

May 7, 2023 – Acts 6:1-9, 7:51-60

Our reading from Acts this morning is a little odd. Normally, each of our readings is a contiguous passage from one portion of the Bible detailing one event. But this isn't that. It's three different events from two separate passages mashed together into one reading.

The reason is pretty simple: Since it would take too long to read the whole ministry of St Stephen, we have excerpts. Scenes. Highlights from the film of Stephen's life. So, not only has St Stephen been stoned... now he's been spliced. Sorry Stephen.

We start with this introduction to Stephen as a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. He's set apart by the church to distribute food to widows. Next, we see him not just distributing food, but doing great signs and wonders, and disputing with people from the synagogue. Then we jump forward and find Stephen giving a long, fiery sermon, of which we only hear his closing words of condemnation. Then, we see him tragically stoned to death. And, just for a moment, high above the sky, we see Jesus. Standing at the right hand of God.

It's an interesting sequence of events. But what's the point of it all? Because, frankly, there are a great many martyrs of the early church who get far less of their lives recorded in the book of Acts. The martyrdom of the Apostle James, for example, gets one verse in Acts 12. Stephen gets two entire chapters! There's gotta be a reason.

So let's look at this passage more closely. As the text opens, Luke does something conspicuous: he takes a moment to redirect our eyes away from the apostles and onto these deacons of the church. The Apostles have been and will continue to be the main focal point of his book. But Luke wants us, for a moment, to see more than just them. He wants us to see the many, various ways in which God is at work in his church.

Because the New Testament church is more than just people gathering around the Apostles to pray and hear scripture. It's more than just the Apostles going around doing miracles. It's more than just these 12 men. It's also the thousands of new disciples of the church doing much more mundane things. Things like giving food to the poor.

Something that is very easy to overlook. And yet also something that Luke finds so important that he names every single person called to the task. And they are definitely called to it. Luke also notes that even something as ordinary as distributing food is something that the Holy Spirit empowers them to do. Something that they were ordained to do by the Apostles with the laying on of hands.

And he connects this ministry to the poor directly to the increase of the Word of God. He draws a bold, clear line between the love they showed to widows and the increase in the number of disciples multiplying in Jerusalem. And even, somehow, to the conversion of Jewish priests who become obedient to the faith.

And it's only from this very mundane work of passing out food that Stephen then has this opportunity given to him to be full of grace and power. To do great wonders and signs among the people. The ordinary work of loving his neighbor came first. The extraordinary work of evangelism came as a result of that.

So that is very much Luke's first point here. When Christ came into this world to bring about salvation, his work extended from the marvelous to the mundane. Yes, he walked on water, gave sight to the blind, raised the dead... but he also welcomed children, asked his disciples to watch a widow giving two small copper coins to the church, and talked with a woman at a well.

So often, we can pass by the simple ways in which God works in our lives, and yet Luke, in this scene from the story of Stephen, asks us to see that God is at work in what our world would call the mundane. God is at work in the simple acts of love that we share with our neighbor. God is at work in the ordinary acts of kindness and generosity that we show to those in need. God is at work and he is filling us with grace and power to proclaim the forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ even in the most boring aspects of our lives.

We need to be reminded that God is working even in the mundane events of our lives. And we especially need to be reminded that God is working in the tragic and painful events of our lives. Because that's what the second half of this reading shows us.

You see, when you look through the Bible and read about the great heroes of the faith, you find a lot of stories in which there is some miraculous deliverance for them. Moses parting the Red Sea to escape from Pharaoh's army. Daniel shutting the mouths of the lions. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego surviving the fiery furnace. The apostles rescued from prison. And, maybe the most miraculous deliverance of all, the resurrection of Jesus.

These are all true. They did happen. But they are not the norm. They are miracles. And miracles are miracles precisely because they are not what normally happens. And so, as we read this account of Stephen's stoning, there's a part of us that is waiting for God to intervene. To rescue Stephen from the rubble and bring about a happy ending for this hero of the faith. But he doesn't.

And it's not because God is just sitting back in heaven, unconcerned about the death of his saint. No, God works. But he doesn't work to eliminate the tragedy. He works in the midst of the tragedy. And Luke wants us to know that God works wonders in the suffering of this world.

Listen to how he tells the story. Stephen is dragged out of the city and stoned. When this happens, he falls to the ground. Yet, when Luke records this, he tells us that Stephen "falls to his knees."

Why is he kneeling? Is it because the stones have knocked him down and he can't stand up anymore? Or is he kneeling in prayer? Sometimes they look like the same thing, don't they? Sometimes, both things are happening at the same time. Luke wants us to know that the suffering and the prayer can't be separated. They should never be separated.

As Stephen is dying, Luke says that he cries out. Of course he cries out! A man who is being pummeled by large stones is going to cry out in pain. Yet, again, when Luke records this, the cry isn't just a scream of pain, but a prayer of faith.

Stephen cries out, "*Lord, do not hold this sin against them.*" His prayer in the midst of suffering is an echo of Jesus' own prayer in the midst of suffering, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" In his suffering, Stephen has been conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. He has learned exactly what Christ's love and forgiveness feels like. And so he shares it with those who are murdering him.

And at the moment of Stephen's death, Luke doesn't say that he dies. No, he says that he falls asleep. Because that's what death is for the saints of the Lord. "*The girl is not dead. She is only sleeping.*" Jesus tells Jairus of his daughter. "*Our friend Lazarus has gone to sleep, but I go to wake him.*" Jesus tells his disciples. "*Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.*" Paul assures us. Stephen falls asleep in the Lord, knowing that the Lord will awaken him.

In Stephen's death, Luke shows us that there is nothing beyond God's reach. Stephen is bloody, stoned, suffering, and dying, and yet God is still at work. God is still in the conflict, in the suffering, even in the death itself, and nothing can stop his work of love. Nothing can separate him from God's love. Nothing can separate us from God's love.

God is at work in our lives. We have no choice about that. God rules over all things and works in our world. He created us and claimed us as his own in our Baptism, just as he claimed little Addie this morning. He calls us to serve him in our various vocations, whether that's preaching from a pulpit or serving food to a widow. And he promises to raise us up to live with him at the resurrection.

That's easy to forget. And that's the beauty of this story of Stephen. It assures us that God is at work in the world. In the mundane. In the suffering. Even in death. Especially in death. God is at work. Because nothing—not even death—can separate his people from him. And everything—even death—can be used by him to share his message with the world. Amen.