"Sons of Adam - Sons of God"
Luke 23:34

Ash Wednesday - February 13, 2002
The First Word
"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do."
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Boise, Idaho
Pastor Tim Pauls

"Abel's blood for vengeance pleaded to the skies;
but the blood of Jesus for our pardon cries"
(TLH 158:4)

Tonight, we look at the first word of our Lord from the cross; but the story begins long before.

I. Sons of Adam

Adam and Eve first are parents of two sons. When the first one, Cain, is born, mother Eve rejoices, "I have a acquired a man, the Lord;" she is persuaded that God's promise is already coming true, and she believes that she has already given birth to the Savior, the Lord of life. Cain will be anything but.

Adam can't be all that disappointed with his firstborn son, either. Cain grows up to be a farmer, "a tiller of the ground," like Dad.

Abel is the second son of Adam, a fine boy in his own right. Rather than "a tiller of the ground," Abel grows up to be "a keeper of sheep." The world's first shepherd has arrived.

The sons of Adam both offer sacrifices to God. God accepts Abel's sacrifice and respects it, because Abel makes the sacrifice in thanksgiving, by faith (Heb. 11:4); the shepherd turns out to be a worthy priest, too. However, God rejects Cain's offering, for Cain does not make the sacrifice in faith. This leaves Cain furious. Jealous. Tempted.

Cain speaks words to his brother Abel, words that are kind enough to lure his brother into a field. There, with no further ado, Cain kills his brother. The wages of sin is proven to be death. It's the first murder.

The first one to die because of sin is a shepherd who makes a pleasing sacrifice to God. Hmmm.

And now, the cover-up begins. The Lord inquires of Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" And Cain responds, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

"I do not know." It's a pathetic attempt to hide his sin, for both know that he's lying. After all, the Lord already knows all that has happened. He is not asking because He needs information; He is giving Cain opportunity to confess. But there is no confession to be heard; instead, "I don't know," the first pleading of the 5th. Perhaps Cain is foolish enough to attempt a cover-up; perhaps he is just saying, "I'm not going to tell you, because I don't recognize your authority." In any event, it's a

blatant lie: He knows where his brother is; he just can't bring himself to admit it.

Whether he admits it or not, there are still consequences: The Lord says, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground. 11"So now you are cursed from the earth, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. 12"When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. A fugitive and a vagabond you shall be on the earth." Cain poured Abel's blood into the ground; the ground will no longer cooperate with its tiller.

Cain's response is telling: "My punishment is greater than I can bear!" He protests the consequence, but he does not protest his innocence: "I do not know" doesn't last very long before the Lord. He now speaks the truth: His sin and his punishment are more than he can bear and live. He faces eternal death.

What does the Lord do? Along with the consequences, He speaks words of kindness. He promises protection for Cain as long as he lives. More than that, He has already promised a Savior to Cain's parents, and that Savior is for him, too. Cain cannot bear his sin and punishment; so the Son of God will bear His sin and accept the punishment for the sake of Cain.

You see, when the Lord confronts sin, He doesn't say, "I don't know." He calls sin what it is in His Law. And He promises repentance for the penitent sinner in His Gospel.

II. Son of God

A similar course of events takes place centuries later. This time, it's a whole mob of Cains on a murderous mission. As they lead another Abel into the countryside, there is no kind persuasion; just shouts of "Crucify Him!" In some ways, this Abel has much in common with the murdered brother in Genesis 4. He is a shepherd-He is, in fact, the Good Shepherd, the Tender of the sheep of God. And like the Abel of old, He makes a sacrifice that is pleasing to God. That sacrifice is at hand.

In some ways, He is far different from Abel. He is not another sinful mortal, facing death sooner or later. He's the sinless Son of God. When Abel's blood was spilled into the ground, it cried out. When Christ's blood is shed, the ground shakes.

As this Abel is hoisted into the air for this far more excruciating death, He speaks; and His first words are astonishing: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do."

And with those words, it's clear that this isn't just a murder. It's not just a mob lynching. This is a sacrifice, and the attendants are caught in a confusing who's who:

The Priest is the Sacrifice.

The Shepherd is the Lamb.

The sheep are the Cains below the cross.

And the Abel on the cross becomes Cain.

The Priest is the Sacrifice and the Shepherd is the Lamb. In the Old Testament, as priests offered

sacrifices, they explained to the crowd what they were doing (cf. Ex. 24:8). This Priest does the same, uttering, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." He announcing this astonishing truth: He is not on that cross because they wrestled Him onto it; He is there voluntarily, at the will of His Father in heaven. He is making the pleasing sacrifice for the sins of the world. He is winning salvation for mankind. The Priest is the Sacrifice for sin. The Good Shepherd is laying down His life for the sheep.

And the sheep are the Cains below! He is winning salvation for those who are putting Him on the cross, and He's doing it by taking their place. He is suffering God's wrath for their sin, so that they might be forgiven. This Abel becomes Cain to save His brother! He takes Cain's place and suffers God's punishment for murder and all sin, in the hope that sinners repent and believe in Him.

