

Sermon at King's Chapel
Wednesday, February 4, 2009
Midweek Service
Genesis 4:1-16

For no particular reason I seem to have become the repository for most of the photographs taken in the Holt family over a span of rather more than half a century. Some of them, definitely the smaller portion, are organized (to use the term loosely) in albums. But the vast majority are accumulated in a various array of boxes, with no organization at all – smaller boxes, larger boxes, even trunks. These pictures have been hauled around from house to house, attic to basement and basement to attic for decades, as they have continued to accumulate, and all or most gradually one way or another have descended upon me.

This may be poetic justice, because an unseemly number of them are *of* me. Not only was I the first-born son of a father who was an only child, but when I was just a baby we moved 1500 miles away from New England and therefore from both sets of doting grandparents, who apparently were supplied with at least weekly if not daily photographs of my earliest development. There is one amazing sequence of about 20 pictures of me as an infant lying on back in a baby carriage; if you look very closely you can detect minute changes of posture and position, each one recorded by the camera for posterity.

By the time my next younger brother was born we had moved back to New England and closer to the grandparents, and photographs of him are relatively rare. This commonly happens with younger children, I think. The first child gets all the attention of two parents who are going through this great adventure for the first time. The second and all the other children have to share their parents' now divided attention, and the somewhat diminished excitement of two people who are a little older and a little more tired than they were a year or two or three before. Birth order matters, as a spate of popular books on the subject documents and attests. Nothing human is completely predictable, of course. But it is clear that in general, the life experience of a first-born is different from that of the middle children or the baby. And the first-born usually has an edge, at least in terms of parental interest and involvement.

Apparently this is not a recent development. It began at the beginning. Cain was the first born. Abel was second. So maybe Cain had gotten used to feeling a little superior to his younger brother. Maybe he was, as often happens, the star of the family, and was used to his little brother always standing, as it were, in his shadow.

So maybe, just maybe, God had a reason for accepting the offering of the younger son and rejecting that of Number One. Maybe it had nothing to do with the substance of the offering. Vegetarians might like the story of Cain and Abel better if God had accepted the veggies and rejected all that fatty red meat. But

even if you turn their appetites around it still feels like God is being unfair. We tend to think that God shouldn't play favorites in this way. And besides, God should know something about nutrition.

But I wonder if maybe God thought that Cain and had had it a little too easy, since he was the Apple -- so to speak -- the Apple of his parents' eyes: Adam's apple, you might say.

In any case the story says that he gave Cain, the elder brother, a bit of a come-uppance, refusing his offering. And Cain responded pretty much as most of us do when we're rejected, with anger. God doesn't explain or justify his action to Cain, but he does warn him about his reaction: "Why are you angry?" God asks. "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 for you, but you must master it."

Cain fails the test. From what the story tells us, it seems to me that Cain has every right to be angry. His brother happened to become a keeper of sheep, he happened to become a tiller of the ground. I don't know enough about their agrarian life to judge, but it seems to me that both must have had to work hard, and the labors of both were equally significant and important. Why should Abel's offering be accepted as somehow more worthy than Cain's? His anger seems at least understandable and even perhaps justifiable.

But anger is a powerful and dangerous emotion; it can become all-consuming. And even if it is justified or justifiable, what we sometimes call a righteous anger, it still matters what we do with it, how we direct it. Cain might have been angry at God, for treating him unfairly. He might have been angry at himself; perhaps he knew he had been slacking recently. He might have vented his anger in a number of ways. What do you do you when you're angry? He could have seethed inwardly; he could have yelled at God; he could have gone around slamming doors or throwing things. Today, he might have taken it to his therapist. He might have prayed.

There's an old poem that goes, "The man who can smile when things go wrong has thought of someone to blame it on." What Cain did was drastic, but in its essence not uncommon. He decided to take out his rage on the nearest and most convenient target. The text tells us he rose up against his brother. Maybe he didn't begin with murderous intent, but his anger consumed him and carried him to this ultimate violence. Anger can do that, if we let it. Most of us don't let it go so far as Cain, but in anger we sometimes at least imagine all kinds of terrible acts of vengeance. Fortunately, we don't actually carry them out. But what we do do sometimes is bad enough. We say terribly hurtful things, hurling words as weapons. Or if we are more the passive-aggressive type we pout and whine and become impossible to live with. One way or another we take out our anger on someone else, and as in the case of Abel, someone not at all to blame. One way or another we try to take our anger out on someone else, and often we succeed.

But it is a success which turns to ashes.

In time anger always passes away. It is a passion. Even if we consciously seek to stoke it, in time it passes. And then we are left with a sense of guilt about our over-reaction. We may try to rationalize or justify in our own minds what we did, but usually this attempt fails. If things go well, the damage we caused can be repaired in some measure. Honestly repentant, we can seek forgiveness. Depending on the level of the venom we have spilled, forgiveness may not be easily given, but if all goes well over the course of time our guilt may be assuaged by the healing balm of forgiveness from the person we have unnecessarily and unfairly hurt

But even then, can we forgive ourselves? Often this is the forgiveness that comes hardest. It is often easier to forgive another than to forgive ourself. We may have to live with consciousness of our guilt, the realization that we did wrong, for a long time before we can heal the wound in our own soul. One way or another, our anger often turns on us in this way, creating an estrangement within our own soul.

Anger is a normal emotion. It is a legitimate and understandable reaction to life's injuries and disappointments and fundamental unfairness. That's where this story begins. We make an offering, we do the best we can, but our offering is refused. There's no particular reason; it's just the way things turn out. It's unfair. We're angry. Life is unpredictable. That Cain's offering was refused was as arbitrary as the fact that he was the first-born.

But anger can also become a destroyer, wreaking hurt and even destruction on others, and ultimately and always destroying our own soul. For there was nothing arbitrary about what happened to Cain in the aftermath of his fratricide. He killed his own brother and ultimately destroyed himself. His guilt was beyond redemption. He became a wanderer, he went away from the presence of the Lord, as the text tells us, wandering alone with his guilt and his fractured soul, broken by his unmastered anger.

What could have saved Cain from his fate? Where was the fundamental source of his failure? Would an anger-management class have saved him? Or therapy? The temptation is to look only at the obvious over-reaction and irrational decision, but read back once more to what God told him: "If you do well, will you not be accepted?" Enflamed by his anger Cain could see nothing but God's unfairness. He would have been happy to bless a God who blessed him. That's easy to do. What he could not do was bless the God who had not blessed him. Blinded by his anger at what God had withheld, he could no longer see all that God had given -- and he was just the second generation of the humanity to which God had entrusted the whole wonder of creation.

Unmastered, anger does blind us in this way. Consumed by this passion, our

narrowed vision focuses only on what we perceive as ill or wrong or unfair, and our anger blinds us to all the goodness that remains to bless us. It is in the times when God seems farthest from us, when life seems to be treating us harshly or unfairly, that is most important to open our eyes wide to the goodness that remains. It is precisely in the times when God seems to refuse to bless us that we need to remember to bless God, in thankfulness for our birth and our life and all that we have received in the marvels of the creation which has given into our keeping. For we are the keepers of not only our brothers and kin, but of all that God has wrought on our behalf.

Let us pray. Dear, God, ever mindful of all the blessings of our lives, so much that we take for granted or for right, forgive us our ingratitude and open our eyes to all the wonder and beauty that fills your world. Grant to all your people pardon and peace, that they may be cleansed from all their sins and serve thee with a quiet mind, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.