

Acts 6:8-7:2a, 51-60 (St. Stephen, Martyr)
“Christ, Our Emmanuel, is with Us”
Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer, Enfield CT
December 26, 2021

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.
 Amen.

The text for the Day of St. Stephen is from Acts 6 and 7:

⁸ And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. ¹¹ Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” ¹² And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, ¹³ and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.” ¹⁵ And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. ¹ And the high priest said, “Are these things so?” ² And Stephen said: “Brothers and fathers, hear me. . . . ⁵¹ “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, ⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.” ⁵⁴ Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” ⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. ⁵⁸ Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Many people may have heard about the Festival of St. Stephen because of the Christmas Carol, *Good King Wenceslas*, “Good King Wenceslas looked out On the feast of Stephen, When the snow lay round about Deep and crisp and even.” I would guess that if they have heard about it, not many would be able to tell you what day that would have been. Well, the Feast of Stephen is today, December 26, the day after Christmas.

Observing the Festival of St. Stephen, the first martyr of Christ, on the day after Christmas probably comes as a bit of shock to our modern-day sensitivities. Shouldn't we still be thinking about shepherds and mangers, angels, and the newborn Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes? Instead, we are reflecting on the life and death of Stephen, the first of the noble army of martyrs—those who were killed because of their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

We first learn about Stephen in Acts, chapter 6. He was one of the first seven deacons, the ministry set up by the apostles for directing the practical affairs of the Church, especially for the relief of the poor and the widow. Luke writes in the Book of Acts that Stephen was "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:5 ESV). As Stephen served in this diaconal ministry of the Church, he was "full of grace and power" and "was doing great wonders and signs among the people." The Lord, according to His grace, used Stephen as His instrument through whom the Lord Himself worked miracles when and where the Holy Spirit desired. These signs and wonders pointed to the validity of the witness Stephen gave to the Lord Jesus Christ. Stephen gave witness in the synagogue of the Freedmen that Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah and Savior.

When those who belonged to the synagogue could not win their debate with Stephen, they decided to conspire against him. Stephen was brought before the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. This is the same council before whom Jesus Himself stood not long before. Stephen, like His Lord Jesus, was charged by false witnesses. They claimed he was speaking blasphemous words against Moses and against the temple. The high priest asked Stephen if the accusations were true. Then Stephen preached a powerful sermon, giving the history of

God's people going back to Abraham and the patriarchs, then to Moses and the Exodus. This message, of which our reading from Acts includes just the conclusion, indicted the people of Israel for always resisting the Holy Spirit, killing the prophets, and now having killed the Righteous One, the Lord Jesus.

The enraged council and crowd ground their teeth against Stephen in anger. Did Stephen notice? He was focused on something—Someone—else. "He, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, 'Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.'" The mob literally stopped their ears and ran at Stephen. They dragged him from the city and stoned him to death. As he was dying, Stephen prayed for his enemies and persecutors, even as His Lord had done at the cross, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Lord, do not hold this sin against them." In the words of Jesus, "Father, forgive them." And when Stephen had prayed, he fell asleep in Christ.

The martyrdom of Stephen reminds us of something we need to remember: this world is a fallen world. It is a world in which our adversary, the devil, still prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking to frighten and devour us. So even though Christmas teaches us that God is with us, Emmanuel, we can expect many trials and heartaches in this world.

The account of Stephen takes us even further. It teaches us that many of our conflicts come as a direct result of our confessing Christ and His Word. If Stephen had kept his faith to himself, or at least kept it inside the small circle of believers, he could have avoided conflict. But he loved his Savior and his countrymen too much to let them perish in unbelief. It was Stephen's public confession of Jesus Christ as Lord that led to his death.

In the same way, our confession of Christ and His Word can lead to conflict. Though none of us has yet experienced persecution to the extent that Stephen did, many of us have died "little deaths" for the sake of Christ. Perhaps that came in the form of conflict between a parent and a child, one of whom departed from the faith; or a smear campaign against us or our church body by those who think our faith is too rigid or outdated. Perhaps it came in the form of mockery from colleagues at work. The story of Stephen reminds us how true this is: the more boldly we confess our faith in Jesus as Lord, the more likely we are to suffer conflict with our world. This is most surely more true today than it has ever been for us. Every day it becomes more likely that we will feel the pressure just to keep our faith to ourselves. To counter that pressure in a world like ours, we truly need the assurance that God is with us always.

