**March 10, 2024 Acts 6:8-15, 7:54-60**

***Discipleship of Martyrs***

**Scripture:** *Acts 6:8-15 NRSV*

*(8)Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. (9)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. (10)But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. (11)Then they secretly instigated some men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." (12)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. (13)They set up false witnesses who said, "This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; (14)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." (15)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 NRSV (54)When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. (55)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. (56)"Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" (57)But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. (58)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. (59)While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." (60)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.*

**Notes:**

1. “The blood of the martyrs is the ***seed*** of the church.”
   1. Remember the ***saints*** who gave their lives for Christ.
2. Stephen’s ***Life***.
   1. Stephen is full of the ***Spirit*** and wisdom”.
   2. Stephen is “a man full of God’s ***grace*** and ***power***”
   3. Stephen ***preached*** with the power of the Holy Spirit,
3. Stephen’s ***Sermon*** and Arrest
   1. Stephen is described as having “the ***face*** of an angel”.
   2. Stephen ***recounts*** the history of God’s people.
   3. Stephen ***condemns*** his contemporary religious leaders.
4. Stephen’s ***Vision***
   1. Martyrs believed in Christ’s ***death*** and ***resurrection***.
   2. The church is linked directly to the ***witness*** of martyrs.
5. Stephen’s ***Death***
   1. The people are ***angry*** and ***cover*** their ears.
   2. Saul ***witnessed*** the Holy Spirit in Stephen.
   3. Stephen asks God to forgive his ***persecutors***,
6. Martyrdom through a ***Contemporary*** Lens.
   1. There is ***hope*** in the midst of our hardship.
   2. The martyrs help us put our own hardship in ***perspective***.
   3. Martyrs did not claim any ***privilege*** or power
7. Lent is a season when we face ***hardship*** head on.
   1. Point to ***faithful*** Christians who came before us,
   2. ***Remember*** the faithfulness of martyrs like Stephen.
   3. Find the same ***courage*** and ***strength***.

**Script:**

The ancient church father Tertullian said, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” I cannot say I know of anybody who has died for their faith in Jesus Christ. I will say I know of those who may have suffered for Christ; and maybe even died for God’s call. But to say that I knew them, I cannot. I think of Jesus twelve disciples. Of course, it is believed that Judas took his own life after betraying Jesus, and it is believed that John died of old age, after years of being exiled on the Isle of Patmos. But the remaining ten disciples and the apostle Paul all died a tragic death at the hands of those who persecuted the church.

Through the years there have been others. Who do you know who may have died a martyr’s death? Who do you know that may have suffered, at the hands of those who persecuted the Christian Church? What about people like Martin Luther King? Yes, he was leading the way for civil rights reform; But it was his faith in Christ and his calling to ministry that took him there. What about William Penn, no he did not die for his faith but it was his obedience to God that helped him lead the way to colonize Pennsylvania

“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” Others have echoed this sentiment as they recognize that the early church spread and grew in places of great persecution. We may not talk much about the martyrs of the church, but it is important to remember those great saints who gave their lives for Christ. There is something powerful in the recollection of the stories of those who took to heart the message of laying down their lives and taking on the power of the resurrection. Our text this week launches us right into the middle of that recollection as we remember the first martyr, Stephen, and the faithfulness of God in the midst of it all. Turn with me to Acts 6:8-15 and then 7:54-60

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**What do we know about Stephen’s Life?** Acts 6 tells us that Stephen is one of seven men chosen to help the apostles in their ministry. These are men who are “known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom” (v. 3). Verse 8 tells us that Stephen specifically is “a man full of God’s grace and power” who does “great wonders and signs among the people.” According to verse 10, Stephen had the ability to preach with the power of the Holy Spirit, which made it challenging for his opponents to effectively argue with him.

Stephen’s ability to perform wonders places him on the level of the apostles as a true follower of Christ, but because he proclaims Jesus as the Messiah, he is considered a blasphemer by the religious leaders the religious leaders who have rejected the way of Jesus. Stephen is arrested on false charges ironically because he is accused of being a false prophet *by* those who are bearing false witness. The Greco-Roman era prized people who were skilled at rhetoric and debate. Some were paid to travel as orators to perform rhetoric in various cities. Apparently having a member of the new Christian church skilled in rhetoric was upsetting to various leaders.

**Stephen’s Sermon and Arrest, a**fter Stephen is arrested and brought to stand trial before the Sanhedrin, he is described as having “the face of an angel” (6:15), which indicates Stephen’s innocence and empowerment by the Holy Spirit. Stephen preaches a sermon that recounts the history of God’s people. His use of “our father Abraham” tells us that Stephen is Jewish by birth. Even as he invokes the heroes of the Jewish faith people like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the twelve patriarchs of Israel, and Moses, his emphasis is on God’s faithfulness.

