

The Martyrdom of Stephen

Acts 7:48-60 ~ April 30, 2017 ~ Heritage Lutheran Church

A man stood alone. He stood straight. He stood peacefully looking up into the sky. He stood in a little space surrounded by a raging crowd of angry men. Yells and screams of wrath filled the air. Violent gestures rippled the mass of human fury on every side. At first there seemed to be a little confusion about what was going to happen next. A little discussion took place. But then the action solidified around a small group of very angry red-faced men who started to remove their outer garments. They were getting ready for action. They bent over and picked up some of the rocks that were so plentiful on the outskirts of Jerusalem.

Then these red-faced men looked at each other for a moment before three of them threw their rocks at the man in the center. One hit him on the shoulder. Another hit him in the hip. The third missed him all together. But the man standing in the middle, Stephen the Deacon, only stumbled slightly with the first two stones and then returned to his peaceful reverie of the heavens. The yells of triumph that accompanied the initial rocks turned into screams of rage.

Soon the air was filled with flying stones. The bedlam of angry voices crescendoed as madness descended over the scene. Many stones missed the mark, but enough hit. Soon the man in the center stumbled and then knelt no longer able to stand. But above the roar of the mob his voice was heard in calm certainty.

“Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

Further enraged by the forgiveness of their victim, the violence of the crowd surges into a massive flight of stones. At its end, all that remained was pile of rocks and crimson rivulets flowing into the dips and hollows. Past the last raging scream and crack of landing rock, the wrath of the mob soured into the silence of panting breath. Then came the first fast footfalls of those who fled. Others, barely recovering the dignity they had lost with the cresting mob strolled away consciously attempting to recover self-respect. Straggler’s lingered unsure what to do. But in the end, all was left to a race between the carrion and the martyr’s friends.

One of the most frightening things in life is a human mob. We are all aware how a group of people can become enraged beyond rational thought. How the mob takes on a life of its own, bent on violence. When we come to the Martyrdom of St. Stephen, we encounter one of history's most poignant expressions of mob violence. St. Luke puts it this way:

Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. ... they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him.

The stoning of Stephen was a murder. It was the killing of an innocent man. It was done without justice, without the pretense of a trial, and without legal proceeding. The same Jews who had come to Pilate a few weeks before asking him to authorize the killing of Jesus, did not bother with that nicety for Stephen. The Jewish leadership was scared, they were desperate, they were frantic to find a way to turn back the tide of Christian witness. Their best scholars had been humiliated in public debate with Stephen. Jealousy at the popularity of Christians was driving their Jewish opponents to extreme action. Stephen's success in debate made him the target. His opponents took offence and trumped up charges designed to bring him down. He was called up for a hearing before the Jewish tribunal.

The charge was that he had spoken against the temple. How interesting that the terrible offense Stephen had committed was to question the Jewish devotion to the temple itself. Stephen had torn away the veil over Jewish shame. Like Jesus attacking the temple with a whip of cords, Stephen laid bare the idolatry of the Jewish devotion to a building and its trappings. The Jews had fallen in love with their own religious facilities and let their hearts drift from true faith in God. He quotes Isaiah to reveal their shame,

Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says,

“Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord ... “

You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. 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, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

At these words, the enraged mob left all thought, law, decorum, and legality behind. In blind fury, they dragged Stephen from the city and murdered him with the weapon of the mob. Stoning was not only the classic method of Jewish execution, it was an instrument of participatory violence without individual recrimination. Anyone could throw a stone, but nobody knew who threw the fatal blow.

We feel terrified when we think of Stephen's story, don't we? This is not just another Bible story. It is not a story about some nice people who God blesses because they follow his will. This story is about the unthinkable. Stephen was faithful. Stephen did everything that God wanted. Stephen was a better Christian than we are. He was fervent in his witness to the Gospel. He clearly followed Jesus command to go, make, baptize, and teach. And yet they killed him for it. And God just allowed it to happen. We can sort of understand how Jesus death serves God's purpose. Jesus died for our sins. But what did Stephen die for? What did the death of Stephen accomplish for the kingdom?

