Quinquagesima Sunday
Rolling Meddows - 1966

Rev. Carl F. Thrun

IN NOMINE JESU

Genesis 4: 9-16 Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He sai "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" And the Lord said, "What have your done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to Me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from you hand. When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength; you shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth." Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, Thou hast driven me this day away from the ground; and from Thy face I shall be hidden; and I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will slay me." Then the Lord said to him, "Not so! If any one slays Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold." And the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest any who came upon him should kill him. Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord, and dwelt in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

INSECURE MAN

What a remarkable conclusion to this story of fratricide! Cain is tormented with his guilt, encircled by visions of dread, smitten with the curse of God beset by the shrieking blood of his slain brother, hunted and hounded in a world that will never let him escape the omnipresence of his brother's spilt blood. Ever the motherly earth broke faith with him. Now, not only the thorns and thistles, but this blood cries out in accusation. And he is not only condemned to the struggle for existence - nature is not only an antagonist, an antagonist from whom he must wring his yield - but the curse has, so to speak, intensified itself. Gain's loss of God has also made him lose man. His brother is no more. And finally it made him lose his world. For him the earth is no longer a home, a place of securit

And yet, none of this cripples him or turns him into a pillar of salt. Rathe it drives him into activity and sends him off on aimless wanderings. It drives him into unceasing marching, traveling, and labor. Later it is said that he built a city, and his descendants were forgers of bronze and iron - and artists too - players on the lyre and pipe. Cain and his family were obviously very productive. They cannot be regarded as antisocial riffraff. They were rather the pioneers of progress, the progenitors of human culture and civilization. Yet whatever Cain accomplishes is under the curse that he was to be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth and whatever he does is unstable and fugitive, aimless and anxiety-ridden. The land of Nod means the land of wandering and restlessness.

What is Cain really afraid of? After all, nobody knows him in the strang land to which he has been exiled; nobody will suspect that he has blood on his hands. He had nothing definite to fear, no definite person who cherishes venge-

ance against him. But it is this very indefiniteness that gives him anxiety. As long as we men fear something definite - a business failure, an operation, or even a war - we can face it somehow by taking countermeasures against it. Fear is not so fearfully bad when we know what we have to fear and what can be done to combat it. But Cain has nothing definite to fear; he is anxious about a great unknown X.

We need only to think here of what Jesus says about being anxious. How does the question, What shall we eat, what shall we drink, what shall we wear? actually arise? Or the question: What calamity will come out of the Vietnam crisis or the Dominican Republic, or Cuba, or the East-West conflict? What radioactive clouds will pass over us? Now notice how Jesus fought against this spirit of care in us! He did not fight it in a rationalistic was. He did not say, Now, be reasonable! You are only confusing reality with the products of your own ~~anxiety~~ uncertain. Where is the reason for the fear that you will get nothing more to eat or to wear? Where do you see any radioactive clouds anywhere on the horizon? Our Lord did not say anything like this at all, for it would not have helped us anyhow. No rational arguments are of any help in anxiety. Instead He makes it clear to us that it is not what goes into a man, what comes to him from the outside, that defiles him and makes him afraid, but rather what rises up from his heart like air bubbles - this is the evil, the defiling thing that causes anxiety. If this heart of yours were still living in the security of the Father, if your hearts were sure, like the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, that you are sustained and cared for by this Father, you would have no more cares. Indeed, then you would walk bravely through the valley of the shadow; not because you could see clearly what is ahead of you - Christians face the unknown future just like anyone else - but because you would feel the rod and the staff in your hand. The man who carries with him the iron-clad surety of the Word of the Lord, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world, will cross the threshold of each unknown tomorrow with cheerful composure. He is safe and secure along each step of the way!

But Cain no longer has this security. He says to God, I must hide from Thy face; I am an outcast. And therefore I must be a fugitive and a wanderer and

go straying and stumbling on the endless road in the land of Nod. When the world becomes fatherless it becomes a weird and homeless place and I am driven into unending flight. Every tree, every shadow becomes a threat. So I try to charm away the weirdness. Or I consult the stars for some dodge by which to escape being caught in my run of bad luck. Or I procure lucky numbers to increase my chances and find out the dates and times when I must be careful because these are unlucky times. This is the law of life in the land of Nod where the security of home is gone. Here is where fear, superstition, and magic hold sway.

