

# OpenTheo

## January 4th: Genesis 4 & John 3:1-21

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Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

Genesis chapter 4. But for Cain and his offering, he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. The Lord said to Cain, Why are you angry? and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door.

Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it. Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.

Then the Lord said to Cain, Where is Abel your brother? He said, I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper? And the Lord said, What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand.

When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth. Cain said to the Lord, My punishment is greater than I can bear.

Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground, and from your face I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me. Then the Lord said to him, Not so.

If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. The Lord put a mark on Cain, lest any who found him should attack him. Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. When he built a city, he called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch. To Enoch was born Erad, and Erad fathered Mithujael, and Mithujael fathered Mithushael, and Mithushael fathered Lamech.

And Lamech took two wives. The name of the one was Ada, and the name of the other Zillah. Ada begot Jubel.

He was the father of those who dwell in tents and have livestock. His brother's name was Jubal. He was the father of those who play the lyre and pipe.

Zillah also bore Tubal-Cain. He was the forger of all instruments of bronze and iron. The sister of Tubal-Cain was Nema.

Lamech said to his wives, Ada and Zillah, hear my voice. You wives of Lamech, listen to what I say. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me.

If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold. And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and called his name Seth. For she said, God has appointed for me another offspring instead of Abel, for Cain killed him.

To Seth also a son was born, and he called his name Enosh. At that time people began to call upon the name of the Lord. In Genesis 4, Cain being born is new life in a world under the shadow of death following the fall.

Eve's statement, I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord, may suggest that she believes that this one might be the seed that crushes the serpent's head. One way or another, she sees in this a continuation of God's creative grace. God has not given up on the world, and in the birth of a child, a new life, there's a sign that life is going to continue, that God is going to still work with his creation, and he's going to show grace to it.

There are two narratives dealing with creation, and now there's a second narrative dealing with the first advent of sin. So we have two creation narratives, and two fall narratives. Adam and Eve bring sin in the garden by rebelling against their divine father, and Cain sins in the land by murdering his brother.

There's a sin against the father, and it's followed by a sin against the brother, the

nearest neighbour. There's a vertical sin, followed by a horizontal sin. A sin against the first tablet of the law, followed by a sin against the second tablet of the law.

Sin has also spread, so it's like a drop of ink, or a blot of ink, that flows out and spreads from the garden, now to the wider world. There's a sin involving a husband-wife pairing, and now it's followed by a sin involving a brother-brother pairing. And the narratives should be read alongside each other.

There are parallels that are immediately obvious to anyone without tin ears, for instance, between verse 3, 16 of chapter 3, and verse 7 of chapter 4. Both speak of the desire of something for someone else, and the fact that that person should rule over them. Thomas Brodie has listed a number of the parallels. So first of all, we see in the setting that they, the man and his wife, and then in the second one, the man knew his wife.

There's the serpent of the field, and then there's the sin crouching into the field. There's the fruit forbidden by God, and then there's the fruit of Cain that is not regarded by God. There's the problem of relationship to God, and then there's the problem of relationship through God to Abel.

There's the drama seen on the face, with the eyes opening, the delight of the eyes, the desire, all these sorts of things. And in the case of Cain, the distress of his face, his face falls. There's crime and punishment.

After eating, they know that they are naked. After killing, God asks where is Abel? They hear the voice, and in the case of Cain, God says, the voice is crying to me. The response of Adam, I hid when I heard the sound of God coming near.

In the case of Cain, he must hide, he must be concealed, lest he be killed. There's an avoidance of responsibility. It was the woman, it was the serpent.

And in the case of Cain, a similar thing. Am I my brother's keeper? Because you have done this, cursed are you. Cursed is the ground because of you.

And in the same case of Cain, what have you done? Now you are cursed from the ground. And there's consequences that are very similar. God protects and clothes them, and God puts a sign on Cain.

