

St. Stephen's News

St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church, Timonium, Maryland

Vol. XX, Number 1

Edited by Anne Hawkins

January 13th, 2009

FROM THE RECTOR

How God uses our foul ups to further his plans

ONE OF the brightest people that ever lived – a guy named Aristotle – devoted a major portion of his life to a scientific investigation aimed at finding out if God exists. He concluded that God does indeed exist, but that he is so different from us the only way for us to get to know him is for God, himself, to take the initiative and to reveal himself to us. This, of course, is what the Bible is all about.

And there is, in fact, no better way to learn just how different God is from human beings than to study the story of the first Christmas – the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The story, of course, begins long before the stable in Bethlehem. Indeed, it goes back to the beginning of time.

It doesn't matter whether you think of the story of Adam and Eve as history or allegory; it contains a vital truth. It is that mankind lost touch with God because of our great fundamental flaw: pride and arrogance. We thought we could do his job better than he can. Amazingly – after millennia upon millennia of abject failure – we still think we can beat him at his own game.

Frankly, if I were God, I'd have dumped all creation down the garbage chute and gone back to the drawing board. But God didn't do that. And that's the first big difference between God and our selves. He doesn't give up on us no matter how badly we behave. His compassion is infinite. He never puts us out with the trash.

Uncomplicated lessons

Instead, God set about introducing himself to us again. It was a slow process. First he had to get someone to pay attention. Abraham and his family were first, and the lessons they learned were pretty basic: (a) There is only one God; (b) He always keeps his promises, no matter how improbable; (c) He doesn't want us to sacrifice our children to show how grateful to him we are. Not very impressive, you might think.

Next came Moses and the Children of Israel. The lessons they learned were equally uncomplicated: If God tells you to do something, it is (1) for your own good; (2) the right answer is: "Yes, sir! Right away, sir!" not "my brother/sister/nephew/niece is better at that than I am"; (3) If God gives you a mission, it doesn't matter how difficult it is, he will give the means to see it through.

Actually, I shouldn't have said "the lessons they learned" because they didn't learn them. Or if they did learn them, they quickly forgot them – with catastrophic results. But we have no right to look down on them because we have not done any better. Like Adam and Eve, when things go well we conclude we know better than God with results that are just as catastrophic for us as they were for the ancient Israelites.

Consequences of failure

To train a Missouri mule, you first need to whack him on the head with a two by four. That's just to get his attention. Human beings are, in many respects, similar to Missouri mules. Mercifully, God doesn't whack us on our heads when we don't pay attention. But, then, he doesn't need to. We do it to ourselves. God simply responds to our foul ups by incorporating them into his plan.

For example, the consequence of the ancient Israelites' failure to take God's advice on foreign policy was that the entire population was deported and exiled – first by the Assyrians and then by the Babylonians. The events were disasters for the

Israelites. But God used the Jewish communities scattered over the globe to broadcast the good news of Christ. Within a decade of resurrection, these widely dispersed communities had spread the Gospel from one end of the world to the other. The exiled Jews were, quite literally, the "light that lightened the gentiles."

This brings us to the Nativity: One of the great ironies of human history is that the prophecy of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem was fulfilled thanks to the machinations of a slick politician on the make named Publius Sulpicius Quirinius (Cyrenius in Greek) and his team of wily attorneys.

Bethlehem at the coming of Christ was a village in the boondocks. Its sole claim to fame was that it was the birthplace of King David. Folks who, like David, aspired to be something more than hicks, hoofed it out ASAP. Yet this was the place that the Prophet Micah had proclaimed would be birthplace of the Messiah.

Bethlehem's obscurity

Because of Bethlehem's obscurity, sensible folks didn't think it likely the Messiah would be arriving any time soon. God had other ideas. He could, of course, have fulfilled the prophecy by making Joseph – like Mary, a direct descendant of King David – a farmer instead of a carpenter. Instead, he set Joseph and his wife down in Nazareth, an equally obscure village, at absolutely the other end of the country.

