

2 Chronicles 24:17-22; Acts 6:8-7:2a, 51-60; Matthew 23:34-39

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

A Lutheran pastor from the Midwest tells how he arranged for a carpenter to build him a special wooden manger to be used for a sermon during the Christmas season. The carpenter had constructed the manger in such a way that it could be disassembled easily, then reassembled into the shape of a cross. So, by the time the sermon was over, that manger had become a wooden cross. It was a powerful, visible reminder that the One cradled in the manger would eventually die on the cross.

Today's lessons, much like those pieces of wood made by the carpenter, remind us that we cannot separate the manger from the cross. We cannot separate the merriment and joy of Christmas from the mission of God's Son in the world, and the martyrdom of his followers.

The sobering truth in the midst of the happy holidays we celebrate with our family and friends is that Jesus' birth isn't an end in itself. His birth in Bethlehem brings with it consequences—serious consequences, not only for Jesus himself, but for those who trust in him and walk in his ways.

If you know the old Christmas carol, "Good King Wenceslas," then you might just want to think about it for a moment. The carol tells of a good king who spotted a poor peasant outside the castle walls on a cold snowy evening which just happened to be the Feast of Stephen. That's an old-fashioned way of saying the Festival of Stephen, or what we today call "St. Stephen, Deacon and Martyr." The carol continues by telling of the king's kindness and compassion on that Feast Day—his going out with his servant through the wind and snow to find that peasant and bring him into the warm castle to dine. An example of Christian charity, an example of living Christ-like. And the fact that it was on the Feast of Stephen tells me that good King Wenceslas was merely following in the tradition of that great cloud of witnesses who had gone before him who had done the same thing, kept the faith, and walked the way of Christ.

Like Stephen. The story of Stephen is found in the book of Acts, in chapters six and seven. Here's the situation in which we learn of him: the early Christian community had some pretty specific divisions. For example, there were the Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians, and the Greek-speaking Jewish Christians. Like divisions in most organizations, they tended not to get along. Birds of a feather flock together. You understand. We learn in today's 2nd lesson that concern was growing among the Greek-speaking Christians that their needy members were being neglected. Their widows and orphans and aged and sick were not receiving food in the daily distribution coming from the offerings that were gathered in the church. The Hellenists, as these Greek-speaking Christians were called, spoke up about this. It was decided by the Apostles that a few folks should be given the role of ensuring that the Hellenist Christians' most needy weren't neglected as food was distributed. Stephen was one of those designated to help in the distribution. Maybe he volunteered. Or, as often happens when you are absent from a committee meeting, perhaps he wasn't there when the assignments were given out, and someone said, "How about Stephen?" And they all said, "Sure. Stephen will do it!"

In any case, we do learn from scripture that Stephen was a good man, filled with faith and the Holy Spirit. See, God had gifted him for his role as one of the deacons. It was a position of leadership. And Stephen **ran** with it. And the gifts God had given him ended up being much

greater than anyone expected. Stephen performed signs and wonders by the grace of God. Stephen displayed wisdom and faithfulness in his speech and action. Stephen witnessed to others and the Christian community grew.

Recall I said that Jesus' birth has consequences. God's coming into our world to restore us to him has consequences for our earthly lives, and not just our heavenly lives. We're seeing the reality of that here in this story. Stephen, full of faith and the Holy Spirit, does wondrous things in the name of Jesus. The Jews in Jerusalem are worried, horrified, envious, or all three. They plot against him. They accuse him of blasphemy, of saying things contrary to Moses and the Law of God. There's a sham of a trial, and although Stephen is permitted to speak at length (that's most of chapter 7), his words about their faithlessness, their hypocrisy, only reinforce his enemies' desire to get rid of him. Stephen is taken out and stoned to death, becoming the first martyr of the Christian Church.