God casts them out of Eden, and Cain goes out from God's presence. There are cherubim placed in the east of Eden, and Cain dwells to the east of Eden. Cain is associated with the service of the ground, and his name may be suggesting some sort of association with the forge.

Abel, on the other hand, keeps sheep, and his name associates him with breath. Perhaps we should see a bifurcation of Adam's own identity and vocation here. So on the one hand, Adam serves the ground.

He tills the ground. He acts within the world to bring fruit from the ground. But he also rules over and names the animals.

So on the one hand, he's defined by the breath that he's given, the breath from heaven. And on the other hand, he's defined by his bodily relationship with the world and the earth, and the way he's going to serve that earth. And in the case of Cain and Abel, we see a sort of bifurcation of that.

Cain expressing the earthward relationship of Adam. And Abel relating to the heavenward relationship of Adam. That Abel is the one who uses his breath, he uses his power of rule to keep the sheep.

And Cain, his relationship with the ground and the earth, and he operates on that level. Animal sacrifice has already begun at this point, and it seems to be a way that the offerer offers themselves to God. And God's reception of the sacrifice is in part his acceptance of the worshipper that offers themselves in the symbol of the sacrifice.

Now, why is Cain rejected? Some have suggested it's the fact that he does not bring an animal sacrifice and the blood of atonement that requires. Perhaps it's also that he doesn't bring the first fruits. He's just bringing average produce.

Whereas Abel offers not just fruit of his works, but a symbol of his person, recognition of the necessity of death, and also of the first fruits of his flock, the very best. Perhaps Abel should have been the one that led, the younger brother as the priest and the elder brother as the powerful king who rules and gains power from the earth. Now, why is Cain angry? His sacrifice is rejected, but Abel's is accepted.

And think of the times when we've given a gift and our gift is thrown back to us. It's rejected. And in the rejection of the gift, we feel that we ourselves are not seen.

We're not accepted. And he feels that he's been cut out of the loop of relationship with God, and he feels threatened by that fact. And so his anger is exercised against the one who was accepted.

There's envy there, but also a resistance to God who has cut him out, it seems. God challenges him at this point, and he challenges him before he has come to any action. Sin resides in the heart before it is expressed in the actions.

And in Jesus' teaching, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount, he draws attention to this, that sin must be dealt with at its root. It must be dealt with at the very basic point of the heart. And the entrance of sin, the weak point, is found within us.

The temptation takes place first there. This is where the garden is. This is where our garden is.

As Adam and Eve found themselves in the garden, they were tempted at that point. The true garden in Cain is within his heart. Is he going to guard that garden? And this is where the beast crouching at the door finds access.

Like the serpent, who is the wildest of the beasts, he finds access to the garden. So there's a beast crouching at the door of Cain's heart, of his garden. We must guard the gardens of our hearts, lest we give access to the beast of sin.

And once that beast has access, the actions so often follow. This is why Jesus' teaching on the Sermon on the Mount is so important. It's how to deal with that problem at the heart.

How to get below just regulating actions in a futile way that often proves unsuccessful. And dealing with the problem where it really resides. Now what does it mean that sin's desire is for Cain? Well, I think it means that it wants to gain his strength by capturing his heart.

Cain's strength is desired by sin. Sin wants Cain to act on its behalf. It wants to capture the citadel of Cain's heart so that Cain would be its willing agent.

And what we see in what follows is an unfolding of the city of man. As there is this first foundation of a city named after Cain's son. Cain is trying to form a civilization in part because he's been cut out of the cycle of gift.

He's been exiled and now he's trying to make a name for himself. Almost in rebellion against God or as an alternative to the city of God and fellowship with God. We have this alternative city being developed.

There are characters that arise from Cain's line that provide other interesting lights on what's happened before. So we have the children of Ada and Zilla, the wives of Lamech. Ada is the mother of Jabal who's associated with those who live in tents and keep livestock.

