

East Hartford
Easter 5,2014

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Acts 7:55-60, Psa 31, John 14:1-14

Like Jesus

Spoiler alert. The lectionary has appointed the outcome of this story, and skipped all the good parts leading up to it. Who was this Stephen. What did he do that made people so angry that they become a murderous mob? Who was this guy Saul who was holding their coats lest they get blood on them?

Like us, Stephen was a disciple who never met Jesus in the flesh, nor is he mentioned in any of the resurrection appearance stories. He believe did not see, yet believed. He was one of seven appointed by his peers to serve at table and ensure the fair distribution of food. In fact, he was first on the list of seven, described as being, “full of grace and power” and doing, “great wonders among the people.” Like many rapidly successful, it was not long before great resentment began to grow among the religious leadership of Jerusalem, especially in the synagogue of the Freedmen.

Scripture says, *“the Spirit was helping him to speak with wisdom, and his words were so strong that they could not argue with him. 11 So they secretly urged some men to say, “We heard Stephen speak against Moses and against God.”*

12 This upset the people, the elders, and the teachers of the law. They came and grabbed Stephen and brought him to a meeting of the leaders. 13 They brought in some people to tell lies about Stephen, saying, “This man is always speaking against this holy place and the law of Moses. 14 We heard him say that Jesus from Nazareth will destroy this place and that Jesus will change the customs Moses gave us.” 15 All the people in the meeting were watching Stephen closely and saw that his face looked like the face of an angel.”

In writing the stories of the early church, Luke works hard to tell

us, “Stephen was a lot like Jesus.” It was just a few short weeks ago that we were hearing about trumped up charges, false accusations and a trial before the council which seemed to end in crucifixion.

In this morning’s lesson, the death by stoning, we hear “he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God” which leads us to remember Jesus’ baptism, and that remembering is only strengthened by Stephen’s surrendering of his life, and his prayer of forgiveness, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

What will the next step be?

Saul will begin a serious persecution of the church - the believers will be scattered far beyond Jerusalem through Judea and Samaria, but the word will live on. The scattered disciples will mean scattered proclamation of the good news beyond and beyond and beyond. The church will be persecuted and yes, the church will grow in new ways and new places.

And what are we to take from this story of the stoning of Stephen, for our lives and living?

I want to call us to this observation - Stephen became like Jesus. The student, the disciple was like his Lord, even tho he never met the man who walked the dusty roads, the teacher speaking with crowds, the healer with the compassionate touch.

In this second volume of Luke’s gospel, the book of Acts, Stephen is like Jesus in three important ways.

1. Stephen saw the presence of God.

And

2. Stephen trusted God in his living, speaking truth to power.

And

3. Stephen trusted God in his dying. Just as Jesus said, “into your hands I commit my spirit.” Stephen said, “Lord, receive my spirit.” likewise commending himself fully into the hands of God.

Friends, few among us, I suspect will see the presence of God in the ways that Luke spoke of Stephen seeing the presence of God. Yet, I believe, most if not all of us, do see the presence of God in many ways. Indeed in the spring of the year I believe we have to work really hard to miss the presence of God.

How many of you spent at least some time on the roads, or out in the sunshine of a glorious spring day? How many of us spent some time at Topstone? How many shades of green did you see? How blue were the skies? How gentle was the breeze? How glorious was yesterday after the prior week of cloudy, drizzly skies? How good did the occasional drink of water taste? What joy did you find in spending time with friends?

In addition to the wonders of Creation which are beyond anything we can count or comprehend, let me place another word in our midst. Blessing. How many of us have ever been blessed by God? How many of us have been blessed by this morning? If we have been blessed by God, we have seen the presence of God. Which is why I do so encourage the practice of thanksgiving. If we have been blessed by God, we have seen the presence of God.

Stephen saw the presence of God therefore, he trusted God in his living thus finding the courage to speak truth. Friends, - think for a moment. When does the process of living our rather ordinary lives require some courage? Sometimes ordinary living requires some extraordinary courage does it not. The courage to love - especially after having been hurt. Loving requires courage. Forgiving requires courage. Extending ourselves for others requires courage. When have you needed courage to live and grow? Whenever we see the presence of God in blessing or in creation or in others, whenever, wherever, we see the presence of God, we can find heart, we can find the courage we need, for our living - as we live in ordinary times, or extraordinary times.

Stephen saw the presence of God therefore, he trusted God in his dying, praying, "Lord, receive my spirit." Our moment of dying is an extraordinary moment, and if we are conscious for it, God will be with us

there. If we are not conscious for it, God will be with us there, for that is the consistent, constant steadfast promise of God.

It is the promise upon which all disciples have rested, and can rest, that in our living and in our dying, God is with us there. It has ever been and forever will be so.

Remember these phrases from this morning's psalm.

You are my rock and my fortress.

Into your hand I commit my spirit.

I trust in you, O God; "I say, you are my God."

My times are in your hand.

Be strong, and let your heart take courage,
all you who wait for the Lord.

This was true for the psalmist, true for Stephen, and is true for us.

Therefore, I offer it for the goodness and hope of our lives and our living.