

## WHEN GOD DISAPPOINTS

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo  
Union Church of Pocantico Hills  
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Psalm 128  
Genesis 4:1-10

The story of Cain and Abel is the first glimpse we get of life outside of the Garden of Eden. It appears to be a story of conflict between two brothers, the sons of Adam and Eve. But it is actually a story of Cain's conflict with God.

I have always found this passage to be confusing. After working on it all week, I have decided that it is supposed to be confusing to us. That is one of its points. Both of the brothers brought gifts to God. Cain brought the fruit of the field because he was a farmer. Abel brought his best sheep because he was a shepherd. Both of the brothers worshipped God. Both of them gave sacrificially. Both of them wanted God to receive their gifts. But God had regard only for the sacrifice of Abel, the shepherd, and no regard for the sacrifice of Cain, the farmer.

Why? This makes no sense to us. We know that farming was an acceptable vocation. When God sent Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, God told them to go and till the ground. We are given no indication in the text that God would only accept sheep sacrifices. Later in the Old Testament, God does receive sacrifices brought to him from the fields of farmers. So why does God accept Abel's sacrifice but not Cain's sacrifice? We don't know – neither did Cain.

Why doesn't God accept all of our religious offerings? Have you ever prayed and prayed for something you wanted, and in spite of your prayers, you did not receive it? Have you ever begged God to heal a loved one but the person died? Have you even faithfully started a day with prayer, only to then have an absolutely miserable day? Of course you have. You know what it feels like to be Cain in this story.

After being disappointed by God, have you ever heard someone's explanations for why God said, "No"? Have you suffered through explanations for why your loved one died in spite of your prayers, why your dreams have not worked out, or why your carefully constructed life ended up in a ditch? Again, of course you have. Most of these explanations try to understand a God whose ways are not our ways. When the righteous man Job suffered so much, his friends tried to offer explanations for his suffering. All of these explanations were just inane. Finally, Job could not take it anymore, and he said to his friends, "You would at least look wise if you just stopped talking." Then God appeared to Job in an uncontrollable whirlwind. Job chose to turn to the whirlwind he did not understand rather than continue to listen to the tidy explanations of God made by mortals.

The Bible does not answer most of our why questions, and it never explains why God does what God does. That is because God is not accountable to us or under our

control, which is what we really want when we demand explanations. However, the Bible is very concerned about our responses to a God we do not always understand.

So much of our lives revolves around deals. “If you do this, I’ll do that.” “If you love me, I’ll love you.” “If you sell it to me, I’ll pay you for it.” “If you hire me, I will work hard for you.” So when it comes to spirituality, it only makes sense that if we give something to God, God should give us something in return. That’s the way deals work. We assume that to be spiritual means we should pray to God for better jobs, better health, and better relationships. And we are called to pray for all of these things. But God is not sitting across the table considering the deal you would offer up. “O God, if only you get rid of my daughter’s boyfriend, I will be a missionary. Or even better, I will join the monastery.” You cannot pry a blessing from the hand of God because God does not negotiate. The real question of spirituality is: How will you respond to a God you cannot control?

When Cain discovered that God was not interested in his sacrifice, he became furious. God may have had no regard for Cain’s sacrifice, but God had enormous regard for Cain. So, the Lord came to him and asked, “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? But sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.”

“If only you do well, you will be accepted.” Apparently, Cain and the Lord understood that differently. Cain defined doing well by his hard work. He worked all year in the field to bring in its fruit, so he thought he had done well and ought to be accepted by God.

There was once a boy—I will not name names—who had a demanding fifth grade teacher. The boy wrote his first essay in her class on the topic of beagles. Unfortunately, the assignment was to write an essay on eagles. The boy wrote a lot about what great pets beagles make. You can train them to sit, shake hands, and roll over. He even drew a picture of Snoopy at the bottom of the essay. The teacher was so amused by the boy’s mistake that she gave him an A for effort.

That is what we expect of God. Even if we blow the assignment, as long as we work hard, we think we should be accepted. But God does not grade us on effort. We are only accepted if we do well, which means that we have to get the assignment right. And this is very important – the assignment is not to bring either sheep or fruit to God as a sacrifice. It is not to know the mind of God. According to this text, the assignment is to avoid sin when God does not reward us. “Sin is lurking at the door.” Sin is anything that separates us from God, and there is no time when we are more tempted to separate ourselves from God as when God has disappointed us.

“What’s the point?” we ask ourselves. “I have been knocking myself out for years. I have been good and met all of my commitments. I have been faithful at church. I have played by the rules, and where has it gotten me? God just likes Abel more than me.”

We all know who Abel is. He is the guy whose prayers are always answered just the way he wanted. Abel has a wonderful job and marriage. He has perfect children. Abel has the life you want, but you have worked just as hard as he has. “It’s not fair,” you lament, and it may not be fair. So, you tell yourself that you got a bad deal from God.

This is when we think it is time to forget about pleasing God and trying to make God happy. Instead, we choose to take control of our own lives. But as thousands of years of history have proven, whenever we start acting like gods, it is not long before someone gets hurt. And in his anger, Cain killed his brother and buried him. “Sin is lurking at the door.”

Cain’s real conflict was not with Abel – Abel did nothing to Cain. Cain’s real conflict was with God. Similarly, many of our conflicts are not really with the people around us, but with the God above us – the God we do not understand. But we typically try to resolve this holy conflict by rising up against someone else. And then, like Cain, we look for a way to bury our guilt and cover over what we have done to hurt others with lots of rationalizations and excuses.

After the burial, the Lord returned to Cain and asked, “Where is your brother?” Cain responded, “How should I know? Am I my brother’s keeper?” But the Lord said, “What have you done? Listen, your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground!”

What is the assignment? What does it mean to do well? It has very little to do with what you accomplish, and it has nothing to do with figuring out God. Doing well has everything to do with how we treat people along the way in life, especially when we are disappointed in God.

We face so many great disappointments in life. Our loved ones die too soon. We lose our jobs. We lose our health, our dreams, and our relationships. Sooner or later, we all face these great disappointments. But have you ever noticed that some people respond to these disappointments by becoming more tender and compassionate to others? They come through their crisis as newer and better versions of themselves. They treat the people they still have more carefully. They just keep talking about gratitude and even receive the rising sun each day as an opportunity to hum the Doxology. While others respond to the very same disappointments of life with dark and angry cynicism. They allow their identities to be consumed by victimization. They lash out at anyone in authority because they are actually angry at the authoritative God. They rise up against Abel without even knowing why. They lose their earlier concern for others and think only of what they need. No one is as self-obsessed as a person who has settled into being a victim.

It is after God has not done what you wanted that you face the most important decisions for your soul. You can either use this experience to become more humble and grateful for the blessings of life and be more compassionate with those around you. Or, you can cuddle up with your anger and live with a soul that is too sick to do anything but hurt others. It is your choice.

At the end of the story, God’s question is, “What have you done?” The question is not, “What have you done with your accomplishments?” but, “What have you done to your brother?” Do not think the Lord will be impressed with our objections that we are not our brother’s keeper – because we are.

There is so much about God that we do not understand. Rather than being preoccupied with mysteries that are beyond our grasp, let us be faithful to what we do

understand. And let us be very, very careful with the brother along the way. For that, we know, is the will of God.

To the Lord our God, Alpha and Omega, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.