



# St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

Passion Sunday, being the Fifth Sunday in Lent, April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2011

**✠ In the Name of the Father and of the Son  
and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN ✠**

Listening to the Gospel lesson appointed for today – St. John 8:46-59 – is a bit like turning on the TV in the middle of a soap opera you haven't watched in very long time. The cast of characters is quite familiar. The tone of the dialogue is exactly what one would expect. But it's difficult to figure out what the characters are talking about because you weren't in on the beginning of the discussion.

The Gospels make it clear that from the very beginning of Jesus' ministry lawyers from Jerusalem's Inside the Beltway crowd – Pharisees and Sadducees – dogged his footsteps, hoping to uncover evidence to indict him on charges of sacrilege or blasphemy. And today's Gospel tells of what happened soon after a particularly egregious attempt to frame him.

The Pharisees had confronted him with a woman who had been caught in of adultery, demanding he pronounce sentence upon her. The Law of Moses decreed adulterers should be stoned to death and there were no alternatives -- no provisions for a suspended sentence or community service; no probation for first offenders. Judges too squeamish to impose a death sentence were deemed guilty of condoning adultery; an offense also punishable by death.

We are all familiar with what happened: Jesus didn't try to wriggle out of passing sentence. Indeed, he tacitly affirmed the justice of the death penalty. But he made it

impossible for any of the woman's accusers to carry it out: "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." It was – and still is – a challenge that is blasphemy to accept. After all, only God is without sin.

The Pharisees were furious and their response might well be translated as: "Who the heck do you think you are?" Very much to their surprise, Jesus proceeded to tell them who he is – in utterly explicit terms: "I am the light of the world. He that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life," he said.

By this time, the religious lawyers were chewing carpet. And the results of the hot and heavy cross-examination that followed did little to lower their blood pressure. During the course of it, Jesus proclaimed his divinity no less than six times.

If you hear anyone claim that nowhere in the Gospels does Jesus declare himself to be God, refer them to verses 12-58 of the eighth chapter of St. John's gospel. He asserts his divinity on plenty of other occasions, to be sure, but these verses record six statements in which Jesus unequivocally asserts his claim to divine Sonship.

***Vs. 12:** I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life*

***Vs. 18:** I am the one that beareth witness of myself, and the Father that sent me beareth witness of me.*

***Vs. 28:** When ye have lifted up the Son of man, then ye shall know that I am he.*

***Vs. 42:** If God were your father, ye would love me: for I proceeded forth and came from God.*

***Vs. 54:** If I honour myself, my honour is nothing: it is my Father that honoureth me; of whom ye say, that he is your God.*

**Vs. 58:** *Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I AM.* [In Hebrew, the statement "I am" is also the name of God – Yahweh or Jehovah – a name so holy it can never be uttered aloud.]

These are not in any way mealy-mouthed, cryptic or obscure statements. In each of them, Jesus unambiguously asserts his divinity. And the Pharisees understood precisely what he was saying. They were so outraged, according to Verse 59, that they picked up stones in order to stone him to death . . .

From our present vantage point in history, it is easy to consider the First Century Pharisees as a remarkably unenlightened lot. But, in fact, we have no more right to pass judgment on them than they had the right to pass judgment on the woman taken in adultery.

We have no right to assume the Pharisees' grasp of the faith was any less firm than our own. For starters, contrast the Pharisees rock solid faith with the wishy washy assumptions of many modern Christians. The Pharisees would have had no time at all for today's popular notion that belief in God is somehow "unscientific" and that to do so requires us to suspend all rational thought processes.

This, after all, is the unspoken presumption that underlies the notion that the mere willingness to acknowledge God's existence achieves our salvation. But, then, as the Church Father Tertullian pointed out, if mere belief in God were sufficient for salvation, Satan would be saved because he certainly believes. The issue is not "Does God exist?" but "Does God care?" It is acceptance of the latter proposition that sets us on the road to salvation – as good Pharisees would have told you.

Condemning the Pharisees for their failure to recognize Jesus Christ as their long awaited Messiah is quite unjustified – an act of 20/20 hindsight. How would you feel if you met a guy at the Inner Harbor proclaiming that he was the Son of God? Amused? Outraged? You betcha!

The Pharisees might have met Jesus face to face, but they hadn't yet witnessed his death on the cross and the literal fulfillment of the familiar prophecies. Nor had they learned of the wonder of his resurrection. In other words, they hadn't had our advantages.

No doubt many of them – up to the time he proclaimed his divinity – considered Jesus to be a very nice man. Many would probably have accepted him as a human messiah. But Jesus denied them that option. The great Anglican writer C. S. Lewis pointed out there is nothing "nice" about pretending to be the Son of God. People who do that sort of thing are madmen or megalomaniacs, charlatans or villains.

Either we must accept Jesus for who he says he is, or reject him completely. We don't have the option of believing that he was a very nice man – perhaps the quite the nicest who ever walked the earth – but just a bit confused about his parentage. We don't have that option because Jesus didn't intend to give it to us. *AMEN*

*To the only wise God, our Saviour, be glory and majesty dominion and power,  
now and forever, AMEN*