



# ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

2nd Sunday After Easter/ St. George (transferred)  
April 30, 2017

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

The passage selected for the Sermon this morning is taken from the Gospel:

JESUS said, I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. I have power to lay it down, and I have the power to take it again. St John X:11,17, and 28

Today we are celebrating both the Feast of St. George and the Good Shepherd. To our modern sensibility, it might seem to odd to juxtapose this legendary dragon slayer and the Good Shepherd. However the discomfort isn't historically appropriate. We moderns have infused our image of the Good Shepherd with the character of the sheep. In fact, the Shepherd was a man's man, a man of action, and a warrior. In that regard, it is perfectly appropriate to celebrate these two feast days together.

St. George, the patron saint of England, never stepped foot on the island. He was born of Greek parents, and his father was so influential that the Roman Emperor Diocletian sought his friendship and his influence. George was a Tribunus, the equivalent of a full colonel, in the Roman Army. Though he owed his position to the influence of his powerful father, he was known as a courageous and competent leader in his own right. He was also a Christian, a dangerous identity for even a man of influence under the reign of Diocletian.

Diocletian's wife was a Christian as well. The influence of her faith led to her resistance to his selfish, privileged and bloodthirsty desires. Their marital discord, urged on by his most important military general, Galerius, who supported the old Roman religious traditions, sparked one of the greatest persecutions the Church has known. In one manifestation of the persecutions, Diocletian made a proclamation that every soldier would sacrifice to idols, or would be killed, and that every other Christian that his army encountered would be put to death.

Certainly Diocletian knew that George was a Christian, but expected he would disavow his faith for his career and his safety. When George proclaimed his faith, openly and publicly, Diocletian had a dilemma. He did not want to lose a valued officer, and the son of his most important political ally. Diocletian opened the full bag of Satan's tricks to resolve his dilemma. He threatened St. George. He appealed to his ambition. He accused him of betraying his family. He tried to buy him off, with money, prostitutes and privileges. When all that failed, he resorted to torture. When the common tortures failed, he put St. George on a rack of swords, reviving him 3 separate times when the pain made him unconscious. When even that failed, the emperor had him beheaded, making him one of the most glorious and inspirational martyrs of his age.

His association with England began with Richard the Lionhearted during the Third Crusade. In St. George, Richard found a perfect patron, the Christian

soldier, persistent in faith, triumphant over the forces of Satan, which were represented by the dragon in George's legend, and by the oppression of the Holy land and aggression against Constantinople by Islam in Richard's campaigns. He adopted St. George's banner, the Red Cross of martyrdom on the white background of purity, to be his banner in battle and eventually the flag of England.

The account of St. George and the dragon has roots as far back as the 7<sup>th</sup> Century. In the legend, a lake in Silene, now Libya, is beset by a plague bearing dragon. The locals, first as practicality and eventually as idol worship, feed the dragon sheep to keep him away. As they run out of sheep, they hold a lottery to select a virgin to offer in the sheep's place. The king's daughter is chosen, and despite his pleading and offering a ransom in exchange for her release, she is left in bridal gown to the whims of the dragon. St. George happens along, sees the predicament, and determines to rescue the maiden. He wounds the dragon with his lance, and then brings the wounded beast into the town, where he commits to slay the beast in exchange for the town's conversion to Christianity. A Roman history of the saints published in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century tried to bring a sense of historical rather than mythical grounding by identifying the dragon as a crocodile. St. George, himself, evolved into the form of knighthood represented in the famous painting by Raphael, as his legend became part of the English Romance tradition.

The truth on which the lesson is based is even more wonderful, and more emblematic of the Good Shepherd, than the legend could ever be. In the legend, St. George overcomes the dragon with military skill. In truth, St. George overcomes the demonically inspired Diocletian by professing his faith and maintaining it through temptations and torture, even unto his death. The maiden he saves isn't a random princess, or even Diocletian's Christian wife, it is the Bride of Christ, the Church. In St. George's protection are the Christian soldiers, their families and the Christians in the land they occupy. They are His flock, and his victory over Satan isn't won by dexterity with horse and lance and sword. It is won by his sacrifice. In the face of persecution, St.

George's faith and courage and sacrifice become an inspiration to the Church, and as she always does in times of persecution, she grew stronger, in the faith of individuals, and in numbers converted through his inspiration.

We forget that the Good Shepherd is a warrior as well. Just as David was, who while still a shepherd, defeated the bear and lion that threatened His flock, and as a young man, used his sling to become a shepherd of God's Holy people in the slaying of Goliath. As the Good Shepherd, Jesus uses His obedience, and sacrifice and love as the weapons of his battle against the greatest and oldest foe of mankind. In laying down His life for His flock, he turns the seeming victory of Satan, that old dragon, upside down. It becomes the weapon by which he is crushed, and his minions, fear and death, are exposed as lies.

The Good Shepherd lays down His life for His sheep knowing that His sacrifice will not leave them alone and exposed, but that He will deliver them, give them life, and give them life more abundantly. Life and death are under His dominion, He lays His life down, and as St. John reminds us, He will pick it up again. Not only will Jesus reclaim His life, but He gives that life to us, His flock, as the spoil of His victory. He gives us a life perfected, a life eternal, a life victorious in love.

How appropriate that this congregation, made of Englishmen and those who love things English, whose national identity is a gift of our English Christian heritage, who aspire to the practice of Christian values in the form of Anglican worship, take this day to honor St. George, whose victory for his flock is a perfect emulation of the Victory of the Good Shepherd. Let's not just honor him with our voices this hour, but by the example of our lives and in emulating Christ by inspiring and protecting the flock He has given to each of us. Let us pray that we too can become good shepherds, just as St. George has given us example.

***In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.***