

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Genesis of Our Faith: Grace
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Genesis 4:1-16; Romans 3:21-26

I would like to begin this morning by asking each of you to think of your favorite Disney or Pixar movie. Or if you don't have a favorite movie with one of those two studios then to just think of your favorite movie. Close your eyes if you need to. Have one in mind? Good, then answer a single question about your movie of choice, does it contain a rescue of some sort? Is its premise that someone is in trouble, or gets into trouble, and someone else comes and rescues them? The rescue could be from a villain or an accident or simply from themselves. Ok, so how many of you have rescue as the theme of your movie? I asked you to think about rescue for two reasons. First, so that you would be aware of what a widespread genre this is in movies and literature. Second, I asked because the concept of rescue is at the heart of both of our stories this morning. Yes, they are both rescue stories, almost like Disney and Pixar, except with one great difference. And that difference is that none of the people rescued in our stories this morning deserves to be rescued. They are not innocents caught up in some villain's plot. They are guilty as charged. In order to understand this difference in stories, let's recap both of our lessons.

Story one is the famous Cain and Abel story. Cain is the older brother much beloved by his mother Eve. Abel is the second born and almost an afterthought...which I, as a second child, understand. Cain is a tiller of the ground, which means he works hard tilling, planting, harvesting. He is dependent on a multiplicity of factors, rain, sun, seed as he strives to feed himself. Abel on the other hand, is a shepherd who merely follows his sheep and can move them from pasture to pasture. As the story goes, they both bring an offering to God. Now we are not sure why they do this. There is no requirement as to what or when to bring an offering to God, or even a command to do so. The upshot though is that Abel's offering, which is offered after Cain's offering, is accepted, and Cain's is not. The first son is not happy. In fact, he is furious, and his fury overtakes his reason. Even after God gives Cain a cryptic piece of advice about mastering sin, Cain plots and carries out the murder of his brother. The resulting punishment is that the ground is cursed, Cain is driven from the soil and made an isolated wanderer, likely to fall victim to the next "Cain" he meets. Cain's life is now at risk, but only because he is guilty of premeditated murder. He does not deserve to be rescued.

Story two is a bit harder to wrap our heads around. This is the story the Apostle Paul tells in his letter to the church at Rome. I say it is a story because, even through the dense theological language, there lurks the story of a good creation gone bad because of Adam's poor choice in the garden. Included in this story is the call of God to Israel as the community through which God will save this wayward creation, but also Israel's inability to fulfill this salvation mission. The result of these failures is that both Jew and Gentile have allowed the preexisting conditions we

spoke of last week (dissatisfaction, desire and deity), to direct their life choices in inappropriate ways. Dissatisfaction has led to anger and misery. Desire has led to theft, murder and war. Deity has led to the diminishment and enslavement of others. Therefore, just as Cain was guilty of premeditated murder, all human beings are guilty of premeditated sins, which bring about harm rather than good. As Paul writes, "*For there is no distinction since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*" What this verse implies is that all human beings have sinned and so do not deserve rescue either. And yet, in both of our stories, God rides to the rescue.

God rescues Cain by placing a mark on him to protect him. God rescues humanity by sending God's only Son Jesus into the world that Jesus might be a sacrifice of atonement for our sins. Why does God do this? The answer to this why can be summed up in a single word...grace. Grace, simply put, means unmerited favor. It means receiving a free gift that is undeserved and unearned. It means being rescued when we don't deserve to be rescued. God does this because this is who God is. God is gracious. God is the creator who loves the creation and desires it be rescued and not ruined. God is the one who acts graciously from the beginning to the end of this book (the Bible). This book is in fact, the greatest rescue story ever told; a rescue story based in grace. And to add one more element of rescue to these stories, God not only rescues us "**from**" but God rescues us "**for**." God rescued Cain **from** death and **for** being the creator of cities and civilizations. God rescues us **from** sin and **for** becoming a new community of love, peace, and justice. God rescues us **from** our preexisting conditions and **for** becoming a people of grace for others.

This morning, on the 4th of July I hope that you will take a moment to ponder the grace that we have received; the grace we have received in the lives offered for the freedoms that we enjoy each day. The freedoms that so many people over the almost 245 years of our nations have given to us that we have been given as a free gift. Then remember the grace that God pours out upon us each day, intending to rescue us from ourselves and for the renewal of the world. My challenge to you on this day is to spend a few moments of each morning, remembering the grace you have you been given, and asking yourself, where can I share this grace with others?