



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Sixth Sunday After Trinity, July 11th, 2010

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

Jesus, in today's Communion Gospel, tells us: "Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter the kingdom of heaven." But this shouldn't be regarded as simply a statement of the obvious – far from it.

True, Jesus devoted a good deal of his time criticizing scribes and Pharisees. But even so, it is wrong to assume they are the bad guys of the New Testament. In fact, quite the reverse is true. By ordinary human standards, the Pharisees were very good guys indeed. Pharisees and their religious lawyers, the scribes, were people who tried to live out their faith on a daily basis.

They tried to conform their lives utterly and completely to the word of God. They tried to obey the Law of Moses to the letter. They believed that if they succeeded in complying strictly with at least 50 percent of the Law of Moses, they would be saved – that God would accept them as "righteous" people.

When Jesus denounced them, he was actually denouncing the notion that the Law could save. He was pointing out that, try as we might, it is impossible for humans to even approach God's standards of goodness. Scrupulous obedience to the Law of Moses cannot save because the Letter of the Law often runs contrary to its spirit.

This confronted them – and, of course, us – with

the vexed question of: "How then can we then be saved?" The answer is found in the 6th chapter of Paul's Epistle to the Romans (today's communion epistle). St. Paul says the Law simply convicts us of wrong-doing because nobody can live up to the extraordinarily high standards it lays down. The key to salvation, he says, is faith. God treats us as righteous solely because we have faith in him.

But what does Paul mean by the word "faith?" Webster's Dictionary defines "faith" as "unquestioning belief." But this isn't at all what Paul means. It is, for example, quite possible to have an "unquestioning belief" in God, but still not have "faith" in him by Paul's definition.

Believing in the existence of God is not unduly difficult, no matter what atheists might say. It is reasonable, for example, to deduce there is an intelligence behind the creation of the universe simply because the alternative – that this was a vast cosmic accident – is just too ridiculous. But a vague belief in God's existence isn't what Paul means when he uses the word "faith." When all's said and done, there is no virtue at all in believing in the obvious.

The career of the Patriarch Abraham provides an insight into what Paul means by faith. When we first meet Abraham at the end of the 11th Chapter of Genesis, we learn Terah, his father, emigrated with his family from Ur of the Chaldees to a city in Canaan called Haran. Terah didn't make this move

because he was hard up. He was quite well off, and it seems that he moved to Haran because it offered even greater opportunities for making even more money than he was making in Ur.

Terah and his family were very capable businessmen. When God called Abraham to leave Haran – to wander first to Egypt and then throughout the Land of Canaan – he was so prosperous he had quite a difficult time disposing of his business and turning his property into cash and easily transportable items.

The cities of Ur and Haran back in Abraham's time were not one-horse frontier towns – the equivalent of 19th Century Wichita, Kansas, or Tombstone, Arizona. Archaeology shows they were, rich, thriving metropolises, where the upper crust like Abraham's family lived in great style and comfort, magnificence even.

If you consider the security and comfort of Ur and Haran had to offer, Abraham's decision to go on an open-ended camping expedition through the Land of Canaan seems utterly nuts. It wasn't what one could describe as "a career-enhancing move." From any reasonable perspective, it was an act of supreme folly.

Verses 1-4 of the 12th Chapter of Genesis sums up Abraham's decision-making process with admirable terseness. They read: "Now the Lord had said unto Abram, get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee:

"And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee; and curse him that curseth thee; and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed. So Abram departed, as the Lord had spoken unto him: and Lot went with him: and Abram was seventy and five years old when he departed Haran."

To sum things up: There is absolutely no indication Abraham had ever heard God speak before he received his instructions to leave his comfortable home in Haran and go schlepping sheep around Canaan. What's more, this revelation of the one, true God was totally alien to the culture in which Abraham lived. Ur and Haran were centers of well-established polytheistic cults.

Haran – a major trading center at the crossroads of the caravan routes linking modern Syria and Israel – was the cultic center of the Moon Goddess Sin, goddess of the Midianites, among others.

Abraham's family and friends must have thought him crazy to abandon everything and follow the peremptory orders of this strange new God. Haran offered security, both physically and financially. Its massive walls provided protection against the marauding tribes of nomads who infested the countryside. Yet Abraham was packing up everything he owned and – at an age when most folks are drawing social security -- started a new career as a Bedouin chief.

In human terms, nothing about Abraham's decision made sense. Surely he could serve his strange new god just as well in Haran? Today we know God's purpose in removing Abraham from Haran was to forge his descendants into a great family of nations. Yet as far as we know Abraham was not aware of this. He was, after all, 75 years old and his wife was known to be barren. Some father of nations!

But Abraham knew that it was necessary for him to know what made God tick or why he wanted him to strike out into the unknown. He simply knew that God was in charge at all times and he trusted him to know what was best. It was a simple, uncomplicated faith based on the knowledge that God is good – perfectly good – and that he can be trusted at all times and in all situations. And this is the sort of faith Paul is talking about when he says salvation is obtained through faith alone.

We can take comfort in the fact that we will never be asked to make the sort of commitment Abraham made. God came as a stranger to Abraham and Abraham opened his heart to him. God will never come to us as a stranger – and we owe this in no small measure to our spiritual forefather Abraham.

Like Abraham, however, we ought to put our full trust in Jesus and follow him as best we are able. Jesus is not asking us to be pioneers like Abraham. He has given us a well-trodden, well-posted path – a road that's brightly lit in a way it never was for Abraham. It was Abraham who made the leap of faith and showed us the way. All we have to do is try to follow in his footsteps. *AMEN.*