

"Stephen"
Acts 7:51-60; 8:1-3
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York Center Church of the Brethren
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This is a gruesome story. I wish I could say religious persecution was a thing of the past - but I can't because it isn't. On April 4th a pastor in the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria (EYN) was murdered in his home by the Islamic State West Africa Province. They also shot his pregnant wife, who was taken to the hospital for treatment. One EYN leader said, *"The hunt for Christians, especially ministers serving in the church, by terrorists in Northeast Nigeria continues. This is the third EYN pastor to be killed in cold blood within a short time by these terrorists."* At the burial service for another murdered pastor, EYN president, Joel Billi said, *"We are bereaved, but we are not devastated because the Lord is with us."* (Church of the Brethren Newslines, April 28, 2023.)

Do you remember what happened at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh four and a half years ago? During Shabbat morning services on October 27, 2018, an anti-semitic terrorist opened fire, killing eleven people and wounding six. It was the deadliest attack on the Jewish community in this country. The gunman was shot several times by police and arrested. His trial has just started. He has been charged with 63 federal crimes and 36 state crimes.

Rabbi Jeffrey Myers, who was leading services when the attack took place, wants his community to serve as a beacon of hope to the world. He told an interviewer, "We cannot let evil win, but we can't just sit back and expect that it's going to just go away on its own. "Every good, decent person must step forward and be able to say that evil is not welcome."

Burning the churches of Black congregations has been a terrorist tool of white supremacists for generations. Here are the numbers: From 1951- 1960 four churches were burned. 1961- 1970 eight churches. 1971- 1980- four.

In 1995 and 1996 more than thirty churches were burned in the south in an 18-month period. These atrocities finally caused Congress to pass the "Church Arson Prevention Act." But the burning has not stopped. From 2001- 2010 three churches were burned. From 2011 to last year ten more were destroyed by arson.

The evil people who burn churches do so for both racial and religious reasons. Unbelievably, many white supremacists consider themselves to be Christians. And so, it continues.

To really understand what happened to Stephen, we need some background information. The book of the Acts of the Apostles, written by the same author as the Gospel of Luke, is the story of the early church. In Acts, we find out what happened to Jesus's disciples after his death, resurrection, and ascension. This book traces the roots of the church from its birth on the day of Pentecost to the Apostle Paul living under house arrest in Rome.

The early church had a lot to learn, and they had to learn it on the go. On the Day of Pentecost 3,000 people joined the fledgling Christian movement. Acts tells us that they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. We also learn that they shared everything so that no one was in need. As others saw their good deeds and loving fellowship, their number continued to grow.

As they grew, they had growing pains, issues and problems arose. The Greek-speaking members started complaining that the Hebrew-speaking members were neglecting their widows when the food was distributed. The twelve disciples called the whole community together to discuss the problem. They decided to select seven men of good standing to basically serve as Deacons to make sure all were cared for. The seven men had Greek names which means they may have been Greek speaking, but that isn't certain. What matters is that everyone was pleased with this decision.

Stephen was one of the seven. We are told that he was full of grace and power and did great signs and wonders among the people. Some other Jews began to argue and debate with him, but they couldn't win against him. So, they instigated a smear campaign and spread lies about him. Then they brought him before the council and called false witnesses to testify against him. The council members watched him closely but all they saw was that his face was that of an angel.

Stephen then gives the longest speech in the New Testament- a history lesson from the beginning with Abraham to Joseph to Moses to David to Solomon and the building of the temple. This was information they all knew by heart but at the end Stephen says, *"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors did. Which of the prophets did your ancestors **not** persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it."*

It is no surprise that Stephen's indictment enraged them. But even as they raged in anger, Stephen was filled by the Holy Spirit, gazing into heaven, and seeing the glory of God and Jesus standing at God's right hand. He told everyone what he was seeing but they stuck their fingers in their ears because they didn't want to hear it. Then they shouted and

rushed at him. They dragged him outside of the city limits and began to throw stones at him.

The author drops a little tidbit into the story to tantalize us. *"The witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul."* Do you know who Saul was? He was the man who would become the Apostle Paul. But here, at the beginning of the Acts story, this young man was the coat check kid for those who murdered Stephen.

While the stones were breaking his bones and tearing his flesh, Stephen prayed, *"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."* Then in a loud voice he cried out, *"Lord Jesus, do not hold this sin against them."* Then he died. Again, we hear of Saul. He approved of this heinous crime.

Stephen's words at the end of his life sound very similar to the final words of Jesus on the cross. When Jesus was arrested Luke records him saying, *"From now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God."* Which is where Stephen saw him.

Jesus cried out from the cross, *"God, into your hands I commend my spirit."* And near the end of his life he said, *"God, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."*

These similarities between Jesus and Stephen are, of course, intentional. As the first martyr of the Christian faith, Stephen bears witness to the crucified Jesus and the risen Christ in the way that he dies.

Believe it or not, there is a glimmer of hope in this horrific story. The death of Stephen kicked off a severe persecution which caused the disciples to scatter throughout Judea and Samaria. Only the original twelve, now called Apostles, remained in Jerusalem. Without intending to, the persecutors of the Christians were actually helping to fulfill the promise of the Risen Christ to his followers in the first chapter of Acts. Before he ascended to heaven, Jesus said, *"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* And so they were.

Even in a desperate situation, the Spirit continues to work for good. The scattering of Christians only serves to spread the word of the gospel and to introduce the mission of the church to the non-Jews, the Gentiles, for the first time.

And who was at the forefront of ravaging the church and dragging off men and women to prison? Saul, who will one day soon have his own life-changing encounter with the Risen Christ. And a fierce enemy will become one of the foremost champions of the Christian faith who himself will face severe persecution and eventually death.

The story of Stephen shows us what radical, prophetic defiance looks like. It is a reminder to us that the post-Easter world is not all bunny rabbits and chocolate eggs. The resurrection of Christ brought great joy to the lives of his followers, but it also brought danger and risk. After the Risen Christ appeared to them, they were not allowed to take a nice vacation and bask in Jesus's company for eternity. They awaited the arrival of the Holy Spirit and then were immediately put to work - following in the footsteps of Jesus-preaching, teaching, healing, and changing the world.

This story reminds me of the saying, "*They tried to bury us. They didn't know we were seeds.*" What the persecutors of the early Christians didn't expect when they ran them out of town was that as they scattered like seeds, they took root in the fertile soil of new places, and they bore good fruit. That is the only way the Gospel of Christ grows, you know, if it is taken to new people and new places and shared.

If we **expect** the risen Christ to be at work in our character and circumstances, and beyond us in society and the world, we just might see signs of grace, healing, and justice. As we tell others what we experience and see of Jesus's work, we bear witness; and as we live in faith and faithfulness, our actions will testify to him as well. When others saw the way the early Christians lived and treated each other, they wanted to be a part of that kind of a community too. And the church grew and flourished.

Our circumstances are quite a bit different from the folks who followed the Risen Christ in Jerusalem all those years ago. But we have much in common. The way we live our lives says more about us than the words that come out of our mouths. If we want to show the world who Jesus is, and how our lives have changed because of him, then we need to live out loud, unafraid to be living witnesses to the One who died on a cross and rose from the tomb. To be witnesses means we must pay attention to the way the Holy Spirit is working in our own lives and in the life of the church.

Poet Mary Oliver gives the best instructions for living a life. She wrote, "Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it."

I would add one more thing to her list. Be a seed!

Go forth and germinate!

Amen.