And so He tells them what is going on as they nail Him to the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do."

This does not mean that the Lord excuses their sin because they don't know any better. If He just excused sins away, He wouldn't be on the cross. Rather, He notes a distinction in sinners below Him.

There are those who sin in defiance of God. They see no need to repent of their sin, for they think they can bear it and face no punishment from God. Among those at the cross are the chief priests and Pharisees, who delight to put Jesus to death and think that they are doing God a favor in doing so. They have no desire for forgiveness because they see no need for it. On the other hand, there are those who "do not know what they do." They do not sin because they wish to defy God, or see no need for forgiveness; instead, they sin because they foolishly follow the temptations of the devil, the world and their sinful flesh. When confronted with their sin, they realize it is more than they can bear; and they are ready for repentance. We might consider the centurion as a sinner like this; though he supervises the execution of the Son of God, in the end he concludes, "Truly this was the Son of God."

Now, Christ has died for both types of sinners, for Christ has died for all. But those who declare they've no need for forgiveness throw away His grace in doing so. Those who "know not what they do," and are moved to repentance when confronted with their sin-they are indeed forgiven.

Near the beginning of the world, Cain defiantly says, "I do not know." Centuries later, for Cain and for all, the Savior prays, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." Nailed to the cross, He does not first pray for Himself, but for those who put Him there; for He allows Himself to be put there for their sake. He bears the sin and the punishment that we cannot.

With sinners, there's a lot of ignorance, foolishness and stupidity that goes with sin. But with God, there is no ignorance, foolishness or stupidity. His Son's journey to the cross is with purpose. His knowledge is sure. So are His promises. And because He knows sin all too well, He has fulfilled His promise and sent His Son to die for the sins of the world.

III. Ignorance and Bliss

If aliens from another planet were to land and conduct a study of the sinful nature, they would surely come to this conclusion: The Old Adam sure doesn't know very much. One of the sinner's favorite phrases is "I don't know."

"I don't know"-just like Cain, spoken in denial that the sin ever happened. It is easier to deny we did the sin than admit that we could be that sinful, selfish…wrong. It's as if we believe that we're innocent before God until proven guilty.

"I don't know"-spoken like Aaron at Mount Sinai: "'I cast [the gold] into the fire, and this calf came out' (Ex. 32:24). I didn't know that was going to happen." People like to build a comfort zone of ignorance into carefully calculated sin. "I didn't know it was that kind of movie." "I didn't know it would lead to something worse." "I didn't know it was yours when I took it." It's as if we believe that we're not guilty of sin if we can frame it to look like it was done in ignorance. In that case, the truth is not that we didn't know better, but that we've willfully planned to deceive so that we could make an intentional sin appear accidental. Sin upon sin upon sin.

There's the "I don't know" of impulsive sin. "How could you do something so wrong?" we may be asked. "I don't know" is the common response. The answer is because we are so wrong. But we'd rather not admit that.

"I don't know." It's a favorite phrase of the Old Adam because we want to avoid responsibility for sin. Ignorance isn't bliss. It's terror, anxiety, or even damnation when it's a tragic attempt to cover up sin.

If we believe this, it is only because we believe the devil's lie. The Lord doesn't say that you're innocent until proven guilty; He says you're guilty from birth because you're guilty. He doesn't say that sins done in ignorance offend Him less; they are just as wicked in His sight. He doesn't say that you can get rid of your sin by denying it happened; this is trying to get to heaven by works-and by lies!, and this certainly robs Christ of His glory.

There are, of course, far more anguished "I don't knows," because there are lots of uncertainties in a sinful world. There are times when even the most godly Christian will say, "I don't know what to do in this situation." A long time later they may say, "I still don't know if I did the right thing."

The Lord doesn't deal in uncertainties. His Word is sure. His Law calls sin, sin. Unintentional sins are still sin. Sins that we "got away with" are still sins. Sins we don't even realize we committed are still sins. He tells us this for a purpose: So that we might know our need for a Savior.

Then He points us to the Savior on the cross, who utters these sure and certain words: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." Knowing your sins and your sinfulness, Christ has died for you. He has taken the punishment for all of it upon Himself, so that He might give to you His holiness and grace.

Have you committed intentional sins? It is not too late: Repent, and be forgiven.

Have you feigned ignorance to excuse your transgressions? Christ sacrifices Himself for this, too, to grant you unfeigned grace. Have you sinned simply because you truly didn't know any better? The Lord has died for you. Are there things you have done, where to this day you are unsure if they were right or wrong? Confess your sinfulness and trust in the Savior; and even though you may never be sure if a specific action was right or wrong, you can be sure that you are forgiven for all of your sins. He promises this is true.

The Lord does not deal in uncertainties, but in certain truth. It is certain that all sin offends God; it is equally certain that Christ has died for all sin. His grace and life are yours in abundance; the only way that you can not be saved is to cling to your sin and refuse His forgiveness.

This is why He calls out, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." Abel's blood for vengeance pleaded to the skies, but the blood of Jesus for our pardon cries (Heb. 12:24).

For His sake, you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen