

Sermon Series "Acts" - Saint Stephen
Acts 6:8-16 / Acts 6:1-8:3
Colebrook Congregational Church
June 25, 2017 / Third Sunday After Pentecost

When one follows the Lectionary, you're supposedly going to cover the whole Bible in three years, but that is not really true. It jumps around a lot, more so in the Old Testament than the New. Like the Book of Numbers is mostly just census data and complaining, so it is pretty much skipped. The Gospels are very similar so with some stories of Jesus, they just chose one of the versions.

Then there are the Letters. At the end of many of Peter's & Paul's letters, there is what I call "housekeeping notes," where Peter & Paul were talking directly to someone about stuff that he probably would not if he knew the letter was going to be considered scripture. Stuff that gives us a good look into the early church but aren't really preachable, stuff along the lines like paying bills, sending personal messages to other people, including the scribes inserting their own messages, locating forgotten possessions, sending thanks to the women who hosted the house churches, and more.

I find those parts fascinating, so here are a representative few:

Do your best to come to me soon, for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful in my ministry. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments. 14 Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will pay him back for his deeds. 15 You also must beware of him, for he strongly opposed our message.

Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you. He is always wrestling in his prayers on your behalf, so that you may stand mature and fully assured in everything that God wills. And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea. And say to Archippus, 'See that you complete the task that you have received in the Lord.'

Now concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to visit you with the other brothers, but he was not at all willing to come now. He will come when he has the opportunity.

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon* of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well.

But one other large hole in what is covered by the lectionary schedule is the Book of Acts, and I feel that is something lacking, and I've wanted to do a series on this book for quite awhile, and this summer, I will try to get through as much of Acts as I can. I will be skipping the parts that should already be known, like Pentecost and the Conversion of Saul to Paul. Not all of the stories in Acts have a specific message or lesson like how the Gospels do, some are just the stories of the earliest Believers and what they went through establishing Christ's Church.

The stories contained in the Book of Acts are about the earliest Church and its formation. The first chapter recounts the end of the Gospel of Luke, because both were written by the same person. It also names Matthias as Judas' replacement among the Disciples; and sets the scene for Pentecost. Chapters 2 through 12 follows the spread of the Jewish Church under Peter from Jerusalem south to Ethiopia and north to Antioch; then Chapters 13 through 28 follows the Gentile Mission under Paul from Antioch to Rome.

Today, we begin the series with the Story of Saint Stephen, the First Deacon of the Church and the First Christian Martyr. The scripture reading today covered just Stephen's introduction, but I will cover his whole story; and this is the pattern that I intend to follow through this series, to cover as much as possible.

Before this happened, we have Pentecost, followed by Peter and John healing and preaching the Resurrection at the Temple, followed by them before the Sanhedrin, who tried to convince them to be silent about Jesus, but they politely declined. Then the Church in Jerusalem starts to organize. Then there is the story of a couple who lied about their offering and were struck down. Then the persecutions against them by the Pharisees and Sadducees in the Sanhedrin started to ramp up towards violence.

Then begins the Story of Stephen with Chapter 6 and the formation of the Deacons. There was an issue between the Jewish Christians and Greek Jewish Christians about the distribution of food to those in need in the community. The Apostles felt that their attention was better spent elsewhere, so they called together the whole church community to hold an election, selecting seven to be the first deacons, and their first responsibility was to make sure that everyone received enough food without partiality.

First among the Deacons was Stephen, described as “a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit,” and being “full of grace and power.” Stephen was also going around preaching and healing people, drawing the notice of the Synagogue of the Freedmen. These guys were the descendents of those who were enslaved when the Romans conquered Judea almost a century earlier, they were dispersed to different areas of the empire, and had since returned; and compared to those Judeans who were not dispersed, they were considered more tenacious in their Judaism. This is also the first time that Diaspora Judaism had come into conflict with the new movement.

They argued with Stephen, but were not up to the challenge, and were incensed. They seized him, brought him before the Sanhedrin, and set up false witnesses against him, claiming he was blaspheming against God and Moses and by speaking against the Temple and the Torah. If this is sounding like what Jesus went through, it is intentional. The charge of blasphemy alludes to the charges against Jesus found in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. Stephen's face shining like an angel alludes to the Transfiguration of Jesus in Matthew. And the interplay between accuser and accused mirrors Luke's own Gospel.

