

Saint Stephen, the First Martyr

By: Jon Heerboth

December 26, 2021. Today is the Feast of Saint Stephen, and guest preacher Jon Heerboth's sermon is about following Stephen's example and being about the Father's business in feeding the poor, treating the sick, and supporting the marginalized.

Readings: [Colossians 3:12-17](#), [Luke 2:41-52](#)

*** Transcript ***

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

"Good King Wenceslas looked out on the feast of Stephen, when the snow lay round about deep and crisp and even." Well, that legend was that the king braved bad weather to take alms to a poor man on the second day of Christmas, the festival of Stephen, deacon and martyr. More on Saint Stephen in a bit. But I want to recognize this day on which we remember the first known martyr of the Christian church.

In the Gospel of Luke that we heard today, it's been 12 years or so since Mary sang the Magnificat, her song of praise at the time of her impending motherhood. We at Christ Lutheran Church sang it the last four Wednesday nights — and said it responsively as the psalm last Sunday — so we've heard it a lot. Mary sang about God, who had scattered the proud, brought down the powerful from thrones, lifted the lowly, fed the hungry, and sent away the rich. All of this was to fulfill God's covenant with the ancestors.

In this story, the reality of parenthood turned out to be different from the joy of the Magnificat. After several days of parental anxiety and panic, the twelve-year-old Jesus was unmoved when they found him. "Don't you know," he asked them — or "Wist ye not," the King James version asked — "that I must be about my Father's business?" That I have to be in my Father's house? That I am involved with my father's stuff? Don't you know that it is necessary for me to do this? The text says they did not understand what he was talking about.

We don't always understand either. We confess that Jesus was truly God and truly human. Here we see what our confession actually looked like in the person and divinity of Jesus at age 12.

After Passover, the great Jewish celebration of liberation, Jesus separated from his earthly family to tend to his real Father's business. Jesus sat in the temple, asked questions, learned from scholars, who were experts in the Jewish scriptures. All who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers, according to the text. So the temple scholars were amazed, and Mary and Joseph were astonished, as Jesus let them know that he knew who his real Father was and what God's business was with God's creation.

Imagine what it would have been like for his parents to have to raise the Savior of the world. Imagine how they felt when they lost him. God didn't choose a wealthy or powerful family to raise God's son. Jesus was a small town boy from a relatively poor family. I'm sure Mary and Joseph were astonished. What in their lives, or in ours either for that matter, would have been preparation for Jesus?

After this, an obedient Jesus went back to Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with

wisdom, and the favor of God was upon him, according to Luke. It's fascinating to hear how Jesus, who was fully God, could also be fully human, ask questions, learn from others, and develop wisdom.

"Why were you searching for me? Don't, you know..." These were Jesus' first words in the Gospel of Luke. Perhaps Jesus was reminding his mother of the outline of Jesus' mission that she had sung so long before in the Magnificat. At any rate, this is all Luke shares about Jesus' childhood. We don't hear from Jesus again, really, until his first sermon in Nazareth in chapter 4. In that story, Jesus went to his hometown synagogue on the Sabbath and read from Isaiah. Listen to what he said. "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed upon him. And then he said to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." That's what we're doing. The people were amazed again. By the time he finished his entire sermon, the people were so enraged that they tried to kill him by hurling him off a cliff. But he escaped. Jesus is no manger baby anymore. His goals of helping the poor and marginalized, of overthrowing the wealthy and powerful, and offering eternal life to all, eventually led to his death — and then to the resurrection. Mary and Joseph managed to lose Jesus and found him again at his Father's house, doing God's business.

We find ourselves here in God's house too, confessing our sins, accepting forgiveness and absolution, receiving Word and Sacrament, and praying for God to use us as tools to accomplish God's will for all creation. Every year, we hear how we lose Jesus in the hubbub of Christmas. But here we are back in God's house on the day after Christmas, worshipping under the open arms of Jesus. We find Jesus when we serve his mission to work for the oppressed and marginalized, and to work for the peace of Christ in our lives, in our congregation, and in our society as a whole. We know that our mission will not be popular among the rich and powerful. We go into the world with a set of values that are in opposition to prevailing views.

In Colossians' reading today, Paul tells us how to dress for our job. "Above all," he said, "clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." Today's reading tells us how to live. "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful." That is our mission. We usually think of the word "peace" as a noun. The peace of Christ is really a verb. It's something that we must commit to live and demonstrate and practice every day, the goal toward which we work as people of faith.

How are we doing? Several weeks ago in the Sunday Forum, the Horns demonstrated that the countries in which Christianity were doing well were those in which people saw benefits from the work of the church. In other countries in which people look to governments for their social safety nets and care, the church was becoming irrelevant as the years passed. Are we relevant in our own country? Are the poor being fed? Are the sick treated? The marginalized supported? How about God's creation as a whole?

When we reach out, we take risks. In our society, many want to believe that anyone can get ahead if they work hard. Are people suffering? "They should clean up their act." Poor? "Get a job, or a better job." Need childcare? "Quit having babies." "I don't want my tax dollars supporting someone who ought to be working as hard as I had to work." Those are all comments I copied out of the Post Dispatch in the past week, on a variety of social issues. And I think those are prevailing views among some people. A lot of people. Not here. "Don't you know?" we might respond. "We must be about our heavenly Father's business." Are we making a difference? Saint Stephen found out the hard way what can happen when Christians make a difference and upset the status quo. When Stephen's work and his

wisdom upset the powerful, they trumped up some charges of blasphemy against him, dragged him out of the city, and stoned him to death in front of Saul — or St. Paul, as we call him now. St. Paul, the writer of the book of Colossians, who said that we should clothe ourselves in love. That St. Paul. In Acts 8:1 Luke wrote, "And Saul approved of their killing him."

This is the day we think about Jesus, both fully divine and fully human, about Mary, who had to raise this child, about our Father's business that turns the status quo upside down, about the potential dangers we may face when we attempt to become relevant to all of our brothers and sisters in Christ. We pray together that Christ Lutheran Church, through our worship in Word and Sacrament and through our outreach to community and Creation, may always be part of doing our Father's business.

Let's pray the prayer appointed for today. We give you thanks, O Lord of glory, for the example of Stephen, the first martyr, who looked to heaven and prayed for his persecutors. Grant that we also may pray for our enemies and seek forgiveness for those who hurt us. Through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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