**How To Treat Those Who Bring God’s Word**

St. Stephen, Martyr

12.26.2021

Grace to you and peace form God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Did you listen to these three texts appointed for December 26? I know, this seems strange. I guess it is sad that so many times, pastors skip the readings appointed for this day because they do not want to consider St. Stephen, Martyr. It seems such a rude interruption to the joy which we know as our Christmas celebration. But dear friends in Christ, I pray by the time this sermon is ended, you will see it is exactly about, “Peace on earth, good will toward men.” Or, to say it another way, it is all about Jesus.

In our Old Testament lesson, Zachariah speaks God's word to the people, but they didn't like the word that he spoke to them. So, they killed him - stoned him!

In our second reading from the book of Acts, the people didn't like what Stephen, proclaiming God's word, declared to them. So, they stoned him - to death!

And then in our Gospel lesson, Jesus speaks about the prophets and wise men and scribes whom God sent to Israel - His church. Some they flogged in the synagogues, they persecuted them, and Jerusalem killed the prophets and stoned those sent to it.

 So, how many of you would like to go speak God's word to God's people? Sounds like a great job! You get to be persecuted! You might get flogged! You might get stoned! You may even be killed! If that is how the people are going to treat those who bring God's word to them, only one of those sounds remotely interesting, but that one is not what most people think that word means today.

Interestingly, whether in the Old Testament or in the New Testament, it is plainly evident that people do not like when God's word is spoken in truth and purity. Why is that?

People do not want to be called to repentance, to be told that certain choices they make are sinful. "What I really, really like cannot be sinful. I know deep down in my heart that what I'm doing is loving, it's not hurting anybody, how can it be bad? It makes me feel so good, how can it be wrong?"

There is also another side to this problem. If what God’s Word declares is true, then it means that ultimately I am not in control of my life. I must answer to someone, and that does not sit well with people. It's especially true if that someone is something we cannot see.

Now you compound that with the fact that you have your own ideas of what you want to believe about God. Your own ideas about what you want to believe about God are not necessarily those things that God's spokesmen have declared to be true about God. In fact, often times the things we want to believe about God are in direct contradiction, and completely opposite to what God has revealed about Himself – and about His will for us and our lives.

In the days of Zechariah, the people abandoned the house of the Lord, the God of their fathers, and served the false gods of the local area, the Asherim and other idols. God sent the prophets to call them back to appropriate worship, finally sending Zechariah. They had their own ideas, they wanted to do it their own way, so they stoned Zechariah. As he was dying, he said, "May the Lord see and avenge!"

May the Lord see and avenge? Of course He sees! How will He avenge? We want our pound of flesh, don't we? We want them to pay – and to pay dearly – for their sins against us! Let them suffer as we have suffered!

And so God does avenge. His wrath against their sin of murdering the prophets He sent to them is meted out upon His own Son. We hear the voice of the Child whose birthday celebrated yesterday cry out from the cross, "Father forgive them."

It is there on the cross, and in these words, that we see the purpose, for which the word of God took on human flesh in the womb of Mary. God's wrath against sin is spilled out on the innocent, fragile, flesh of His own Son.

"Vengeance is mine, I will repay,'' said the Lord.

Stephen was stoned because he spoke the truth, He faithfully proclaimed God's word to them, doing so even with his dying breath, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Yes, that is the most faithful proclamation of God’s Word.

Their sinning against Stephen has already been paid for, in full, upon the cross! Jesus had already done it!

How do we live our lives with others? Do we willingly forgive, knowing that the debt of sin owed to us has already been paid in full? Do we forgive trusting that God knows better than we even know what they deserve, and that it is nothing less than a word of forgiveness?

Do we also call for vengeance when after our shower we stare at the mirror in the morning? There standing before us is the one whose sins we are the most intimate with. We know the sins of that man gazing back at us from the mirror better than we know the sins of any other. And the full truth is that, compared to what God knows of that sinner, our knowledge is incomplete. Some of our sins we do not know. Others sins we have forgotten. And some of our sins we try to deny as sins before the One who defines what is sin and what is not.

"Father, forgive them." That is why we celebrate the birth of this most holy Child, for He grew to manhood in order to speak those words for you – and to you. Standing at the right side of the father, He continues to plead for you, for me, and for all who trust Him.

Forgiveness is the very word that you are privileged to speak, in the name of Christ, to all in your life who sin against you. It may not feel that way at times, but it is a joy and a privilege to know that vengeance has already been paid in full for all those who sin against us. We truly are at peace with God, and at peace with our neighbors in Christ.

You are here today to hear that forgiveness, to eat of that forgiveness, to drink of that forgiveness – you are here to receive Christ. You receive Him even as He came that first Christmas – God, hidden in human flesh, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

He's hidden in the voice of your pastor.

His flesh wrapped in the swaddling clothes of bread.

His blood nestled in the cup from which you drink.

These are the means of God's grace, in them, Christ cries out, "Do not hold their sin against them." And it is done for you, just as you believe! In the name of Jesus. Amen.