Next, for the majority of Chapter 7, Stephen gives a speech before the Sanhedrin. It is a retelling of the History of Israel, focusing on Abraham, Joseph, and Moses; and is the longest speech in the Book of Acts. His response is in the style of midrash, which is the style of theological argument that the Rabbis engage in, which was fitting to his audience; and only indirectly addressed the charges leveled against him.

Stephen spoke about how in the time of the Patriarchs, of Abraham and Joseph, God actively tried to reverse evil with good, making and keeping promises. About how Moses was granted special wisdom and power and so was a true prophet and the prototype of the anticipated messiah, leading God's People into newness of life, found manifest in Jesus. About how God does not dwell in houses made with human hands, but he did not demonize Solomon or the Temple itself. God just isn't bound by a particular place, or to domestication. And about how Israel has repeatedly disregarded God's saving word delivered by both Moses and Jesus. Stephen's speech was to show that Jesus has fulfilled scripture, that he is not blaspheming; and in fact, it was Israel that keeps turning its back on God and those sent by God and they should cut that out.

Unfortunately, the Sanhedrin did not take kindly to Stephen's speech and were angry. Then both God & Jesus appeared to Stephen, fortifying him. The Sanhedrin rushed at Stephen, and dragged him out of Jerusalem, and by the north gate, stoned him to death. While they did, a young man named Saul watched the coats of those involved and witnessing; setting up the story of Saul in a couple chapters.

Before the end of Stephen, he continued to mirror Jesus, offering his spirit up to heaven, and asking forgiveness for those who were killing him.

Most of the meanings and usages of The Story of Saint Stephen do not fit with our time and place. Primarily, this story is told to help fortify believers facing persecutions just for being Christian, that if they trust in Jesus and Witness Him, He will not abandon them. We are lucky to live in a country with the Freedoms of Speech, Assembly, and Religion; but there are many Christians around the world, even today, that are not so lucky. We should never forget their plight and support them however we can.

But Saint Stephen is also held up as a good Follower of Christ. He helped make sure that people were fed, that everyone's needs were met, and he preached the Good News; and when he provoked the ire of the Sanhedrin, it was because of his similarity with Jesus. Saint Stephen was continuing what Jesus started, full of wisdom and the Spirit, and was accused of similar things to Jesus, but was clearly obedient to Jesus. He was not messianic, just a follower of Jesus. He is like Jesus in character and conduct, becoming an exemplar for those in the young church; and even so today, motivating and pointing us towards Christ as our goal as we live our lives.

Please join me in the Spirit of Prayer:

Loving God, we thank You for the example and sacrifice of Saint Stephen. May we too follow and imitate Jesus with the same devotion and trust that he showed. We know that the path of Jesus is not easy, but we know that with Your help, we can walk it. Amen.

Intercessory Prayer

[PAUSE]

Loving God, it is with awe and wonder, joy and gladness we offer You our thanks, and pray for Your creation, its nations, and peoples, for your church, for ourselves and all in need.

We give You thanks for all Your gifts to us—for food, for health, for each breath we take; for Your guidance, for our Joys, and for our loving friends and families. And thank You for all who have sacrificed of themselves for us.

We ask Your forgiveness, for sins known & unknown. We know that we can do better and be more aware of ourselves and of those around us.

We pray for those around us who need your care. We pray for those who hunger or are homeless. We pray for those in pain—the abused, broken-hearted and lonely. We pray for the sick in body and in mind, and for those who grieve. We pray for the caretakers who bring comfort to those in need. We pray for all who put themselves between us and harm in this chaotic world. We pray for the victims of terrorist attack and for their families.

Help us to see Your presence burning in the hearts of others; grant that we may all be united in a fellowship of love and prayer; give us the courage to pick up our cross and respond to the needs of the world, give us the stamina to follow You, to be Your hands and heart in the world; and enable us to witness to Your grace and mercy.

We also pray for:

The Suddath Family
Sean Larose

Deanna Muzzulin Sue Kenny
Family of Greg Roberts Becky Bodycoat

We offer these prayers in confidence and trust, as well as the prayers of our hearts up to you, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Psalm 31:1-8

In you, O Lord, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me.

2 Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily. Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me.

3 You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake lead me and guide me,

4 take me out of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge.

5 Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.

6 You hate those who pay regard to worthless idols, but I trust in the Lord.

7 I will exult and rejoice in your steadfast love, because you have seen my affliction; you have taken heed of my adversities,

8 and have not delivered me into the hand of the enemy; you have set my feet in a broad place.

Acts 6:8-15

Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. 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. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. Then they secretly instigated some men to say, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.' 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. They set up false witnesses who said, 'This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; 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.' And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.