

Tuesday of the Fifth Week of Easter - Acts 6:1-15; 7:2a, 51-60

¹ Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

² And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³ Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." ⁵ And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶ These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

⁷ And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

⁸ And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.

⁹ Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. ¹¹ Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." ¹² And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, ¹³ and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us." ¹⁵ And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

And the high priest said, "Are these things so?" ² And Stephen said:

"Brothers and fathers, hear me... ⁵¹ "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, ⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

⁵⁴ Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.
⁵⁵ But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” ⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. ⁵⁸ Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Acts 6 and 7 record the first martyrdom in the post-Pentecost era, the first Christian martyr. It is a story which sets a pattern for much which follows in the next 2,000 years. You may want to read the whole account.

These verses are chosen because they draw our attention to an important fact about Stephen on this day. He was filled with the Holy Spirit. The world cannot understand this. It could be logically argued that to be on the side of God should insulate the partisan from the assaults of the enemy. If you are overcome by the enemy's hatred, it must mean that something more powerful has overcome your ally or you have been rejected by your powerful deity. But Acts is firm in this: Stephen has the Holy Spirit. It was that Holy Spirit who first got him into conflict with the leaders of the day and that Spirit filled his mouth and deeds up until he dies with forgiveness on his lips.

Our familiarity with the story and the subsequent 2,000 years of Christian history can dull our sense of the strangeness of this text and what it says about the Kingdom of God. God's kingdom is utterly upside-down when you view it from the perspective of this world ruled by the devil. What looks like defeat, disaster, even death, is not a loss in God's strange scorekeeping. Even before a pandemic shuttered our houses of worship, it felt like Christendom was in retreat in North America. It retained strength in some quarters, but in many ways, the church has seemed like a fragile and weak thing when one compared it with what it had been a generation or two ago. Some have wondered if the Spirit has left us. But that is worldly scorekeeping, imagining that the measure of the presence of God is feeling successful and blessed. I am sure Stephen felt fear as the rabidly angry people forced him outside the city walls and it became apparent what they intended to do. I am sure the impact of stones on his flesh hurt him. But thanks to this text, I am also sure that the Holy Spirit of God never left him. We may be dismayed by what is happening. But we cannot be dispirited. Count on Him for the confidence, courage, and endurance to face the days ahead.

God be with you until we meet again. In Jesus' love and mercy, Pastor Wulf