

St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church, Modesto, California
The Commemoration of St. Stephen, Deacon and Martyr
December 26, 2004

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

Acts 7:51-60

51 "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! 52 Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— 53 you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."

54 When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep. (NIV)

Good King Wenceslas looked out On the Feast of Stephen, When the snow lay 'round about, Deep and crisp and even. Do you know that Christmas carol? For the longest time I wondered what it meant: Good King Wenceslas looked out On the Feast of Stephen. I imagined a King with the funny name of Wenceslas looking out his window on a winter day on some guy named Stephen who was setting up a banquet out in the snow. Good King Wenceslas looking out on the feast of Stephen, right?

That's not what it's talking about, of course. "The Feast of Stephen" refers to this date, December 26. That's the date that Christians have set aside to remember Stephen, the first Christian martyr. In fact, it's possible that this date for remembering Stephen is older than celebrating Christmas on December 25. So, it happened that Stephen came to be connected to Christmas.

But it's more than just a coincidence of dates that connects Stephen to Christmas. When we look at Stephen, we see what happens when Christmas really grabs hold of someone. We see what happens when Jesus, God incarnate, brings someone to life. Let's look at Stephen, first Christian to face what Jesus foretold: bitter opposition and death for his sake. Let's look at Stephen and see what Christmas does to a person.

See What Christmas Does to a Person?

It compels us to testify

Do you remember Stephen? Shortly after the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit jump-started the New Testament church, the group of believers in Jerusalem was huge, numbering in the thousands. The people took care of each other, supporting those who

were poor with donations and food. Especially people with no means of support, like widows, were the recipients of generosity. But this was a big task to distribute food to all the people who needed it. And after a while there were some who weren't getting what they needed when they needed it. Insinuations of favoritism followed; one ethnic group of Christians was saying that its widows were being overlooked. And the apostles? They were trying to provide spiritual care for thousands of people. They couldn't afford to devote big chunks of their time to food distribution without the ministry of the word suffering. So, the Christians put their heads together and selected seven men to oversee the food distribution. One of these men was Stephen.

We don't know a lot about Stephen, only what we're told in Acts 6 and 7. He was "a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit." And we're told that he was "full of God's grace and power" and that he "did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people." A spiritually mature man, whom God decided to use to help people in special ways through miracles. And the miracles gave credence to the message that he and the apostles were sharing with people.

After a while, however, opposition to Stephen arose. The source seems to be people who did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah and didn't want other people believing that either. They took Stephen on in a debate. But Stephen held his own and then some against them. He knew his Scriptures well.

But these men weren't content to let Stephen win. So they trumped up some charges: "We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God." They dragged him before the Sanhedrin, the body that had accused and convicted Jesus. Then they had false witnesses charge that Stephen was rejecting the Bible.

What was Stephen going to do?

He was going to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. What Stephen did was give these men a Cliff's Notes version of the Hebrew Scriptures. He showed them that he was not at all doing what he was accused of doing, trying to get rid of Moses and all the heroes of faith like him. And more than just giving his accusers a Bible history lesson, Stephen showed them that all of the history of Israel was leading up to the coming of the Messiah. Jesus of Nazareth, he said, was this Messiah. He testified to the truth of the Scriptures as a witness who knew what he was talking about.

Then Stephen got more personal with his testimony. He told the truth about his hearers: You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him. Stephen pointed out their sin and told them that they were angering God. He had to say it; what he said was the truth.

But Stephen also testified to the grace of God. Did you hear what he said just before he died? Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Even at the moment of his death, Stephen was asking God to forgive those who were sinning against him. Why would he ask such a thing? Because he knew that Jesus had come to win forgiveness for all people, even for the people who were now unjustly killing him. Stephen testified to the forgiving grace of God.

I like to think that if I had been in Stephen's position, I would have done the same thing. But the reality is, I've had chances to testify to the truth, times I haven't done what Stephen did. That's one reason why we need Christmas. We need a Savior to take the

initiative and save us from our sins of lacking the boldness to say what we need to say. We need a Savior to come and forgive us for not testifying when God gives us the chance.

And we need Jesus to come to us and show us the depth of his commitment to us. We need the Holy Spirit to sink into our hearts the magnitude of it all: Jesus Christ, the almighty Lord, became weak and helpless in order to help me. Stephen knew that. God filled him with that knowledge, filled him with his grace, the love that moved God to send his Son. That same grace is here for us, too. The Holy Spirit still is working through the same old Christmas Gospel to sink the truth deep into our hearts and to make us bold to tell the world what it needs to hear:

the history of the world hinges on Jesus Christ, the God-man;

we all have angered God and deserve his wrath;

God is merciful and forgives even the worst of sinners.