The trouble with having days in the church year designated for martyrs such as Stephen is that we focus so much on his death, we tend to forget about his life. Stephen was martyr AND deacon. You cannot separate the manger from the cross, but you don't go from manger to cross instantaneously. There is still, like that wooden structure made by the carpenter, the time spent in the assembling—the time between manger and cross. Luke in his Book of Acts sounds like a Hollywood scriptwriter—the moment just before Stephen is stoned, the raging Jewish council coming at him, Stephen looks up and sees a vision of heaven opened, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Of course, his uttering that vision out loud enrages the council all the more, but you and I ought to remember it was not just the last few seconds of Stephen's life that were bathed in that heavenly light. All the while he served as deacon, grew in faith, preached the word, worshiped God, witnessed to others, he was seeing that same vision of God's kingdom before him. The light of Jesus Christ was shining through him all the while, not just when he died. In each day of his life Stephen lived out the story of the One who went from manger to cross and on to resurrected life. Stephen lived out this story on a daily basis in a way that was absolutely coherent with the vision, and he did it to the end. In fact, at his end, he lived it out again in words much like the words of our savior: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Doesn't that sound a lot like Jesus from the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"? That's what was happening in the time between manger and cross for Stephen.

St. Stephen, Deacon and Martyr. Will you and I be martyred for our faith in Jesus Christ our Lord? I don't know. I can't predict. None of us can. The word *martyr* has the connotation attached to it of someone who dies for a belief in something. But the word *martyr* itself basically means "witness." When Jesus tells his disciples in Luke before his ascension, "You are my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and to the ends of the earth" he used the word *martyr*. In that sense, the moment you and I open our mouths about Jesus Christ (whether in word or song), the moment you and I invite someone to worship with us, or offer to pray for them, or have your children baptized in the church and teach them the faith, or serve in Christ-like ways for those in need, or seek justice and peace in a hate-filled world, or find any other way to tell someone else about God and our faith in him—**that's** the moment we become martyrs.

If we cannot predict where that witnessing will eventually lead us, there is one thing we do know. Something about **us** must die in order that Christ might live in us. St. Paul and Martin Luther would say it is the "Old Adam" in us that must die, the self that sins and strays from God. Such a death takes place in the waters of baptism, where the "New Adam" arises, and then, whenever we remember what God has done for us by sending us his Son, the dying and rising takes place once more. Others would speak of the things about us we need to let go, the things about us that aren't really important, in order for God to do his redeeming work through us.

Maybe an example would help. The writer Gordon Atkinson tells of a man he knew in his church as he grew up—a man named Red Davis. Atkinson said, “Red Davis was nobody special in this world, or he was a great saint. I guess it all depends on how you look at things, but I’ll tell you something true and wonderful: ‘nobody special’ and ‘great saint’ go together a lot more often than some people think.”

Red Davis had been the CEO of a big company in East Texas. This company added much to the economy of the area and employed many people. Thus the company was somewhat famous in those parts, and so was its CEO.

When Red Davis retired as CEO in the late ‘70’s, he got his gold watch and an elaborate retirement party and much back-slapping and handshaking. Then Red went to his pastor and said he wanted to serve the Lord. Contrary to what we might assume, Red had no interest in chairing a critical financial committee, working on the building program, or serving on council, very public positions. Red had noticed in the church newsletter that the three-and-four-year-old Sunday School class needed a teacher, and Red said that he would like **that** job.

The famous CEO who once sat in a leather executive chair was now sitting on carpet squares on the linoleum floor of the children’s Sunday School room. He didn’t know a lot about teaching children, but he was warm, kind and willing. He was patient and generous with hugs. For 25 years, Red taught that class. The generations grew up, knowing and loving Red Davis, Red Davis knowing and loving them.

When Red Davis stood up to speak at a congregational meeting, the room fell silent with respect, not because he had been a big-shot CEO, but because he was, as Atkinson put it, “the gentle Sunday School teacher and passionate lover of children.” You see, Red had let go of the thing about him that wasn’t really important, opening up this space in him where God could do his redeeming work through him. That’s what was happening in that time between manger and cross.

And when Red Davis died, someone at his funeral told the story of how a young child spied him at the grocery store, turned to his mother and said, “Mama, I just saw God.” Atkinson said that little boy had been in Red’s Sunday School class, and when “he tried to wrap his little mind around the very big idea of God, the best he could do was think of Red.”

Red Davis and Stephen are separated by nearly 2000 years, yet they are very much the same. Red Davis, deacon and martyr, nobody special and great saint.

Whether they die for their faith or live out their lives in joyful service, martyrs inspire and encourage us. Their witness makes us more committed to following Jesus Christ. They help us link together the manger and the cross, knowing God’s gift of his Son has the power to assemble the disparate pieces of our lives, and shape us according to His good purpose and design. Assembled and shaped by Him, we live out that heavenly vision, martyrs and witnesses for those we meet. AMEN.

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