

East of Eden
Genesis 4:1-16
September 25th, 2005

The loss of Eden has been a powerful theme throughout human history. Great writers have resurrected it in their novels, philosophers in their ideas, and artists in their imaginative creations in art and music. Some, like Steinbeck, even used it as the title of his novel.

Living east of Eden doesn't mean we have lost everything. In his little book, **One Foot in Eden**, Philip Newell reminds us that within the Celtic tradition at least, humankind was considered to retain the image of God. While damaged in the Fall, it was not destroyed, in spite of our rebellion that occurred in the Garden. Every time I look into the eyes of a young child in baptism I am looking into the image of God. Yes paradise is lost and we do now live east of Eden, but there remain within us remnants of God's image. That is why we remain wired for God. That is why the homing device within us in the form of God's image continues to beep. And that is why humankind is able to receive the message and power of the Gospel and be forgiven and renewed.

Have you ever noticed that the west end of town is often the most salubrious? When I was a boy I used to deliver groceries on my bike. It had the big basket in the front and was one of those sturdy, heavy, metal bikes of a bygone age. It had no gears, and felt like it weighed a ton. It was almost impossible to ride up hills with a full load up front. My best off customers lived in the West End of town. With a full load of groceries I would peddle my way over town from the west end to a world far removed from the housing scheme where I lived. I entered a world of large fashionable homes with high walls and lovely cars sitting in their long driveways. The west end of town was so charming and upscale in comparison to the rest of town where most of us working folk lived. It was almost like entering paradise, at least it seemed that way to a young teenager. West became a metaphor for finding paradise and hope.

Living east of Eden has been where the human story has played out since Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden. We may not

have lost everything God blessed us with in Eden, but we surely have lost much. Our story today tells us a little bit about that loss and its effects on the human family.

Let's listen to the story.

Living as a couple like Adam and Eve is one thing but living with our neighbours, brothers and sisters, presents a much more complex challenge. Abel and Cain were seemingly correctly named. Abel means "vapor, or nothingness" while Cain means "to get or to create." Worship calls and each brother brought his best, Abel from the flock, Cain from the fruit of the ground. Within the family worship all seems well and yet something is amiss. The strange God of Israel, as Bruggemann calls God, is inexplicitly unhappy with the offering of Cain. Perhaps life is unfair. God's freedom is hard to accept. Life is full of paradox, harsh consequences and bitter rivalries. God's choosing of Abel's offering has dire consequences.

It would be comforting if we could explain why Cain's offering was unacceptable and Abel's pleasing to God. Was it Cain's bad attitude, or perhaps just the farmer/shepherd rivalry surfacing from the past? Some have made much of the lack of blood in Cain's offering, but that is imposing too much on the text. Certainly the New Testament has made comment on this story.

Let us hear 1 John 3.

We must not be like Cain who was from 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 writer to the Hebrews comments: ***By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable (greater) sacrifice than Cain's.***

There's often rivalry among us in church as to who brings the most acceptable gifts in worship to God. Preachers are often far too confident that they are the stars in God's sky without whom the church would crumble into dust. Sometimes it is the musicians who feel they are the ones that make God smile most widely because of the sweetness of their offering. Or perhaps it is the maintainers of the

building and the powerful brokers (usually male) of the organization who feel most important before God.

Let me suggest that none of these pivotal figures, important as they all are, have a corner on God's smile. We are reminded in many places in Scripture that all God's people are essential to the functioning of God's church and kingdom. Each one of us brings our talents and gifts to God in worship, gifts we have nurtured and each is acceptable and pleasing to God if brought in humility and love. Abel's offering, for whatever mysterious reason not shared in the story, is the one that pleased God.

I am sure that here in West Flamboro there are those among us who perhaps think that they have little or no gifts to bring to God. They look up at the front of the church Sunday by Sunday and hear me sounding forth, or Sandra and the choir causing us to be moved to worship and faith and profound joy, and we think, "I couldn't do that." But I suspect that some of you who are saying, "yes, that's me", possess other gifts (that I certainly don't have) of hospitality, prayer, compassion and grace that helps this community of faith grow and those you meet outside of this place to find a way to God and healing.

Perhaps there is a suggestion in our story of what is wrong with Cain. The story tells us that Cain is angry with God and he suffers serious depression. His face fell. God suggests to Cain that there is sin crouching at his door ready to devour him but he can master it. What this sin is we are not told. Perhaps he is arrogant, perhaps his heart is bent with envy for his brother's open, generous heart, or perhaps Cain is just too wrapped up in himself. Whatever it is something of that was brought with him and his offering that day which displeased God.

Sin is powerful, like a lion ready to pounce on us. Cain must be careful, God is saying, how he handles his rage and depression. The disorders among us brothers and sisters can break out into terrible murders. Jesus reminds us that just to be angry against our brother is to commit murder. The power of our anger is quite staggering; many of us keep it bottled up, like we do our depression, and suffer all kinds of internal stress and unhappiness. For weeks, even years, we can manufacture these calm exteriors whose smiles and niceness fail to

tell the truth about us. Inside is rather a world of depression, anxiety, disappointments, loss and rage at life's unfairness. But the energy required to keep the lid on our anger is a huge burden. And how much life and joy is bottled up inside unable to be expressed?

Cain is unable to tame his lust and anger. He murders his brother. His brother's blood cries out to God, like so many in the world today. "Where is your brother," asks God. "I don't know," answers Cain, "am I my brother's keeper?" Judgment follows, and Cain is banished even further east of Eden to the land of Nod. Cain cries out for mercy for his punishment is too much to bear. God, as he does for each of us, shows mercy by marking Cain so that he will always be protected from the vengeance and revenge of his neighbours.

This is a story that reminds us that the problem for us is not just the neighbours within our lives. It is the problem of having God and the neighbour together that causes our dilemma. We would like to separate our religion, our faith and our God stuff, from our relationships to work, play and above all to our neighbours. But this story reminds us that this is impossible. Life with his brother, Cain discovered, is not lived in a void, but in relationship to God.

Finally, the story is a refreshing reminder of God's amazing and unfathomable love toward us. God never lets go of us, even the most unwilling rebels against his reconciling love in Jesus Christ. Like Cain we are all marked by God. Yes, even in the land of Nod where Cain is banished to, this place further east yet of Eden and paradise, even there God's hand hovers over Cain and us. Such truth ought to move us both toward the neighbour and God. For the Gospel will not allow us to live our piety out in private. It is always lived in relationship to our brother and sister. This is the Good News of the Gospel, that reconciliation between God and us moves us toward our brothers and sisters in love and action.

Amen