

Stump the Preacher: Changing God?
Genesis 4:1-16, Mark 14:1-2, 10-12
the Rev. Michelle Slater July 3, 2011

Over the summer, I've invited you to submit your questions about the Bible, God or the Christian faith, in an attempt to "stump the preacher." And wouldn't you know it, but Marnee Connal was the first one to get a question in. Actually, it was more like an observation, wasn't it, Marnee? An observation about the way we try to change God, or to make God act the way we want God to act.

And as examples of this kind of behaviour in human beings, Marnee suggested two key stories of our faith, one from each testament. First, from the Hebrew Scripture, we heard the story of Cain and Abel, the first sibling rivalry and the first murder. It's not a story that ever comes up in the lectionary, the three-year cycle of readings that we and most other Protestant churches follow, which is interesting in itself. Perhaps the ones who put the reading cycle together couldn't find any "good news" within it, no sign anywhere of God's redeeming grace.

Second, from the New Testament, we heard the story of the betrayal of Jesus by his follower and friend, Judas Iscariot. We read about Judas' betrayal every year, in Holy Week, as we retell, and relive, the last week of Jesus' life: his betrayal, his trial, his crucifixion and burial, and then, unexpectedly, his rising again.

Now, I am interested in what you think about these stories. So I'll ask you (and hope some of you will give a response!): Do these two stories have anything in common, for you? ...

- both Abel and Jesus are innocent, hence "martyrs"
- both Cain and Judas involved in murder/killing (one directly and one indirectly)
- both "murders" have questions about the motivations
- the victim's blood itself does something/accomplishes something: Abel's blood "cries out from the ground"; Jesus' blood brings mercy and forgiveness
 - Hebrews 12:24 compares Abel's blood and Jesus' blood: "But you have come... to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel." (forgiveness/new life vs. condemnation/vengeance)
- both Cain and Judas are traditionally considered to be damned/condemned
- both Cain and Judas are traditionally portrayed as having red hair in art

In the case of Cain, what have you thought the reason was that he killed his brother?

- traditional: jealousy of Abel having God's favour (would Cain then gain God's favour?)
- rabbinic Midrash: fighting over women (rabbinic tradition was that each had a twin sister to marry, and Abel's was more beautiful, so Cain killed Abel so as to take his bride)
- greed: Cain wanted Abel's flocks
- desire for closer relationship with God: Cain wanted God to speak to him as well as Abel (jealous of God's relationship with Abel) and so sought to make God speak to him by attacking Abel, assuming God would come and save him

In the case of Judas, scripture is silent about what his motivation could have been. The earliest gospel written, Mark, gives no reason at all, while later gospels say that “Satan” entered him. I wonder, why do you think Judas betrayed Jesus?

- greed: for the 30 pieces of silver, which would be about enough to buy a small farm in that day
- disappointment and anger: that Jesus had not overthrown the Roman government, did not have a political liberation agenda; feeling that Jesus had merely raised their hopes only to turn out to be an imposter and a weakling
- self-protection: Judas saw what was coming and found a way to save his own skin, “cut a deal” with the authorities
- protection of the Jewish people: Judas felt it was necessary to keep the uneasy status quo in place, between the Roman authorities and the Jewish leaders
- acting on Jesus’ behalf: the Gospel of Judas (discovered in the last decade, dates from the late 2nd c.) claims Jesus and Judas had a special relationship, and Jesus *asked* Judas to betray him to make things happen
- to make Jesus reveal himself: Judas wanted to force Jesus to declare himself the Messiah and bring the kingdom of God, to force Jesus’ hand

In both these stories, it’s possible that both Cain and Judas were acting to make God do something. In the case of Cain, for God to reveal himself, to give Cain his favour and love. And in the case of Judas, for Jesus to reveal himself and take power. As Marnee put it, “How do we try to influence God in this way?” Or, as I have phrased it, “How do we try to change God?”

It might be hard to compare ourselves with Cain and Judas, given that these are two of scripture’s, and history’s, most well-known villains. Each of them took fairly extreme actions that led to the death of another human being, something we would all balk at, no matter how jealous, angry, disappointed or fervent we felt.

