

26 December 2010
St. Stephen, Martyr

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Birthdays”

Text: Acts 6:8 - 7:2a, 51-60; Matthew 23:34-39

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

It seems at first quite odd, and not very Christmas-sy, to commemorate St. Stephen the day after Christmas; to replace our white paraments with the blood red ones; and to think of a brutal death so soon after the joy of a new birth. But so it has been in the church for a very long time, and for two reasons, I think: **first**, to remind us that this newborn child, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in the manger, is Himself going to die a brutal death. And that this is the reason why He came - to give His life so that people like Stephen, the people who stoned Stephen or approved of it (like Paul), and folks like you and me, could be saved from our sins and from the brutal death that is going to happen to us all. For, in fact, all death is brutal. We sometimes live under the mistaken notion that a quiet death in our sleep, or at home among loved ones, is better than stoning or a cross. But no, there is no good death. All death is brutal, an affront against the Lord of life, and against His plan for us. We were not created to die. It was never to be. That we do - whether it be from old age or terrorism or in some other way - is because of sin. Sin that has invaded our world and robs us of the life, peace, and joy we were created to have. Jesus has come to rescue us from that and give us life again. And so our Saviour lies as a babe in a manger, that He might hang as our atonement and hope on the cross.

The **second** reason I think the church has placed the commemoration of St. Stephen right after the birth of Jesus is because the church has always considered the day a saint dies to be his (or her) *birthday in heaven*. For after Stephen **fell asleep** under the weight of those hateful stones that came down on him and crushed him, he woke up in the hands of angels in the first day of his new life, in the eternal day that will never end. The promise of Jesus, made to him in Baptism, was fulfilled. He who was born again of water and the Word and given the promise of eternal life, was given that life that day - God using such an awful event to gather one of His children to Himself and set him free from the sin and suffering of this world. The world would be poorer for St. Stephen's absence, but heaven is richer, as another son takes his seat at the feast that has no end. And so it will be for you and I. Brutal death - however it comes to us - will not have the final word. The promise made to you in your baptism will be fulfilled, and when your eyes close here for the last

time, they will open to behold the wonders of heaven in the day that has no end. Your eternal birthday, just as for Stephen, because of Jesus, because of Christmas, because our Lord has come to save us from our sins.

Now, if you were going to pick someone in the Bible to be the first Christian martyr, it probably wouldn't be Stephen! Peter maybe, or James, or another one of the twelve. They *would* all - except John - receive the same fate as Stephen and be killed for their faith. But Stephen was first. Stephen, who was just one of the seven deacons chosen by the church to help distribute food among the poor and do acts of mercy. And maybe if Stephen just had stuck to that, if he had kept his mouth shut and minded his own business, he would have lived a long and healthy life. But Stephen, as we heard, filled with **grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people**. Or in other words, he was preaching Jesus and giving Jesus. He was preaching the fulfillment of the old and the beginning of the new. He was preaching not an earthly kingdom, but an eternal one, and that this eternal kingdom had been established in Jesus' death and resurrection. So repent and receive the good news.

Well, those who had just crucified Jesus and had gotten Him out of the way, didn't hear this as good news, and weren't in the mood to deal with this again. And they weren't going to bother with Pilate and a trial and crucifixion and all that again. They took matters into their own hands - *literally*. It would be much faster this time. But their success in silencing Stephen didn't satisfy them as, we are told in the first verse of the next chapter, **there arose on that day a great persecution against the church**. Their thirst for blood only increased. And so though we are not told their names, there were undoubtedly more eternal birthdays that took place that day.

If only Stephen had kept his mouth shut and minded his own business. That's always the temptation, isn't it? To keep our religion private, to swallow our words when we should speak, to ignore what we know is wrong and shouldn't be, or let someone else handle it. It's easier, and it's certainly safer. Because when we do speak, sticks and stones often come our way - if not physically, then at least verbally. But even verbal sticks and stones hurt. And if they're not going to listen anyway, what's the point?

Actually, you couldn't blame God if He said that about us. After Adam and Eve didn't listen to Him, after Israel didn't listen Him, and after we don't listen to Him but go our own ways and do our own things. You can hear this frustration a bit in the words of Jesus today, when He lamented, **"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it (like Stephen)! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!"** You couldn't blame God if He just kept His mouth shut and minded His own business. *And how dreadful would that be for us?*

But the good news of Christmas is that God *didn't* keep silent. To Adam and Eve He spoke His Word of promise, to Israel He sent His prophets to repeat and expand that promise, and to us . . . to us best of all, **that Word of promise became flesh.** God roared His answer to our sin by sending His Son - to be born for us, to die for us, and to rise for us. That in Him you both see and hear - as I said Christmas Eve - the marvelous, mysterious love of God for you.

There was a time, though, when God did remain silent. Do you remember when? *When He could have saved Himself.* Oh, how quick we are to speak then! To defend ourselves, excuse ourselves, or point the finger at others. But not Jesus. The very Word of God who created the world would not speak to save Himself, but allowed all the sin and accusations of the world to be heaped upon Him and be condemned and killed for them. No, not for *them* - **for you.** That you might never hear the word of God's condemnation, but His Word of forgiveness, like you did this morning. Those words that came from Stephen's lips: "**Lord, do not hold this sin against them,**" came first from Jesus: "**Father, forgive them.**" And those words are still being spoken and heard. To give us eternal life.

That some do not listen to them is sad. That there are still some today who, like they did with Stephen, cover their ears and kill those who speak of our forgiving God, is a reality many Christians live with, in countries all around the world. But Christmas means that these deaths are not victories for the enemy, but eternal birthdays. When shouts of hate are silenced, and the song of the angels is heard.

Christmas, as St. Stephen reminds us, means that is the future that awaits you. Whether death comes sooner or later, suddenly or slowly, at the hands of others or hooked up to tubes in a hospital room - because of Christmas, your death is not a victory for the enemy, but your eternal birthday. The day that **heaven is opened** to you, you **see the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God**, and hear the song of the angels.

Until that day, we join with the song of the angels - and St. Stephen - here, joining our "*Holy, holy, holy*" with theirs as our Lord comes to us today in His body and blood in His Supper. For the Word who became flesh is still flesh for you, to feed you with Himself. To strengthen you with His forgiveness and life. To strengthen you for when those sticks and stones come *your way* - be they physical or verbal. To strengthen you in Christ, who took a *stick* of wood and died on it, and who then rolled away the *stone* of the grave. And no sticks and stones that come your way could be greater than those!

And so, well, St. Stephen is kind of Christmas-sy after all! Not the world's kind of Christmas-sy, but even better. For St. Stephen teaches us not what Christmas *should*

be, but what Christmas truly means. That because of Jesus, heaven is open. And that, my friends, in any and every circumstance of life, makes Christmas merry indeed!

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.