At the time of Jesus' birth, the Roman government was conducting an empire wide census to make tax collection more efficient. In Judea, the local Jewish pols had managed to stave off the census (thus the tax hike) for six years – arguing it would cause massive civil unrest because God had forbidden kings to count the Jewish people.

Enter Quirinius the newly appointed Imperial Legate and military governor. His career hung on conducting the census without mayhem and he instructed his legal team to search for a loophole. They discovered a law from the days of the Judges that permitted the Israelites to be counted in their tribal capitals. Over the centuries many of these places – like Bethlehem – had fallen into total obscurity.

The rest, as they say, is history: The census was conducted at the cost of vast social upheaval. All over Judea, people were forced to trudge to their old tribal capitals to be counted – Mary and Joseph among them. Jesus was born in a cowshed because Bethlehem boasted only one inn. And human nature being what it is, the Holy Family doubtless had to pay through the nose for that dubious privilege.

God uses the commonplace

God, in short, exploited a commonplace phenomenon to fulfill Micah's prophecy – government's perpetual hunger for revenue and the fast bureaucratic footwork that is so often used to raise it. But for the census, Mary and Joseph would have had no occasion to visit Bethlehem. The more things change, the more they remain the same.

One lesson we can draw from this is that each and every one of us has a part to play in God's great work of redemption – even slick politicians and wily lawyers. But most importantly, it demonstrates how vastly God loves us. St. John summed it up thus: "So God loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." GPH✘

FROM THE CHRISTIAN EDUCATION DEPT.

Lenten Study: "Mere Christianity"

THE LENTEN Series for 2009 will be interactive study of C.S. Lewis' thought-provoking book "Mere Christianity." The se-

**THE SCRIPTURE READINGS FOR
THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
January 18th, 2009**

8.00 AM & 9.15 AM
HOLY COMMUNION
The Epistle: Roman 12:6-16
The Gospel: St. Mark 1:1-11
11.15 AM MORNING PRAYER
The Psalter: Psalm 62
First Lesson: Isaiah 54:11-17
Second Lesson: St. John 1:35-51

ries will begin at 6.45 PM after Evening Prayer on Wednesday, March 4th, 2009, and will continue every Wednesday evening until April 1st.

We are announcing the study rather earlier than usual because some of you may wish to put "Mere Christianity" on your reading list.. If you have already read the book, why not root around your bookshelves for your copy and re-read it. It is truly one of the great Christian classics. **BROCK JOHNSON**

COLLECT FOR THE WEEK

The Epiphany Collect

O GOD, who by the leading of a star didst manifest thy only-begotten Son to the Gentiles; Mercifully grant that we, who know thee now by faith, may after this life have the fruition of thy glorious Godhead; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *AMEN.*

Book of Common Prayer, Page 108

✠ PARISH PRAYER LIST ✠

OUR Prayer Chain offers prayer daily for people on the Prayer List and guests of the Joseph Richey Hospice. To add a name to

the list, or to the visiting list, or to join the Prayer Chain, call the office at 410 560 6776.

