

Acts 6.8-7.2a, 51-60; Matthew 23.34-39  
Feast of St. Stephen of Jerusalem, Martyr  
26 December 2021  
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

+ Iesu iuva +

Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

I'm sure many of you, perhaps the vast majority of you, don't take time to go back and read the sermons you just heard on our website. That's okay. Sermons are for hearing, not reading.

But if you did do that, you'd notice, following the custom of the church, the very top of the sermon has a Latin header—four of them that circulate throughout the year.

**+ INI +** —an acronym standing for “in nomine Iesu,” “in the name of Jesus.” The standard-time epigraph.

**+ Hallelujah +** —used during the Easter season after the Easter greeting, Hallelujah! Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Hallelujah! It means “praise the LORD!”

From Christmas Eve through the Feast of the Epiphany it's **+ gloria in excelsis deo +**, “glory be to God on high,” after the song of the angels in Luke chapter 2 at the birth of the Lord Christ.

Finally, for Advent, Lent, and funerals it's **+ Iesu iuva +**, “Jesus, help.”

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Though the glow of Christmas is but one day behind us this morning, today's epigraph isn't **+ gloria in excelsis deo +**, it's the last. **+ Iesu iuva +**.

For just as yesterday we celebrated a birth, today we celebrate a funeral. Just as yesterday we beheld in the manger the sacrificial Lamb of God who bears the sin of the world, today it is not Christ, but His holy Church, that is the living sacrifice. Just as yesterday we counted the cost to the heavenly Father of sending His beloved Son into the flesh to redeem His fallen creation, today we count the cost of following Jesus.

And seeing the cost, re-living the funeral, with a mind on the living sacrifice, we are left with nothing on our lips but to cry out **+ Iesu iuva +**. Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God and Mary's Son, help us!

*Oremus:* Lord Jesus Christ, seated in all glory at the right hand of the Father, we cry to You. As You graciously received the supplications of St. Stephen in the hour of his death, so receive our prayers. Strengthen us for the hour of trial, tribulation, and persecution, that with St. Stephen we may perfectly place our trust in You and at last be received into Your eternal paradise; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.

There's a beautiful Christmas chorale by Paul Gerhardt that didn't make it into our service book—at least this time around! It's pretty much my favorite, for whatever it's worth.

It's really a reflection, I think, on the gift of the magi, a sermon on what it means *for me*.

This is how the first stanza runs: I stand beside Thy manger here, O Thou my Life from heaven. I come and bring Thee, Savior dear, what Thou to me hast given. Take it—it is my mind and heart, my soul and strength. Take every part. And let it give Thee pleasure (*ELH* 129.1).

While I'm not insensitive to the anachronism, this could well have been penned by St. Stephen himself.

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St. Stephen is the first martyr of the Holy Christian Church.

He first came on the scene, by name, anyway, in roughly A.D. 35—just a couple years after the Lord Jesus Christ had ascended into heaven. In all likelihood he was even around at the first Pentecost.

You see, Pentecost was a standing festival of the Jews. And just like happened at Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) or Pesah (Passover), so also did many Jews—Jews from all over the known world—make the journey to Jerusalem for Shavuot (the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost)—7 weeks or 50 days after the Passover. Indeed, Luke writes, on that day “there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2.5). Notice that Luke doesn't say they were visiting. They “were dwelling”—they were there long enough to unpack their bags and settle down for a bit. Which probably means that had arrived 7 weeks earlier in time to celebrate Passover—and you know what happened then.

Well, these Jews “from every nation under heaven”—they are what's known as Diaspora Jews. Jews who scattered throughout the world by Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. And living in the Gentile world, they bore two names. A Hebrew name and Greek name.

St. Stephen, well, his name is a Greek name—*Stephanos*.

In any event, St. Stephen may have been there on Pentecost. In fact, I suspect he was. And I suspect that he was among those stung by the sharp barb of the Law when St. Peter exclaimed, “Know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2.36).

