



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Thirteenth Sunday After Trinity, September 14th, 2014

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

If the Church ever decides to take a survey of the Sunday School stories that stuck (as opposed to the Sunday school stories that didn't), I bet the one about Joseph and his coat of many colors comes near the very top of the list. A reason for this might be that everyone loves a “rags to riches” story.

Joseph was his family's youngest son and his father's favorite, but his older brothers were jealous of him and sold him as a slave to a band of Midianites. The Midianites, in turn, sold him to a powerful Egyptian official. Then after an undeserved spell in jail, he rose to become the most powerful man in Egypt after Pharaoh.

Joseph's remarkable rise in the world has all the elements of a fairy story. He does well not for any particular merit of his own, but because God, probably out of affection for his grandfather, is fond of him. Joseph is The Bible's Cinderella, with God cast as fairy Godmother.

From the human perspective, perhaps one of the most reassuring things about Joseph is that he is not a particularly pleasant person. Far from it, he's very much like one of us – all too human. He is a pip-squeak know-it-all. His bragging not only earns his older brothers' enmity, but it even gets on his doting father's nerves.

Even a long spell in jail, the consequence of giving his owner's wife the brush-off, doesn't seem to inspire in him any real desire to reform. He is still a vindictive jerk whose taste for bullying people weaker and less clever than himself remains quite unchecked.

When we encounter him in an Old Testament lesson appointed for today, he plotting a revenge of exquisite mental cruelty. His intended victims are not just the brothers who sold him into slavery, but his aged father and younger brother. Sure, Joseph has admirable qualities to offset his awful ones. Yet, despite his virtues, he remains a sadly flawed character, who does little to conquer his faults.

But probably it is the very fact that Joseph succeeds despite his personal flaws that human beings find so appealing. It provides us with the assurance that God loves us despite our predilection to commit precisely the same sort of sins as Joseph was prone to commit. Not least, it demonstrates that God almost invariably chooses the most ordinary and unexceptional people to do his work.

For example, men like Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets are generally regarded as giants of history; larger than life heroes of a type we are not likely to see again. Yet looking back to the times in which they lived, we find exactly the same lament in the Scriptures: Where are the heroes? Where are the statesmen? Why have they disappeared from the face of the earth?

These heroic ages, it turns out, were perceived by the people who actually lived through them as being rather like our own: bereft of heroes – dull, prosaic, yet paradoxically frightening. And what's more when we take a long, hard look these giants

of history we learn what very ordinary people they were.

When we first encounter Gideon, he is quaking in fear over a disorganized rabble of Midianites – so scared, in fact, he is threshing his grain in his wine press for fear they will beat him up and steal it. Samson, by contrast, is courageous to the point of recklessness – brutal, dim-witted and incapable of recognizing the transparent scheming of his bubble-brained mistress. Samuel, the last judge of Israel, a man dedicated to God's service, whose ministry is thoroughly undermined because of he blinded by love to the corruption and immorality of his sons. David, the greatest of all, has a close and loving relationships with God, but, corrupted by power, he commits terrible sins, including adultery and murder.

However the critical difference between ourselves and these heroes is the way in which they respond to God – the way in which they yield to his will and make him "the Captain of their Souls." God transforms the fearful Gideon into a great military leader. God inspires Samson to save the Jewish people by destroying the Philistines' temple in an act of self-sacrifice. God gives Samuel the courage to risk King Saul's wrath, by anointing David as Israel's future ruler. And God, in turn, transforms David from a simple shepherd boy to Israel's greatest king.

Yet we must not forget that, like us these men possessed the gift of free will. They could have ignored God's call if they had chosen to do so. They are heroes because they chose to submit to God and put their lives in his hands.

It's tempting for us to dismiss the lessons their lives teach. Perhaps God acted that way back then, we say, but he doesn't act that way today. History, however, has a way of showing us up for fools. Consider the event we are commemorating in Maryland this week. September 12th is Defenders' Day. On that day, 200 years ago, God also inspired very ordinary mortals to achieve heroic stature.

The Battle of Baltimore was not a Thermopylae, Marathon, Agincourt, Waterloo, York Town or Gettysburg. It was was a small, relatively inconspicuous action in a small, relatively inconspicuous war. It is doubtful whether it changed the course of history. Even had Britain

triumphed overwhelmingly it is unlikely that it would have had the stomach to master its former American colonies. But the number of troops engaged and its impact on world history is not the important thing about the Battle of Baltimore.

Defenders' Day doesn't mark the Battle of Baltimore as a great victory – although victory it was. In truth, it marks a day upon which a group of very ordinary people showed quite extraordinary courage in defense of their fellow citizens.

The military paintings that grace our nation's art galleries portray noble-looking, straight-backed men, elegantly uniformed, sabers and muskets ready, jaws clenched, resolutely preparing to dispatch the enemy. But this isn't really what happened at the Battle of Baltimore.

Ordinary men – cobblers, grocers, clerks, lawyers, printers, farmhands, shipwrights – picked up muskets they were ill-trained to use and went off to face the worst that the finest army and the most powerful navy in the world had to offer. Very few of the folk who watched those tradesmen and farmers shamble out of town expected to see them return triumphant. Indeed, few expected to see them return at all.

It is humbling to realize that our fellow citizens who marched out of town to meet the British 180 years ago were well aware of the tremendous odds ranged against them. They, too, knew they had little hope of victory.

They marched out of town dressed in their Sunday best, not because they were foolish dandies and wanted to show off, but because even the slightest wound on the battlefield could result in a slow and agonizing death. Freshly laundered clothes gave them a somewhat better chance of survival.

On September 12th two centuries ago God inspired ordinary men to heroism of the sort displayed by Gideon, Samson and David. Like their Israelite counterparts they weren't seeking glory, they were simply defending their loved ones, their neighbors and their homes. They were, in fact, obeying the words of Jesus recorded in St. John's Gospel: "This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." *AMEN.*