



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

4th Sunday after Easter
May 20, 2019

**✠ 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 Epistle:

"We should be a kind of first fruits of His Creatures." St. James 1:

At first blush, these are difficult readings to understand. In fact they are almost riddles. We have St. James talking about how we should become first fruits, and we have Jesus telling us He has to leave so the Comforter can come. Why should we be first fruits? Why couldn't the Comforter come while Jesus was still with us? For these readings to make any sense to us, we have to answer these two riddles.

To start, we have to unravel the first fruits riddle. First fruits go back to Cain and Abel. Abel offered up the first fruits of his flock, and his sacrifice was pleasing to God. Cain offered up a sacrifice as well, but it was deemed unacceptable. It didn't turn out that way because God liked lamb better than broccoli. What made one sacrifice pleasing and the other unacceptable was the heart of the one making the offering.

In Abel's heart, the offering to God was his first thought. I have been given the blessing of increase. I know where the blessing comes from. Before anything else, I thank God for that blessing. Cain made an offering too. But thanksgiving and acknowledgement of the source of his increase came second. He sacrificed to God as an after thought, or a formality, or because he felt it was expected of him. He split his life in two. He gave his first care, His first fruit to his earthly interests, and then looked to please God, to thank God, as his second concern.

Of course, we live our lives like Cain. We split the week up, giving 6 days to our earthly needs, and as an afterthought, we give a day to God. If we're honest, we even struggle to give a whole day to God. It is hard enough to give the morning, imagine a whole day of putting God first, and our earthly affairs second. It is pretty hard for us to do. We don't do it too well or too often.

But, putting God first, not just on Sunday, but everyday is what we are called to do. The drama enacted by Cain and Abel is reflected as the basis of the whole Jewish worship system. First fruits were the cornerstone of the sacrificial system. You wouldn't think of bringing a sickly or contaminated lamb to offering at the temple. You were commanded to bring your best, the first of your labors, and the priests were there to inspect it. If you couldn't produce a first fruit in your work, you had to buy the sheep or doves from the temple that were set aside to be first fruits. Putting God first, recognizing that He was the source of one's blessing, and thanking Him before we turn to our everyday interests is the ritual we were given under the Old Testament. It was given to us to prepare us for life under the New Testament, when Jesus became the First fruits of our lives.

So, we see that the requirement to offer first fruits to God is specified throughout Scripture, from Genesis to the Gospels to revelation. But, before we are ready to be first fruits, we still might want to know why God cares. Why isn't Cain's offering as good as Abel's. What does God want with our offerings at all? Does He need anything we might have to give Him. Everything is already His.

Well that's right, everything is already His. He created it. It belongs to Him. Since we can't give God anything He doesn't already own, then giving first fruits can't really be of any benefit to God at all. So, if first

fruits are not meant for God's benefit, they can only be meant for us, the ones offering first fruits, or as St. James puts it, becoming first fruits.

To get an earthly idea of how offering this blessing might be to our benefit, we can think of those times in life when we have been with someone who is dying in peace, because their faith is strong, and going fearlessly to be with their Savior and the loved ones that have gone before them. We go visit them to bring them consolation, to give our regrets, to offer our love and say good-bye. However, whenever I have had the privilege to witness a passing in faith, it becomes clear that the well wishers' and family have nothing to offer. The person passing is already filled with peace, already seeing the glory to come, and instead of receiving comfort and condolence, they turn around and offer it back. They tell the family and the loved ones how beautiful the vision is of the place they're going, they talk about being reunited in love to the ones who have gone on before. Most importantly, they offer peace and comfort and hope to the ones that came to bring them presents, to be in their presence as they passed.

God created us to love Him, and to be loved by Him. That is the first purpose of life. That should be our first fruit. Everything else we do is secondary. When we are what He meant us to be, when we love Him first, and offer our lives to God first in thanksgiving for our creation, He is pleased with us. He takes the gift we offer, the living of our lives as He created us to live them, and He blesses that gift, and He returns it. What God has blessed is richer than what was offered at first. So lives that were offered up as first fruits are enriched by the blessing of those first fruits, and those lives are returned with power and grace and peace and above all, a love that passes all understanding.

That is why Jesus goes to the Father, before the Holy Ghost comes to us. In Jesus, the new life is offered up to God. A life that was totally obedient, perfectly given to the Father's will, that poured itself out in love is

created by Christ as He takes our humanity, and makes it one with His divine nature. Because He is divine, He not only offers that life up as a symbol of His obedience, He actually brings that life to the Father, as He ascends to Heaven to sit at the right hand of God, preparing the place where we will follow.

God, pleased with Jesus as the first fruit of the New Man, the Man we were meant to be in Adam, and failed to be in our self will, blesses that new life. That new life, the life of Jesus, the one that we share by Baptism, offered up perfectly, blessed by God in His pleasure, is then returned to us, so that we can not only have life, but have it more abundantly. The Holy Ghost, the Comforter, strengthens us in that new life, that perfect life, the life that was offered up as first fruits for us.

Since we share in Christ's life, and since that life was the first fruits, then by becoming one in Him, we also become first fruits. At Communion, we acknowledge our duty to become first fruits when we pray that we offer our lives, and souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy and living sacrifice to God.

Just as we are blessed to be called to new life as first fruits by our attraction to participate in the perfect life of Christ, so we reflect that perfect life to the rest of the world when we become first fruits, and we attract the world to seek life in Jesus the way we were first attracted. The blessing of first fruits, that is carried to us by the Holy Ghost, that fills our lives to overflowing, spills over to the rest of creation, and brings the whole of creation closer to its original purpose, to love God, and to be loved by Him.

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