

A PROMISE THROUGH THE LAW ALONE BRINGS LITTLE COMFORT

Hear again the Word of God for this eleventh Sunday after Trinity:

Then YHWH said to him, thus (upon) anyone slaying Cain sevenfold (vengeance) shall be taken, and YHWH put upon Cain (a) mark lest anyone coming upon him should cause to kill him.¹

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

The Word of God for the week illustrates well the themes of this sub-section of the Trinity season. In the Word for this week, we have reminders of God's work of sanctification in those who believe in His promises. We also hear of the importance of forgiveness in the lives of those who daily continue to be declared holy. In truth, we again learn that the act of being declared right with God, which we have heard proclaimed through today's readings, leads the faithful to continue to sorrow over our sins and repeatedly receive God's Holy Absolution.

Following the Introit (Entrance) Psalm verses' declaration that God resides with His people and causes His enemies to scatter, we heard the narrative of the one who dwelt with God, the first martyr of the Church – Abel, and the enemy of that man and God – Cain, whom God scattered. As we regularly hear today's ancient lessons, God's people are led to remember that it is by grace through faith in God's Good News Promise that declares one right with Him. We also may be led to learn that a Law-promise, even that given by God Himself, that a promise through the Law alone brings little comfort to anyone who receives it without holding onto faith in and through the Gospel. Such a law promise is contained in these words, our emphasis verse for the day:

Then YHWH said to him, thus (upon) anyone slaying Cain sevenfold (vengeance) shall be taken, and YHWH put upon Cain (a) mark lest anyone coming upon him should cause to kill him.²

We will hear more about God's protection of even unrepentant sinners, such as Cain, a bit later. For now, we continue to be reminded that the contrast between any

¹ Genesis 4:15

² Genesis 4:15

comfort received by trusting in God's Law Promises and the true comfort received by holding firmly onto God's Gospel Promises is revealed for us in this day's Word. The contrast between Law and Gospel promises are declared, fairly clearly, in the records of heart attitudes toward God and others in the Church which were displayed by a specific pair of Adam and Eve's children. The text begins:

Then the Adam knew the Eve, his wife, and she bore the Cain, and she said, "I have gotten (a) man of the Lord." And again, she was caused to bear his brother, the Abel; and Abel was (a) keeper of sheep, and Cain was tiller of ground.³

In today's Genesis text, five persons are named: YHWH, Adam, Eve, Cain and Abel. The Word for the day reveals heart-thoughts of each of them. The Lord is shown to be true to His Word. His mercy is revealed – even for an unrepentant sinner. The text declares that God is faithful in all He says and does.

Adam is revealed to be faithful to the Lord's Promise. His union with his wife shows his faith that God's promised Seed that would crush the Old Evil Foe's head would spring forth from the mother of all the living. Eve is declared to be true to God's Promise as we heard her name her son, Cain. That name is directly tied to her exclamation, "I have gotten." Her words that follow indicate that she believed, "I have gotten," Cain, to be the Man who would save her from the Author of sin. She was the first human recorded to have used the term that would thousands of years later, be used of Jesus, "the Son of Man." In addition to that, in birthing and naming Abel, "Breath of God," or "Father God," Adam and Eve appear to declare their hope that God would continue to breathe life, as the loving Father of all humanity, into their descendants. The name Abel may also be tied to words that mean "vain," "vanity," or "emptiness." He, in the revelation of the minds of his parents, was unnecessary for their salvation, for they believed they had already gotten the Man of the Promise, Cain.

Cain, Abel, and their brothers and sisters had been born outside the Garden of Eden. The two had followed in the vocation of their parents. That is, they tended the land

³ Genesis 4:1-2.

and exercised dominion over the fallen creation. With the first human-birther generation, came divisions that would have eased the labor of tending creation. Working the ground and tending flocks in the fields could be shared and divided.

Nothing in today's text indicates that either man's work was greater than the other's. In fact, in the generations after the Flood that destroyed all of Adam's descendants except for eight, both grain and animal sacrifices were prescribed as God established His covenant with ancient Israel. With that in mind, our text continues:

And it became, in the course of days, (that) Cain brought from the fruit of the ground (an) allegiance offering to YHWH. And Abel brought also from the firstborn of his flock, and their fatlings...⁴

That text has, for millennia, led the Church to teach that Adam exercised his spiritual priesthood in passing on that which he had learned from God's sacrifice. Remember, God gave Adam the skins of animals to clothe him and Eve. That his sons came to offer to God from their work reveals that Adam had been faithful in teaching his children to give homage and show allegiance to YHWH. This they clearly did through giving of the fruits of their life-callings – their vocations.

