

Reading: Acts 7: 51-60 (NRSV)

When the Chief Priest asked Stephen to explain his beliefs, Stephen gave an account of salvation history, and the way that God's people often turned away from God's saving grace. He ended his testimony with the words:

“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.”

When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. But filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!”

But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he died.

Sermon: “The Blood of the Martyrs”

You may not know the story about the stoning of Stephen found in Acts. And yet, for the early church, this story was *the* story. The facts that this story is based on are as follows. Stephen was a deacon in the early church in Jerusalem. His teachings angered the members of various synagogues in the city, and they accused him of blasphemy. Brought by an angry crowd before the Chief Priest, Stephen defended himself by denouncing the Jewish authorities who sat in judgement of him as being just one more example of the many throughout salvation history who have turned away from God's grace. This, of course, did nothing to calm down the crowd, and, as a result, Stephen was stoned to death.

Like the crucifixion of Jesus, the stoning of Stephen is horrible. As followers of Christ, we have a difficult time with the cross on which Jesus died. In our time, thinking about Stephen is not common. Contemplating the facts of another horrible death is not something we do easily. Thinking about COVID19 is hard enough. Thinking about the mass shootings in Nova Scotia, or the deaths of Canadian military personnel is even harder.

And yet, in the history of the church the way that the story of Stephen has been told, the way that the grim historical facts of his violent end have been massaged, coloured, embroidered and finally, presented to the faithful as a story, has been extremely important. Stephen's untimely death was a severe blow to the early Jerusalem church. Indeed, Stephen's stoning could be seen as part and parcel of the gathering hysteria and violence of the tragic second Jewish revolt, which would culminate in the year 70 with the total destruction of the Jerusalem temple and the end of all Jewish worship, including that of the early Jewish Christians, in the city. The facts of Stephen's death, in other words, could have easily been used to tell a story of humiliation, loss, and defeat. Indeed, in the history of the early church, such violent ends to early Christians were common. Stephen was just one of many.

But this is not the story we read, and this is certainly not the story that the church decided to tell. We see this in the name our scripture chooses to give him. We tend to think of the name Stephen as a common name. But, when Acts was written, it was an honorific – kind of like the word Reverend. It was an honorific title one used in addressing someone rather than simply a name. And this honorific meant, “wreathed or crowned,” and by extension “reward, honour, renown, and fame.” The use of the word Stephen suggested victory, rather than defeat. And this is, indeed, how the early church chose to tell the story of Stephen. In early Christian art, Stephen is always shown as a beautiful young man dressed in magnificent robes, wearing a glorious crown. And sometimes he is depicted with three stones striking his body, while he serenely cradles a small golden, glittering image of a beautiful church safely in his arms.

Instead of an ignoble footnote to church history, Stephen’s death is seen as an act of suffering, akin to childbearing, which helps to bring about the birth of the church. The story the early church tells about Stephen lifts him up. He becomes a martyr. He does not die senselessly. His life has meaning. And, in the writings of Tertullian, an early church father, Stephen is positioned as the first Christian martyr – the first of many by whose death, and blood, the church is built. Like Jesus, he suffers for us, that we may better enjoy the grace of God in our lives.

Stephen becomes important. Very important. So important that he has very real significance to us even today. Stephen has a day all to himself in the church calendar, which is one of the only Saint days that everyone in the Western world celebrates – whether they are Christian or Protestant, atheist, agnostic, or followers of another religion. Everyone in Canada celebrates Stephen’s feast day whether they realize it or not. Acts tells us that as a deacon, Stephen had a special ministry to widows and orphans. Boxing Day, a paid statutory holiday in Canada, is Stephen’s feast day, the day when Christians have historically distributed gifts wrapped in white to widows and children in their community. Stephen shares the distinction of having a statutory holiday in his honour only with one other person in our Bibles – Jesus.

So why am I telling you this?

I am telling you this because the way that we tell stories is important. Tertullian himself recognized this. He realized that facts could be taken in different ways. He wrote: *All things are always in danger of being taken in a sense different from their own proper sense, and, whilst taken in that different sense of losing their proper one.* We all know this. For example, right now the way that the facts of the Corona Virus are made into a story south of the border is vastly different from the way the story is being told here in Canada. We know that here in Fonthill the facts about what has happened at Sobeys are being used to tell a great many different stories as well.

We know, perhaps more than ever before, that a story can be used to bring life, and hope, and joy and calm and peace to those who hear it. And, that it can do just the opposite.

I am also telling you about Stephen because we have witnessed in our own country two recent tragedies: the shootings in Nova Scotia in which 22 people were murdered, and the crash of a military helicopter off of the coast of Greece which killed six members of our armed forces; and this on top of the many COVID19 deaths which touch many of our friends and loved ones.

The way that the news reports are telling this story, usually starts in this manner, as quoted from the Canadian Press: “A nation already struggling with the emotions of a pandemic lockdown, a horrific plane crash in Iran and the worst mass shooting in its history is being forced

to grieve again.” Our own Sheila Laundry, in the “Social Distancer” this week echoed this way of setting up the way we frame the beginning of these stories: “Just as we were getting used to social distancing, this bad news.” And, what are we to do?

Well, we cry. We certainly cry. We reflect. We spend time alone. We pray. We experience for a while what Jewish mystic Simone Weill called broken thought, or what Christians might call the dark night of the soul. But, we can only do this for so long. There is something in us, that God put in us, that – when we are cut down – allows us to stay down only for so long. We leap up high again.

And so, Sheila decided to tell the story that when she woke up the next morning after learning of the tragedy in Nova Scotia, the signs of God’s grace, and God at work in the world -- the daffodils that had never been more beautiful -- assured her that life would go on. People in the East Coast are telling stories about their loved ones who died, and how blessed they were to know them, and how that precious gift of knowing them made their lives worthwhile. And, in our formal military eulogies, we choose to see our dead military personnel as heroes. We choose to tell a story of life. We stare at death, we shudder, and then we refuse to let it have the last word. We stand in our driveways holding flickering candles because in our story “a light shines in the darkness, and darkness can never put it out.”

Acts tells us that when Stephen was stoned, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. And we know that Saul becomes Paul, and learns to tell us the Good News, perhaps more clearly and joyfully than any other – even though later on, he himself suffers and is, if we are to believe Christian tradition, beheaded in Rome. And yet, in Romans Paul writes these astonishing words:

*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:
“For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”*

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is our faith. This is the fine and delicate paper on which all our stories as a people of faith are writ. Cry. Weep. Lament. Feel your loss. Fear. Worry. Doubt. But know that nothing can extinguish the Good News. Not a helicopter crash. Not a virus. And most certainly not a deluded gunman, or an American politician.

Tertullian reminds us: *All things are always in danger of being taken in a sense different from their own proper sense, and, whilst taken in that different sense of losing their proper one.* If we remember Christ, and God’s love, mercy and forgiveness, then the story we will always tell -- the story we hand down to our children and grandchildren about this time -- cannot help but be the proper one.