

Stephen, Deacon and Martyr
The Reverend John H. Brock

Saturday, December 26, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Acts 6:8–7:2a; 7:51–60; Matthew 23:34–39

Grace to you and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen

Everybody have a good Christmas? Did everybody have a mediocre Christmas? The weather while wasn't the best, it actually worked out, we had contingency plans starting on Monday. We started to, can't say sweat, because it was too cold to sweat, but we started to be very concerned about what the weather was going to be like on Thursday night and then on Friday morning, you know with what is happening out in the Midwest when they were talking about freezing rain on Wednesday, and then it moved from Wednesday to Thursday and then from Thursday to late Thursday and then from late Thursday to early Friday. Now fortunately, I mean it wasn't like I say, it wasn't the best of weather, but we at least were able to do okay as far as weather went.

My Christmas day itself was rather a long one. It was pushing 1:00 A.M. before I got home Thursday night, Friday morning, by the time we got done with all the services here and I helped clean up and I got home and then by the time I got in the house and shooed my youngest one upstairs to get out of the living room so that I could bring in the rest of the presents from my car that I had hidden here at church, it was 2:17, not that I paid attention, by the time I finally crawled into bed. I had turned off most of my alarms. I set one for 7:45, I know my radio came on, but I did not hear it at all. I slept right through the radio, but the alarm woke me up at 7:45. So I got up and headed downstairs to get the last of the presents set up and, it was not enough sleep to get going that day. But accordingly we got ready and Marianne and I came here to worship and we had a good time at worship yesterday morning. Pastor Hardy did a wonderful job, as always. And then by the time we got home at 11:00 as we pulled in the driveway, my in-laws are already there in the drive and so we got out and unloaded their stuff in the house. My mother and father-in-law were there, my sister-in-law and her husband showed up a couple of hours later. We had a wonderful meal, Aunt Janice, Uncle Jack and Cousin Shirley showed up about 5:00. Cousin Jeanie and her family came over as well and so we had this huge house full and I am doing my darndist to try to stay awake. I am trying to be polite, because I know when I don't have enough sleep I am not a very pleasant person. And so I am pouring even more caffeine into me than what I think is a safe amount. But we had a nice time. It was enjoyable to have them all there. Cousin Shirley, incredibly shy Cousin Shirley, started a conversation with me. She's never done this in the 20 years I have known this girl, she has never done this. It was a wonderful Christmas present to me to have Shirley do this conversation with me. That was worth staying awake that long just as it was.

We eventually got them out of the house and my in-laws, whom I love very dearly, out of the house and cleaned up the house. Not that I was paying attention, but it was 10:20 when I crawled back into bed. It was a very long day. I had sacrificed a

bunch of sleep. But it was a good day. We got a lot of really fun presents. Stuff that was well appreciated in the morning and then stuff, that not to say that just because I have teenage boys, and they didn't show the amount of gratitude that I thought was appropriate for getting this new gaming system, along with the new television, but a..., it was a good Christmas. It will be a little painful next month when the bills come in, but it was a good Christmas.

But today, we're talking about, not Christmas, even though it is the 26th. Today, we heard this lesson about this guy Stephen. We've got the flowers here, we've still got the tree up, but we heard this lesson about this guy Stephen, now we heard it's today, because today is the day that historically we credit as being the day that he was martyred, the day that he sacrificed his life. We don't know a whole lot about Stephen other than the little bit that we get in the book of Acts. There at the end of chapter six and all of chapter seven. We've got the abbreviated reading in our first lesson tonight. I really encourage you to go home and read Acts Chapter 7. Stephen does this wonderful job of talking about faith and what it has meant to the Jewish people and what Jesus' coming means to them now. Unfortunately for Stephen, his audience didn't appreciate the message that he was bringing. They didn't want to receive the gift that he was trying to give to them. The gift of the word of God. This gift of salvation, through Jesus, whose birth we just celebrated. They didn't want to hear that message so much that they killed him. I don't know if you caught the last line of the reading there that the people who stoned him laid their jackets at the foot of a young man named Saul. Saul will go on and eventually after having a wonderful conversion experience, I don't know if wonderful is the right word, because he is blinded for a while. But after he is converted he goes on to be known as the Apostle Paul, who wrote so many of the letters that we have in our new testament. Because Paul, while he was Saul, was a man who was filled with his own love for faith. He was a devout man of God, but he saw this guy Jesus, and therefore this man Stephen, as being an assault on his faith. Saul's job when we were first introduced to him here in the book of Acts, his job was to go around and track down these people that were fouling this radical zealot and arrest them. He was a religious policeman so to speak. And so to introduce him there at the end of Chapter seven, but Paul receives the gift eventually. We don't know about how many of those other people received the gift that Stephen was trying to impart on them as well, but Stephen was willing to sacrifice.