RECOVERY: McKayla, Rosemarie, Debbie, David, Skippy, Jack, Grace, Bob, Fran, Doris, Carolyn., Ken, Serina, Wyatt, Bobby, Alexander, Erline, Jack, Kathleen, Earle, Judy, Polly, Katherine, Helen; William, Betty, Cal, Wendell, Jack, Peggy, Linda, Millie, Dorcas, Walt., Bruce, Cienna, Tracy, Lelilah, Jennifer, Miriam, Harriet, Karen, Steve, George, Eliza, Mel, John, Randy, James, Sarah, Linda, James, Suzanne, Marian, Edith Anne, Steven, Jeanne, Betty, Judith, Angela, Tammy; Ellen, Jim, Patricia, Henry, Bonnie, Mary Ann, Robert, Christine, Ruth, Dee, Brian, Barbara, Gillian, Eileen, Matthew, George, Bryan, Jason, Jane, Joan, Frances, Mary, Ernie, Pat, Lynn, Michael, Ray, Leslie, Brandon, May, Scott, Stephen, Robert, Danny, Billy, Betty-Ann, Mildred, D'Metrius, Rachel, Laura, Stacey, Frank, Alma, Christine, John, Henry, Eric, Naomi, Pam, Betty, John, Ben, Kevin, Gwen, Elizabeth, William, Gloria, George, Lee Emily, Elsie, Bruce, Regina, Lewis, Madolin, Eudora, Carol, Bernie, Charlene, Josephine, Margaret, Mackie, Jody, Sheila, Jo Anne, Thomas, Jeanne, Sister Catherine-Grace, Mae, Marilyn, Lawrence, Rebecca, Dorothy, Joanne, ✠Albion, Martha, Matthew, Jackie, Charles, Tony, Edward, Kim, Wendell, Vivian, Geradine, John, Maxine, Ann Sharon, Tom, Dennis, Alice & Anita.

LIGHT, STRENGTH & GUIDANCE: Melba, Debbie, Phyllis, Georgetta, Carolyn, Perry, Suzanne, Tony, Robert, Doris, Drake, David, The Norris family; Gillian, Beverley, Adrienn, Jhana, Marla, Matthew, Joan, Laurie, Ellen, Lynn, Mildred, Sarah Lee, Tom, Susan, Debbie, Kathy, Owen, Douglas, Amy, Jo Anne, Mary, Gregory, Isabel, Bobby, Dorothy, Harriet, Darren, Scott, Rebecca, William, Charles, Joyce, Asfa, Eleanor, Kathy, Linda, James, Barry, Ann, Evelyn, Jeanette, Elizabeth, Virginia, Mildred, Chris, Micki, Stephen, Erik, Carol, Sandra, Elsie, Anita. Rhae, John, Robert, Mary, Michael & Loyal.

ON ACTIVE SERVICE: Alex Bursi, US. Navy; Capt. Charles Bursi & Lt. Col. Harry Hughes, U.S. Air Force; Lt. Col. R. J. Lytle & PFC Charles E. Heintz, IV, U.S. Army

FOR THE DEPARTED: Mrs. Jean Catherine Watson
FOR THOSE WHO MOURN: The Watson Family,

✠ St. Stephen's Traditional ✠ Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Road, Timonium, MD 21093
Tel.: Office (410) 560-6776; Night 665-1278
Web Address: <http://www.ststephens-md.org>

RECTOR: The Ven. Guy P. Hawtin
ASSOCIATE RECTOR: The Rev. James V. Johnson, Jr.
VICARS: The Rev. Rhae E. Kelley, The Rev. Robert Menas & The Rev. Jonathan Filkins
ORGANIST & CHOIRMASTER: Adric
DIRECTOR OF PASTORAL CARE: Anne Hawkins (410-308-2771)
WEDDING CO-ORDINATOR: Anne Hawkins (410-308-2771)

SUNDAY SERVICES
8.00am -- Holy Communion
9.15am -- Holy Communion (Nursery & Church School)
11.15am -- Morning Prayer (Nursery)
(1st. Sun. of the month: Holy Communion at 11.15am)

WEEKDAY SERVICES
Wednesday: 6.00pm Evening Prayer
Friday: Noon: Healing Eucharist
Saturday: 5.00 PM Family Eucharist.

HYMNS FOR THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Sunday, January 18th, 2009

PROCESSIONAL: 477 (Tysk)
God himself is with us

GRADUAL: 10 (Winchester New)
On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry

SERMON: 327 (Jordan)
The Lord is come! On Syrian soil

COMMUNION HYMN: 189 (Unde et memores)
And now, O Father, mindful of thy love

RECESSIONAL: 366 (Engelberg)
All praise to thee, for thou, O King divine

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