



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

Feast of the Circumcision and St. Stephen's transferred Sunday January 1, 2017

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen.

The passage selected for the sermon today is taken from the Gospel for the Feast of St. Stephen;

“And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, “Lord, lay not this sin to their charge”. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Today there are two feasts that we are commemorating, the Circumcision and the Feast of our Patronal Saint, Stephen the Protomartyr, meaning the first martyr. Before we discuss what being named after St. Stephen should mean for us in the parish, I want to take a few minutes to discuss the very important feast of the Circumcision.

To our modern way, circumcision is a surgical procedure, perhaps even one we dismiss as cosmetic. To the Jewish people, circumcision was the outward sign of the particular identity of the Jews as the Chosen People of God. It was given as a commandment from God to Abraham, first as the sign of the covenant between God and Abraham himself, and second for all males who would be his descendants as a sign of the covenant that would be transferred as a heritage to the children of Abraham.

What circumcision represented was the selection by God of Abraham and his descendants to be a people with a unique and particular gift. They would be the vessel through which God would be

known to the world. He would speak to them directly. They would hear His Word, record the Word, and it would be through the lineage of this chosen people that the Word itself would be made flesh.

The circumstance of God making this commandment wasn't capricious. Abram, though selected by God to be the Father of a Chosen people, despaired in his old age of God fulfilling the promise. He had a child by his consort as his way of fixing what he did not have faith in God to do. God spoke to Abram, chastising him for his pride, and then God did something remarkable. He re-named Abram, giving him the name of Abraham, and renewed His promise that He would make a Chosen people by Abraham. The instrument through which that miracle would be performed became the element of blood that is required in a covenant, and of course the birth of Isaac was miraculous, since both Abraham and Sarah were in their nineties. The circumcision of Abraham is the outward sign of the covenant, and the reminder that God's will is done by God, and that our part in the fulfillment of that will is not presumptuous action in the place of God, but through obedience and humility to Him.

It is important to remember that the circumcision was the not only a physical act, but also a spiritual act. Just as God named Abraham at the first circumcision, the ritual of circumcision became the opportunity for naming a child into the character

and the charism of the Jewish people to be the instrument of delivering God's Word to the world. The symbolism of being named to a purpose, to a mission, to be dedicated as a Chosen person of God was a deep tradition of the Jewish faith. God named Adam when he created man to His purpose. He renamed Abram to Abraham, and Sarai to Sarah, to symbolize the covenant. Jacob was made Israel. John the Baptist, as the last prophet of that Covenant with Abraham, was named by the Angel Gabriel, even before his miraculous birth to another aged couple. The very name of Jesus is given to Mary through the angel at her Annunciation.

In the New Covenant, that holiness of naming, as the symbol of being received into a community with the particular Godly purpose of witnessing the Word of God to the world, is reflected in the sacrament of Baptism, when we start with the command to "Name this child."

Which finally brings me back to the celebration of the Feast of St. Stephen. A parish is given a name with the same purpose that a Christian name is given in Baptism, which is, that in the life of the community represented by that name, we would reflect the particular gifts of our patron saint as we fulfill our mission to preach the Gospel through the way we live our lives and care for each other.

What is it that we know about St. Stephen? What particular gifts are we to emulate in our spiritual lives, individually and as a community? We know his faith, that he was willing to die by stoning while proclaiming the Gospel. That courage is something we all need to practice, even if we aren't in danger of being stoned physically. Living for the faith, enduring through the trials of life, requires just as much courage as being martyred.

St. Stephen is also known for being dogmatic and uncompromising. His exposition to the Jews that led to his stoning stretched from the time of Abraham to the death of Christ, leveling his accusations that the Jewish people had failed to be the vessel of blessing they were chosen to be, of not only not recognizing the Christ, the Word of God made flesh, but for killing Him. That's the gift we see often reflected in St. Stephen's parish. We are quick to document the

failure of this world to recognize Jesus as their salvation. We are just as quick to recognize the lack of charity other Christians exhibit, especially when the hurt is done to us. We all could use a little more work recognizing those same tendencies, when we are the culprits of hardheartedness.

We should know that St. Stephen was a paragon of holiness and charity. When it was time to name a group to be set aside for serving of the widows so the Apostles could tend to the evangelizing, he was the first person named, unanimously recognized and approved by the whole community to be the hands of Christ to those in need. He was a man of compassion and healing. St. Luke tells us in the Acts of the Apostles that many were brought to him to receive healing. Those are traits we can certainly adopt along with our resolutions, to be holy, and generous and compassionate.

But the charism of St. Stephen that I think is both the hardest, and most important to emulate, is the one reflected by the passage selected to open the sermon. While being murdered, he looked to heaven, and when He saw Jesus Christ coming to receive Him, he imitated the Lord by asking forgiveness for those who were committing this atrocity, crying, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge."

How wonderful it would be if in the year to come, St. Stephen's of Timonium became the place where the forgiveness of Christ was shared between its members with love and humility as a witness to the world. How wonderful it would be if we received the healing, consolation and grace that comes from forgiving our trespasses as we hope that our trespasses would be forgiven us.

As we prepare our resolutions for the year, let us each remember that we should take this time to ask forgiveness, and to be forgiving, in our families, in our social and work circles, and especially within this community dedicated to the love of Christ in the name of St. Stephen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen