

Sermon - Easter 5, Year A
St. Stephen/Acts of the Apostles
5/7/23

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In today's first reading, we encounter just a glimpse of the extraordinary story of St. Stephen. Stephen is commonly remembered around Christmas time, when we celebrate his Feast on December 26th (as memorialized in the carol "Good King Wenceslas look'd out, On the Feast of Stephen; When the snow lay round about, Deep, and crisp, and even..."). While the carol remembers King Wencelas, it might be more edifying to imagine a carol about the saint himself: "Deacon Stephen serv'd Christ, faithful was his preaching. Judges found him blasphemous, blacklisted his teaching..."

Stephen appears first in the sixth chapter of Acts just as the apostles of Jesus are asking themselves some fresh new questions about how this fledgling community of those who follow Jesus will develop and be directed.

In our Bible study this past Wednesday, we discussed together how the Acts of the Apostles is the Bible's paramount adventure story. It is written by St. Luke – the second book of his two-part accounting of the miraculous events unfolding around the Incarnation of Jesus. His Gospel tells us the story of Jesus' birth, ministry, death, and resurrection. His second volume is the Acts, and here we find the story of how the Holy Spirit will continue Jesus' mission by the apostles who continue to live and pray and teach. There is one verse in the very first chapter of Acts that tells the story of the entire book: Acts 1:8 – Jesus declares, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." The Holy Spirit will arrive at Pentecost, and the apostles will be Jesus' *witnesses*.

This is a key idea throughout all of the events that follow Christ's Resurrection. Real, actual people saw Jesus after he rose from the dead. In the first century Mediterranean world, there were all sorts of magicians, alleged "messiahs," wizards, and charlatans traveling about, proclaiming themselves to be blessed by God – we'll even meet a special one later in Acts 8. But all of these guys were mortal men. The cults that grew up around them dispersed. Their influence faded. Their "powers" were illusions, and their proclamation were falsehoods. Jesus was exactly who he said he was – the Messiah, the Son of God– and he had genuinely, actually risen from the dead. And so this theme of "witness" drives the events of the book of Acts. The apostles had seen these events themselves, the women at the tomb had met the physically arisen Jesus in the garden. Luke is careful to include physical details, describing how Jesus ate and walked and permitted his body to be touched. The apostles' task now was to carry this truth into the rest of the world. As Jesus declared: "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

This witnessing is not to end with a small community of disciples. Yes, it begins in Jerusalem, but Jesus is clear that this transformation of life and death is a proclamation to be inherited by all creation. The Acts of the Apostles itself is structured around this idea. With chapter one, it begins in Jerusalem, the Gospel known to only a small collection of witnesses. The story then takes the apostles out into Judea, and then Samaria. In the final, 28th chapter, Paul is in Rome. Today, we often use certain expressions to describe a place of great, even unimaginable distance – "all the way to Timbuktu" or "might as well be on the moon." In Jesus' day, to describe something as being "in Rome" was another way of saying, "the ends of the earth." And so - by the end of the Acts of the Apostles – the Gospel is indeed in Rome. It has found its way to the ends of the earth, witnessed indeed by all creation.

We are first introduced to St. Stephen as the apostles are looking to officially expand their number. The community of disciples has grown, and the needs have become too great for the original twelve apostles. There are the duties of teaching and preaching the Word of God, and there is great need for administration of resources and care for the sick, the elderly, and the poor. The apostles ask the community to select from among them seven reputable men of Spirit and wisdom, and the apostles lay their hands upon them. This is often, in the tradition of the Church, remembered as the first ordination of deacons. Later in Paul's letters, we will see the text use this very same word *διάκονος* used to describe women who also perform these ministerial roles.

Stephen, the text tells us, is full of grace and power, and he was working great signs and wonders among the people. Leaders from the temple authorities attempt to rile the crowds of Jerusalem up against him, accusing him of blasphemy and of trying to destroy the temple itself. False witnesses are called against him, and Stephen simply gazes upon them, his face – the Bible tells us – shining like an angel. He then begins one of the finest sermons in scripture, recalling the entire history of Israel from Abraham forward and gently, steadily revealing the fulfillment of God's every promise, every law in the Incarnation and Resurrection of Jesus. Those who have accused him refuse to listen. Stephen is yet another threat to system of power that Jesus himself had so artfully subverted. And so he becomes the saint who we recognize today as the first Christian martyr – the first person to die for their Christian faith.

The text thoughtfully, artfully, and deliberately aligns the life, work, and death of Stephen with the life, work, and death of Jesus. You may have noticed the similarities - both are accused of blasphemy. Both are brought before the high priest. Both “commend” their spirit before dying, and both cry out in a loud voice. Both beg God to forgive their enemies. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

The powerhouse of faith on display in the seventh chapter of Acts propels the activity of the apostles forward at a breathtaking velocity. The action careens forward – persecution, transformation, magicians, Ethiopians, shipwrecks, visions, and more. But it is worth pausing here at the final breath of St. Stephen. His faithfulness is worth our attention. His steadfast courage is worth our thanksgiving. For in Stephen, we see the stakes and the blessings of following Christ. We see in him a pattern of true discipleship. In him, I think, we might even find a friend.

For all the drama of this chapter, it is important for us to remember that Stephen is an ordinary guy. Like the rest of the apostles, he is not uniquely noble or powerful. He is simply faithful, doing the work that he has been given to do. Stephen is one who is sent to care for the least among the disciples – those most desperately in need. He is not interested in wealth or in making a name for himself. He is a servant, inspired by the servanthood of his beloved Christ.

Stephen is also a preacher. Clearly alongside his servanthood of other people, he is also a servant of the story of Israel: his story. He is not following this Messiah on a whim or for personal gain, but instead has staked his life upon the radical, astonishing belief that the promises of his holy and living God are true. This truth is what animates his remarkable courage. This truth is what inspires him to pray for his enemies. The truth is what roots him – steadfast to the end. And upon that threshold of his own martyrdom, he is rewarded beyond riches with God’s own perfect vision of the heavens themselves.

Stephen sees Jesus. “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!”

Our discipleship is a life of adventure. The stakes are high, the terms are often uncertain, and the road before us may be marked by stones and all manner of difficulty. But we have been

given these steadfast friends in the faith – St. Stephen and all the rest – from the time of scripture to the person who may be sitting beside us this very day. We are given to one another as companions in this life of witness. It will take courage. It will take the best of us. It may even take our lives. But we will truly see them brought to perfection in a paradise that waits for each of us.

Amen.