



**ST. STEPHEN'S  
ANGLICAN CHURCH**  
11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

**The First Sunday After the Epiphany, January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020**  
**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son**  
**and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

Today we mark the First Sunday After the Epiphany and the Gospel appointed for today's Eucharist is the account of the child Jesus debating the meaning of the Scriptures with the learned doctors at Jerusalem's Temple. It is a debate that has gone on for more than 3,200 years – not least since shortly after the Children of Israel entered Canaan, the land God had promised them.

When they first arrived they were united not only in a common bond of faith and in universally accepted Laws (God's Laws), but in a communal commonality of purpose. Their common social vision was, of course, not of their own conceiving. It had been given to them by God and recorded in the first five Books of Moses, but it was, nevertheless, held by all of them in common esteem. Yet when we read the Book of Judges and the Book of Ruth – records that started just decades after the triumphal entry into the Promised Land – we encounter a story of what can only be described as one of abject failure.

Scarcely a generation after they entered the Promised Land that common social vision had evaporated. Society was unravelling. As the Book of Judges quaintly puts it, time and again: "The Children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord."

The story of the Children of Israel had a powerful influence on the founders of the United States. This should not be entirely surprising – for they shared a similar social

vision to that of ancient Israel. The nation they founded was to be a virtuous nation, a nation united under God; indivisible because of its common consecration to its creator.

This was because many who first settled America had been impelled to seek a new lives far from their homeland by fervent religious convictions. They felt a shared experience with the Children of Israel. They even spoke of America in Biblical terms – the New Jerusalem; the Land of Milk and Honey.

But if the founders were resolved to establish their new nation on a similar footing to that of the ancient Children of Israel, they were equally determined not to repeat their mistakes. And they were perfectly confident that they would not do so for they had the Children of Israel's experience to drawn upon. That's what the Scriptures are all about.

Today, scarcely two centuries since the founding of the republic, we should be less confident about our superiority over those ancient Israelites. Society has been utterly transformed in the space of a couple of generations. Not only have the fundamentals for personal relationships been radically recast, our social and corporate relationships have been altered just as drastically.

Forty years ago, people who disagreed politically generally regarded each other as honorable. While they shared the same basic

goals and aspirations, they acknowledged that it was perfectly legitimate for people to differ about the way in which goals should be achieved and aspirations realized.

There was a common understanding that it's normal for fundamentally like-minded people to disagree on individual issues. But, almost overnight, that has changed. Discourse has become difficult in both social and political arenas. Folks who disagree politically and socially no longer view their adversaries as decent but wrong-headed. Instead, they denounce them as traitors, frauds and moral degenerates.

The explanation for this is not simply that manners have declined beyond all recognition. Standards have certainly plummeted. But it's not solely the alacrity with which people resort to abominable rudeness that makes civil discourse difficult. The real problem was that as a society we no longer share the same basic common goals.

In the space of less than half a century, our society has splintered into a vast spectrum of competing special interest groups, each with its own individual goals, none entirely compatible with another and many wholly incompatible with almost all the rest of society. Curiously – or maybe not so curiously – this was exactly the situation in which the Israelites found themselves a generation after their arrival in the Promised Land.

But the parallel with modern America by no means ends there. When we read the Book of Judges, it is plain to see that social morality has completely broken down – and in just the same way that it has broken down in America.

Our political leaders unashamedly emulate their flawed counterparts in The Book of Judges: Samson, for example, one of Israel's most respected judges, allowed his career to be destroyed by a hooker. Less exalted folk displayed similar moral lapses. Ruth – the great grandmother of King David and an ancestor of our Lord – was in most respects an admirable person. Yet she didn't

think twice about seducing a naive widower in order to coerce him into marriage.

These are the sort of shenanigans that take place in our society today. Such goings on would have shocked people a generation ago. Today they are so commonplace, when we hear about them, we scarcely raise an eye brow.

But, like us, the Children of Israel didn't deliberately set out to flout God's will. Rather they simply slithered into trouble – not realizing what they were getting themselves into. Indeed, they started out with the best of intentions.

God had warned them against moral compromise. But striking compromises seemed much better than conflict. The problem, however, was that their compromises left pockets of paganism all over the land God had declared holy. Good cannot co-exist with evil and, thus, before they knew it, they knew celebrating diversity on a grand scale.

The Book of Judges teaches that when a society no longer shares the same social vision and basic goals it disintegrates. And in a society in which the social goals are based on Holy Scripture, as in America, disintegration is particularly swift.

It is a lesson that was learned, unlearned, and learned again throughout the history of Israel. What's more, the process has continued from the advent of Christianity until the present.

The late President Harry S. Truman famously observed that the only new things we encounter in this world are found in the history we haven't read. However the history recorded in The Book of Judges ought to be familiar to all American Christians. Maybe it's time to take to heart on President Truman's other familiar saying: "The buck stops here." *Amen.*