So I wonder if there is any similarity between Cain, and Judas, and those of us here today? Speaking for myself, I can’t say I have ever actually taken some action because I thought God might do something in response. I have, however, been very unhappy with some of the things life has thrown at me, some of the things that have happened to me, and have blamed God for not acting the way I would have liked. For not changing my reality, for not changing other people’s feelings or actions, for not protecting me from pain and suffering.

And that’s really the issue, isn’t it? Our desires to have God behave the way we want, to take the action we would like God to take, to influence God, are rooted in our disappointment in God. Our sense of anger and betrayal when God acts differently from our hopes and expectations, or worse, doesn’t seem to act at all.

Just look at Cain. The story gives no reason for his offering to be less valued or desirable than Abel’s. Oh sure, scholars try to find a reason, buried in the text between the lines. Some people note, for example, that the story says that Abel’s offering was the fat from the firstborn animals of his flock, while Cain’s offering was merely “the fruit of the ground”. But that seems

like a stretch to me. In other words, we really are given no reason for God to prefer one offering over another. No wonder Cain was angry and disappointed and felt betrayed. God's action made no sense and was fundamentally unfair.

Or look at Judas, surely a more complicated fellow. Whether his motivation was to provoke Jesus to act, to reveal himself and to bring his fellow Jews political liberation in the here and now; or to punish Jesus for disappointing him with his talk about suffering and dying. Whatever his feelings, surely Judas was feeling, most of all, that Jesus was not acting the way he, Judas, wanted and needed him to act. He too, was angry and disappointed, and felt betrayed. Either before-hand, with his disappointment and anger leading him to betray Jesus. Or afterward, when Jesus did not reveal himself and take power from on high...when Judas felt so remorseful and self-loathing that he killed himself.

And what about us, then? What do we do when God lets us down? When the God we want turns out not to exist, and some other God has taken his or her place? I suppose we get disillusioned, don't we. Over and over again, when God seems to let us down, to disappoint us and betray us, we get disillusioned about who God really is, and how God really acts, and what living as a disciple of the way really entails.

But you know, disillusionment is not necessarily a bad thing. Disillusionment is, literally, the loss of an illusion: about ourselves, about the world, about God. It may be painful to lose our illusions, certainly. But it can never be a bad thing, to lose all the labels and expectations and images and demands that we have put on God, in order to see God more clearly.

"Disillusioned, we find out that God does not conform to our expectations. We glimpse our own relative size in the universe and see that no human being can say who God should be or how God should act. We review our requirements of God and recognize them as our own fictions, things we tell ourselves to make ourselves feel safe or good or comfortable.

Disillusioned, we find out what is not true and we are set free to seek what is, if we dare; to turn away from the God who was supposed to be, to seek for the God who is. Every letdown becomes a lesson and a lure." {Barbara Brown Taylor}

Perhaps there is no good news in the stories of Cain and Judas, and they are included merely as horrible warnings. Perhaps their stories are included to show us the dangers of trying to change God into the one we would like more, or to provoke God into acting the way we would like. Rather, we can allow our disappointments to teach us, again and again, that we are not God, not the Creator, but human creatures with understandings that are finite and limited. We can allow our disillusionments to draw us deeper and deeper into the mystery of God's being and doing. We can have faith that each time our misunderstandings, our false expectations, our images are exposed, we will come to know and trust God more fully.

And we can take comfort that even when we find it difficult to do so, God's grace still abounds. Cain was not condemned to death, despite his crime. There were consequences of his actions, certainly, yet God put a mark on him to protect him from violence, and Cain went on to

marry, and have children, and found a city, and become the patriarch of a nation of nomadic herders, and craftspeople, and musicians.

And Judas? Well, Judas never knew God's grace, at least in this lifetime. But who's to say that was God's will? After all, Peter denied Jesus three times and was still forgiven by Jesus, for his betrayal. I do believe even Judas would have been forgiven his betrayal as well, if only he had been able to push through the pain of disillusionment, of disappointment, for long enough to see God's grace at work within it.

And that *is* good news. It is good news that the God we place demands on, and have hopes in, and expectations of, is bigger and wider and more mysterious than all of those things. The good news is, God will seem to let us down, again and again, in order to lead us into a grace and love that is beyond our imaginings. Thanks be to God! Amen.