

Genesis 4:1-7 (NRSV)

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."² Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground.³ In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground,⁴ 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,⁵ but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.⁶ The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen?⁷ 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."

Colossians 1:15-20 (NRSV)

- ¹⁵He [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation;
¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created,
things visible and invisible,
whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers
all things have been created through him and for him.
¹⁷He himself is before all things,
and in him all things hold together.
¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church;
He is the beginning,
the firstborn from the dead,
so that he might come to have first place in everything.
¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,
²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things,
whether on earth or in heaven,
by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Plain and simple, there is no Christianity without Jesus Christ.

And there is no hope without Jesus Christ.

But the truth is that he lives and he has brought us into peace with our Creator.

Let's begin by going back to last week. We learned that a new "religion" is sucking the life out of Christianity in America, reshaping it into what Christian Smith calls a "pathetic version" of the "actual historical Christian tradition." In other words, Christianity is being undermined and displaced by this new set of beliefs, this new worldview.

You'll recall that based on their extensive and well-done research, Smith and his fellow sociologists found the key tenets of this new "Christianity" to be:

- A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
- God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
- God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die.

What's missing from this creed? Jesus, of course. We don't need a savior if all we need is help with a tough problem from time to time. And if Christianity doesn't really *need* Jesus, then what would be the big deal about becoming a passionate servant of his?

Thus, we have to come to grips with our absolute need for a savior, a rescuer . . . for Jesus. This has been the Christian proclamation for 2,000 years and it must be so until Jesus' returns.

Sin

I've come to understand that without acknowledging the reality of sin, there is simply no reason to go any further with Christianity. The whole point of the cross, the climactic moment in the Christian story, is that there is something deeply wrong with us that we cannot fix; i.e., we are not "ok." Instead, God must rescue us from ourselves and reconcile us to himself. This we simply cannot do for ourselves, not a single one of us.

I think at least part of the problem is that we don't really understand what the Bible means by "sin" and "sins."

In the story of Cain and Abel, murderous anger overtakes Cain and God gives him a chilling warning: "sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it" (Genesis 4:7).

Notice that God speaks of sin almost as if it is a person. It isn't, but its power often seems that way. It is like a beast that stalks us and hungers for us. We must master this beast, sin, or it will devour us.

Sin is like a tragic flaw or deformity that is shared by all humans. It is something with which we all are born. It is that beast always lurking, ready to enslave and to destroy. In my classes, I often use the metaphor of a flaw in our moral DNA. It is just there and we all have it – from birth. From this flaw, from Sin¹, springs the destruction wrought by pride, greed, jealousy, hatred, and the rest. Sadly, it so often does.

Just look at the course of human history. How else do you explain the destruction and hurt we inflict on one another? Frankly, I have trouble grasping how anyone could fail to understand this. Humans used the awe-inspiring technologies of the twentieth century to kill more humans than anyone could ever have contemplated. Not just by the millions, not even by the tens of millions, but by the hundreds of millions. More than anyone, Christians ought to be realistic about our heart of darkness.

Where did we get this flaw? It has been with humanity almost from our beginning, when our earliest ancestors chose against God rather than for God, desiring to be like gods themselves. This is the tragic story of Adam and Eve.

But the worst consequence of all is that Sin separates us from God. Indeed, you can think of Sin as the giant chasm that separates us from our holy God. Adam hid from God after he rebelled against God -- separation. The biblical story is the long story of a gracious God determined to restore the relationships that *we* wrecked, to close the chasm.

In contrast to Sin, "sins" are specific transgressions of God's law, which boils down to loving God and loving neighbor. God showed us how to live fulfilled and joyful lives together. That is what his Law, his teachings, is all about. Sins are nothing more than the many self-destructive ways we live when we think we know better than God.

So . . . it is Sin that drives us to gossip about others, and it is a sin when we do so.

This may all seem a bit pedantic, but your Bible reading will be easier if you can differentiate between the beast called "sin" that lurks within us all and the specific sins that we commit.

¹ I think it is sometimes helpful to capitalize the singular "Sin" when used in the sense of a beast that threatens us. It reminds me that there is Sin and then there are the various sins we commit.

Reconciling

What can we do about this beast called Sin? On our own, sadly, *nothing*.

Go to a bookstore sometime (are there any left?) and look at the long shelves of self-help books. Reams of them. All filled with much good advice and wise teachings. What's the problem? We don't follow that good advice and those wise teachings. Want to lose weight? Eat less and exercise more. It isn't a lack of knowledge on our part; it is a lack of will. We are simply incapable of doing what is in our own best interest.

Enter Jesus.

Who really is this man Jesus? He better be more than a wise teacher or an inspiring example, we've got no shortage of those. He better be able to do far more than you or I. He better be a bona fide rescuer of us all, for we are all in the same boat.

And that is exactly who we have in Jesus. Not merely a friend or a helper, but a savior and more. In his letter to the Christians in Colossae, the apostle Paul directs our eyes and hearts to the true Jesus. Today's passage from Paul's letter is a bit like a hymn in two stanzas, v. 15-17 and v. 18-20. Though the passage is usually rendered in prose, I've printed it in verse form to help you see its poetry and its structure.

The first stanza emphasizes that all things were created in Christ, through Christ, and for Christ. In case we miss Paul's point here, he gives us a list: all things visible and invisible, all thrones, dominions, rulers, and powers. Eugene Peterson paraphrases Paul this way in *The Message*:

“We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels — *everything* got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment.”

