, “I do not know”

Then he adds insolence and defiance toward the Creator God by asking ,“Am I my brother’s keeper?”

God’s answer is rich in sorrow and grief,

“What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground.”

God’s anguish is clear in the words “what have you done?” I have children, when one of them commits an act that is hurtful to another person, and I ask “what have you done?” What do I have in mind? Well, first the sorrow they have brought another, but then also what they have done to themselves. God’s anguish is not only for the killing of Abel, not only for the act of absolute animalistic degradation of the human race that God has created in his own likeness, but can you hear God’s anguish also for Cain? And here the beauty of God breaks through in all of its glory. Love and concern for the murderous Cain, who snuffed out the beauty of a life God had created and one that God deeply loved.

God's judgment is so appropriate and contextualized for this act of injustice.

God says, *"you are cursed from the ground which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand."*

Instead of the ground being used to bring life through the labors of Cain, through the fruits of the ground; Cain has chosen to use the ground for purposes of death - to swallow the blood of a human being.

God tells Cain that when he works the ground it will no longer yield to Cain its strength.

This is a crucial statement in this exchange. Despite the fact that Cain refused to acknowledge it, Cain had always been dependent upon the goodness of God for the land to yield fruit. Like his parents before him, Cain dismissed his dependence on the grace of God, the goodness of God and the love of God.

God's final punishment of Cain is more than he can bear, he is to become a vagrant – the word noo-ah meaning someone who is unstable and is tossed all around. He will be a wanderer who will move to and fro aimlessly on the earth.

This punishment is the exact opposite of what makes for flourishing – and especially for a person who lives off of laboring in the ground.

Cain is to be attached to no particular land, and to no particular place, he is meant to simply wander, unable to put down roots, unable to build a life of stability.

Cain's response to God is heart-wrenching.

You have driven me from the face of the ground.

Notice this word face again. Our series is about the face of God, the Presence of God, the glory of God.

Cain processes his judgment and realizes he is being driven from the **face of the ground** that he used to labor on and work with his hands. Cain had loved the work he did, his vocation suited his disposition, but his relationship with the ground is ended.

Cain is also distressed about being hidden from the face of God – because he is certain that whoever finds him will kill him. He may very well here be fearing the wrath of his parents and particularly his father Adam – for murdering his brother.

God's love is breath-taking here, truly something to simply behold.

Here is a man who is an unrepentant murderer. He is not sorry he killed his brother, He is not sorry that he will be removed from the face of God. He remains impudent and completely focused on himself. The pain and sorrow he has brought his parents, the injustice he has committed and the disgrace he brought upon the ground by spilling blood on it means nothing to Cain.

He is only sorry that he will lose the benefits of being around God. He will lose the protection that God's presence brings. His thoughts are, as always, on himself.

But God, in his steadfast love, provides a way to keep him safe. He will put a mark on Cain so that no person finding him will kill him.

In the face of such mercy, such love, is Cain's heart melted? Does he repent, turn his heart toward God, ask forgiveness and seek grace to be restored?

No, some of the saddest words in all of scripture follow:

"Then Cain went out from the presence paw-neem, the face presence of God."

Watching the ruin of another human person, removed from the presence of God - is shattering to any of us who know what it is to be in that Presence.

Even as a person who willfully and of his own choosing in the end – walks away from the Presence of God – God will ensure that Cain is protected from the very thing he did to his brother. God will ensure that Cain is not murdered.

What a tragic tale of woe – a broken body, a broken man and the broken heart of God.

CONVERSATION #6

The conversation between work and worship.

What is remarkable about the story of Cain and Abel is how it displays the deep interrelatedness between work and worship. Work comes as a gift from God and has to do with our worship of God. When this orientation to work fails, our false self crouches, it longs to have us and we must master it. But how do we master the relationship between work and worship, both are gifts from God and both need to share a

conversation that leads to the face presence of God being seen in both our work and our worship. The recommended book for this week is *Work and Worship* - you will find a synopsis of the book in the sermon resources online as well as a link should you want to purchase it. I will be sharing the author's work in this section of our talk.

"Work shapes our body, fills our thoughts and speech, stamps our character. The accountant bears the imprint from decades of vouchers as surely as the carpenter bears the weight of tons of lumber and the jolt from thousands of hammer swings. The plumber's forearms are speckled with burns from molten solder and the banker's face bears a crease for every foreclosure. Whatever else we make through our labor, we also make ourselves." Scott Russell Sanders

When we gather in this place we gather for the worship of adoration. When we leave this place we continue to worship through our work. We labor unto glory – either our own glory or the glory of God. And when we labor for glory, we are often met by glory - even in the mundane of our work-a-day world!

