

“Even unto Death”

Stephen was a man “of good [reputation], full of the [Holy] Spirit and of wisdom.” He was one of seven men picked out from the great number of believers in Christ and given the duty of “serving tables.” But some of the Jews “rose up and disputed with Stephen” – not because he was distributing food – but because of what he said and believed.

To use the language from 1 Peter 2, Stephen was – proclaiming the excellencies of God who called him out of darkness into His marvelous light. And for that, Stephen was charged with blasphemy (sound familiar?) – speaking against Moses, God, the holy place, and the law – saying that “this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.” Is that true, Stephen?

Stephen answers the charges by saying, “Brothers and fathers, hear me” – but our appointed text for today doesn’t let us hear everything he said. In the text before us he comes off as harsh by calling them “stiff-necked people” – but he has spoken many other words to them. He is not some radical, a loose cannon, a hot-head.

In the verses omitted from our text, Stephen recounts God’s promises and faithfulness to His people of old – to Abraham, the patriarchs, Moses, David and Solomon. He also recounts how God’s people of old rejected God’s servants, how they became idolaters and engaged in false worship.

When our text for today jumps back in – Stephen calls them “stiff-necked people” because they are doing it again! They are following in the footsteps of their fathers – rejecting the Holy Spirit by closing their ears to God’s Word – persecuting the prophets.

They killed God’s prophets of old who “announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom YOU have NOW betrayed and murdered ...”

The reaction to Stephen’s words is not all that surprising – after all – isn’t that how we react when our sin has been exposed, our hearts laid bare for all to see? “Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.”

But Stephen doesn't take his words back, or try to cover them with honey. He is full of the Holy Spirit – and as the Holy Spirit is always doing – He points us to Jesus! Revealing, through Stephen, that this “Jesus of Nazareth” is now “standing at the right hand of God.” That only enrages them more! They rush at him, cast him out of the city, and stone him.

And then our text adds this little piece of revelation – that “the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.” You know him better as St. Paul – who before his conversion to faith in Jesus Christ – persecuted Christ, and all who followed in His Way.

And then another odd, but very important revelation. Stephen, being pummeled by stones, fell to his knees and cried out with a loud voice – “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” Forgive these people stoning him to death? Sounds a lot like Jesus on the cross when He says, “Father, forgive them.” Stephen, “full of the Holy Spirit,” points to Jesus in whom there is forgiveness because that is what the Holy Spirit does.

And finally, “when he had said this, he fell asleep.” How can Stephen “fall asleep” when he is being battered to death by these enraged, stone casting enemies? It means he died – and upon his death, he goes to the place that Jesus has prepared for him in heaven – while his body will rest in the ground, until Jesus comes again on the Last Day to awaken him to eternal life.

So, “*What does this mean?*” – FOR YOU? Is this just some history lesson? A graphic account to persuade you to read more Scripture, like some thrilling novel? NO.

This is God's Word, which He has preserved in Holy Scripture so that you may hear His voice today. Today He reveals this important truth – that He and His beloved children are always persecuted (in the days of Abraham & Moses, Jesus & Stephen, and still today). There will always be those who attack God, His Word, true worship, His servants and His followers.

In spite of all this, God is faithful. He does not abandon us – even those who rebel against Him. Rather, He calls us to repentance so that He might “forgive them” – just as Jesus & Stephen prayed – and in the resurrected Christ, you are forgiven!

YOU are chosen by God – filled with the Holy Spirit and baptized into Christ. The Holy Spirit works through the Gospel to call you to faith, gather you into the holy, Christian Church, and keep you in the one true faith unto life everlasting.

In these days – God the Holy Spirit points you to Jesus through “the means of grace” – so that you may know and believe that Christ died for your rebellion – that He rescues you from your enemies and from the power of the devil – that He delivers you from death – that His forgiveness is “for you.”

Spoiler alert! Next week the Confirmands will promise to “continue steadfast” in this faith and “to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it.” In and of ourselves, we would fall away – Stephen would fall away. But the Holy Spirit is faithful – pointing us to Jesus, leading us to trust in Him for the forgiveness of our sins, the resurrection of our bodies, and the life everlasting.

Dearly beloved, may you “continue steadfast” in this faith – full of the Holy Spirit – so that you too may “fall asleep” – trusting that the Jesus who has forgiven all your sin will come and take you to be with Him in heaven, to live a life that has no end. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.