Even so, that which should have been given to God through faith in His promises was not so offered by both of the sons of Adam. The wording of the text, "*Cain brought from the fruit of the ground (an) allegiance offering to YHWH,*"⁵ indicates that he picked up whatever of his produce he could find in order to give. In contrast, Able carefully chose to offer that which would cost him the most, for he, "*brought also from the firstborn of his flock, and their fatlings*"⁶... . These first-fruits allegiance gifts revealed his trust, his faith, that God would provide him with more of the same.

What does that comparison ask you to consider? Are the gifts you offer in homage to the one True God, be they any or all of the New Covenant sacrifices of prayer, praise and thanksgiving, are your offerings simply whatever you may pick up? Or, are they

⁴ Genesis 4:3-4a

⁵ Genesis 4:3

⁶ Genesis 4:4a

your first-fruits – the giving of which displays to you that you trust in God to truly provide for all your needs of this body, life, your eternal spirit, your comfort, consolation and peace? Know that the New Testament speaks to both kinds of giving when God’s people are called to remember that, *faith remains [the] essential nature of [things] hoped for, proof of things not seen...* For,

by faith, [a] better sacrifice Abel, in comparison to Cain, brought to God, through which he was witnessed to be righteous, continually being witnessed to with respect to the gifts of him to the God, and through it [faith], although he died, he continues to speak.⁷

Christ Jesus, who has the witness of His own sinless sacrifice to declare Him to you to be right with God, in time, became the best and perfect sacrifice. He offered Himself, in the sins of the whole world, in your sins of offering some of that which you pick up instead of your first-fruits, as the One Whose blood washes away your sins. By Christ’s faith, the blood of Abel has been redeemed. In Christ’s expiring His last breath, Abel, and all the faithful for all time, receive the breath of eternal life. In any faith other than the Faith in God’s promise of the Gospel – the propitiatory sacrifice of Jesus to take away God’s wrath at sinners and rescue them, you, from sin, death and hell – in any other faith we ultimately end up with Cain’s reaction to God’s rejection of his “whatever I have” gifts, as our text records the contrast between Abel heart-attitude and Cain’s:

YHWH had regard for the Abel and upon his allegiance offering; but for the Cain and his offering [He] had no regard, and Cain was very angry and his face fell.⁸

Today’s bulletin cover illustrates the heart attitudes and God’s acceptance and rejection of the gifts therefrom. Penitent Abel kneels at the Gospel side of the Altar, hands folded in a pose of supplication. The fire of God shines forth onto his first-fruits offerings. Abel lifts his face before the Lord’s glory reflected in the fire God kindled on the Altar. The smoke of Abel’s sacrifice rises as a pleasing aroma to God. We behold that Abel offered his best in the faith in God’s Gospel promises.

⁷ Hebrews 11:1, 4

⁸ Genesis 4:4b-5.

On the Epistle side of the same Altar, unrepentant Cain leans forward. He boldly places his hands on the Table. The smoke of the fire he lit rises. It blows into his face as he tries to fix his eyes on faithful Abel. The smoke obscures from his vision the glory of God. We behold that his duty bound, law-fulfilling but not faithfully offered sacrifice is rejected. Cain offered some things of his in faith in God's Law promises.

From the bulletin image,⁹ we return to the day's text. Therein, it records that, following God's rejection of his law-complaint but faithless gifts Cain's entire countenance fell. We may learn from that which follows that the texts for this day declare to us how heart-attitudes toward God (First Table realities) may be manifested through heart-attitudes toward our neighbors (Second Table realities). God's warning to Cain still rings out for all who offer by faith in the Law without trust in the Gospel:

Then YHWH said to the Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? Is it not (so that) if you cause to do good you will be accepted; and if you do not cause to do good – at the door sin crouches, and for you is its desire. But you must master it."¹⁰

God calls out Cain, and anyone who offers sacrifices to God out of simple obligation to God's Law. God's word indicates that those who desire to be accepted on account of keeping His Law must perfectly live by that Word – in humility. (Here we have a direct tie to our day's Gospel parable of the Pharisee and tax-collector. We have not the time to go into that now. Even so, you may follow it through later on your own).