This question frightens us. We feel like the death of God's servants, while carrying out the ministry of the Gospel, should have meaning, don't we? What meaning could Stephen's death have had? Does it mean that faith in Jesus is worth dying for? Did it mean that dying for faith is a powerful witness to the gospel of Jesus? Could God have used the death of Stephen to further the Kingdom of God? But how far do we want to explore that line of thought?

Such thinking has the power to truly shake us. It is difficult to understand and very disturbing. Don't we think that when people believe the right things, when they pray rightly, when they have faith, shouldn't things work out well for them in this life? (pause) Well, it doesn't seem like that is the way it works in real Christianity. Stephen was the first of many, many people that have been killed for no other reason than that they believe in Jesus. Many of us have lived through a time in history when the blood of martyrs was not a common thing. Perhaps, we got to the point where we thought Christian martyrdom was a thing of the past. But if we think that, then we are wrong. Today, in light of current events, Stephen's story raises the specter of Christian martyrdom in a very uncomfortable way.

We live in a world where Christians are again being killed for their faith. We see this particularly with the ISIS sponsored attacks in Egypt. Not only are individual Christians dying for their faith, but entire congregations are attacked while in worship. In several

Muslim regions of the world Christians are persecuted and converts from Islam to Christianity can be in mortal danger. There are people in the world today that have to face the decision about whether their faith means more to them than their life. And in the months and years ahead many Christians will lose their homes, their livelihoods, and perhaps even their lives based on their desire to profess Jesus as lord.

When we think about the growing incidence of martyrdom in the world, it causes us to wonder... how deep is our faith? Would we maintain our witness to Jesus Christ in the face of a threat to our lives the way Stephen did? There are people in the world that are making this decision right now. Some of them may even lose their lives for it.

When we think about our faith like this, it is very easy for us to feel extremely inadequate. Perhaps, we may even become discouraged. This happens we begin to think that faith is something we do all by ourselves. That is a terrible mistake to make, because it makes our faith in Jesus simply a matter of personal loyalty. We are certainly called to loyalty in the kingdom of God, but faith that saves, faith that can make martyrs is not a human work. It is a thing of the Spirit. The book of Acts tells us about this when we read Stephen's story. It says...

But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit when he faced the Jewish leaders who killed him. What he saw was heaven opening itself to him. He was already in heaven with Jesus before the first stone flew. We take too much on ourselves when we try to test our faith against the fear of martyrdom. If it were to come, our faith tells us that the Spirit will be with us. As the Coptic Christians and others face death at the hands of ISIS we can be confident that God's Holy Spirit is with them too. He is taking them to himself in eternity. This does not cause us to slacken our efforts to stop evil, but it assures us that evil is only transitory. God has the victory. That is His promise. We live as Easter People. The whole nature of life and death has changed for us. Stephen's story is just the first example of how this has turned around. In the kingdom, death is an easy thing, full of promise and hope. It is living on in this life that creates the challenge for Christians. As Paul writes in Philippians:

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between

the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.

What Jesus offers you is not freedom from death, but rather freedom through death. Jesus died ahead of you to guide you through death to eternal life with God. It is natural to cling to this life. But by the faith the Holy Spirit grants you, you too will see Stephen's vision. You too will see heaven open. You will see the glory of God. You will see Jesus in the position of power and authority over all the universe. The Holy Spirit is active right now to bring you faith. Your faith is everything. It is the gateway to life everlasting with God. It is your firm anchor in this life. It will carry you no matter what comes. Let us pray for a peaceful and quiet life. But whatever comes, by the power of the Holy Spirit, you are ready for it.

The cross is full. The tomb is empty. Jesus is alive and leading us out to go, make, baptize and teach disciples. Let us take up our cross and follow him.