



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Fourth Sunday After Easter, May 2nd, 2010

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

The Collect for today is a petition to "Almighty God, who alone canst order the wills and affections of sinful men . . ." And I thought it might be worth spending a couple of minutes considering just how he goes about the business of ordering our wills and affections.

One thing that's clear is that God doesn't order us about in the way we are inclined to order other people about. He doesn't shriek orders at us like a drill sergeant and then zap us with lightning bolts when we ignore him. To see the way he works, we should study his first pupils – the children of Israel. For starters, we might consider the implications of the place he had picked out for them to live.

The Holy Land is a rather peculiar place for God to have selected as a homeland for his Chosen People. It's not particularly fertile. In fact, growing things there takes a lot of trouble. Much of it is wilderness." Most of it is quite arid. There is not much in the way of natural resources. There, for example, are no trees like the cedars of Lebanon. Ore and chemical deposits are in out of the way, inhospitable places like Sinai, Negev, and the Dead Sea.

It's a difficult place to defend. Wadis and canyons, craggy hills and mountains make it ideal for guerrilla warfare. But guerrillas can't defend a nation state. And besides, the natural obstacles do not offset the disadvantages of wide valleys and plains that favor large and well-disciplined standing armies. The Children of Israel were formidable fighters but even at the height of Israel's power, there were never enough of them to fend off the powerful nations surrounding them.

Worse, the Holy Land stood at the hub of the ancient world. Folks who wanted to go any place dry shod used it as a highway. Egyptians crossed it to attack Lebanon. Hittites, Assyrians and Babylonians crossed it to attack Egypt. And Alexander the Great marched across it to attack absolutely everyone he could lay his hands on.

Why did God put his Chosen People in a dump like this when he could have put in far more attractive places – Africa or Europe, or the best of all, the United States of America? The answer is God was trying to teach them – and us – something that can't be taught in a comfortable backwater where food falls off the trees.

God is trying to teach us through them that he is in complete charge at all times. He was trying to us that even the most powerful human beings are subject to his laws and are utterly powerless before him.

He is trying to demonstrate that he will protect, defend and nurture all those who put their trust in him. It is not an unduly complicated lesson, but to make it quite clear, God had to plant his Chosen People in the most vulnerable spot conceivable.

It was solely thanks to God's intervention the Israelites were able to settle the land of Canaan. From a human perspective it was a hopeless quest. The people who conquered Canaan under Joshua were runaway slaves. The Canaanite military was far better armed and equipped and yet they were utterly vanquished by the Israelite rabble. It was an event unique in military history – a miracle, pure and simple.

One might imagine that after such a demonstration of God's power the Children of Israel would have learned – once and for all time – to put their trust in God. And it's quite clear that the men and women who, under Joshua, had conquered Canaan were acutely conscious of God's hand in the victory. But it's no less clear that this humble sense of awareness lasted only a couple of generations.

Read the Book of Judges and you'll see that God's role had entirely been forgotten. The people turned to worshipping the more congenial Canaanite gods. Everyone "did what was right in his own eyes." Slowly but surely, they were dispossessed of everything their ancestors had won at God's command.

The Book of Judges illustrate in the minutest detail the consequences that follow when a god-fearing people abandon their faith. First

comes a breakdown in social and sexual morality. The crime rate starts to rise; first slowly, then, exponentially. Finally, society disintegrates altogether.

This is a predominant theme of the Old Testament -- echoing and re-echoing throughout it. The message is that we exist not thanks to its own abilities and resources, but thanks to God's grace alone.

God would much prefer us to learn this lesson the easy way – by learning it from the history of the Children of Israel. But history teaches us it is a lesson that has been learned, unlearned and learned again – at the cost of untold human misery – throughout our history. And current events show that our generation is no more inclined to learn than the Children of Israel were in the days of the judges.

We constantly seek to control of our own destinies. We consistently try to do his thinking for him, as if our tiny finite minds can devise a better plan of action than God's infinite mind. We try to rely on our own limited resources rather than on his infinite supply. When this gets us into trouble, we blame God for abandoning us.

The good news is that God is always ready to forgive us for our mistakes and to set thing right again. Indeed, that is why he sent us Jesus Christ.

And this – the most important lesson of all – is eloquently summed up by St. John: "So God loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish but have everlasting life." *AMEN*

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