

SUPERHEROES OF FAITH - ABEL

Cross of Glory Evangelical Lutheran Church

Create in Me a Pure Heart

Genesis 4:1-5

Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, "With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man."² Later she gave birth to his brother Abel. Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil.³ In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD.⁴ But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering,⁵ but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

What makes a superhero great? Usually when we think of superheroes, the first thing that comes to mind is their super powers. Superman is a great example. He has super strength. He has super speed. He has the ability to fly. He has x-ray vision. Those things make for a pretty extraordinary super hero. As we begin looking at superheroes of faith this week, we will see that there is a great contrast between comic book superheroes and biblical superheroes. In the comic books, it's all about the superheroes heroic actions. As we see from the story of Cain and Abel, being a superhero of faith is first and foremost a matter of the heart. And so as we look to become superheroes of faith ourselves, we begin with the short prayer, "Lord, create in me a pure heart."

Our reading this morning shows us what it means to be a superhero of faith by way of contrast. I guess you could say we have a hero and a villain. The reading begins by introducing us to the villain. From the first verse of our reading, you would never think of Cain as a villain. We know the background to this verse. Adam and Eve were created in perfection and place in the Garden of Eden. By their disobedience to God, they brought sin and death into the world and were banished from the Garden. God told them the dreadful consequences of their sin and what it would be like to live a sin-filled world. But God also gave them a promise that he would send a Savior who would make things right and rescue them from this world of sin and death.

The next thing we read is that Adam and Eve have a son and name him Cain. The word Cain means "to bring forth." In the Hebrew text, there are actually two ways you can understand Eve's explanation for this name. She might have said, "I have brought forth a man, who is the Lord." That would mean that she took God's promise to heart that he was sending a Savior and she believed that her first Son was that very Savior. It is probably better to understand her words the way they are translated in the NIV, "With the help of the Lord, I have brought forth a man." This still gives us the impression that Eve knew this child was special. She was grateful to the Lord for allowing her to take part in the process of bringing life into the world. You can be sure that both Adam and Eve were grateful for this gift of a child and took their role as parents very seriously. They taught Cain about the gracious God that gave them the promise of a Savior back in the Garden. They taught Cain to acknowledge the Lord and worship him. One way that Cain could worship his Lord was by bringing him an offering from the crops he harvested in the field. And this is exactly what Cain did.

But there was something wrong with Cain's offering. We read that the Lord did not look with favor on Cain's offering. What was wrong? Did he bring the wrong fruits and vegetables? Was it not enough? The reading does not say anything like that. It simply says that God was not pleased with Cain and his offering. And so we must assume that the reason God did not look with favor on Cain's offering is the reason he still does not look with favor on some people's offerings: it was a matter of the heart. Cain did not give his offering with a heart of faith. And as the author of Hebrews writes: "Without faith, it is impossible to please God." Cain was only going through the motions when he brought his offering to the Lord. He was acting as a hypocrite. He did not believe. His offering was not a thank you to God, it was something he did begrudgingly.

We are tempted to act the same way. We have so many advantages just like Cain did in his life. Someone cared about us enough in our life to share the Savior with us and teach us about the grace of God. We have come to know the wonderful things the Lord has done for us. We realize that out of gratefulness for God's goodness we ought to worship him and bring him thank offerings—offering of our time, of our service, and of our resources. But do we ever bring those offerings the way that Cain did? Are we ever just going through the motions? We know we should go to church. We know we should put something in the plate. We know we should volunteer every once in a while to help those in need. And so we do it. But our hearts are not in it. God is not pleased with such offerings. It comes down to a matter of the heart. In the end, it's not about the amount of money that we give, or the number of hours that we spend in the pew. It's about the motive behind our gifts. If our gifts are not prompted by faith and love, we might as well not give them at all. Our gifts need to come from a pure heart. And what does it mean to have a pure heart? For the answer to this question, we turn to the superhero of our reading—Abel.

Abel shares some similarities with Cain. They are both children of Adam and Eve. They are both told about the Lord and his promises. They both work for a living—Cain as a farmer and Abel as a shepherd. They both bring offerings from the fruits of their labors. But that is where the similarities end. In the last verses of our reading, we see the great difference between these two brothers and their offerings: "*The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering,⁵ but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor.*" Why is that the Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering? Just as with Cain, it is a matter of the heart. The author of Hebrews gives us the critical information for this story as he writes, "*By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings.*"

I think there is a tendency for people to think that Abel's offering was accepted because he gave the very best and Cain just gave a meager amount of his harvest. But that is not the difference the Lord looked at. The real difference is that Abel's offering was given from a heart of faith and Cain's was not. Abel put his trust in the Lord and looked to the Lord to save him from sin and death. Out of gratefulness for God's goodness he gave his offering. And it is true that his offering was the very best. But this is not what made it acceptable. It is Abel's heart of faith that made his offering pleasing in God's eyes. It is his heart of faith that naturally wanted to give God the very best. It was not because Abel was seeking an earthly reward for his actions. It was simply his way of saying thank you to God.

We seek to have the same kind of heart as we bring our offerings to the Lord. You and I know that this is not something that comes naturally. Our hearts are sinful by nature. None of us come into this world with pure hearts. And none of us could ever achieve pure hearts no matter how hard we try. That is why we pray, “*Create in me a pure heart.*” A pure heart is a result of the Lord’s work in us. He gives us a pure heart when he creates faith in our heart. The object of that faith is our Savior Jesus. We know that God kept his promise he first made in the Garden of Eden. Abel looked forward in faith to the coming of a Savior who would crush the work of the Serpent. We have the privilege of looking back and seeing that God sent that Savior by sending his Son, Jesus. Jesus is our true hero. He rescued us from sin, death and the devil by his perfect life and innocent death on the cross. It is by faith in Jesus that we are acceptable to God. When God looks on us he sees the perfection of his Son covering over our imperfection. He is, therefore, pleased with us and the offerings we give to him.

Having a pure heart means gratefully recognizing the grace of God and letting that thankfulness overflow in our words and actions. Just as it was natural for Abel to bring his first and best to God, we, too, bring our very best offerings and place them at the Lord’s feet. We don’t do this begrudgingly, but joyfully. How could we not give our all to the Lord who has given us everything?

In the weeks ahead, we are going to look at other aspects of what it means to be a superhero of faith. But it has to begin here. It has to begin in the heart. The greatest acts of kindness, charity, and service are nothing if they come from a heart of unbelief. And so we look to Abel as our example this morning and we pray, “*Create in me a pure heart, O God.*” **Amen.**

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