

**“The First Brothers”**  
Sermon by Lisa Crismore  
May 20, 2012

*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.” Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, 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, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. The Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? 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.” 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. Then the Lord said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” And the Lord said, “What have you done? Listen; your brother’s blood is crying out 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 till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.” Cain said to the Lord, “My punishment is greater than I can bear! 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.” 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. Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.”*

Stephen King, the science fiction/thriller author, said when he was little, his mother told him, “If something terrifies you, say it three times”. After Stephen grew-up, he decided to write about what terrifies him! When the Rabbi Sandy Sasso decided to write about the story Cain and Abel, she wanted to write about what terrified her! This is the first act of violence in the Bible. You know I find it very interesting that we don’t even get out of the first book in the Bible before someone is killed. We don’t even get into the double digit chapters before someone gets so angry that it leads to violence!

The Rabbi Sandy Sasso spoke at the APCE conference which I attended back in February. Her main talk was on Midrash which is a method that Rabbis have used for centuries to look at scripture. They put themselves in the place of the Biblical characters. It is much like what many of our Christian commentators do when they interpret a text. This is what Frank and I use when we begin researching for our sermons.

It was very fascinating to hear Sandy talk about exploring Midrash while writing her book, Finding the Fruits of Peace, which is a book of Cain and Abel. There is a Midrash that is written from a Rabbi, who is questioning why do apples grow on apple trees and why do pears grow on pear trees? The Rabbi writes, “In the beginning God created each tree so that it could yield many different kinds of fruit. Then Cain killed his brother, Abel, and the trees went into mourning. From then on each tree would yield just one kind of fruit. Only in the world to come will the trees return to their full fruitfulness.” (Finding the Fruits of Peace, by Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, Illustrated by Joani Keller Rothenberg, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001, p. 3)

She had always thought as Cain being the bad guy. But on second reading of this well-known story, she found that Cain’s shoes fit very comfortable. Cain was the farmer. The tiller of dirt gave God his very best. The scripture doesn’t say differently. We may interpret it that way but that is not so. Abel was the shepherd. The keeper of the sheep gave God his very best. But it appears that God liked Abel’s gift more than Cain’s. It is hard to be rejected by another human being, but even harder when you are rejected by God.

I believe that God knew humanity had to learn to react to very real feelings. Things in life will not always be fair and the first brothers had to deal with this. Cain was angry! He did not understand why God had rejected his gift! Cain was angry at God and the focus of his anger was centered on Abel. The illustration for Cain in Sandy's book shows his face as muddy red. She writes, "Just thinking about Abel made Cain's face turn red like the beets he grew!" Have you ever been that angry? I know I have!

Beth Moore in her series "Loving Well" talks about the testy people in our lives. Those people, who push our buttons and know just the right things to say to set us off, these are the folks that get under our skin and drive us crazy! She says, "Don't you just want to take all the testy people in our life and put them in one room so they could just kill each other." She apologizes later for this with a little chuckle and a wink! We laugh at this too but we know these thoughts are true!

We don't know what happened out in the field that day between the two brothers. Sandy explains that Cain was clearing the ground of rocks and instead of tossing it over to the side he threw it at Abel. Had they quarreled about property? Was there a heated discussion about a family issue? I know my family has issues that can cause a heated discussion. We don't know what sent Cain over the edge. But the moment the rock struck Abel in the head, the world changed forever! It is written in the Talmud, which is a rabbinic writing, that says, "When one person is destroyed, it is as if an entire world is destroyed and when one person is saved, it is as if an entire world is saved."

Sandy writes, "Time passed, a long time. The world was not new anymore. People built cities and made homes there. Yet people often spoke angry words. And with angry words they drew their swords. Swords turned to guns and guns to bombs. One killing became two, two became four, and four became sixteen. Sixteen killings became war. Entire worlds were destroyed." (Finding the Fruits of Peace, by Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, Illustrated by Joani Keller Rothenberg, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001, p. 29) I want to show you an illustration from her book. She received the final set of illustrations for her book on September 10, 2001. The following day the attached picture took on a whole new meaning. She called Joani Keller Rothenberg, her artist for the book on September 11<sup>th</sup> and asked how did you draw this? She said she would have never been able to do this, if she knew what was going to happen! Very SAD! I started thinking about this story as I was preparing this sermon and I started to wonder about the people from World War II. Could the people from Japan also relate to this picture the day the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima? Thousands of years have gone by and our anger is still leading to violent, horrible acts.

What would have happened, if Cain would have used his words to act out his anger? What if he could have talked it out with his brother? It is interesting to note that this story takes place in 16 verses and yet the anger which leads to violence only takes 4 verses. The only conversation that goes on is between God and Cain. God tells Cain, "You must master this!"

There was a classroom of 1<sup>st</sup> graders and after hearing Sandy's book of Cain and Abel read to them they were asked to draw pictures of how they responded to the story. One little boy drew two big people with a little person in between them. When asked to tell what his picture, he said, "These two people are my parents and the one in the middle is me. They are always arguing! And I want to tell them to stop!" The teacher had no idea that there were problems at home. This was the first time this little boy had been able to voice the situation at home.

How do we respond to anger? What is our rock? We can use our words as adults but even those can hurt. Do we state things on Facebook that demean or lash out? Do we gossip? Do we not listen but push our own ideas or agendas?

I asked others on Facebook how do they respond, when they are angry. These were their responses:

- Walk away
- Talk about it with a friend or coworker (sometimes with a LOUD voice)
- Go for a walk or journal
- Drink a really cold glass of water, which lowers blood pressure (from Dr. Oz – it really works!)  
(from the conference)
- Shopping
- Go in my bedroom and punch a pillow

In Sandy's story, Cain is upset once he discovers that he has taken Abel's life. He wants to take back his anger, take back the rock but he can't! The trees mourn because the world will never be the same. Then God asks, "Where is your brother?" And Cain responds, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Then a mark is placed on Cain's forehead as a reminder and protection as he wanders aimlessly.

Sandy shared that there is a midrash that explains the mark. She first asks, "What is the most used word in the Hebrew and Christian Bible?" I did reference this. Guess? You would think it might be God, or love. It is "and" – and God said, and Moses went, Ruth and Naomi, Mary and Joseph, Jesus and his disciples. Rabbinic midrash shares that they believe the mark that God places on Cain is the Hebrew symbol for "and", which is "vav" but pronounced "vuv". The Hebrew symbol looks like a line with a little swoosh at the top. This mark was to remind Cain that "you are your brother's keeper!" It is not just about you. It is about you and your brother. It is about you and your sister. It is about you and everyone else.

We must keep telling the story of Cain and Abel so that we can learn about ways to react in a way that will not destroy the world when we try on Cain's shoes and they fit! We must teach our children about how to master their anger. Even Jesus got angry when he saw the church or the Temple being missed used. He did react by turning over the money changer's tables but he did not violate anyone. He did not physically or mentally hurt anyone. On this seventh Sunday of Easter, when we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, how do we bring new life to God's kingdom? How will we celebrate Jesus, the Prince of Peace?

Rabbi Sandy Sasso ends her book by saying this, "The people keep telling the story of Cain and Abel, the first children. They sigh as they read of Cain picking up the rock. They want to hold back his hand and stop his anger from growing into hate. Perhaps one day, when each person learns to reach out an open hand without the rock, without the sword, without the gun, the entire world can be saved. Then many different kinds of fruit will once again grow on a single tree. And in God's garden called Earth, all will be good. Amen, (Finding the Fruits of Peace, by Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, Illustrated by Joani Keller Rothenberg, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001, p. 31-32)