Remember what Stephen did in the darkest hour of his persecution? "He looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:55). It is in Christ that Stephen found the assurance that God was with him, in spite of his enemies and their threats. This same Christ, whom Stephen believed and confessed, had given up the riches of heaven, had come to earth, and was born in a manger. This Christ, whom Stephen saw enthroned in heaven, is the same One who had suffered and died as the sacrifice for Stephen's sins on a Roman cross. The Savior who had paid such a great price for Stephen's salvation would never desert him in his hour of need. Seeing Christ gave Stephen assurance that God was with him.

We have the same assurance. No, you and I have not seen Christ visibly in the way that Stephen did. But we have seen Him just as certainly in His Word and Sacraments. Every

time we read our Bible or devotion book or listen to a sermon, we see Christ and His love for us. We see how much Jesus sacrificed for our salvation, and we are assured again that He will never leave us or forsake us. Every time we come to the Lord's Supper, we eat and drink the true body and blood that Christ gave up into death on the cross for the forgiveness of sins, and we are assured again of our Lord's commitment to us even in our dark times.

In this world we endure trials and troubles. Sometimes we suffer severely. But as we look to our Savior with the gift of Baptismal faith and trust, we see One who knows what it is to suffer. We see the One who once cried out to His Father, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Because Jesus was forsaken by His Father as He bore our sin for us, we know that we never will be left alone. As we gaze intently upon our Savior Jesus with the eyes of faith, God shows us that He is with us, even in our worst suffering.

God's gracious presence with us then gives us courage to confess our Savior and His Word to others. Now, it's not easy to be bold confessors of the Savior. Where do we find courage like Stephen's? In Jesus' promise to be with us. Hasn't He promised to be with us as we confess Him? Hasn't He promised to give us the strength to do so? After Jesus commissioned His Church to "go and make disciples of all nations," He added the promise, "I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Mt 28:20). Before our Lord ascended into heaven, He promised His followers that He would not leave them as orphans, but would send the Holy Spirit to help them testify about Him (Jn 15:26-27).

Richard Wurmbrand, a Romanian pastor, tells of being imprisoned with another Christian who had been tortured terribly (*Reaching Toward the Heights*, 1977). When he and other prisoners would fret over their sorrows, this prisoner would say to them, "If the outlook

is bad, try the uplook." Then he would remind them of how Stephen, when he was surrounded by hostile men who were about to stone him, looked up to Christ for courage. It is in the "uplook" that we also find courage, even when the outlook seems bad. Knowing God is with us in Christ Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit, we find courage to walk in the way of our Savior. We have courage because we know that the God who is with us works all things together for our good (Rom 8:28). The "good" here means especially our salvation from sin and death and the glory of God.

This good is even seen in the martyrdom of Stephen. After his death, intense persecution scattered the members of the Jerusalem church. Many fled Jerusalem and went to the regions of Judea and Samaria. But God used this scattering to accomplish His plan. Jesus had told His disciples that they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Persecution was the tool the Lord used to enable them to do that. The Christians established churches wherever they went and, inspired by Stephen's witness, they boldly proclaimed the Gospel.

How many thousands of souls were saved as a result of this? Only God knows. Think of the impact that Stephen's courageous confession must have had even on the enemies of the Gospel. Think of how Stephen's prayer for their forgiveness must have pierced their hearts. Could his faithfulness to Christ have made a lasting impression on some of those enemies?

I pray that it did. And I know that God can also use our faithfulness to Christ to make an impact on others and bring honor to His saving name. Think of the impact that a father's example of faithfulness to Christ and His Word might have on his children. Think of how, when we forgive our enemies, our action speaks to them about the love and forgiveness we

have received from our Savior. Yes, the Lord even uses our humble faithfulness to bring honor to His name.

Observing the Festival of St. Stephen on the day after Christmas probably comes as a bit of shock. While many are still thinking about shepherds and mangers, angels, and the newborn Jesus, we are reflecting on the life and death of the first martyr of Christ. And this Word of God gives us the comforting assurance that the Lord is with us. Christ is Emmanuel—God with us. We pray that God's precious Word might give us the courage in our witness to stand up for our Savior, who stood up for us on the cross, and now stands ready to give us the crown of everlasting life. Amen.