



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Laetare Sunday March 6th, 2016 - Lent IV

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

One of the Old Testament lessons appointed for Morning Prayer comes from the Book of Exodus, harking back to the earliest history of Israel. The thing about history is that it is often seen not so much as steadily unfolding continuum, but as a series of golden ages of peace and prosperity punctuated by sudden catastrophes:

Israel's united kingdom of David and Solomon snuffed out by Assyria; Periclesian Athens destroyed by Spartan brute force; the Anglo-Saxons' embryonic democracy crushed by the Norman Conquest; Native American nirvanas smashed by rapacious Europeans. One minute everything is perfect; the next, everything is in ruins.

But while popular historians get rich with narratives that put the finger on the moment in history when everything went wrong, real life simply isn't like that. Things don't suddenly go wrong, or at least they very rarely do so. What actually happens is that problems gradually accumulate – often over centuries – until the pressure becomes intolerable and everything explodes.

It is as wrong, for example, to ascribe the rise of the Third Reich to the inequities of the Treaty of Versailles as it is to attribute the destruction of the Kingdom of Judah and the Babylonian Captivity to King Jehoiakim's policy of backing Egypt against King Nebuchadnezzar.

The seeds of the Third Reich, and Communism, too, can be traced back the Renaissance – to the philosophical conceit that man is capable of

creating the perfect society. Similarly, the destruction of Judah and the Babylonian Captivity can be traced to the kindness and understanding King Solomon to his host of foreign wives.

The lesson from Exodus tells us the Israelites were far from grateful to God for rescuing them from Egyptian captivity. The ink had scarcely dried on the Covenant they made with him when they went off to worship the Golden Calf. But, then, from the time they arrived in the wilderness they did little else but complain about the arrangements God had made for their welfare.

Things didn't get any better after they settled in the Promised Land. Within a few decades of their arrival, most of them had embraced the cult of the Canaanite deity Baal and his main squeeze, Ashteroth.

King David was different. Though far from perfect, he loved God with all his heart. When his sins were pointed out to him, he repented sincerely and tried to amend his life.

Samuel, the last of the judges, began the task of persuading the Israelites to renew their commitment to their covenant with God. David continued the job, with considerable success initially. But his commitment to the spiritual welfare of his subjects was far stronger than his commitment to the spiritual welfare of his family, and this, in the long term, undermined all his good work.

David had an eye for the ladies. He fathered a host of children by his wives and concubines, but,

sadly, he was more interested in siring children than raising them to love God and honor his commandments. The Israelites were fortunate that David's heir, his youngest son, Solomon, sincerely feared God. He was kindly by nature and far more interested in the acquisition of wisdom than wealth or military might. As a consequence, scripture tells us, God endowed him with all three.

Solomon didn't share his father's enthusiasm for the ladies. Even so, scripture tells us he somehow managed to accumulate over a thousand wives and concubines. Most came to Solomon as diplomatic brides – daughters of surrounding rulers, who were married to Solomon to seal bilateral trade agreements and military treaties.

Solomon, a kindly man, did his best to make these lonely foreign women as happy as possible. He gave them their own households and allowed to worship the gods of their homelands, doubtless persuading himself that they were just worshipping the Lord God of Israel in other guises.

But his kindly inclinations meant that pagan gods were routinely worshipped in Jerusalem – the city dedicated to the one true God – in direct contravention of the first and second commandments. It also meant his kids were raised as pagans because Solomon was as hopeless a father as David. Thus for the ensuing five centuries the Jewish people were ruled by *de facto* pagans.

By the Sixth Century BC, paganism – under the royal family's patronage – was entrenched and the Law of Moses completely forgotten. Imagine then the people's amazement when workmen renovating the Temple discovered an ancient, dust-covered Scroll of the Law that had been lost there at the time of King Solomon.

It was taken to King Josiah, who read it and wept. II Kings 22:11 tells us: "It came to pass, when the king heard the words of the law, that he rent his clothes." It was a reasonable reaction. Josiah realized every one of the Commandments was being broken on a daily basis. Pagan idols had been set up in the Temple and human sacrifice was being widely practiced by all classes.

Josiah had the people assembled and read the Law to them. He stamped out the worst pagan practices and smashed their idols. And he destroyed the

altars upon which children were sacrificed to Moloch. The revival, however, was short lived. The people much preferred celebrating diversity. Judah's moral decline continued, its politicians far more interested in the acquisition of personal power than serving the national interest.

This chain of seemingly inconsequential events led to the destruction of Judah. And it provides a lesson as instructive today as it was two thousand years ago. It calls to mind the Roman general Scipio Africanus, who wept in the ruins of Carthage. Asked if he was weeping over the city's destruction, he said: "No. I am weeping because Rome will one day suffer the same fate."

Our nation is experiencing a moral decline similar to that of ancient Judah. The symptoms are plain for all too see – from dysfunctional families to dysfunctional public institutions. There are no shortage of solutions on offer – prayer in schools; sexual abstinence; the Ten Commandments in the courthouses. But such actions treat the symptoms not the disease. The seeds of our problems were planted long before the campaign to drive God from the public square.

The Old Testament teaches is that on those rare occasions when the children of Israel honored their covenant with God, things went well for them. But when they turned their backs on him, things began to come unraveled. The New Testament teaches another vital lesson: It is that the covenant is not open to legal chicanery. God demands we honor it in the spirit rather than the letter.

In other words, it is not necessary for us to set up the tablets of God's law in the nation's classrooms or courts or legislatures. We don't need to engrave his law on granite monuments in our public squares.

In the unlikely event we were to do so, it wouldn't solve our problems. On the other hand, if we actually were to take Jesus seriously and graft his words into our hearts, God's law would be honored throughout the land – and no court on earth could order its removal. *AMEN.*

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