



# ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Fifteenth Sunday After Trinity, September 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016

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

Since the very beginning of recorded history, people have striven to take control of their destinies. Self-help titles are the publishing industry's most productive cash cow. They are moneymakers besides which all others pale. Indeed, authors who sincerely hope to get rich would be wise to abandon notions of writing the Great American Novel or becoming a new Dickens or Dostoevsky. Horatio Alger is the model to emulate.

The vision of man seizing control and shaping his own destiny is by no means solely an individual obsession. It has been the animating force behind virtually every political movement from the late 18th century onwards. Democrat, Republican, Marxist, socialist or capitalist; National Socialist or Fascist, Anarcho-Syndicalist or Libertarianism: every one of them is striving towards basically the same goal: Namely, that of enabling human beings to control their collective destinies.

When first confronted with the notion, there is something quite disconcerting about the proposition that such vastly different ideas and ideologies are marching towards the same ultimate goal.

But think about it: Each one of them offers the same pot of gold at the end of the rainbow – the nirvana of a happy, contented, and well ordered society. The issues about which they differ concern the route the human race should take to get there.

There's nothing new about this notion of controlling our lives. The Psalmists, as well as

other pious people in ancient Israel, devoted much thought to the subject. Many of them decided the secret lay in cultivating virtue. A good example of this school of thought is to be found in Verse 12 of Psalm 90: "Teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom."

King David, by contrast, was convinced the key to the question lay in establishing a personal covenant with God. Verses 3 & 4 of Psalm 89 eloquently sum up his ideas: "I have made a covenant with my chosen; I have sworn unto David my servant: Thy seed will I stablish forever, and set up thy throne from one generation to another."

From today's perspective, the striking aspect of David's yearning for control over his destiny is the unselfishness of his ambition. David was not so much concerned about his own personal destiny as that of his children and grand children – not just those he knew, personally, but the numberless generations yet unborn. Sadly, however in this age of general self-absorption the destinies that people seem most interested in controlling are their own.

Some scholars explain King David's concern for his children and his children's children by with claims that the Israelites didn't believe in life after death as Christians conceive it.

If the Jews believed in life after death, these scholars say, it took the form of a vague ephemeral existence in a shadowy nether world. They claim in King David's day, Jews believed the nearest thing to immortality was for your

name to be perpetuated in the lives of your children – hence David's concern that his "seed" should prosper.

David's own words give the lie to this. Verses 2 & 3 of Psalm 30 affirm a firm faith in his Resurrection: "O Lord, my God, I cried unto thee; and thou has healed me. Thou, Lord, hast brought my soul out of hell: thou hast kept my life, that I should not go down into the pit."

However, by no means everybody is as altruistic or as God-centered as David. And people back in the days of ancient Israel were no different from folks today. Like us, they regularly pored over their horoscopes. Charms and talismans were hot items back then just as they are today. Clairvoyants and fortunetellers did a roaring trade.

When God abandoned King Saul because of his repeated disobedience and presumption, Saul was foolishly too proud to repent and beg forgiveness. Instead, he visited a famous medium – the Witch of Endor – to learn what was in store for him. She conjured up the ghost of the Prophet Samuel, who grimly foretold Saul's death.

A remarkable aspect of all the effort we expend on controlling our destinies, is that, except in the most minor of ways, it doesn't work. Our helplessness and vulnerability in this regard was to be seen in the appalling Islamic terrorist attacks not just here at home, but in France, Belgium, Germany and Turkey.

Cynics profess to find the public out-pouring of grief that follows such atrocities – even the slaughter of more than 3,000 at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon 15 years ago – to be overblown or excessive. Thousands die in the Third World every day, they say, and we don't mourn them with the same intensity.

That might be true. But we do not live in the Third World. We live in the United States of America. And with our wide ranging intelligence services and all our technology, these attacks should not have happened. But happen they did, and it is, perhaps, the sheer randomness of the horror that strikes a chord with so many of us. The suddenness of these happenings is a stark reminder of our inability to control our destinies.

Our dismay is reflected in the quotation from the beginning of the 14th chapter of the Book of Job

that is occasionally read during the Burial Office: "Man, that is born of woman, hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up and is cut down like a flower: he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay." In other words, it raises the uncomfortable question: Are we all simply at the mercy of capricious fate?

This is the very question Jesus is addressing in today's Gospel, and his answer is a resounding: "No." It doesn't matter what cruel twists fate imposes upon us, if we embrace God, he will embrace us. Thus, no matter what happens to us, we will triumph in the end. Jesus' message is: "Don't worry. God loves you. And, because he loves you, he will take care of you."

Saying this is one thing, but accepting it and believing it is another. It is not hard to believe in God. Evidence of his handiwork is all around us. The difficult thing to accept is that the great Creator of the Universe cares about the fate of folks as tiny and inconsequential as ourselves. The answer, says Jesus, is to be found in God's creation. Very few creatures could be more inconsequential than the common sparrow, yet not a sparrow falls to the ground that God doesn't know and care about.

We imagine God is far too exalted to be interested in our individual needs, yet God cares so deeply for his creation that even lilies – a flower that lasts no more than a day – are clad more gloriously than the most magnificent king. If God supplies the needs of birds of the air and grass of the field – which make no effort to care for themselves – how can we think he doesn't take a similar interest in the well-being of creatures he has made in his own image?

The root cause of all our cares, concerns and anxieties is not capricious fate, but, rather, our own inability to trust the God who created us. We suffer agonies not because God has placed us at the mercy of the vagaries of fate, but because we refuse to accept the fact that he will shore us up, strengthen us, comfort us and, ultimately, deliver us from those things that betray us and hurt us.

To be sure, we cannot control our own destinies, but, then, we don't need to. That is God's department. And the fact of the matter is that he's an awful lot better at doing the job than we are.  
*AMEN*