

Ask the Question, Part 2

We ran out of time for a number of questions asked in worship on April 15. Here is the second installment on responses to those questions.

How did Cain and Abel get their wives in the book of Genesis in the Bible?

I did respond to this on Sunday, but the pre-teen that asked the question was in Sunday School when I did. So, this is for our curious youth. As the story goes, Adam (the human) and Eve (life) are the first humans amidst all of creation. They have two sons, Cain and Abel. Long about the 4th chapter of Genesis, Cain kills Abel. And 9 verses later, Cain's wife appears out of nowhere and has a son. The following 6 verses list the next 8 generations of sons – and one great7-granddaughter – of Adam and Eve. Then we're told that Adam and Eve had a third son named Seth who also had a son.

Basic facts of life tell us that these sons had to have had wives in order to have children; but the story fails to tell us from where these wives came. The narrative doesn't mention a daughter until the 8th generation. As a pre-teen, I suggested to a nun who had no answer to this puzzle that perhaps these women were evolved from the apes. I was taken by the ear and escorted out of the class. Deeper than the issue of evolution, embarrassing the teacher was forbidden!

Walter Brueggeman often told his students at Eden Seminary that the Bible is a compilation of "stories we have come to believe about ourselves." What he meant was that these are narratives handed down orally through the generations to explain a mystery about why something exists or persists. The stories reflect truth about the relationship between God and the world, God and humans. The Bible is not a history book. When these narratives were inked on a page after tens of generations of being told around camp fires, the concept of history did not exist. Nor did the concept of science. The purpose of the narratives was to hand down to a new generation an understanding about who God is and who we are because of God.

The ones who long ago listened to these stories were not concerned with whether they contained facts that are justifiable according to our scientific and historical thinking. What kept these stories alive was their reflection of the reality that the listener knew as their own experience. They had experienced the failure of not being good at something, of comparing themselves to another and being disappointed and angry. They understood the jealousy that Cain felt toward Abel. They had felt like someone was a threat to them and wished that threat was dead. They knew firsthand the regret of having done something that cannot be undone. They too knew what it felt like to have crops fail and to feel a restless wanderer on the earth.

The early hearers of this story would have assumed the wives came from neighboring villages or from another clan. They know that the story was really about God's response to human disobedience: that God loves all of us, accepts us God's own sons and daughters, and longs to see our transformation into good stewards of all life.

Have a question about faith, the Bible, the Church, our congregation? Submit it here and look for a response in a future Tidings.