

A Sermon on Genesis 4: 8-16 and Galatians 3:10-14

Astrologers, witches, and morlocks are doing a booming business these days. Every popular magazine—Time, Esquire, Ladies Home Journal, Life, Look—has had, within the last year a major article of astrology, witches, numerology, and magic rites.

Bestselling books have been written by soothsayers, prophets, and clairvoyants such as Edgar Cayce and Jeane Dixon.

The late Bishop Pike purported to have contacted his dead son through a medium. The Sharon Tate murder has been linked to a series of ritual witchcraft murders. The FBI relied upon the powers of clairvoyants in their search for the Boston Strangler.

Our ancestors really took witchcraft seriously. They feared the threat of a curse and in their fanaticism thought they could escape it by burning witches, sacrificing children, and inflicting pain upon themselves.

But most of us are romantics. We have fun looking at our horoscope, but we know that science and reason have done away with all of that.

The modern approach is to deny that we are threatened by a curse. We have given the curse more sophisticated and, I believe, more superstitious names such as “disaster,” “misfortune,” “tragedy”.

We try to guard ourselves from it with birth control pill, garbage and sewage disposal plants, well equipped policemen, complicated and expensive defense systems, and balanced budgets.

Although we are reluctant to say that the world and you and I are under a curse, we know that there is something radically and desperately wrong.

It is reasonable to assume that no one knows exactly when, or how, or by whom, or why, Mary Petry was brutally murdered just last week, but it would be insane to deny, on that basis, that she is dead, that a crime took place, and that a pall hangs over her family.

Likewise, call it what you will, fight it however you please, and explain it as rationally as you are able, the curse has suffered no defeat and seems to grip us now as ever.

One might be led to deny the historical circumstances, but one cannot deny the consequences.

The curse has a persistence that wears down all resistance.

The curse is perfidious—it is defeated on one front only to attack from another.

Technology brings prosperity and pollution. Science brings synthetic foods and atomic bombs. Medicine cures polio, diphtheria, and a multitude of other diseases and then we become faced with the problems of old age.

Science and reason have burnt the last witch and transformed the wizard into a research chemist, but the world in which you and I live remains as always filled with terror and horror as well as awe and wonder.

If we take the time to look around us we will discover that our world is much more frightening and beautiful than any fairy tale.

There is something in fairy tales that fill me with wonder and amazement. Pandora opens a magic box and world is darkened with disease and pestilence. Prince kisses Sleeping Beauty and the curse of death is dispelled.

The Bible tells us that something has happened to the world and you and I that much more pervasive and fantastic; something much more terrible but at the same time wonderful. The story is told and retold from Genesis through the Revelation of John.

The story of Cain and Abel is but one variation on a constant theme.

In the story of Cain's murder of his brother Abel, we have our first glimpse of a person born after the fall from innocence. Cain is truly our brother because he, like ourselves, was born outside the Garden.

He, like all of us, was born into a world that was already curse. For God had cursed the ground when he had driven Adam and Eve out of Eden.

Now Cain has multiplied the disobedience of his father. God extends the curse beyond the ground; and Cain is the first to feel the curse upon himself.

He is driven from his farming into a wandering and fugitive existence, away from the presence of God, in a foreign land.

But the curse did not die with Cain. It has continued to our day. It covers all of us. It is no disrespect of character. In fact, the Apostle Paul says that the curse is most severe on those who try their hardest to obey the law.

Without a doubt most of us could care less that we are under a curse because we personally feel so little of its power.

There are three amulets that temporarily ward off the curse. They are money, health and youth. To the degree that you have anyone of these the curse loses a bit of its power.

But given a few unexpected chest pains and the curse becomes very real. Read a newspaper account of robbery, rape, or ruin and the curse is upon us.

The full weight of the curse hangs over the head of each one of us like the Sword of Damocles. Every day we are living, not somewhere between birth and the grace, but at the end of our lives.

We also have been driven from our homes. There is no way to return to the land of memories. We, like Cain, are fugitives in time. We are forced to go forward and never allowed to go back. We cannot even stop the clock for a moments rest. We are relentlessly driven into the future, and everyone is a step into eternity.

The curse hovers over all of us and will descend upon all of us eventually.

If we felt the curse as strongly as did Cain we would draw back in horror. “How can I bear the punishment?”

The threat of the curse implies guilt. However Cain’s horror was not with his guilt but with his punishment.

Heedless of his own act of murder, he fears for his own life. “Everybody who sees me shall kill me.”

Cain could not believe that he was that deserving of a curse. Punishment implies responsibility. But Cain can be hardly blamed for his actions.

After all, he came from a bad family. His mother and father had been deported from their native land for theft and insurrection. Only by the kindness of their Kind were they spared immediate execution. What can you expect of a child from that kind of a family? Certainly a just judge would take that into consideration.

But then his mother and father hardly can be blamed. They were victims of circumstances. Their environment contained at least one unsavory character that was bound to corrupt them sooner or later. It was society that failed Cain. The system was at fault.