See what Christmas—and the grace of God it exemplifies—does to a person? moves people tell the gospel truth.

It opens heaven for us

If you look back at the history of the Christian church, you see that a couple hundred years after Stephen died, a sort of conventional wisdom had developed. People assumed that if you were killed for being a Christian as Stephen was, you were a shoe-in for heaven. How could God not let you in if you had been willing to die for him?

Do you think Stephen would have thought that way? He did say, I see heaven open... Did he mean, "God, I'm about to die for you. Impressed? Open the pearly gates and get a special halo ready for me!"

He did not mean that. That's evident from what he said to the men who were accusing him. As Stephen walked them through Old Testament Bible history, he mentioned the times that God's people had turned away from him. And he referred to these people as "our fathers." Stephen knew that he was part of a human race that was, by nature, rebellious toward God. He knew that he, too, deserved God's wrath and punishment. So why, then, was he bold enough to say, I see heaven open? Why was he confident that he was going to be with God after he died? Listen again to what Luke writes: But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." He saw Jesus. Jesus was the key that opened heaven for Stephen the sinner. Stephen knew that Jesus was the "Son of Man"—that's a Messianic title. Jesus was the one God had promised to send into the world. He knew that Jesus had accomplished the mission laid out for the Messiah: to live a sinless life, to die an innocent death, to rise back to life, to be the ultimate prophet, priest and king. To do what no one else could do: destroy the power of sin to condemn and kill.

Yesterday we heard the beautiful words of 1 John: That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. (1 John 1:1,2) If we had continued reading, we would have come to these words: My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense-- Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and

not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:1,2) That's what Stephen was counting on as he looked beyond this life. He knew that Jesus had come down to bear his sin using the body he took on in the womb of the Virgin. He knew that when he, a sinner, approached God the Father, Jesus would be there saying, "Father, with my own blood I have paid for Stephen's sins. I have made him pure and holy in your sight. For my sake, open the gates and let him in."

So as it turns out, Stephen was a shoe-in for heaven. But it wasn't because he was so good. It was because Jesus, who became man, who shed his blood, who lives and forgives, is so good. And it turns out that we, too, are shoe-ins for heaven. Not because we're so good, but because Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, is.

See what Christmas does to a person? It opens heaven.

It makes us fearless in the face of death

One more point I'd like to mention. It's something that stands out as you look at Stephen: his fearlessness in the face of death. Luke writes, While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." We get the impression that Stephen was not panicking, even though he knew he was in his last moments. Just a simple prayer: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

In the last few years, I've been with several people who were in the last days or hours of their lives. Some of them were in intense pain. Others were drifting in and out of consciousness. But what I've seen in Christian people facing death is a certain calmness. They know what's happening, that they do not have long to live in this world. But at the same time they know that their spirits, their souls are going to be with the Lord in a short time.

Again, I'd like to think that I would be like Stephen if I were in my last moments. But I don't know how I will act when that will happen. I think I'll be scared. But I pray that I'll be able to face that moment with the same confidence that I've seen some of your loved ones display. I pray that I'll be able to calmly pray, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

Every year our children memorize part of the Christmas Gospel for our children's program. One of the reasons for that is so that they can recite it for us and look cute doing it. But there's more to it than that. We pray that this true story of Christ's birth will become a part of them. We hope that they will grow into it, learning more and more each year the significance of what this birth means for them. When we remember that Jesus came into this world for us; when we remember that he took on flesh and blood so that he could live and die in our places; when we remember that Jesus' body rose from the grave, alive and made new; when we remember that Jesus Christ has taken the sting out of death—this knowledge will give us confidence, even confidence to face death.

See what Christmas does to a person? Knowing that Christ was born for us enables us to die in peace.

At first blush, it seems that this is a bad day to remember St. Stephen, doesn't it? It's Christmas! Be happy! We can talk about people dying horrible deaths some other time. But when you think about it, maybe it's not such a bad day to think about Stephen after all. In him we see what happens when the message of Christmas—the whole message about the incarnate Son of God—what happens when that message takes hold of someone.

It affects what we say. It compels us to tell the truth of the Scriptures, both law and gospel.

It affects our relationship with God. This gospel brings forgiveness, brings us into fellowship with God and opens heaven.

And the birth of Christ affects our death and the way we approach it. Because Christ has done what he has done, death is now the gate to eternal life.

May the Holy Spirit sink the message of Christmas deeply into all of our hearts, so that we, like Stephen, may be full of his grace. Amen.