



# St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21057

The Tenth Sunday after Trinity, August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2011

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

Today's Scripture readings deal with the issue of sin. But while most of us find sin to be an infinitely fascinating topic in the abstract, today's readings deal with it in an exceedingly discomfoting way. Sin is truly interesting when other people are committing it. Personal sin is a horse of a different color. Today's readings compel us to confront sin up close and personal – our own sins not the sins of other people.

Last week's lessons graphically illustrate the way in which we talk ourselves into committing sins. This week's readings confront us with the fact that all sins have consequences and that sometimes those consequences are very much more serious than anything we can possibly imagine.

In today's communion Gospel, Jesus foretells the coming siege of Jerusalem and its destruction by the Roman military some 40 or so years after his Crucifixion. In a lesson from the Book of Jeremiah the prophet foretells how the people's refusal to heed God's warnings will end in the total destruction of the Kingdom of Judah by the Babylonians -- a tragedy that came to pass in the 6th Century B.C.

Judah at the time of Jeremiah was quite different from Judea at the time of Jesus' earthly ministry. It was a free country and its government was doing all it could to eradicate foreign influence from its political life. Judea in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD was an occupied country – a tiny sliver of Rome's vast Empire. While Judea's national

leaders would dearly have liked to rid the country of all foreign influence such a policy was not merely impractical, it was positively suicidal.

Judah, at the time of Jeremiah, was uniformly Jewish in a religious sense. Most people were reasonably observant and few questioned the fact that the nation had a very special relationship with God. By contrast, Judea in Jesus' day was in many respects a secular state. To be sure, many Jews took their religion very seriously – the Pharisees and Sadducees, for example – but many others had abandoned the faith and were hardly distinguishable from their Greek and Roman neighbors.

Despite the differences in their circumstances, however, they were guilty the same fundamental sin – they failed to heed God's holy Word and to accept his absolute authority in human affairs. The situation in Judah in Jeremiah's day more closely reflects our own, so let's examine what happened.

Jeremiah warned the Jewish people that God wanted them to stay out of the affairs of nations far stronger than themselves and to rely on him, the Lord their God, to protect them. Their worship practices, Jeremiah told them, showed they only paid lip service to God and their government's foreign policy demonstrated they had no faith in him. And he didn't mince words in saying so.

Judge for yourselves: "Thus saith the Lord: Stand in the Court of the Lord's house, and speak unto all the cities of Judah, which come to worship in the Lord's house, all the words that I command thee to speak unto them; diminish not a word. If so be they will hearken, and turn every man from his evil way, that I may repent me of the evil, which I purpose to do unto them because of the evil of their doings."

But the people of Judah didn't see themselves that way. They were deeply insulted at being branded apostates. They considered themselves pretty good churchgoers. They regularly attended services at the Temple. They observed all the feasts, fasts and holy days in the Prayer Book. They tithed, rigorously, not just their incomes, but everything they had. And they fed up to the back teeth with that self-righteous so-and-so, Jeremiah, telling them they were terrible people.

But people who go to church regularly aren't necessarily good Christians – or in this case good Jews. Just because folks go to church doesn't necessarily mean that they are doing God's will. The people of Judah imagined they were worshipping God, but, in fact, they were flagrantly disobeying Him – and not just in matters of foreign policy.

They had set up pagan gods into the Temple – the Canaanite fertility deities, the Assyrian sun god and a moon goddess – a practice strictly forbidden in the Law of Moses. So what made them think what they were doing was pleasing to God?

The answer is that they rationalized their way around the theological objections using exactly the same arguments we use today. They claimed that the Scriptures were simply "cultural documents" reflecting the needs of primitive runaway slaves in the wilderness. A sophisticated modern nation needed to celebrate the diversity of its surrounding cultures, they argued. The deities that Jeremiah condemned as “pagan” were simply alternative faces of the one true God.

But the pagan "faces of god" were utterly different from the God encountered in the Bible – a just and loving God who created heaven and earth and all that therein is. Moloch the Phoenician fire God demanded human sacrifice. The priestesses of Astarte or Ashteroth, the Canaanite moon goddess, were, in fact, prostitutes. Baal was worshipped in drunken orgies.

Jeremiah denounced what they were doing. He warned them that violence begets violence, killing begets killing, and immorality begets immorality. They would bring disaster upon themselves, he warned. But they just laughed him off as an ignorant country bumpkin – a crazy fundamentalist.

But Jeremiah's prophecies turned out to be right on the money. In 586 B.C., the Babylonian army sacked Jerusalem. The Temple was burned to the ground. The holy city was wiped off the map. And the people of Judah were uprooted from their homes and marched away into exile.

It wasn't until they had lost everything that they began to understand God intended his commandments to be taken very seriously including the one that's as difficult for us to understand as it was for folks back then: "For I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, and visit the sins of the fathers upon the children, unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and show mercy unto thousands in them that love me and keep my commandments."

This doesn't mean that God gets jealous, like a jilted lover, if we don't worship him. But he knows if we aren't worshipping him, the embodiment of everything that is good, we are worshipping something else: the embodiment of all that's evil.

When he says he "visits the sins of the fathers upon the children, unto the third and fourth generation . . ." He is not threatening revenge. He is explaining to us how the world works. He is telling us that sin, by its very nature, has inevitable and unforeseeable consequences. While he is ever ready to forgive our sins, he cannot help us to escape the inevitable consequences without turning us in to robots and depriving us of our free will, the essence of our humanity.

God has given us his laws not because he is a spoilsport and wants to make life difficult for us. He has given them to us but because he designed us and created us, and, therefore, knows what makes us work best. His laws are loving efforts to keep us out of trouble. And if we choose to ignore them, we shouldn't really be surprised that things go wrong. It's the same as mother telling us not to touch the stove or we will get burned.

But the truly wonderful thing is that every time we let God down – every time we fail him – he is there ready to forgive us for the mistakes we have made. All we have to do is ask his forgiveness, and he gives it to us. That's the most remarkable thing about him: His forgiveness is always there – just for the asking. *AMEN.*

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