

Acts 7:55-60

John 14:1-14

1 Peter 2:2-10

“You are our rock and fortress, O God.
Lead us, Guide us for your name’s sake.” AMEN!

So this is my second time in having
the privilege to preach to
the congregation of St. Stephen on
the Sunday of our namesake.

There’s always something special that happens
when a church’s name comes around in
the lectionary.

But ours is a disturbing story in
the Acts of the Apostles.

Last week we celebrated when the followers of
Jesus were giving possessions away
so that none would go without, but
today is challenging to celebrate, right?

This stoning of Stephen is a tragic account.

Here’s a devoted follower of Jesus
feeding the hungry and sheltering
the un-housed widow.

The warm and fuzzy feelings of Easter
give way to an understanding that

pain and suffering continue in the aftermath.

Being followers of Jesus did (and does)
not mean life becomes a cakewalk
where everyone lives carefree.

Stephen, a devoted follower who spoke truth
to power and that led to him paying
the ultimate price.

We are reminded that in the post-Easter world
all is not blossoming lilies and colorful eggs.

As commentator Amy Oden wrote,
“Our Easter trumpets are jarringly silenced
by shocking human brutality.”

So, how do we celebrate our namesake?

One way is that Stephen reminds us of
what changes in a person when Christ enters in.

While on the surface it can look like
the focus of the text is what a violent crowd
can accomplish in a single moment.

And we lovers of justice,
shake our heads at the visceral, and
frankly murderous acts, that can occurred

when mob mentality takes over.

It might seem that we need to focus on the mob
that rose up against this follower of Jesus' way.

We are tempted to do that, right?

Point out the ways "they" get it wrong, but
I don't think that's what Luke, the writer of Acts,
was meaning for us to focus on.

When our focus is on the ones acting
with violence our response will be violent.

There is no sign, nor word, that Stephen tried
to run or fight back.

What he did do was, he turned his gaze,
his focus, his attention... in the midst of
an enraged crowd that ground their teeth
and came at him,
he turned his focus not on them.

Verse 55 told us, "he gazed into heaven and saw
the glory of God and Jesus standing at
the right hand of God."

In the midst of the violence and instability of
his personal safety, he kept his gazed

focused on Christ. (Pause)

But, I want to be careful here to point out
that Stephen was not passive nor
was he a doormat.

He was not in some type of denial about
what was happening to him.

He didn't take abuse for abuse's sake.

He, in fact, was actively protesting what
they were doing by not looking at them
and peacefully protesting their violence
by giving himself over to God,
while forgiving the offenders.

Now, I hope and pray we are never put in
the same situation as Stephen was but
if it does happen,

because it could happen
to people who follow Jesus in this age...

if it does happen then we can
find strength in our namesake;
purpose in his non-violent protest.

We can remember what he did and

keep our gaze on Christ in the midst of
violence and persecution.

To not engage in the same way but
to engage like Stephen.

For we know that God is up to something good...
even in the midst of all this violence
(in the midst of today's violence)

God is up to something good and
actively at work to accomplish good for everyone.
(Pause)

And it is a God-thing to have this text,
with our namesake, partnered with
the gospel from John.

Here we are in the Easter season and
we rewind time clock to look again at
Jesus' quiet words with his disciples
the night before he was crucified.

On the 5th Sunday of Easter, we go back
to what he said to them to affirm his words
to what was happening and how we can
now interpret it.

This Holy Week encounter,

the night of Jesus' betrayal, is now set
for us in the Easter season so that we can
see that when Jesus faced his final ordeal,
he comforted them; assured them;
testified to them and
their troubled hearts. (Pause)

You see, God knows we need
something to look forward to.

We look forward to the pain and suffering we
will be called to endure but we also look
forward to the good God is up to.

So Jesus was sure to promise them that
he'd prepare a place for them.

Here, I sort of picture Jesus, with
his carpenter's belt on (hammer and plumb line)
and ascending into heaven to get work
on building rooms and mansions, right? :-)

But that's really a poor translation.

Christ prepares abiding places
not mansions or rooms.

And the thing about abiding places is
that they are available right now.

Abiding places to receive while
the hardships of life occur, and
the heart of our Christian faith is
this person to person bond with
one another and with God.

It is real and good.

So, those with troubled/agitated hearts can
keep their gaze on Christ and be assured that
God is up to something good and
there's abiding presence with us,
right now.

We all have an experience/s to relate to.

Mine happened when I was critically injured
in a skiing accident.

It was a remote trail, and I could have laid
there wrapped around a tree
for hours but one friend went back
and found me.

Then he let the others know to get ski patrol
who got there quickly and they called for
a helicopter that came to lift me
to the hospital.

I had no part in saving myself.

My actions brought it all on, and some could
have said that I was getting what was deserved.

Then, for the next few days
doctors, nurses, caregivers tended to me.

And during that uncertain time my mom and
step-dad drove the five hours to be at
the hospital and my dad from Miami flew
to be there, too.

Did I know they were there?

I can't say that I remember them
talking to me or holding my hand, but when
I did wake up in that strange place there

were voices there to speak to me
that I knew and recognized and trusted.

Voices of my parents to say,
“We are here with you. And you are safe.”

I'm willing to bet you all have a
similar story or account in your own life
when a person you knew and loved came

to your side, too.

Assuring you of safety and presence.

What a difference it makes... that abiding presence.

Today, I invite you to consider such an episode
in your life because from time to time
our thoughts turn toward death.

We must talk about it openly,
freely, and without shame.

For there will be an “inevitable moment, when
no one can step into our shoes and
do our dying for us, then we shall
know in full what these words of
Christ signify,”

that where I am you may be also.

Sorry, if you were expecting a big mansion!

We look to something even better,
a personal, redeeming,
caring and abiding love making
a space for us to know...

Christ is here, Christ is with you.

So, with these promises, and our call
to gaze upon Christ,
we are instilled with an encouragement.

And that hope is made known to us.

For we have tasted that the Lord is good and
we have sought after things that we thought
were precious only to find

they paled in comparison to
the precious stone the builders rejected.

This living stone, Jesus, will trip up each and
every one of us.

Yet, the rock that makes us stumble
also protects us from falling
too far from God.

Firm, secure, everlasting...

That is the way, the truth, and the life.

Words of inclusion, not division.

And we can go our own way,
knowing of an abiding presence that is

both tangible, persistent, and very hard
to explain.

Still, there's a song of peace and
a gladness in our heart.

For where Christ is there you will be.

AMEN!