

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
10:00 a.m. Celebration of the Holy Eucharist
The Feast of Saint Stephen the Martyr – December 27, 2015

“Imagining Stephen”

Scripture: Acts 6:8 – 7:2a, 51c-60; Saint Stephen's Day observed on the First Sunday after Christmas Day, Year C

When I was a boy I had a very vivid imagination regarding the stories of the Bible and the saints of the Church. I wouldn't just hear the stories, but I would conjure up in my mind a vision of what things might have looked like or sounded like, or the things that people might have told us were we with them in those most important times in their lives. It helped me understand them as real, and not only some characters in a tale. So I hope you will bear with me as I allow my imagination to run free this morning in order that I might introduce to us the saint for whom this church is named, the one who we mention constantly but about whom we likely know so little. Who is Saint Stephen? Why does he matter? Why does this church, and churches all over this wide world, bear his name? To get some sense of this man, let me speak with you for just a few moments as if...

I am Stephen. Thank you for remembering me today. I trust you understand why I do not attempt to speak with you in my native language, the language of the ancient Greek world. You hear the vestiges of my tongue today in the Mediterranean regions around the Aegean Sea, but the Greek spoken when I was young, what we

called *Koine*, is all but forgotten today, except for in the ceremonies of the Orthodox Church and the work of your biblical scholars who still try to translate and understand what some of my contemporaries wrote in what you call the *New Testament*. But this won't be a problem. I have a gift for languages, my father always told me. As a Jew in my day, you almost had to. The world was big, and the culture of Greece was everywhere, despite the more recent conquest of the Roman Empire. I didn't really know my father well, but I expect that he was a learned man. I imagined he had studied in the storied schools in Alexandria in Egypt or in the libraries of Rome and Athens. We moved at an early age to Jerusalem; I don't remember a time before then. And my fluency in Hebrew, the tongue of my ancestors, became excellent. But I always continued to speak Greek, and I suppose this is really my first step on the journey that brought me to Jesus. More about that later.

There was something about Jesus that I found magnetic. Friends told me of the day he came to Jerusalem on a donkey. They said it was a real parade! People were making a scene, tossing their clothing and palm branches on the road like he was some sort of noble. But that's not what attracted me to him. I heard Peter tell the story of Jesus on the day of Pentecost, how he was sent from God, Son of God, how he died on the cross to take away my sin. How they had seen him again, alive, after three days in the tomb. But what struck me most of all... his followers, his disciples, said that just as Jesus was dying on the cross, some of the people nearby heard him

pray for their forgiveness. He actually asked God to forgive the very people who were killing him. That was it for me. What kind of love was this, that a man could forgive with such generosity? That could only be of God. So that was my next step to Jesus. I became his follower that day. And I was with the apostles when they taught in the synagogues. I was with them when they were questioned in the Temple. I was there when they began to help the throngs of people coming to them for healing and hope and food and understanding. It was all too much, you see. Once this Jesus thing took off, there was no stopping it. People were looking for hope and for help, and we were giving it in Jesus' name. And they came by the dozens, then the hundreds, then the thousands.

Now no matter how holy something may be, it's not easy to deal with the needs of hundreds and thousands of people. And the harder we worked to help some people, the more others complained that they weren't getting their fair share of help and attention. In fact, a funny thing happened. Remember I told you that you really needed a gift for languages in the ancient world? Well, it was language that was causing a problem for Peter and the apostles. Because those Jews who had not grown up in Jerusalem, those Jews who did not speak Hebrew and whose families were not the "locals", they began to complain that they were being overlooked. When the Jesus people gave out food at the synagogues, it was the Hebrew speakers who got the lion's share, and the Greek speaking Jews felt left out. And that was my next step on

my journey to Jesus. Peter chose me to help solve the problem. He chose me and six other devout and faithful men fluent in Greek to serve the people who couldn't speak Hebrew. They called us deacons, "servers", servants really, and they prayed the power of the Holy Spirit on us, and we relieved the apostles of the work of the distribution of food. And we cared for all the people, Greek speaking and Hebrew speaking alike. And we were everywhere in the city, at the synagogues, the marketplaces, the Temple. We were helpers and healers; we became teachers, telling the people about the Savior, Jesus. And that was my next step on my journey to Jesus. I was heard.

Not everyone was pleased with us Jesus people. I suppose they saw us as a threat to their idea of faith and order. The synagogues were filling with people who believed Jesus was the Messiah, but not all the priests and religious leaders of the people were ready to go there. And, believe me, the Roman governors and the local kings wouldn't give an inch of ground to a common Jew from Nazareth who was now threatening their power and authority, even from the grave or, if you believed the stories as I did, from heaven. And the more I told people about Jesus, the more I helped and fed and healed people in his name, the more I got noticed by the wrong sorts of men. And I was accosted in the synagogues, and I argued with the leaders who wouldn't believe in Jesus. Until one day I was dragged before the high council of the Jewish leadership, and my propensity for language is what did me in.

I took my next step in my journey to Jesus when I took the leaders to task by telling them their own story. Before the high council, I, Stephen, a simple servant of Jesus who waited at table to fulfil the needs of the widows and the poor, a common Jew, likely seen as tainted by the Greek language and culture of my day, instructed the high priest and religious leaders on the history of the Jewish faith... speaking perfectly clear and fluent Hebrew. I told them about Abraham and God's promise to make him great. I told them about Jacob and his twelve sons who would become the nation of Israel. I told them about Moses leading our ancestors out of slavery. I told them how, time and again, our people had been unfaithful to the God of our ancestors, and how God tolerated us for this sake of his love. I told them about King David and his desire to build a house for God. I told them how it was Solomon who accomplished it. And they already knew it, of course. Neither David nor Solomon were perfect in the eyes of God. And neither were they. I called them stiff-necked, stubborn, and unfaithful. I told them their record was consistent: their ancestors had long persecuted the prophets who called our people to trust in the Lord, to love God and each other without guile and dishonesty, but with love and truth. And I called them murderers for taking the life of Jesus, just as they had taken the lives of the prophets before him. And it was then I took my next step in my journey to Jesus...

Their anger at hearing my words was uncontained. I suspect that their fear that I might be right is what drove them to do what they did next. No sooner had I told

them I was having a vision of Jesus, the Christ, sitting with God in heaven, I was grabbed roughly and hustled out of the city by a great crowd, and there, in the place of execution, I was pummelled by rocks thrown by the very people I wanted to teach and serve. It was hard at first. The fear and pain were unimaginable. But it grew easier as I realized my journey was nearly done. And I saw my Lord in heaven. And I remembered what I had been told, what he had said and done on the cross. And before I took that last step to Christ, I uttered the words. I don't remember whether in Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic. It doesn't matter. For it was all of the Holy Spirit anyway when I heard myself say before my persecutors, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And my final step was taken; my journey was through. And I died in the faith of Jesus.

I, Tom, and grateful for Stephen, grateful to part of a church that bears his name. In all honesty, I would far rather live my life for the Christian faith than die for it. But I suspect, were Stephen really hear with us this morning, he might remind us of a few things:

A martyr is a witness to the truth of Christ. We, the people who bear the legacy of Stephen, are those who tell the story of Jesus, just as Stephen did in his day. We are here to care for each other and others in need. And we are here to challenge the powers that do not put love at the center of their work. We are to be ready to live

for this, and perhaps to give our lives for it as well, by sharing all that we have, all that we are, all that Jesus is, until our dying breath.

Thank God for the witness of Stephen, faithful deacon, martyr, witness for Christ, a builder upon the foundation of our church.