



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Eighth Sunday After Trinity, July 29th, 2012

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

“Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.” The fact of the matter is that there is really only one prophet true enough to back the farm on – and he is Jesus Christ. The rest of them, no matter how hard they may try, all have the potential to be false prophets. It is, after all, and essential attribute of our fallen human nature.

For folks familiar with the Old Testament, the words “false prophets” brings to mind the prophet Jeremiah and his epic struggle with the false prophets who turned Judah’s ruling elite against him. Instead of heeding Jeremiah’s warnings to trust in God and avoid foreign entanglements, they backed Egypt against the Babylonians with catastrophic results. The price of listening to the false prophets was the utter destruction of the Kingdom of Judah and the brutal exile of its entire population,

Most false prophets are rather less easily identifiable than the villains of Jeremiah’s story. Indeed, a vast majority of false prophets only work at it part time. They are ordinary, decent folks who occasionally go astray – invariably when they decide to trust their own judgment rather than that of Jesus Christ.

Politicians are, perhaps, the first people who spring to mind as false prophets. After all, as politicians frequently point out – usually when they have failed to honor a solemn campaign promise – “politics is the art of the possible.” In other words, politics generally involves compromise. Not a bad thing in some respects.

As mothers used to remind fractious children: “Little birds in the nest should agree.”

But, all too often, compromise involves the betrayal of the few for the benefit of the majority – a strategy commended with cold-blooded clarity by Caiaphas, the High Priest of Jerusalem, proposing Jesus’ execution. “It is expedient for us,” he explained, “that one man should die for the people that the whole nation should not perish.” Few political compromises involve quite that degree of ruthlessness. But compromises often leave a bad taste in the mouths of the onlookers – for in an age of age of moral they tend to be ethically questionable.

Nobody, of course, expects politicians to maintain notably high ethical standards. Indeed, Mark Twain claimed: “There is no native criminal class except Congress.”

But most people expect high ethical standards from another major source of false prophecy: the clergy. And rightly so. While we are, of course, in no way exempt from the curse of original sin, our congregations have every right to expect us to try to set good examples of Christian living.

The “rub”, as Shakespeare put it, is that ordination usually carries with it a license to preach – a privilege that, these days, is increasingly abused. When preachers opt to ride their own hobbyhorses instead of the word of God they almost invariably lead their congregations astray. Yet preaching one’s own opinions is so tempting. It’s much less demanding than being shackled to preaching God’s opinions, which, when all’s said and

done, tends to require a good deal more study and research.

However, pointing the finger at individual false prophets, the small fry so to speak, takes our eyes off the arch false prophet of them all – the person who inspires and encourages all false prophets. He is Satan, the devil, Beelzebub, Mephistopheles, Lucifer, Old Nick or any other names mankind has called him over the millennia.

One reason we fail to recognize him is that increasingly we define the world – and all the ills and evils – in it in have become increasingly political in political terms. For Conservative Christians, the false prophets are secular humanists. Liberals, on the other hands, see them as fascists, racists and sexists. To be sure, when acting as God Parents, we renounce, on behalf of the child, "the devil and all his works." But such is the depth of our present spiritual decline many people find reject the notion that that Satan as an actual person.

Many folks think of evil simply as a general inclination (a human predisposition, if you will) but we don't think of evil in any real sense as personified. That's all right for primitive people, but not for sophisticates like us. This is a very dangerous way of thinking. It is exactly what Satan would like us to think because folks who don't believe in him aren't on their guard against the pitfalls and traps he sets for us.

As long as we are prepared to blame ourselves – or, more often, other people – for the evils that afflict the world, we aren't laying the blame on him. Our disbelief simply affords him more opportunities to inflict pain and suffering upon us and upon others. Is it, for example, really an accident that the two most awful wars in human history were fought in this century – a century in which mankind's belief in the devil waned even faster than its belief in God?

The trouble is that when we forget about Satan, we start blaming his handiwork on God. And people who blame God for the devil's work are well on the road to total apostasy. C. S. Lewis, the popular Anglican author and scholar, says in the preface to his book "The Screwtape Letters" that the commonest question he was asked was whether he really believed in the devil. This is his answer:

"I believe in angels, and I believe that some of these, by the abuse of their free will, have become the enemies of God, and, as a corollary, to us. These we may call devils. They do not differ in nature from good angels, but their nature is depraved. Devil is the opposite of angel only as Bad Man is opposite from Good Man. Satan, the leader or dictator of devils, is the opposite, not of God, but of Michael."

Nobody can accuse C. S. Lewis of lacking sophistication. He was an Oxbridge professor, a noted Christian apologist, a writer of splendid science fiction, a renowned literary critic and a leading academic authority on medieval literature. Yet, for all his learning and sophistication, Lewis believed firmly in the devil. As a Christian, he had no choice. Jesus, himself, confirms his existence.

Perhaps an explanation of the failure of so many folks to recognize Satan is the way in which he is depicted in medieval art, cartoons and by the outfits we hire for costume parties – grotesque and hideously ugly. But Lewis points out, he doesn't look at like that in real life. He is, in fact, very good-looking. And this should come as no surprise. He is, after all, an angel named "Lucifer" means "light."

He can take the form of a beautiful woman or a handsome man: a movie star, a pop singer, a clean-cut storm trooper, a newscaster, a politician or a honey-tongued preacher. He speaks to us in the language of our own desires. He doesn't tempt us by offering us goodies we don't want. He's much more subtle than that. He simply keeps us supplied with rationalizations and excuses.

Without Jesus, resistance is hopeless. Remember St. Paul's candid admission to the Romans: "The good that I would I do, I do not: but the evil that I would not, that I do." But if Satan can do seduce a saint like Paul what chance to ordinary human beings stand of resisting him? The answer is to put your trust in Jesus Christ. But to do so, you must first give the devil his due. *AMEN.*

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