“Whom *you* crucified.” St. Stephen? Yes. Even him.

For even if St. Stephen hadn't been there holding the centurion's cloak like Saul held the cloak of Stephen's murderers, he was certainly among those whom Jesus lamented in His last week: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!” (Matthew 23.37) Who killed the prophets? Jerusalem. Who killed Jesus? Jerusalem, and all those dwelling in it.

“Know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” Horrible news. The death of Jesus wasn't just the death of a random ne'er-do-well who probably even deserved it. It was a holy, innocent death! The death of the Lord. The Christ. God's Son! And those who dwelt in God's holy city were responsible for it.

Truth is, though, even if it was Jerusalem who's charged most immediately with the death of Christ—historians would call it the “precipitating cause”—there was blame to go around.

For to look at Christ on the Holy Cross isn't to see just the sins of Jerusalem against this Last, Great Prophet, the One whom Moses saw in the Spirit when he promised the LORD would raise up a “Prophet like me, from among you” (Deuteronomy 18.15), the last one in the long catalogue of prophets killed by Jerusalem.

To look on Christ on the Holy Cross is to see the world's sin. It's to see your sin. And the horror of your sin: it requires a payment in the blood of God's own Son. For to behold Him is to behold the Lamb of God that bears the sin of the world. And to be moved to lament. And ask with the hymnist, “What punishment so strange is suffered yonder? The Shepherd dies for sheep that loved to wander. The Master pays the debt His servants owe Him, who would not know Him.”

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem!

That was the horrible news St. Peter delivered that day.

And you know what happened next. That crowd of men dwelling in Jerusalem from every nation under heaven cried out, “Brothers! What shall we do?” (Acts 2.36)

And from Peter’s lips they heard no more scolding. No more shaming. No more accusation.

Instead, they heard good news. He told them to do what they had already done—repent. Abhor your sins. Hate them like you hate the devil and hell. And be baptized, every one of you, for the forgiveness of your sins.

For in a great stroke of greatest irony the death that they had caused. The death your sins wrought. The death for which they were guilty. And the death whose guilt you bear—that death is made a redeeming, saving, propitiating, expiating, sin-forgiving, reconciling and life-giving death. The blood shed there cries out not as Abel’s for vengeance against his murderer, but for mercy and grace for the whole world, even for those who put God’s Son to death. For in the crucifixion of God’s Son God accepted a guilt and charge He hadn’t incurred and responsibility for sins He hadn’t committed. He accepted the charges against you for your sin. And their guilt. He was made to be Sin for you.

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Good news indeed. If that death could expiate for the sins of those whose treachery had nailed Him to the Holy Cross, what can’t that death do for you? What hasn’t it done for you? What won’t it do for you?

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It seems reasonable to assume St. Stephen was there that day, Pentecost A.D. 33. That the life-giving Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who was poured out upon all flesh was poured out on St. Stephen, too, through a Baptism for the remission of his sins.

Because, by the time we catch up with him—by the time he makes his first appearance by name in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles—by then he’s already a pillar of the church in Jerusalem. A “man of good repute, full of the Spirit and wisdom” (Acts 6.4). A man who, through the Word of Christ and Christ’s Baptism had stood before His manger saying, “I come and bring Thee, Savior dear, what Thou to me hast given. Take it—it is my mind and heart, my soul and strength. Take every part. And let it give Thee pleasure.”

To answer an acute need in the Holy Church in Jerusalem, he was selected to an office of service. He was to be a deacon. To head up and organize and participate in the distribution of alms for the impoverished Greeks among the first Christians. He wasn’t a pastor. The apostles were the pastors of that congregation. But the body of Christ doesn’t work that way. Not everyone’s an apostle. If the whole body were a mouth, what kind of body would that be? No. In His wondrous providence the Lord through whom He calls to Christ builds up the body of Christ, His Church, to mature manhood, providing for His Church’s every need through His Church.

So St. Stephen wasn’t an apostle. Or a pastor.