God says to Cain, and to all who would live by their keeping God's Law:

Is it not (so that) if you cause to do good you will be accepted; and if you do not cause to do good – at the door sin crouches, and for you is its desire.¹¹

We might say, he who desires to live by the Law must do it "good," that means, perfectly. It is true that the one who does the Law will be saved. Yet, for one who breaks even the least part of the Law, there is no salvation. What then, should Cain have done to be saved when he heard these words:

⁹ Albertinelli, Mariotto. C. 1514. "The Sacrifice of Cain and Abel. Internet. <http://www.the-athenaeum.org/art/full.php?ID=263638> Accessed 26 August 2017.

¹⁰ Genesis 4:6-7.

¹¹ Genesis 4:7

“at the door sin couches, and for you is its desire. But you must master it?”¹²

He should have remembered the curse mother Eve received, the one which contained the same word, *desire*. It is a power struggle word. God declared that it was even then reclining at the door to Cain’s life. It was longing to possess him, to conquer him. God names it, sin. Compare all that about Cain to Abel.

Abel had been sanctified by faith in God’s Promise. Think about it, he would have known what Cain’s name indicated. He might have, as his mother did, considered Cain to be the Promised One. Even so, Abel looks to God in giving his first-fruit homage.

Cain is consumed in his own self-thoughts and desires. He lets his own self-worth dictate his life, his thoughts, his actions. Cain murders – sacrifices to the ground from which his father Adam had been formed. Cain kills Abel on account of God’s faithfulness to him.

When God calls out Cain in his sin, Cain receives a greater curse from the ground than did repentant father Adam. He, whose family had been cast from Paradise on account of sin, is then cast from the safety and security that was left in the fallen world. Cain, who had allowed himself to become an enemy of God, receives that which God reserves for those who continue to reject Him throughout their mortal lives. Recall your words from today’s Introit Psalm:

God shall arise, his enemies shall be scattered; and those who hate him shall flee before him! (68:1, ESV)

In response to his more than deserved punishment, Cain does not repent. Rather, he declares, *greater (is) my punishment than I can bear... and it will be, anyone finding me will kill me!*¹³ His are words, not of repentance, but of despair. He had hoped in the promise of the Law of doing the sacrifices that he would have been found acceptable before God. His lack of faith in the promise of the Gospel provided the impetus for sin to leap into his heart, and he martyred the one whom God had sanctified and absolved.

¹² Genesis 4:7b

¹³ Genesis 4:13b, 14c.

Even so, God hears the sinner's unrepentant self-concern, and God still shows him mercy. God knows Cain trusted in the Law for his hope, so God gives him more Law. In this, Cain could place his trust all the rest of his mortal days.

Then YHWH said to him, thus (upon) anyone slaying Cain sevenfold (vengeance) shall be taken, and YHWH put upon Cain (a) mark lest anyone coming upon him should cause to kill him.¹⁴

In mercy, God declares a covenant that may protect that fallen child of repentant Adam and Eve. He placed a mark of the Law on that man – and on that one alone – that was to be a sign for all his relatives that there was a greater punishment crouching before the door of the one who would take Cain's life. In this sign, in time, God even displayed mercy for the unrepentant child of Adam. A Promise of the Law brings little comfort to sinners in time.

Yet the Promise of the Gospel brings eternal comfort to repentant and forgiven sinners in eternity. How much more will God do for you who daily repent of your sins?! He has marked you, not with the sign reserved for Cain alone, but with the sign and seal of His cross. God continues to free you to offer to Him, in grateful response as faithful Abels in our generation, out of sanctified and absolved hearts, the sacrifices of Christian homage – prayer, praise, and thanksgiving!

The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

Trinity XI (LSB One-year series)

Introit Psalm 68:5b-6a, 1; Genesis 4:1-15; Psalm 50:7-23; I Corinthians 15:10; Luke 18:9-14

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Soli Deo Gloria

¹⁴ Genesis 4:15

THIRD DRAFT TRANSLATION:

*Then said to him, YHWH, thus anyone slaying Cain sevenfold shall be taken,
and put YHWH upon Cain mark lest should cause to kill him, all coming upon him.¹⁵*

¹⁵ Genesis 4:15