



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Fourth Sunday After Easter, April 29th, 2018

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

At first glance, the reading from the Epistle General of St James appointed for today's Communion Service falls into the category of "beautiful, but not very challenging thoughts." It kicks off by declaring that everything good and perfect comes from God, and advises us to behave like Christians – a statement of the blindingly obvious, if ever there was one.

But that first impression is entirely false. Take, for example, the opening declaration: "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above and cometh down from the Father of lights in whom there is no variableness nor shadow of turning." Those 28 uncomplicated words succinctly spell out the fundamental attributes of God – the basic things human beings need to know about him. You might call it "God 01."

It tells us that God is invariably good and invariably perfect. In short, he is perfectly loving, and because of this the gifts that he gives us are perfect and good. This, however, does not mean he is going to fulfill our every wish or even that we are going to like the gifts he chooses to bestow on us. Far from it.

Consider, for example, the gifts he gave the children of Israel: The Holy Land is a rather odd place for God to have given his Chosen People for a homeland. A good deal of it is "wilderness." It doesn't have many natural resources: There aren't any tall trees like the cedars of Lebanon. There are ore and chemical deposits, but right off the beaten track in inhospitable areas.

It's a hard country to defend. Its wadis, canyons, hills and mountains are ideal for guerrilla warfare. But the wide valleys and plains favored large, well-disciplined armies. The Israelites were tough fighters, but even at the height of Israel's power, they were never able to field an army sufficiently large to fend off the great powers surrounding them.

Even worse, the Holy Land stands at the hub of the ancient world. Folks who wanted to go any place dry shod used it as a highway. Egyptians marched across it on the way to Lebanon. Assyrians marched across it to attack the Egyptians, as did the Babylonians. And Alexander the Great marched across it to attack absolutely everyone he could lay their hands on. The consequence of its location was that the Holy Land was always either under threat of attack or in a state of abject subjection.

Why would God have put His Chosen People in a place like this? It was not because more attractive places were unavailable. Africa wasn't heavily populated and in many areas food can be grown with comparative ease.

We can deduce from this God didn't create his "chosen" people in order for them to have it easy. Nor did he choose them because they were morally and spiritually superior to the rest of us. Rather, they were chosen because they were just like us: no better and no worse.

God singled them out as the means by which he would teach everybody else in the world the

nature of his relationship with us, his creatures. It's not a lesson that can be taught in a cozy backwater where food falls off the trees. There is only one sure way for God to get his message across, and that would be to set up his chosen people in the most vulnerable place possible.

The lesson is that we cannot control our destinies. But God can and, in fact, does. It teaches us that he will nurture, protect and defend people who place their trust in him enough to take his advice and do his bidding. The Holy Land's location provided both the lesson and the means of its dissemination. It was a lesson the Jewish people were had to learn time and again.

Only thanks to God's intervention were they able to settle in the land of Canaan. It was a hopeless quest from a purely human perspective. The Canaanites were in every way Israel's military superiors. Yet contrary to all military wisdom, they were defeated, and their cities and strongholds were destroyed, by a rabble of former slaves, unschooled in the use of arms.

The citizens of Jericho, for example, were secure behind immense mud-brick ramparts. The city's granaries were overflowing thanks to a bountiful harvest. Yet seven days after the siege began, the earth heaved and the brick walls collapsed in heaps of rubble. Everyone was put to the sword, man and beast. Not a kernel of grain was looted. It was an event unique in military history.

One might think that after such a demonstration of divine power the Israelites would have learned, once and for all time, to put their trust in God. They must have known the victory was owed solely to God. This sense of awareness, however, lasted only half a century or so. Within a couple of generations, God's pivotal role in the conquest of Canaan had been entirely forgotten.

The people turned to worshipping the far more congenial Canaanite gods. Everyone "did what was right in his own eyes," living in easy harmony with licentious Canaanite neighbors. And slowly but surely, the Children of Israel were dispossessed of everything God had helped their ancestors to win. And they did not regain it until their faith in God had been restored.

This lesson was learned, unlearned and learned again throughout Israel's history. It is the predominant theme of the Old Testament, echoing and re-echoing through every book: Mankind thrives not thanks to its own abilities and resources, but thanks to God's grace alone.

God miraculously saved Jerusalem many times when all human hope was lost. Some 800 years before Christ, God enabled the Prophet Elijah to lure a Syrian army away from the city. A hundred years after that a huge besieging Assyrian army was miraculously decimated by a plague. And only 250 years before the birth of Jesus, a miraculous military campaign freed them from the tyranny of the successors of Alexander the Great.

On each occasion, the Jewish people had brought the catastrophe upon themselves. God had not abandoned them. They had abandoned God. Instead following the course God had mapped for them, they had resorted to dishonest political intrigue and force of arms. By taking God for granted and smugly assuming he would never allow his holy City and His chosen people to be destroyed, they brought destruction on their own heads.

Among the many lessons we should learn from this sad history is that when people fail to grasp what God is trying to teach them, there are usually consequences – most of them ugly. In short, we can learn the lessons the easy way or we can learn them the hard way.

And, actually, this is the case James is making in his Epistle General: If we put our trust wholly in God, he will never let us down: "[God] giveth to all men liberally . . . [if they] ask in faith, nothing wavering," He says.

It is a point Jesus makes with even greater emphasis in today's Gospel: "[W]hatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask anything in my name, I will do it." It is a promise we can truly count on – if we ask in faith, nothing wavering. "AMEN"