



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

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The Fifth Sunday After Trinity, July 24th, 2011

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

Today's lessons for Morning Prayer include accounts of the doings of two men who had much more in common than a shared name - - Saul. A reading from the First Book of Samuel deals with Saul, Israel's first king. Another, from the Acts of the Apostles, deals with Saul, later Paul the Apostle.

Physically, the two men had nothing in common. King Saul was tall and strapping, with flowing hair and a commanding presence. Paul the Apostle was short, wiry and balding. His eyesight was so bad he was obliged to dictate his epistles to secretaries.

The differences, however, were superficial. Intellectually, temperamentally and in terms of personal magnetism, both men were remarkably alike.

Saul the king forged a bunch of fearful, peace-loving farmers into one of the most formidable fighting forces the Holy Land has ever seen. Paul the Apostle did something even more remarkable. First, he transformed a group of decent, charitable human beings, primarily preoccupied with the rule of law, into a howling mob of religious fanatics. Then, in a remarkable about face, having converted to the faith he had persecuted, he was largely instrumental

in spreading it to all four corners of the world.

The primary quality the two men had in common was an indomitable will and they used it to bend men to do their bidding. Saul the king, by sheer strength of will, inspired his singularly unwarlike subjects to perform remarkable feats of slaughter. So, too, did Saul the Persecutor.

But while Saul the king united the Israelites to do battle against a common enemy, Saul the Persecutor persuaded a group of academics and lawyers to do something that ran entirely contrary to their learning and instincts – to lynch a charismatic religious leader who enjoyed wide community support.

Neither Saul, of course, was entirely unique. There have been leaders in modern history with equal talents. Vladimir Illyich Lenin, Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler used their abilities for evil. Men like Winston Churchill, Pastor Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King used their's for good.

Saul the king first exercised his spellbinding talents when Nahesh, king of Ammon, (today's Amman, capital of Jordan)

.besieged the Israelite city of Jabesh-Gilead. Outnumbered and outclassed in fighting capability, the citizens of Jabesh tried to surrender. "Make peace and we will do what ever you say," they begged. But Nahesh replied: "I'll give you peace only if you let me put out everybody's right eye – and so embarrass all Israel

Saul was plowing with a team of oxen when he heard Nabesh's cruel peace terms. He was so incensed he hacked up two of his oxen and sent the gory pieces throughout his kingdom. His message to every able bodied man was: "If you don't turn out to fight, this will happen to your livestock."

The Bible records that 330,000 men turned out -- virtually every fighting man in Israel. This vast force, formed into three infantry corps, surrounded Nabesh's army and utterly destroyed it. There were so few survivors, the Book of First Samuel tells us, that not two of them remained together.

Saul the persecutor lived and worked in more sophisticated times. Thus he had to take a political approach – operating behind the scenes, in Jerusalem's equivalent of smoke-filled rooms, coaxing the Jewish religious authorities into suppressing the rapidly-growing sect known as Christians.

His moment of greatest success came when he helped persuade the members of the Jewish Council of State to lynch Stephen, one of the Christian's most charismatic preachers. It was a triumph as complete as Saul the king's victory over the Ammonites. In its wake, Jerusalem's high priests handed Saul a commission, giving power of arrest and execution over Christians not just in the Holy City, but as far afield as Damascus.

However, while there are many similarities between the two Sauls – not least their energy, their determination and single-mindedness of purpose -- there is also a vast difference between them; And that difference lies in their response to God when he called on them to follow his agenda, not their own.

Saul the king followed his own inclinations and ignored God's commands. He chose to go his own way; to do what was right in his own eyes, as the Book of Judges puts it. His story is one of decline into suspicion, mistrust and paranoia.

He turned against David -- his greatest warrior and strongest supporter – and plotted to kill him. When it became clear that God had deserted him, he didn't repent and beg God's forgiveness. He ultimately resorted to witchcraft and the occult, with predictably catastrophic results.

When, by contrast, Saul the persecutor encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus his response was not simply to repent and accept baptism, although that would have been remarkable enough. Saul didn't merely turn his life around, he let the Holy Spirit take it and transform it. And in submitting to God, he became the greatest evangelist the world has ever seen – greater even than St. Peter, St. John or any of disciples who had followed the Lord from his first days in Galilee.

Paul proclaimed to the world Christ's Gospel of grace and redemption. It is a Gospel declares all people – from the mightiest of the mighty to the lowliest of the lowlies – are equally precious in the eyes of their creator. It is a promise God affirmed by giving his only begotten Son to pay for our sins by suffering a hideous death the Romans meted out to only to slaves and traitors, That Gospel transformed the world.

The curious thing is that every human being confronts the same choice as Saul the king and Saul the persecutor. Each of us is offered the opportunity to do things our way, or God's way. For most of us, the consequences of the choice we make will not be seen in a defeated nation or a world transformed. Even so, it is a choice we would be wise to make very carefully. For each of us, personally, the eternal consequences will be profound. *AMEN.*