So Cain has no more happiness, no more enthusiasm. For, after all, we experience such upsurges of enthusiasm only when there is something or other in our life that is worth living for, because it provides us with something more than the boredome of the daily treadmill. In John Osborne's play Look Back in Anger, Jimmy Porter says - and Cain might have said exactly the same thing! - Oh heavens, how I long for a little ordinary human enthusiasm. Just enthusiasm - that's all. I want to hear a warm, thrilling voice cry out Hallelujah!...Oh, brother, it's such a long time since I was with anyone who got enthusiastic about anything. But how can one possibly find anything in the land of Nod to get excited and enthusiastic about? Is there anything here but looking back in anger - anger over the bungled past that compels us to pay the consequences, anger over the meaningless mess that keeps driving us on in restlessness and anxiety?

True, I can fabricate a few illusions. I can work up some enthusiasm for certain ideals, and the fan clubs of our teen-agers are a pathetic attempt to break out of the land of Nod and find a star, a hero, that can serve as something like a guiding image. Thus they recognize themselves in young stars like the Beatles or the Rolling Stones. We Christians ought not to smile about this and in a kind of pious snobbery dismiss these teen-age dreams with a wave of the hand. We ought to recognize the desperate homesickness that is trying to break through the iron curtain of the land of Nod. At any rate, when they reach adulthood this hero worship will come to an end, except that then it will become a bit more sober and hopeless. In any case, there is one thing that I must realize and that is that I shall find

the great and sustaining thing in my life only if I see all around me the little evidences of the loving God.

After all, what is a flower? A bit of vegetation that soon wilts and withers away, and when the wind passes over it it is no more. But for him who liv in the security of that peace which Jesus bestows it is a lily - a lily that neith works nor spins, but is simply there, living without a care and more gloriously clothed by God than Solomon in all his splendid robes... What is the love of my parents, who by the law of the generations will one day leave me orphaned, what is this transient love, if I do not see in it a parable, an analogy of Him Who from our mother's arms hath blessed us on our way with countless gifts of love and will never leave us desolate?

All this Cain no longer knows nor possesses as he leads his fugitive and wandering life, even though he is tremendously active. For him the world holds neither parable nor message; it is dull and gray. For he who loses God has lost, not only heaven but earth as well. The Father of Jesus Christ is, after all, far more than merely a personage whose proper place is only in the beyond. Ever since the Manger and the Cross stood upon our earth God has been the very utmost of this-worldly Beings. Therefore our faith is by no means sustained merely by the hope that one day at our last hour He will be our stay and comfort and that finally He will help us get to heaven. This is true, of course, but it is by no means the whole story. God wanst us to face and endure this frightening and fascinating world now, now when we are young and in the prime of life, when we are shaken by passions, when we are in the thick of things and we need to fight and resist.

For this reason even Cain is not altogether forsaken in the land of Nod. Even about him God throws a circle of protection and puts upon him a sign, the mark of Cain, which makes him taboo. Even this guilt-laden man remains God's property. He too is given room to repent. And this is the message that we, the descendents of Cain, who live in this land of Nod, must hear. There is One who comes searching for us, to seek and to save. There is One who offers restoration from the restlessness of our life. No one is beyond the scope of His love, not even Cain.

Because the Word became flesh, God has come into the here and now. Right

now He is in the midst of Pharisees and harlots, in the midst of people who are hungry and people who are ambitious, the snobs and the seekers, those who laugh and those who weep, the teen-agers and the hoar heads. Jesus Christ is with us in the land of Nod, and he who has eyes to see observes to his utter amazement that this transforms this gloomy, frightening land into the promised land and our home. For where God is there life is changed - life, and by no means only death. For now I have a purpose again, now I have something that is greater than myself, and therefore life is worth living.

The clouds and storms of life go on exactly as they did before. But in them shines the rainbow, a greeting from Him who never forgets me, who gives me goals and brings me to them. There are pitfalls and abysses to be sure, but there are bridges over them which now I cannot see. And the night is coming too, when no man can work; true, but even then the stars will shine and He who numbered them all will be there. This I have done for thee, says the Crucified, what dost thou do for Me? This is the question that breaks the world of Cain. And when it is broken, then there is no more looking back in anger - then there is hope, a new future, and joy forever. Amen.