That is why when we assemble here for worship, we need to be mindful that we come here as those who have been working all over the city throughout the week. Our worship in this place should be a candid conversation about what that work has meant and what it means as a gathered community. Workers sitting in these seats, are engaged in formative rituals and liturgies all week long. For Cain that liturgy was directed toward making something of himself out of the ground. For Abel that liturgy was about tending something belonged to God, for God, and then giving back to him what was his - with thanksgiving.

Nicholas Wolterstorff argues that when we gather for worship we bring stories of thanksgiving and praise, stories of sin and rebellion and stories of heartbreak and lament from our work.

This is why, in our worship service, we must make room for worship singing where we can bring the stories of thanksgiving and praise from our work to God in the presence of this community. We must also make room for stories of sin and rebellion, we do this when we invite people to the altar for prayer. We are being formed in this place for our work in the world, and our work in the world is forming us for this place together. The practice of public, shared confession each week forms us to know that we come from a world where we have labored and struggled and at times failed. We need to be formed around confession of sin. We also come with stories of lament and heartbreak- and this means we need to think about how we will create a space in this service for more tears and sadness, for more acknowledgment of distress in our workplaces.

There should be a give and take, a healthy reciprocity between our worship of God through our work and our worship of God through adoration in this place.

In corporate worship Constance Cherry states *“we are approached by his presence, instructed by his presence, fed by his presence and we depart with his presence . . . a journey together with Jesus into the worship of work outside these doors.”*

Kaemingk suggests that sanctuary practices of kneeling, bowing, listening, submitting and confessing are meant to be disruptive to how our work-a-day world may be forming us. Our worship practices can confront vocational postures of greed, dominance, pride, and grasping, Sanctuary stories that are covenantal, communal and gracious can confront marketplace stories of relationships that are contractual, competitive and utilitarian. A worship experience of silence, rest and waiting can disrupt a working experience of noise, busyness and personal initiative. The economy of the work world and the economy of the kingdom of God should have a different texture. Good worship should expose this dissonance.

This is the tale for all of us. We labor unto glory – and our labor is meant to renew the earth. Each week at FOL, I want to honor the relationship between work and worship. We come together here to worship so that we can receive the gifts of God to go out to our workplaces and be on mission with God – bringing the face of God to our work. And at every workplace across the city we gather stories to bring into this gathered assembly so that we can see how the face of God is changing our city and changing those of us who choose to engage work as a form of worship.

There is one more conversation in the scripture that is related to this story of Cain and Abel – and it is the conversation that ultimately shapes our labor and shapes our worship, and unites them as one.

CONVERSATION #7

Conversation between the blood of Jesus and God the Father

When we worship together on Sundays, this is how the writer to the Hebrews describes what we are doing:

“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to

God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”

We labor unto glory when we know beyond a doubt that the blood of Jesus now cries out from the ground for us. It cries out for justice. And what is that justice that the blood cries for? The blood of Jesus was sprinkled when he climbed the cross and spilled his blood for our sins. That blood now cries out, not the blood of a sinful man, but the blood of an innocent man. That blood cries out to God and it cries out for God to be just in his dealings with us, with FOL. What do we deserve? The wages of sin is death. But what does Jesus' death do? It pays the price our sins deserve. So, then, the Justice that the blood of Jesus demands is your pardon and mine. The punishment for every sin has been paid. The blood cries out for you and me to be free. In that freedom we don't use work to make a name for ourselves – Jesus has already guaranteed our name – written in heaven, our name seated in heavenly places with Christ Jesus. So, we don't use our work to make a name for ourselves, we use our work to make a name for Jesus Christ. The blood of Jesus cries out to the Father for you, for you! The justice of God demands that you go free - and now your work is about a freedom song, freedom from the need for our work to justify our existence, freedom from the need for work to create your identity, freedom from the need for work to give you a name. You have been justified by the blood of the Lamb, you have the identity of a child of the King of kings and Lord of lords and your name is written in heaven!

CONVERSATION #8

A conversation between Patrick and FOL.

In order to hear the stories of God's glory coming close, of the mattering of God touching down in Long beach, we are beginning a new FOL weekly practice. Each week, here at FOL we are going to have a conversation with one of the workers from our church who represents a particular vocation. We want to bless all the vocations in our church and acknowledge that one of the thin spaces where God can come close is in our work! God came close to Abel -having regard for the outcome of his labors - that were offered to God in faith. And God comes close to us when our work is offered to God in worship. We are formed by our work and formed by our worship. Let's make sure these are always in a conversation when we gather in community

Interview with Patrick.