



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Fifteenth Sunday After Trinity, September 16th, 2007

✠ **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 want to get rich are advised to abandon notions of becoming a second 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. Socialism and capitalism; Marxism and Fascism, Anarcho-Syndicalism and Libertarianism: every one of them is headed in basically the same direction: and that is enabling mankind, collectively or as individuals, to control its collective destiny.

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 main issues about which they differ concern the route that the human race should take to get there.

Actually, there's nothing new about the notion of controlling our lives. The Psalmists and other pious people of ancient Israel devoted much thought to the

subject. Some believed the secret to exerting control over one's life 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 a modern 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 -- and not just those that he knew, personally, but all the generations yet unborn. These days, by contrast, the destinies most folks are interested in controlling are their own.

Some scholars explain 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 they believed in life after death, these scholars say, it took the form of a vague ephemeral existence in a shadowy nether world. But most Jews of David's time believed the nearest one came to immortality was having one's name perpetuated in the lives of one's 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 his faith in his ultimate Resurrection: "O Lord, my God, I cried unto thee; and thou has healed me. Thou, Lord, hast brought my soul out of hell: thou has kept my life, that I should not go down into the pit."

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 fortune tellers did a roaring trade.

When God abandoned King Saul because of his disobedience and presumption, Saul was too proud to repent and beg forgiveness. Instead, he visited a famous medium – the Witch of Endor – who conjured up for him the spirit of the dead Prophet Samuel.

A remarkable aspect of all the effort we expend on to trying to get control over our destinies, is that, except in the most minor of ways, it doesn't work. We cannot control our lives. Our helplessness and vulnerability in this regard was to be seen in the appalling crimes that were committed in New York and Washington a year ago six years ago last week – more than three thousand innocent people cut down as they went about their daily lives at the murderous whim of a band of terrorists.

Cynics profess to find the continuing public out-pouring of grief that still follows the tragedies of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon to be overblown or in some way excessive. Thousands die in the Third World every day and 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 all-seeing intelligence services and all our technology this simply shouldn't have happened.

But happen it did and it is, perhaps, the sheer randomness of the horror that struck a chord with so many millions people. The suddenness of the happening is a stark reminder of our inability to control our destinies. It echoes the two verses that begin the 14th chapter of the Book of Job 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." It leaves us asking: Are we all simply at the mercy of capricious fate?

By coincidence, it a question Jesus Christ addresses 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, and no matter what happens to us, we will triumph in the end. Christ's message is: "Don't worry. God loves you. And, because he loves you, he will take care of you."

Saying this is one thing, of course, but accepting it and believing it is quite another. It is not difficult to believe in God. Evidence of his handiwork is all around us. The hard thing to believe is that the Creator of the Universe could care about the fate of folks as tiny and inconsequential as ourselves.

The answer, says Jesus, is to be found in God's creation. Few individual 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 as being far too exalted to be interested in our 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 the birds of the air and the grass of the field – creatures that make no effort to care for themselves – why would we imagine he doesn't take a similar interest in the well-being of the 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*

***To the only wise God, our Saviour, be glory and majesty,
dominion and honor, now and forever. AMEN***