And of Jubal, players of the lyre and of the pipe. Now looking at those names you should immediately recognise some sort of resonance with the name of Abel. Jabal, Abel.

Jubal, Abel. These are the same sorts of names and it seems that there's a sort of progression and building out and unpacking and unfolding. Some sort of refracting of the identity of Abel here.

So we have two sets of brothers. Those associated with Ada and those associated with Zilla. And in the case of Ada you have Jabal and Jubal associated with tents and livestock as Abel was associated with keeping of sheep and with breath.

And so the player of the lyre and pipe making music is associated with Abel. It's an

unpacking of his identity. On the other hand we have the son of Zilla is Tubal Cain.

Again there's an association with Cain's name. And Cain is associated with the earth. Tubal Cain is the smith.

And thinking about those connections I think can be helpful to see that contrast between these two characters and the way that they are unpacking the fundamental vocation of Adam. It might be interesting to think about that. Some questions.

Cain says, am I my brother's keeper? Think about the relationship between Adam's sin in relationship to Eve and Cain's sin in relationship to Abel. There is a parallel to be observed there. Second question.

Lamech speaks of himself being avenged 70 times 7. Now this is not the only time in scripture we see this number. Where else do we see the number and how might the comparison and the contrast prove significant? John chapter 3 verses 1 to 21. Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, Rabbi we know that you are a teacher come from God for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him. Jesus answered him, truly truly I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus said to him, how can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? Jesus answered, truly truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I say to you, you must be born again. The wind blows where it wishes and you hear it sound but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

So it is with everyone who is born of the spirit. Nicodemus said to him, how can these things be? Jesus answered him, are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly truly I say to you, we speak of what we know and bear witness to what we have seen but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the son of man.

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the son of man be lifted up. That whoever believes in him may have eternal life. John chapter 3 is one of the most famous passages within the New Testament.

Within it Jesus speaks about the importance of being born again. A concept which has received considerable attention and prominence within evangelicalism in particular. Within evangelicalism it represents the importance of conversion, of entrance into

spiritual life, of being raised into a relationship with God and enjoying a transformation of the heart.

So that you can relate to God no longer as an enemy but as a dearly beloved son. In the context of John however I think there is a more complex and deeper theology playing beneath the surface. Which does not deny the concepts that evangelicals have held but unpacks and enriches them considerably.

Within the Old Testament we already see concepts of birth being brought into relationship with concepts of resurrection. In Isaiah chapter 26 verse 19 it talks about the earth giving birth to its dead. Resurrection as an event of new birth.

Elsewhere we see the connection between the womb and the tomb. Naked I came from my mother's womb, naked I will return there. Knit together in the lowest parts of the earth in Psalm 139.

Might be worth reflecting upon the fact also that within the story of the Exodus it's told as an event of new birth. Israel is being born from the land of Egypt. It's being opened up.

The womb of Egypt is being opened. Israel is coming out as God's firstborn son. And just as the Passover emphasizes the firstborn and the rite of the firstborn immediately follows.

So Israel is being born to new life. It's why there are so many stories of women struggling in birth at the beginning of the Exodus narrative. The new Exodus that Jesus is going to accomplish is also a new birth.

As we see in places like John 16 21 where he describes the woman whose hour has come. This is very strong pregnant language within the context of John's Gospel. And this woman whose hour has come gives birth to a man.

The new birth is resurrection. Now Nicodemus's question understood in this light may not be as facetious and ridiculing as many people think it might be. It may be asking the question of how after all this history can Israel return or how can we return and be reborn as a nation? What might that mean? What might that look like? How can we return to our mother's womb? It seems impossible at this point.

Within the story of covenant history there are a number of cycles of wombs and birth. And I think we see this particularly within the story of the Exodus. Israel enters into that womb and is reborn in a new form.

Israel has to die in the event of exile and then they return in a new sort of event afterwards. They're born as a new sort of people. Likewise in Christ's death and resurrection there is another event of birth that occurs there.

