

People are Peopling

Acts 7: 55-60

The Story of Stephen the first Martyr

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May the God who creates us, redeems us, and sustains us, be with us this day, and remain with us always. Amen

Good Morning!

Stephen. The first martyr and first deacon of the church. What is his story? Stephen is stoned to death by religious authorities of Israel. This account is an early pivotal story in the Acts of the Apostles. You may remember that the Acts of the Apostles is essentially part two of the Gospel of Luke, a continuation of that Gospel outlining the formation and the early days of the Christian church.

In the second chapter, on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is given to the Apostles and they tumble out into the streets of Jerusalem, speaking in various different languages, touching the hearts of all who hear.

Peter gives his first sermon and more than 3000 people are baptized. The early Christian communities are beginning. The church is growing. People are meeting, praying and holding things in common. And then by the sixth chapter, as the church continues to grow and expand, disagreements are developing. I don't know if this should make us feel good or bad, that it only took four chapters for the people of faith, to start getting annoyed with each other?

It seems that "hard feelings are developing between the Greek speaking believers—the Hellenists—and the Hebrew speaking believers because their widows are being discriminated against in the daily food lines" (The Message Acts 6:1-3). Even then people of faith disagreed, people of good will saw the same issues differently.

To address issue the 12 apostles gather and discern that it wouldn't be right for them to stop their preaching and teaching to sort out this feeding issue, so they decide to bring in some assistance; they choose seven faithful ones to assist. They pray over them and send them out.

Stephen is the first chosen and listed in this group of deacons. He is described as a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. Stephen by all accounts does a great job. God's presence is palpable. But there arose a group of men, who are annoyed by Stephen's work. They try to argue him down. But he's smarter and he bests them in the argument. And as my colleague Ellen Ekevag says, "People are people and they always seem to be peopling," And this disgruntled band of men bribe some others to say to the Jewish religious authorities and scholars, that Stephen has been cursing God and Moses.

Word gets around and the religious high council calls Stephen in for questioning. Is Stephen blaspheming? The bribed witnesses lie. And Stephen, being human, being peeved for being called and being falsely accused, lets the high council have it. Maybe he could have greeted the group with some curiosity, found out exactly what they'd heard, maybe listened a bit to their fears...but no. Stephen, being human, *peopling* tells them what for. All about Abraham and Moses, the promised land and Egypt and Jesus. Maybe he offers his words in a way that the others primed to think ill of him, maybe they cannot now hear. Maybe Stephen goes a bit overboard and in the midst of his scriptural review he peppers his words with an insult or two...

Maybe the ones who are listening are so focused on what they have heard said of Stephen that they can't actually hear what he is saying now, and people being people, the Council rushes Stephen and takes him out to stone him.

Then a thing happens. A thing happens that I want us to remember. A thing happens that is Holy and is of God. A thing happens that leads to another thing happening. Also holy and of God.

The first thing that happens as stones are raining down on Stephen, he says, he prays, "Jesus, receive my spirit!" Then he prays, "Jesus do not hold this sin against them," and he dies.

Stephen isn't *peopling* he is filled with the Holy Spirit. His last words as he is dying an excruciating death, his last words are not enmity and revenge but forgiveness and hope. Stephen isn't *peopling* he is praying Holy words to God. Setting a possible stage for connection and care not pain and regret.

Scripture tells us that there is a young zealous pharisee there, off to the side holding coats of the ones who are throwing the stones. The young pharisee's name is Saul. Though he throws no stones as he stands in the corner he is happy to watch as Stephen dies.

In the weeks and months that follow Saul is zealous in his persecution of Christians. Dragging them from their homes sending them to jail.

And then this other thing happens, a Holy thing, completely unexpected. This figure of the shadows the zealous pharisee, two short chapters later is struck down on the road to Damascus: blinded by the light of Christ.

And Saul becomes Paul.

The scales fall from his eyes.

A holy thing happens to a very human—human.

And the Gospel is spread to the ends of the earth.

Though people are people, and continually peopling, Christ has Died. And Christ is Risen. And because of and in spite of us Christ will come again. Thanks be to God.