



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

Quinquagesima, Sunday Next before Lent, February 14th, 2010

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

The thirteenth chapter of St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians – his glorious sermon on the vital importance of love for mankind – might best be described as Christianity 101. Yet, paradoxically, when one looks back at the great heroes of the Old Testament very few of them seem to exhibit the quality St. Paul claims is absolutely essential for our salvation.

Take Joseph, for instance: If the Church should take a market survey of the Sunday School stories that stuck (as opposed to the Sunday school stories that didn't), I'll bet you 10 to 1 the story about Joseph – owner of the coat of many colors – comes near the very top of the list.

Even dullards and day-dreamers seem to remember the story of Joseph: how he was his family's youngest son and his father's favorite; how his older brothers were jealous of him and sold him to the Midianites; how the Midianites sold him into slavery in Egypt; and how he rose from being a jailbird to the most powerful position in Egypt after Pharaoh.

There are a number of plausible explanations for why the story of Joseph exercises such a remarkable fascination on children's minds and, for that matter, on adult minds too. But perhaps the best explanation is that the story of Joseph encapsulates all the essential elements of the classical fairy story, yet, far from being a fairy story, it is actually history.

For starters, Joseph's remarkable rise in the world is thanks to no particular merit on his own part. He succeeds simply because God, for some inexplicable reason, is fond of him. Joseph is The Bible's answer to Cinderella, and God is cast in the role of fairy Godmother.

From the human perspective, perhaps one of the most reassuring things about Joseph is that he is not a particularly pleasant person. Far from it, he's very much like one of us – all too human.

He is a pip-squeak know-all and braggart whose arrogant behavior richly warrants the animosity of his older brothers. Indeed, his boastful claims that his brothers and even father would eventually pay him the sort of homage due to royalty even gets on his father's nerves.

I, for one, was not in the least bit sorry when his brothers, sick of his constant bragging, dropped him down a pit as a prelude to auctioning him off to a bunch of nomadic Midianite traders, who, in turn, job him off as a slave to Potiphar, a naive and trusting Egyptian civil servant.

Even a long spell in jail after giving his employer's wife the brush-off, doesn't seem to inspire in Joseph any real desire to reform. He is still unpleasantly vindictive and his taste for bullying people weaker and less clever than himself remains quite unchecked.

When his brothers arrive in Egypt to buy grain for their starving kinfolk, he plots an act of revenge of exquisite mental cruelty. What's more, his intended victims are not confined solely to his older brothers (the folks who actually sold him to the Midianites). His revenge includes playing a hideous trick on his poor old doting father and his entirely innocent younger brother.

To be sure, Joseph has admirable qualities that offset his awful ones. Yet, despite his virtues, he remains a sadly flawed character, who does little over the years to conquer the faults he was born with. And it seems fair to contend that it is the very fact that Joseph succeeds despite his appalling personal flaws that human beings find so appealing.

The story of Joseph, moreover, teaches us that God frequently – indeed, almost invariably – chooses the most ordinary and unexceptional people to do his work. Take, for example, the famous men cited by St. Paul in his Epistle to the Hebrews: Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets.

Today we tend to regard such people as giants of history; heroes who were larger than life; men the like of which are not likely to be seen on earth again. Yet when we study the scriptures and examine all of their deeds – not just the occasional acts of courage – we see they were very far from heroes in Hollywood's understanding of the term.

When we take the trouble to peer through the mists of time and take a long, hard look at the lives of these real flesh and blood human beings, we discover that, like Joseph, they were really ordinary, unexceptional sorts of people.

When we first encounter Gideon, for example, he is quaking in fear over a disorganized rabble called the Midianites. He's so scared, in fact, he is threshing his grain in his wine press for fear the Midianites will confiscate it.

Samson is courageous to the point of recklessness. But he's also decidedly dim-witted and brutal with it – a sybarite so enslaved by his

animal appetites that he is unable to defend himself against the transparent scheming of his bubble-brained mistress.

Samuel, by contrast, is a man whose life is dedicated to the service of God and to the pursuit of virtue. But even he is sadly flawed. He is so besotted with his love for his sons that he fails to see their corruption and immorality is undermining his ministry.

The greatest hero of them all, David, is another giant with feet of clay. Sure, he often displays remarkable humility and piety, but ultimately he is corrupted by power. He readily commits appalling acts when they are in his own interests. He even conspires to the murder of one of his most trusted followers, in order to cover up his own sinful passions.

In other words, at the time these men strode on to the pages of history, they were simply ordinary mortals – mere men like ourselves.

But the critical difference between them and us is the way in which they responded to God – the way in which they yielded to his will; the way in which they made God "the Captain of their Souls"; the helmsman who charted their careers.

It was God who transformed the trembling, fearful Gideon into a great national leader. It was God, who inspired Samson to redeem himself – and the Jewish people – with his self-sacrificial destruction of the Philistine temple. It was God who inspired Samuel, the last Judge of Israel, to anoint David as king. It was God who, in David, transformed a simple shepherd boy into Israel's greatest king.

Even so, we are right to regard them as giants. They could, had they chosen to do so, have ignored God's call. You see, they, like us, possessed the gift of free will. But instead of rejecting that divine call they chose to submit; they chose to serve God and their fellow men.
AMEN

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