The people that come out of Egypt are a different people as the one that entered in. Jesus said you must be born again. The you here is plural.

Nicodemus is the teacher of Israel. And this is Israel as a nation that must be resurrected. While individual persons may participate in this resurrection.

It's important to appreciate that the new birth that Jesus is referring to is an event in covenant history. Not just a private experience in the human soul. We should notice for instance the parallel between John 3.8. The spirit that blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

Jesus describes himself in the same way. As it is in the case of the spirit so it is in the case of Christ. In chapter 8 verse 14 people do not know where he comes from and they do not know where he's going.

He is the man born of the spirit. He is the first to be born again. The first to return to the womb of mother earth and be raised again.

The first born of the dead as Paul can speak. Jesus is the one who opens up the womb of the tomb. So that we also might one day be reborn from the womb of the tomb.

In verse 14 Jesus relates his death to the events of Numbers chapter 21. And the connection between these events is worth reflecting upon. The numbers of passage occurs within the context of the exodus.

Where Moses raises up the bronze serpent in order that the Israelites who are being bitten by fiery serpents on account of their rebellion could look at the bronze serpent and be healed. Jesus talks about his death in a similar way. For John Jesus' cross is playing a similar role.

Jesus is raised up as in the case of the Septuagint of the Numbers account. The serpent is raised up as a sign. Jesus is raised up as a sign.

And as people look to him in faith they will be healed. It might also be interesting to see the way that this presents Jesus as a lifting up in his cross. It's an ascension event.

Within John's gospel in particular, even more in contrast to the synoptic gospels, the cross is already part of Jesus' glorification. Already part of his ascension. He's already being lifted up from the earth.

Raised as a sign for the peoples. In Jesus' ministry and death there's a progressive movement upward. Up to Jerusalem.

Up to the cross. Up from the grave. And up to heaven.

And John doesn't just compare Jesus to the elevated serpent but to the serpent which



Moses lifted up in the wilderness. So beyond the comparison between Jesus and the bronze serpent there's also an implicit reiteration of the relationship between Moses and Jesus here. Moses who bore witness to Christ's glory, he's the one who Moses saw on that heavenly mountain, Mount Sinai.

Also typologically raised him up as a symbol to the people that they might find healing through him. And the mention of the wilderness might be significant here as well. The wilderness was the staging ground for the new exodus.

As we've already seen in the case of John the Witness, he describes himself as a voice crying in the wilderness. And it will be within this wilderness that Christ will be raised up for the people. We can think again of Isaiah's references to God raising up a standard as part of the new exodus.

He's going to raise up a banner as it were and all the people will follow this and flock to it. And this might be part of the background that John is thinking about. That just as God is going to raise up this banner for the new exodus, this banner will be the cross of Christ.

It's not surprising or inappropriate that since the death and resurrection of Christ, Christians have often treated the cross as a banner, as a symbol that we follow, that we gather under. More generally, the vertical polarity between above and below, heaven and earth, is very pronounced within this chapter. And it connects with the spirit flesh polarity in various ways.

Notice the themes of water, purification, and a wedding that were already present in the previous chapter. And then there's light and witness, which were present in the first chapter. Night and day, darkness and light, these are key themes in John's gospel.

The old covenant was a period of faithfulness in darkness, but the light arrives in Christ, revealing all. Are we drawn to the light or do we want to hide in the shadows? Some questions. Do you think that there might be some significance to the fact that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night? What might it be? A second question.

Jesus talks about being born of water and the spirit. What do water and the spirit represent in that? Is it, for instance, a reference to original birth and then spiritual birth? Or is it a reference to the event of John's baptism and then the baptism of Pentecost? Or is it something else? Where else in scripture, a third question, do we find the concepts of flesh and spirit contrasted? And what can we learn from these contrasts, especially when related to John chapter 3?