Although there are numerous details we could examine in Stephen’s sermon, particular emphasis is usually given to verses 51–53, where he condemns his contemporary religious leaders, calling them idolatrous and accusing them of committing the same sins as their ancestors instead of seeing where God is at work, they have created their own gods for themselves, and instead of listening to the prophets, they have killed the prophets, including Christ. We do not know whether Stephen intended to end his sermon here, or if he so enraged the Sanhedrin that they interrupted him before he was finished, but one thing is clear: they are furious with him.

**Stephen’s Vision, i**n verse 55, Stephen is described as being full of the Holy Spirit and having a vision of the glory of God in heaven, and Jesus standing at God’s right hand. Verse 56 says he shared his vision out loud. This vision demonstrates Stephen’s innocence. He is empowered by the Holy Spirit and has not lied about his knowledge of Christ, even though he has been accused of teaching things that oppose God.

Multiple narratives about martyrs who came after Stephen have included descriptions of Spirit-empowered visions or dispositions. Blandina, a young female martyr, was viewed with awe by witnesses at the power and strength given to her by the Holy Spirit. Thecla, the first female martyr, was also viewed as someone who was empowered by the Holy Spirit. Perpetua wrote of various visions she had while in prison awaiting her death. These are just a few examples of other ancient martyrs who saw the glory of God and testified to it, and the witnesses who were in awe of the Holy Spirit’s presence in those moments.

Those who were martyred believed wholeheartedly that they were joining in Christ’s death in order to obtain the resurrection of the dead, and Stephen is no exception. Stephen trusts that God is with him and that his faithfulness and death will not be in vain. The vibrance of the early church can be linked directly to the faithful witness of martyrs. Many who witnessed the supernatural strength of the martyrs were inspired to seek God, which made the church grow and spread.

**Stephen’s Death**, the people are angry at Stephen’s steadfast words about the hope of Christ, and they cover their ears and make noise in order to ignore Stephen’s words. Why might they have done this? To harden their hearts against the Holy Spirit’s conviction?

Many involved in witnessing Stephen’s stoning lay their coats at Saul’s feet. Many scholars believe this moment is the beginning of Saul’s conversion experience, which culminates in a dramatic moment on the road to Damascus a journey he is making with the express purpose of carrying out more persecutions against Christians (see Acts 9:1–19). It is possible that witnessing the Holy Spirit in Stephen during his stoning is the beginning of Saul feeling a stirring in his heart toward Christ.

At the very moment of his death, Stephen asks God to forgive his persecutors, reminding us of Jesus’s prayer of forgiveness from the cross. Stephen knows he is joining Christ in his death and has hope of resurrection. This hope of resurrection was true of many, if not all, Christian martyrs. They were able to face their deaths bravely because of this hope. In their reasoning, they were not abandoning children or leaving important business unfinished. They were becoming who they were meant to be through the death and resurrection of Christ.

**How do we see Martyrdom through a Contemporary Lens?** Martyrdom is our collective faith history. Looking at the faithfulness of past Christians gives us resurrection hope in our present. Most of us won’t face stoning or the brutal trials of the Roman games in the Colosseum, but we all face hardship of some kind. The stories of the martyrs remind us that there is hope in the midst of our hardship.

Remembering the martyrs can also help us put our own hardship in perspective. Sometimes we want to act like we are being martyred when we encounter difficulties, but martyrs did not claim any privilege or power except the power of the Holy Spirit in them. They also did not *seek* death but received it as a consequence of their witness to Christ, they laid down their lives in obedience and faithfulness.

Sometimes today we get hung up on discussions over the death of the church, or the hardships the church faces in the world, but ultimately these conversations should help remind us of our Christian proclamation that death leads to resurrection. The blood of the martyrs led to the spread of the church. Their deaths brought about resurrection hope. Often what we perceive as death today is actually an opportunity for resurrection power to be revealed.

Lent is a season when we embrace death, grief, and lament. We face hardship head on. Like the martyrs of the church, the reason we can face those things is that we point to the faithfulness of generations of Christians those who came before us, and trust in the hope of resurrection.

Who do you look up to? Perhaps they were not a martyr. Perhaps they never really suffered for their faith, or at least they never suffered where you were able to see. Each of us here this morning are walking a path that is filled with difficulties; there are those who see us walking this path and they are watching to see how we react in difficult moments; where we turn when everything else seems to be difficult. Are you setting an example that others would be willing to emulate? Are you living the life of Christ, so that all who see you will know you are following the Lord?

As we continue our journey through Lent, may we also take time to remember the faithfulness of martyrs like Stephen. May we find the same courage and strength when we face hardship, May we know the Holy Spirit is with us too.