And eventually, unless we too want to charged guilty, we must say that Cain was innocent. He does not deserve to be cursed! It is God who is guilty! It is God who must be cursed!

Because if Cain is still guilty despite his family background and environment what is to prevent us from being charged. But it is not we who are responsible for the curse. It is the hippie, the communist, and the liberal. It is the racist, the hawks, and the establishment. But it is not I who am guilty.

Our guilt distorts and perverts our eyesight and all of our senses. We cannot see our guilt. We cannot feel it. We cannot believe it. Therefore, somebody else must be responsible for the curse.

Our eyes, stigmatized by our guilt, see God, not as a redeemer, but as a judge, and not only as a judge, but as an unjust judge; a wrathful god; a devil god.

When Martin Luther was struggling with God in the monastery this devastating thought hit him. He found that he was unable to love God because he suspected that God was unlovable.

God is unlovable if he is not even just, if he curse men without reference to their guilt. Who can love this kind of God? “Love him,” said Luther, “I do not love him. I hate him.”

It has been said that the insane man is not the one who has lost his reason. Rather he is the man who has lost everything but his reason.

Try arguing with him and you will soon find out. You either lose the argument or end up on his side.

So also with the man who is guilty before God. He has lost everything, but his self respect. He is naked yet he sees only the poverty of those around him and the injustice of God.

In my living room I have framed a piece of a brown paper bag with words scratched on it that say, “Under my clothes I am naked too.”

It was sent to me by a young girl in a mental hospital. She was from a respectable family. She had been actively involved in the life of her church. She was a sensitive girl who understood beauty; a responsible girl who showed practical concern for the poor and defeated people in the inner-city of Chicago. She was a good girl.

Yet her goodness for 20 years had protected her from the fact that, despite all her goodness, she too had fallen. The sudden discovery of that fact was too much for her to bear.

The belief that the whole world and you and I are under a curse is obviously an unattractive idea, but the person who takes it seriously is spared the sudden discovery of his own fallenness.

The Christian Church, with this horrible doctrine, built hospitals, visited jails, cared for the elderly, showed compassion for the poor, the mentally retarded, and the social outcast.

Because of this doctrine the Church has shown love even to the unlovable, the merciless, and the unjust.

The horrible doctrine does not lead to brutality and despair, but to kindness and compassion.

The person who takes it seriously will not trust the honest man too much, yet he will show love to the criminal and the outcast. He will hate murder, but he will love the murderer more than ever.

For the curse covers all. It means that no one because of his status or place in life can place himself above me in judgment.

It means that I must not place myself above anyone because he is less moral, less wealthy, or less respected than myself.

And we, as Christians, who start with the curse can go beyond love and compassion to freedom and joy.

By God's grace the curse has been diluted and made bearable. For the hand of God reached down and marked Cain, not for destruction, but for comfort and protection. "For the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest any who came upon him should kill him."

Not only has God protected us from the full weight of the curse, he has given us the promise and the hope of its complete and final destruction through a man in many ways very much like Cain the murderer.

If the story of Cain reveals to us God's frown the story of Jesus of Nazareth reveals to us God's smile.

The Old and New Testaments, like an antiphonal hymn, proclaim the story of guilt and grace, sin and redemption, the curse and the promise of release.

While his brother's blood was still warm Cain was asked "Where is your brother?" Cain, who had a brother, disclaimed him and defiantly would not take the opportunity to confess that he no longer had one.

Jesus of Nazareth, the only begotten son of his father, when asked this question claimed as his brothers those who by right were not.

The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but Cain was made a fugitive and a wanderer and the Son of Man had no place to lay his head.

Cain cried to God "My punishment is greater than I can bear" and the words echo from Gethsemane, "My Soul is very sorrowful, even unto death...my father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me."

God cursed Cain, but Christ redeemed us from the curse having come a curse for us. The hand that held the sword above our head was nailed to the cross and the full weight of the curse came crushing down on him.

The mark that protected Cain was removed from himself and the curse was driven indelibly into his hands and feet. He saved others yet he would not save himself.

Christ has redeemed us from the curse becoming a curse for us. We in our blindness could not admit our guilt. In our hearts we said, "I am not guilty. It is God who is guilty; it is God who must be damned."

And God was damned! The sovereign God became the suffering servant. The God of wrath became the derelict of the cross. The curse that haunts us fell on him and was itself broken.

And now I understand what it was about all those fairy tales that held me spellbound. They were all talking about something that really happened in the world in which I live.

Pandora opens a magic box and the world is darkened with disease and pestilence.

The Prince kisses Sleeping Beauty and the curse is dispelled.

The muted words and distorted vision they all were trying to tell me something that I know is true.

A man murdered his brother and the ground rose up and cried out against him sending him as a fugitive and wanderer into an unknown land.

A man was nailed to a wooden cross; the sun blinked, the earth for a moment shook off its ancient curse, and dead men came out of musty graves into the light of day—the promise of the eternal day when there shall be a curse no more.