

'I See the Heavens Opened'
Acts 6:8-15
Acts 7:54-60

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Acts 6: 8-15

Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. Then they secretly instigated some men to say, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.' They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the council. They set up false witnesses who said, 'This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us.' And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Acts 7:54-60

When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. But filled with the Holy Spirit, he 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.

At first glance, this is not exactly a feel-good story. I mean, Stephen is the first Christian martyr, the first follower of Jesus killed for being a follower of Jesus. He is falsely accused of blasphemy and killed by stoning.

There is more here, though, than meets the immediate eye. Stephen is one of the first deacons, chosen by the community to take care of widows and other vulnerable people. He is described as being full of grace and power, and doing great wonders and signs among the people. He may have been elected to "serve at tables," but he's clearly more than a waiter.

At this time, what we would call the Christian Church was still part of the Jewish community. Most Christians would have worshipped in the synagogue as well as gathering together in exclusively Christian gatherings.

Some of the members of the synagogue argued with Stephen, and when they lost the argument, they set up some people to tell lies about him and drag him in front of the council.

I believe that Stephen is thinking here about the end of the Beatitudes, when Jesus says that, “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”¹ That’s what’s happening here.

He gets in front of the council, and, in a long sermon that I skipped reading, he proceeds to tell the council that they personally witnessed the coming of the Christ, and they opposed Him. He tells them that their ancestors killed God’s prophets, and that they themselves killed the very same Messiah that they say they’re waiting for.

Then he tells them that he sees a vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God. At this, the council lose it. They drag him out to the entrance of the city and stone him. Stephen is calm as he echoes Jesus’ prayers from the cross. He prays for Jesus to receive his spirit and not to hold his murder against the people who are killing him.

Before we talk about what this story tells us, we should briefly talk about what it does not tell us. This story has historically been misused by Anti-Semites to say that Jews are bad people, and the kind of people who kill Christians. This is false. When they say that, they are twisting

¹ Matthew 5:11.

Scripture to say what they want it to say, instead of what Scripture says. They are trying to justify violence against Jews in the name of Jesus Christ. They fail in justifying it, because it cannot be justified.

Being a Christian in the early church was a dangerous thing to be. Stephen was the first of many people killed for being a Christian. But we are not alone in this.

Any time we look in history, we find humanity relying on violence to protect our fears and ignorance:

- Being a Christian missionary has traditionally been a dangerous occupation. So has standing up to dictatorial leaders in the name of Christ.
- *Pogroms* were massacres of Jews in the Middle Ages and the predecessors of the Holocaust. To our shame, they were usually conducted in the name of the Church.
- The Ku Klux Klan lynched thousands of people, mostly African-American men who used their rights as citizens. They murdered human beings and burned down churches for this purpose, and, in a blinding display of hypocrisy, still call themselves a Christian organization. Race-based abuse and violence in America has not gotten worse in the past fifty years: it's become better-publicized because so many people have smartphones.
- Matthew Shepherd and thousands of other people have been murdered because they were born LGBTQ+.
- In recent years we have seen a resurgence of so-called "White Nationalist" groups, who seek to excuse all of this violence, when they're not committing it themselves.

So we need to remember who we are. As post-Resurrection Christians, we are Easter people. We know that God raised Jesus from the dead, but there is more to the Easter story than trumpet fanfares and triumph.

Jesus taught non-violence. He taught his disciples to love even their enemies. He taught them to turn the other cheek, to walk the extra mile.

The Crucifixion is the ultimate example of violence – human beings killed Jesus in a literally excruciating way, to protect themselves from his message of love and salvation. And then God raised him from the dead.

If that means anything at all, it means that God promises an end to violence as a way of doing business. And that God can save us from ourselves.

With God's help, we can renounce not just violence, but the fear that people are trying to defend with violence.

Now that would make Easter morning make a difference in the world.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.