We as believers in the 21st century, North America, I don't think really understand the concept of sacrifice. Maybe some of us are sacrificing, maybe because of our economic situation or employment situation; we are a bit more familiar with sacrifice than what we might be. A friend of mine was a missionary in Japan. He has been over there for close to twenty-five years. He has told me of times when the people to whom he ministers, when they leave the faith of their families, when they leave the Shinto behind or when they leave Buddhism behind and become a professing Christian, they are declared dead by their families. They're not allowed to come around. They are no longer welcome. That is sacrifice. Giving up cable is not a sacrifice, doing without a cell phone while difficult, is not a sacrifice.

Stephen gives us this example that there are times that God calls us to take that step beyond our comfort zone. To be a willing witness for the love of God. I want to close with a reading, part of a sermon, a sermon for St. Stephens Day. It was written by, if I pronounce his name correctly, I believe it is pronounced Kaj Munk. Reverend Munk was a pastor in Belgium during the second world war and he was murdered by the Nazis because he himself encouraged the people to stand up, to stand up for their faith, to stand up against what the Nazis were doing, to stand up and help the Jewish people who were being sent away to exile and concentration camps. This is what Reverend Munk wrote about St. Stephen:

"The Christ Child is the world's Savior and Prince of Peace because He is the world's greatest war Lord. Apparently there is the most glaring contrast between the Christmas gospel and that for St. Stephen's Day—between the Christ Child and the first Christian martyr. But in reality there is the closest connection.

The pagan Christmas with eating and drinking and parties and family joy may well be contained in the Christian celebration, but it can never take the place of it. Jesus Himself took an interest in family life, and He attended parties; but He was, nevertheless, ever on the way to the cross. Let us sing Ingemann songs and eat goose and play with our children about the glittering Christmas tree; but we must never forget that the coming of Christ to earth means dauntless struggle against evil. And if we kneel by the manger in other than sentimental moods, we shall become aware that one hand of the little Child is open and kindly, the other clenched in blood.

We wish one another Merry Christmas. And we mean; may your Christmas goose be delicious—or your meatballs, if that is the best you can afford this year; may you have fuel to keep your house warm; may you have friends and loved one about you; may your tree glitter in its wonted beauty and the hymns sound with their old power. And may there, through it all, be one song in your heart: 'My Jesus, I want to be where Thou alone wilt have me.' Yes, but there are so many doubts and questions that spoil my Christmas joy.

Well, but who promised you joy? It may be better that you have a poor Christmas. Don't be like a spoiled child and think of God as a great Santa Claus who has in His bag some sort of electromagnet with which to give your brain cells such a shot that everything becomes gloriously clear to you, and that you can be happy, in harmony with yourself and the world. My friend, perhaps your doctor can do that for you with a stimulant that will send the blood to the brain and clarify your mind so you see things in bright perspective. This has nothing to do with real joy. True Christmas joy, no matter how much or how little of it you may comprehend, means that you have Christ, and that you go where He wants you to go."

We leave here tonight hopefully striving to remember the joy that we had yesterday as we gathered with friends or family. If you spent it by yourself, or whatever, but remember as well the joy that God gives us. Remember the joy that is not fleeting, the joy that Stephen had even knowing as he was dying, the joy that he felt from God. To know that God is not far from us. That God is indeed Emmanuel, Christ with us, Always.

Amen.