



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Second Sunday After Easter, May 8th 2011

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

Today is called Good Shepherd Sunday because Jesus, in the Gospel reading, likens God's role towards us as that of a good shepherd. It is beautiful, poetic imagery, but it is worth asking: Is it really deserved?

When you consider where God actually decided to plant the children of Israel one's forced to ask one's self if he actually deserves the compliment. It's hard to believe that sheep – silly animals that they are – would consider a shepherd “good” if he decided the Holy Land would be the ideal place for them to live..

Indeed, with all the world to choose from, the Holy Land is just about the last place you'd decide to dump your class favorites. I suppose the North Pole and the South Pole would be rather less desirable. So might the Sahara, the Kalahari and a few other swathes of inhospitable territory. But that's about it. Ninety nine percent of the globe would offer folks a softer life than the Holy Land.

For starters, it's hard to grow things. Much of it is what the Bible calls wilderness. Most of it is so arid it requires irrigation to make the land produce. Nor does it have much in the way of natural resources.

There are no big trees like the cedars of

Lebanon. There are ore deposits, of course. But they tend to be off the beaten track in somewhat inhospitable areas such as the Negev Desert and the Sinai. There are huge chemical deposits on the Dead Sea. Salt and bitumen floats on its surface – a permanent reminder of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. But this does little to make up for the unpleasant nature of the terrain.

These are by no means the Holy Land's only drawbacks. It is also a country that is difficult for a small number of people to defend. Its wadis and canyons, hills and mountains are ideal for guerrilla warfare. But guerrillas can't defend a nation state. What's more, these natural obstacles do not offset the disadvantages of the Holy Land's wide valleys and plains that favor huge, well disciplined standing armies.

Although the Children of Israel were redoubtable fighters, even at the zenith of its power, Israel's population was never large enough to maintain an army sufficiently large to fend off the powerful nations surrounding them.

These would have been problems enough for a nation located in an obscure and far away part of the world -- the sort of place nobody in the right mind would feel inclined

so much as to visit. But while Israel might have been an unappealing place to live, it stood of at the hub of the ancient world. Anybody who wanted to go any place dry shod had to use it as a highway.

Egyptians marched across it on the way to attack Lebanon. Hittites, Assyrians and Babylonians marched across it on their way to attack Egypt. Alexander the Great marched across it to attack absolutely everyone he could lay his hands on. So did the Romans. Israel's unhappy geographical location meant that, throughout their history, the Jews were always under threat of attack or in a state of subjection.

The reason God planted his chosen people this dreadful place -- rather than, say, Africa, where in many places food literally drops off trees -- is that they weren't chosen in order for them to have it easy. They weren't chosen because they were somehow morally and spiritually superior to the other nations of the earth. Quite to the contrary. They were chosen because they're so much like the rest of us: no better and no worse.

God plonked them down in the Holy Land because he wanted to teach them (and through them, the world) a vitally important lesson -- a lesson that would not have been learned in a more salubrious region. The most effective way to get this lesson across was for God to plant his chosen people to in the most vulnerable position imaginable.

God's purpose is to teach us the vast difference between himself and mankind; to teach us that he is the boss and not we ourselves; and that he will protect and care for those who put their trust in him. And in God's usual economical fashion, the location provided both the lesson and the means of its dissemination.

It was thanks solely to God's intervention that the Children of Israel were able to settle in the land of Canaan. The people who fought under Joshua were simply runaway slaves; unschooled in the use of arms; untutored in military strategy. The Canaanite soldiers were far superior to the children of Israel.

Yet the Canaanites were vanquished by this rabble. Their cities were destroyed and put to the torch. The handful that survived must have been numb with shock at defeats the best military wisdom told them should never have happened.

One might imagine the Israelites, after such an experience, would have learned to put their trust in God for all time. But not so. Soon they were doing what was right in their own eyes, including worshipping the more congenial Canaanite gods. And slowly but surely they were dispossessed of everything their ancestors had won.

It was a lesson learned, unlearned and learned again throughout Israel's history. It is the predominant theme of the Old Testament is -- Israel exists not thanks to its own abilities and resources but thanks only to God. It is the message of Ezekiel's vision of the valley of the dry bones; one of the lessons appointed for today.

Among the lessons to be learned from Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones is that God is always ready to forgive us. But first we need to confront our sins honestly and seek his forgiveness. Things may seem hopeless to us, but just as he miraculously restored the Jewish people to their homeland 2,500 years ago, so -- like a Good Shepherd -- God helps those who call for his aid today. *AMEN.*