



# St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Second Sunday After Christmas, January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son  
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

This week marks the Feast of The Epiphany, which marks Jesus Christ's revelation of himself to mankind in general and the gentiles in particular. The lessons for the Second Sunday After Christmas look forward to this event and there is one lesson in particular that's rather puzzling

It is a passage from St. Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians (4:3-4). It reads as follows: "If our Gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them."

Paul's words "the god of this world" echoes Jesus' expression (*John 12:31*) "the Prince of this World" – a reference to Satan. In other words, Paul is warning us that no matter how clearly God manifests himself to mankind, there will always be folks who, at the devil's instigation, refuse to believe.

It is a point Jesus makes in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. Tormented in hell, the rich man begs Abraham to raise Lazarus the beggar from the dead to warn his five brothers to amend their lives. Abraham sadly tells him (*Luke 16:31*): "If they hear not Moses and the prophets,

neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead."

It is an aspect of Epiphany we rarely consider: People's unwillingness to recognize God and manifestations of his works in human history – even when they are right in front of their noses. There's nothing new about this. It is not a phenomenon that arrived with the Coming of Christ. It is a constant theme of the Old Testament.

The Children of Israel routinely re-interpreted – or simply ignored – events hailed as manifestations of God's intervention in history by the people who had actually lived through them. The Book of Judges, for example, reveals that less than 100 years after Joshua and the children of Israel, with God's help, had conquered the Promise Land, the Ten Commandments were being utterly ignored.

They weren't merely flouting a few trivial points of the Law. The problem was they had abandoned God's Law in its entirety. And in abandoning God's Law, they actually abandoned God. This might seem strange to us – quite incomprehensible, even. How could they have forgotten God when they owed Him so much?

After all, he had saved them from Pharaoh only a few decades earlier. He had led them out of captivity in Egypt. He had brought them in safety through the perils of the wilderness. And he had kept his covenant to give them in a land of milk and honey by helping them to conquer its Canaanite inhabitants; people who were far more sophisticated than the Children of Israel in the realm of military technology.

The Canaanites had a huge technological edge over the Israelites. They had iron weapons, for instance, while the Israelites were armed only with bronze weapons. The Canaanites lived in fortified cities, while the Israelites were obliged to live the life of nomadic herdsmen. Neither victors nor the vanquished were in any doubt as to why the underdog had triumphed: The God of Abraham had intervened on the side of the Children of Israel.

Yet in the Book of Judges, we discover the Children of Israel have abandoned the victor for the vanquished. We discover they have turned from worshipping the one true God who led them to victory to worshipping Baal, the god of the Canaanites' invention, an imaginary deity who presided over the Canaanites' defeat.

The history of God's relationship with the Children of Israel uncannily resembles the history of his relationship with the American people. But it would be wrong to assume that this is an entirely unique phenomenon. It is a story that repeats itself time after time through Old Testament and it is also a story that has repeated itself throughout the history of Christendom.

Time and time again, God saved the Children of Israel from the consequences of their own apostasy and folly. And time and time again, God has saved Christian nations in similar circumstances – from the cruel

Islamic invasions of Europe in the eighth century through the carnage of the 20th Century wars. Yet on virtually every occasion, a subsequent modest spiritual was followed by a return to much the same vainglorious status quo.

One reason for this is not complicated: Human beings, for all their declarations of undying devotion, don't seem to find God all that impressive. Adam and Eve, for instance, regularly met God face to face. Yet far from standing in awe of him, they figured they could do his job better than he could. And a lot of pious churchgoing people decided much the same thing when they came face to face with Jesus Christ.

Of our many defects, one is truly illogical: We assume we know ourselves better than our creator. When the Children of Israel arrived in Canaan, they decided the Canaanites' manner of worshipping God was much more interesting than the way God instructed them to worship him. Tailgate parties and barbecues are far more fun than singing hymns and examining your conscience.

The problem is that the way we worship defines our understanding of God. If, in our worship, we treat God with the awe and respect due to the ultimate authority in the universe, chances are we will make an effort to live lives that are pleasing to him. If, on the other hand, our worship sanctions primarily that which pleases us, we will, in fact, be worshipping ourselves. And, in doing so, it is the god of this world we will be pleasing -- an altogether more terrifying prospect. *AMEN.*

**To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be  
Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power,  
Both Now and Forever. *AMEN.***