



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity, October 16th, 2011

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

When I was a small boy it was impossible to avoid my grandmother, She always seemed to be on my heels. And every time she left a room, she would turn and say to every one in hearing distance: "Oh . . . and find out what Guy is doing and stop him!" In short, she seemed to echo today's collect in that she constantly "followed and prevented" me.

But, in fact, the prayer is not a plea for God to prevent us from doing anything in the modern sense of "prevent." The original meaning to the word "prevent" was to "go before" or to "precede." The plea for God's grace to prevent and follow us is intended to evoke the image of God leading the children of Israel in the wilderness – manifesting himself in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

The prayer is, in fact, quite unnecessary: God always leads us and follows us – even when we are not aware of it. Whether we respond to him or not, he constantly offers us his succor, support and salvation.

Nowhere is this phenomenon more evident than in the escape of the children of Israel from Egypt, subject of the first reading appointed for Morning Prayer. The Book of Exodus makes it clear the children of Israel had forgotten God. They were vaguely aware that their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph had enjoyed a close relationship with some God or other. But they didn't know much about him. What's more, their ignorance doesn't seem to have bothered them very much either.

The children of Israel didn't call on God even when the Egyptians made their lives hell on earth – enslaving them and murdering their children. Some seem to have been resigned their fate, while others who, like Moses, yearned for freedom, relied solely on their own physical strength. God didn't enter into the equation.

This might seem quite daft. God, after all, had named them his chosen people and he had revealed himself to them in dramatic ways to their forefathers – not least when Joseph brought them into Egypt as honored guests. Stories of the patriarchs must have still been fresh in people's minds. Surely they couldn't have forgotten the God who led gave Abraham and Sarah a son in their old age; who destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah; who raised Joseph from slavery to prime minister of Egypt?

Exodus makes it plain the children of Israel were well aware they were ethnically different from the Egyptians. But they were also well aware Egypt's culture was far more refined than their own. The difference lay in the sophistication of Egypt's social structure – its political organization; its class system; the complexity of its religious beliefs; and the sumptuousness and grandeur of its cultic practices.

By contrast with Egypt's gods (Ra, Horus, Isis and their multiplicity of colleagues) the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob must have appeared rustic and old fashioned, the legacy of backwoods past. It should be no surprise that the children of Israel were ashamed of their naive

and unsophisticated past. How many Americans today are embarrassed to recall that America's patriarchs – George Washington, *et al.* – were effusively hailing God as the savior of the new U.S.A.

We don't really know whether the Israelites were embarrassed about their ancient God or merely indifferent to him. But there's is no evidence that they asked him to intercede on their behalf. From what Moses says it's reasonable to assume they indulged in hopeless lamentation – what the unsympathetic might call "whining."

But, despite the fact no prayers were uttered; no supplications made, Moses tells us God heard their cries of anguish. He hadn't forgotten his Covenant with Abraham. He looked on them with compassion; and reached out to help them.

It was God who initiated the contact. Long before Moses and the children of Israel were aware of his existence, he was caring for them, planning their future – anticipating their every need. And he provided for those needs in a most remarkable manner.

He could have zapped the Egyptians and Canaanites and transported the Children of Israel on magic carpets from the Nile Delta to the Promised Land. But if he had done so, he wouldn't have helped them in the long run. He wouldn't have helped them to help themselves. He would have treated them like pets.

God helped them in a far more imaginative and practical way, in a way that didn't rob them of their free will, in a way that helped them grow spiritually. God created for them a uniquely qualified leader. He guided and oversaw Moses' remarkable career – from condemned son of slave to Egyptian prince to Bedouin shepherd.

In Moses, the Israelites had a leader intimately familiar with three cultures: Their own Israelite culture; the arcane sophistication of Pharaoh's court; and the harsh world of the Sinai Peninsula. There wasn't another man living who possessed the knowledge Moses possessed. His life was a miracle. But Moses, for all his unique talents, would've been worthless to himself and his people if God hadn't revealed himself to him, and goaded him into action.

There's something disturbingly familiar about Moses' reluctance to trust God – the way he tried to wheedle out of doing God's will: "The people won't believe him. Others are much better qualified. He's got no talent for public speaking, etc., etc." Given the way Moses behaved, it would have been entirely understandable if God said: "Okay, back to the drawing board! I'll create another Chosen People, who'll be a lot more trusting than you guys."

But he didn't do that. He showed infinite patience. He gently demolished Moses' objections. "Don't worry," God said, "I'll give you courage. I'll protect you. I'll write all your speeches for you."

The thing that makes Moses unique isn't his unusual childhood, or his ability to straddle three vastly different societies. Moses is unique because he ultimately got the message. He ultimately submitted to God's will. He ultimately learned to trust God, and to do his bidding freely, wholeheartedly – without bargaining, wheedling or trying to equivocate.

Most of us never learn that. The Israelites certainly didn't. Their history from the Exodus onwards is one of short periods obedience to God interspersed with longer – far longer – periods of apostasy. And few of us can honestly claim we are better than the ancient Children of Israel.

Sure, we have learned something. Most of us are wise enough to call upon God when we're in trouble. As they observe in the army, you don't find atheists in foxholes. But providing things are going reasonable well – and that's much of the time – we don't really bother too greatly about God.

It would serve us right if he treated us the way we treat him . . . if he forgot us just as we forget him. But he never forsakes us. The story of Moses demonstrates that God is truly a God of love. His hand is always outstretched to us. It doesn't matter how often we reject him, or how much we neglect him, he is always ready to comfort us, strengthen us and bind up our self-inflicted wounds. He is always reaching out. Always reaching All we have to do is respond. *AMEN.*