For any Jew, this sort of language could be used only with respect to the LORD God. Paul was a Jew and not just any Jew, but an educated, zealous Pharisee. He knew the meaning of what he wrote. He knew that he was speaking of Jesus as one would speak of God. Yes, Paul struggles to find the right language, just as Christians have been struggling for two thousand years to make sense of a mystery. On the one hand, Paul says that Jesus is the “firstborn of all creation” which might make us think he is about to lump Jesus in with the rest of creation. But no. In the next phrase, Paul says the opposite – all things are created in, through, and for Jesus! It takes an expansive, open, and imaginative mind to hold together seemingly contradictory truths about God. Such minds are God's desire for us.

Notice also that Paul speaks of *all* things and *all* powers. There is no person, no government, no angel, no demon . . . nothing . . . that was not created in, through, and for Jesus. Everyone, everywhere, at all times, sits under the lordship of Jesus Christ, whether or not they know it or acknowledge it. Hence, for 2,000 years, Christians have pursued the universal proclamation of the Good News.

The focus of the second stanza shifts from creation to re-creation, renewal, and restoration, the embodiment of which is the church. Christ is head of the church, yet distinct from it, just as Christ is distinct from creation. Why is Jesus Christ, though fully and completely human, unique? Because he is the one person in whom God's fullness² dwells.

And as it must, in closing, the hymn turns to what Jesus accomplished. Since we can't defeat Sin on our own, then God, in the man, Jesus, has done it for us. Jesus, God-made-flesh, fully God *and* fully human, has not only led by example, his sinless faithfulness even

²Peterson is very helpful when paraphrasing “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” From *The Message*: “So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding.”

to death, death on a cross, reconciled all humanity to God. Here is how the Christ-hymn of Colossians 1 puts it:

¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,
²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things,
whether on earth or in heaven,
by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Strip Jesus out of Christianity and what are you left with? Another well-meaning but ultimately failed life philosophy, because it is precisely in the living that we fail; we are incapable of doing what we know we should and we are all too capable of doing what we know we shouldn't.

God's purpose in all this is the reconciliation of the entire cosmos to God, the undoing of the tragedy of the Garden. And how is all this done? Through the crucifixion, the "blood of his cross." This is the good in Good Friday – that, in a way we cannot fully explain, we and the entire cosmos have been put right with God through Jesus' death on the cross.

And on the eve of his death, Jesus shared a meal with his disciples, a Passover meal. This meal signified and enacted Jesus' coming sacrifice of himself. He would be the lamb whose blood was shed so that the death of the first-born would pass over the Hebrews huddled in the homes. Jesus' meal with his disciples inaugurated a new Exodus, a crossing over into freedom and the kingdom of God.

This is the Jesus-who-is, the Savior we proclaim, the God we worship. If he does not fill every nook and cranny of our Christian faith, then it isn't Christian at all.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

My experience is that we tend to have a lot of pat phrases that we fall back on when it comes to talking about the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection. "Jesus paid for my sins." "We are washed in the blood of the lamb." Such phrases have their purpose but they can blind us to other ways, biblical ways, of thinking about God's work in Jesus.

What are some phrases that you've used or heard others use? What do you think they mean? If you are talking about this as part of a group, you might make a list of them. You might even try categorizing them. Which phrases are you most comfortable with? Which ones make you uncomfortable? Why? Which ones surprise?

Rev. Arthur Jones has written the curricula for the *Christianish* Connection Group series. The video is available on-line at www.standrewumc.org. You might view it before considering the following questions:

1. Consider the metaphor of life as a dance...
 - a. Are you a good dancer? If not, have you ever seen a truly great dancer? What makes the difference between a truly great dancer and a mediocre dancer?
 - b. Have you ever seen a truly passionate servant? Who in your life has shown you what it might look like to dance go through life loving God and loving neighbor? Did they make doing the right things look easy? How did they get to the point where faithfulness became natural for them?
2. Consider this: "What if the rules [God's Law] aren't a burden, but a gift, a way that God teaches us how to dance?"
 - a. In 2007, a Barna study reported that 52% of young adults (ages 16-29) *within the church* consider the church judgmental and 47% of young adults (ages 16-29) *within the church* consider the church hypocritical. Is it possible that our young adults look at the church and see the rules as a burden because we

ourselves don't always follow them? Do we consider the rules of Christianity a burden?

- b. Read Matthew 22:34-40, where a Pharisee asks Jesus to declare which rule is most important. Jesus has a clear and concise answer. How do we keep focused on the most important rules: to Love God, and to love our neighbor?
3. Keeping in mind that when we talk about the Christianish we are always talking about ourselves, how is God calling us to be more faithful? In what ways do we ignore rules or follow too closely to the letter of the law rather than the spirit of the law?
4. Truly good dancers know the steps so well that it appears natural. How can we become a church that is not seen as judgmental or hypocritical but naturally pours abundant grace to a culture that does not expect it from the church?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Genesis 3:1 – 4:17 The origin and consequence of this beast called Sin.</p>	<p>Tuesday, John 1:1-18 Jesus is the Word and the Word was God.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Luke 26:17-30 Luke's account of the last supper</p>	<p>Thursday, 1 Peter 1:3-12 Peter gives thanks to God for the gift of hope and joy that is Jesus and the salvation of our souls.</p>
<p>Friday, 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 Paul acknowledges that the proclamation about Jesus seems like foolishness to much of the world. It is the same now as it was then.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