But he was a prophet. So are you. According to the Old Testament lesson for Pentecost, Joel 2: “I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy.”

It doesn't matter which "body part" you are in the Body of Christ. Christ needs them all. Fingers and toes, ankles and wrists, legs and arms, torso and head, ears and a mouth. But no matter what part you are, you are still a prophet.

Because just like St. Stephen, you hold the priestly prophetic calling of every Christian to declare the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light in word and deed. That's the "Take it" part. "Take it—it is my mind and heart, my soul and strength. Take every part. And let it give Thee pleasure."

And within his vocation as deacon that's just what Stephen did.

Because how could he forget? How could he forget being cut to the quick upon hearing that it was *he* who was responsible for the death of the Son of God? How could he with any less difficulty forget that in that very death he had caused the Lord had given him everything. His life had been destroyed by God's Law; but it was raised again to new life by the Gospel of the resurrection of Jesus. Even in his vocation, even as a deacon waiting tables, doling out alms, St. Stephen was a priest and prophet, proclaiming the excellencies of Him who had called him out of darkness into his marvelous light.

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Thing is, that's just where the troubles started. That's just where the cost of discipleship started to be counted.

But faithful Stephen—he remained faithful to his vocation. Even to death.

You see, Stephen was full of the Spirit and wisdom. His words were full of the Gospel. His sermon was straightforward: sinner though you be, yet Jesus Christ died even for you! Repent. And be baptized every one of you for the forgiveness of your sins! It was the same sermon he had heard. The same exact sermon that echoes through Christendom to this day. The same exact sermon you're called to preach in *your* vocation, you priests and prophets of the Most High God!

But you will always encounter resistance. There was no special reason Jerusalem killed the prophets, some reason in the special identity of Jerusalem. It's just that the natural man cannot receive the things of God. He can't hear that his righteousnesses are all as filthy rags. That he has nothing to offer the Lord. At all. But that God in His great mercy still *saves*.

But all that that is, powerful to save though it is, is words. Soundwaves in the air. And the natural man and the children of natural man resist with whatever they have at hand. For Stephen it was stones.

At other times it's been laws.

Today it's the extreme pressure of peers, of social conformity, popularity. Threats not perhaps to life, but certainly to livelihoods. Threats not perhaps to removal from the company of men by death, but certainly to removal from the company of men by ostracism. I know how acutely you feel this. How frequently in your vocation the Spirit and the wisdom of the Gospel are on the tip of your tongue, and you falter, stutter, swallow hard. There's so much to be lost. I know it.

So did St. Stephen.

But there was much more yet to gain.

In all seriousness—if the Lord God of heaven and earth whom he had killed had showed him such mercy that he didn't count his sins against him, but reconciled him to Himself through His death, what good

thing could Stephen have possibly lacked from His gracious hand even as he was being stoned to death? That Lord still remained the Lord of heaven and earth. But now He smiled upon Stephen. If He had rescued Stephen from his sins could He not, was it not also an entailment of that, to rescue Stephen from death itself? To join him who was being taken from the church militant, the Body of Christ on earth, to the Body of Christ in heaven, the church triumphant?

The cost of discipleship for Stephen was enormous. None of you will probably ever have such a cost exacted from you. But as enormous as it was, it was nothing to be compared with the glory that was to be revealed—of which he was even given a blessed glimpse before his death when the heavens opened and he saw Christ, his Savior, Redeemer, and Brother, sitting at the right hand of the Son's Father, and Stephen's Father, in all glory. For that, the cost wasn't worth counting.

Neither is it for you.

Just keep your eyes fixed on Jesus Christ, the Author and Perfecter of your salvation, who has gone before you. Live according to your calling. And in your calling live as you are—as priests and prophets of the Most High God, who that you might live with Him forever stooped to take on a lowly birth in Bethlehem. Through Holy Word and Blessed Sacrament stand there firmly. For He is your Life from heaven.

Lord Jesus, help!

Amen.

*pax dei, etc.*

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