



# St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Road  
Timonium, Maryland 21093  
Telephone: (410) 560-6776

Rogationtide, The Fifth Sunday After Easter, May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2011

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

Rogationtide, at its inception in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, was a time of penitence. This is why the liturgical color for the three Rogation Days – Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday – is penitential purple. Rogationtide, however, coincides with the planting season and in the Middle Ages it began to take on an agrarian flavor. Thus even today at Rogationtide, rural congregations pray for bountiful harvests.

Here in 21<sup>st</sup> century urban America our main problem is not associated with where our next meal is coming from. One of the greatest problems we face is cutting back on the size of the darned portions. Our problems don't arise from dearth. They stem from abundance. We are a consumer society, which means we are never satisfied. Thus our Rogationtide reflections might more aptly deal with acquisitiveness and the great sin that can arise from it – covetousness.

The Book of Exodus (20:17) tells us: "Thou shalt not covet . . ." And the Bible contains a number of case studies on the subject. Take, for instance, the case of King Ahab, who ruled Israel (Samaria) from about 919 B.C. to 897 B.C. We know a great deal about Ahab.

*First Kings and Second Chronicles* deal with him at length. He was a charismatic leader, able administrator and brilliant general. He had all the qualities that should have made him one of Israel's most highly revered and respected kings. Instead, he is one of the most despised.

Ahab was totally dominated by his wife – a great beauty named Jezebel. Both were fanatical followers of the cult of the Canaanite God Baal. Their efforts to promote the worship of Baal brought them into conflict with the Prophet Elijah. But this does not account for the contempt in which Ahab was held.

Ahab had so many great qualities – not least courage – that he should have been able to retain some elements of a decent reputation. And the reason he didn't was his besetting sin of covetousness. He controlled all Israel and yet he was never satisfied.

*I Kings 21* tells us that next door to Ahab's palace in Jezreel lived a man named Naboth, who owned a vineyard that ran up to the palace wall – right at the place where Ahab had set his heart on expanding his garden. Ahab begged his neighbor to sell.

But Naboth refused. The land was his family's patrimony and selling it would have been contrary to the Law of Moses.

Ahab asked Naboth to name his own price: anything he wanted. Again, Naboth piously declined. At this point most ordinary people would have shrugged their shoulders, swallowed their disappointment and got on with other plans that didn't involve Naboth or his backyard. But not Ahab.

Beside himself with rage at the rebuff, he took to his bed in a fit of petulance and refused to eat. Jezebel solved the problem by framing Naboth on charges of blasphemy. He was sentenced to death by a kangaroo court and, as a consequence, his goods were forfeit to the state – Ahab.

A second case history in covetousness involves King David. Like Ahab, David was a charismatic leader, an able administrator and a brilliant general. But unlike Ahab, he was openhearted and generous with his worldly goods. Also by contrast with Ahab – who was slavishly besotted with Jezebel – David had a roving eye.

*II Samuel 11* tells us David was hanging out on the roof of his palace in Jerusalem one evening when he spied a pretty girl taking a bath on the roof of a neighboring house. She was, he knew, the wife of one of his most loyal comrades-in-arms, Uriah the Hittite. Uriah was away campaigning with David's army – putting himself in harm's way to advance David's cause.

David didn't need women. He was a polygamist, contrary to the Law of Moses. If that weren't enough, he had scores of concubines as well. He could quite easily have done the decent thing. But he didn't. He coveted Uriah's wife, invited her over for a drink and hopped into bed with her. Eventually, Bathsheba became pregnant and when it proved impossible to foist the child off on to Uriah as his own, David ordered Joab, his ruthless commander, to put Uriah

into a position where he would inevitably be killed in battle.

One thing to be learned from these evil abuses of power is that intrinsically good people are subject to exactly the same sort of temptations to which intrinsically wicked people are subject.

It wasn't sinful for Ahab to want to make a vegetable garden out of Naboth's vineyard. It wasn't sinful for him to want it so much that he offered an extravagantly high price for it. The sin arose when he refused to accept Naboth's refusal to sell it. His hunger for the land led to the judicial murder of his neighbour, Naboth. And precisely the same is true of David: Like Ahab, David wanted something that wasn't his and in his lust he betrayed one of his closest friends.

Acquisitiveness becomes covetousness when it tempts us to break God's law. Jesus says that God's first and most important commandment is to love him with all our hearts and with all our souls and with all our minds and to prove it by loving our neighbors as much as we love ourselves. Coveting things that belong to other people prevents us from doing this.

There's nothing wrong with wanting fancier clothes, a larger house and a faster car. It's when we allow our desire for things we haven't got to poison our relationships with the people who do have them that our acquisitiveness becomes sinful.

God doesn't tell us not to be acquisitive. He simply tells us – in Verse 17 of the 20th Chapter of Exodus -- not to lust after things that belong to other people: their spouses, their homes and their possessions. He doesn't tell us this to make us jump through hoops, but so that we might live harmony with our selves and our fellowmen. Covetousness is rightly called a deadly sin – for nothing can poison neighborly relationships faster. *AMEN.*