Genesis 4

Chapter Four can be divided into two main sections. The first section is what is commonly referred to as the Cain and Abel story. The second is a genealogy of Cain.

The back story of the Cain and Abel tale is that their parents, Adam and Eve, having been expelled from the garden, have sex and produce two children. The first is Cain, whose name means *"to get"* or *"to create".* The second son is Abel, whose name means *"vapor"* or *"nothingness".* The names will prove to have meaning as the story continues. The controversy in the story arises when each offers their first fruits to God. God accepts Abel's but not Cain's. Commentators have tried to explain God's choice, but the story leaves us in suspense. The writer simply implies that this mysterious God is free to do what this mysterious God wants to do. The result is that Cain is filled with rage, not at God, but at his brother. At this point God engages in a discussion with Cain. This discussion makes two interesting points about life.

The first point is that sin has a life of its own. God says, *"…sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you…"* The image is of a wild animal crouching in the high grass waiting for its next victim. It is powerful and wants to consume the unsuspecting passerby. The sin in this case is anger, a force which sometimes seems to overpower all of us. The second point is that human beings can master sin. *"…sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you and you must master it."* People have claimed that Adam and Eve's disobedience (often called "the fall") made it impossible for human beings to deal with the power of sin in their lives. This story would tell us otherwise; that we are all capable of and responsible for, dealing with sins such as anger in our lives.

Unfortunately, the story tells us that Cain makes the choice not to master his anger, but instead allows it to master him. He invites his brother to a meeting and then kills him (which is perhaps why Abel is named *"vapor"* and *"nothingness")*. Later, when God asks about Abel, Cain claims to have no knowledge of his whereabouts and responds with the famous line*, "Am I my brother's keeper?"* The actual answer is that no, he is not his brother's keeper, but he is his brother's brother; meaning he is to treat his brother with the respect due to one of God's special creatures. Cain's punishment is to be separated from the rest of humanity and wander the earth alone. This sentence is never carried out however, for when Cain cries out the punishment is more than he can bare, God chooses to show mercy and places a protective mark on him.

This protection leads to the second section in which we see the results of the commutation of Cain's sentence.   The results are mixed. On the one hand he becomes the ancestor of those who herd livestock, play music and create bronze and iron tools (remember his name can mean *"to create").* On the other hand, he is also the ancestor of Lamech, who is vengeful and will kill to protect his family's honor. Second, we see that God's name will be invoked not by Cain's offspring but by Adam and Eve's new son Seth and his descendants. In a sense, with Seth, God is trying again to help humanity begin again.

Reflection: This story helps us to reflect on the difficulties that human beings have living together. In a world that does not always seem fair, it is easy to become envious of the good things that come to others. In the face of that envy we are given the choice of how to respond. Will we let the envy/anger master us, or will we master it? The good news, according to the writer of Genesis is that, with God's help, we can master it and live in right relationship with others. And even if we don't, God will not abandon us, but will continue to work with us across the years.

Questions:
1. Think about a time when you were consumed with anger. How did you deal with it?
2. Have you ever had a time when God's favor seemed to shine on others more than on you? What was that like. How did you come to grips with it?
3. Think about a time when God was gracious to you. What was that like?