



**ST. STEPHEN'S
ANGLICAN CHURCH**
11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

**Feast of Saint Stephen
December 30, 2018**

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

The passage cited for our meditation this morning is taken from the Epistle:

“And they stoned Stephen (as he was) calling upon God, and saying, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” And as they stoned him, he said, “Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said that, he fell asleep” Acts 7:59

Today we celebrate the Feast of St Stephen, the first Deacon and Martyr. In fact, the actual date of celebration is December 26, the day after Christmas. It may seem ironic or misplaced to juxtapose this awful event with the Blessed and sweet story of the Christ child's arrival, and yet the church intentionally orders its calendar so that we have to contemplate the Incarnation in the context of this sacrifice.

In fact, even our subconscious demands the juxtaposition. Our culture, which celebrates death and selfishness relentlessly, continues every Christmas to release epic films that are no more than a dim reflection of the stories of St. Stephen and other glorious martyrs. Why else would we be treated to the stories like the one where two insignificant little people overcome the whole force of evil, and the allure of its seductive promises, by being true to their faith by tossing the One Ring into Mordor's fire. They even overcome their own corrupted nature, along with the Evil One, as our little hobbits

overcome not only Mount Doom, but obsessed and selfish little Gollum, which is certainly their own corrupted and sinful nature.

Even more directly, we might struggle to fill our pews, but hundreds of millions of viewers paid to sit and watch Luke Skywalker defy his own nature and the exhortations of the ultimately powered Evil One, by refusing to take vengeance on his relentlessly brutal Father, forgiving him and attempting to redeem Darth Vader. While we may struggle to recognize the epic heroism of St Stephen, we still yearn for it, continually creating pale images to entertain and inspire us. These quests into the realms of fantasy and future are desperate attempts to re-capture the truth and the redemptive power that sits so close at hand in the Book of Acts.

There is no less human act we can contemplate than forgiveness. It is an aspect of love that is exclusively Godly. The world is filled with demigods and demons masquerading as God, whose demand is vengeance for the glory of their dominion. It is only the one true God that demands forgiveness as his sacrifice. It is an act of love that he makes that demand because He created us to be in His image, and His nature, being Love, is endlessly forgiving. But we also need that quality of forgiveness to live with each other. It is the reason the one prayer Jesus teaches us directly encumbers us with the

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responsibility to ask forgiveness as we endeavor to forgive each other.

I often preach about the beautiful and inspirational deaths I have had the privilege to witness. Those are the passings that leave us confident in the truth of the heaven that awaits us. But, there are also difficult deaths. At those times, the person is poised at the edge of death, but stalled, not able to go through to glory until the process of asking and forgiveness can be completed. If we have failed to forgive throughout our journey, we can be faced with a daunting task of making amends and begging forgiveness for a life of self-centeredness. We don't escape that responsibility, we can only defer it to the time we should be easing from this world instead of laboring to reverse our hard heartedness.

The Jews that condemned and stoned St Stephen became as much an instrument of the power of God's love as they had hoped they would be as the instrument of erasing it. When they were convicted by the angelic face of St Stephen, when they accused him falsely to cover his representation of their own guilt, when they stoned him to shut up his Godly admonition and call to repentance, they believed they could confound the will of God. Like St Paul, who held their cloaks as they did the deed, they hoped they could frighten the Church and disperse the movement. They believed that the proper response to the gentle message of love and redemption was imprisonment, torture and murder. Not only did they reveal their own true character, but they revealed the truth through St Stephen.

But as St Stephen reiterates the words of forgiveness that Our Lord offered His own persecutors, we are privileged to have witness to the power of grace. That by the sacrifice that Jesus made, we have His life in us and we live in Him. We can even overcome that brutal yearning for revenge that characterizes a graceless

humanity, and do the unimaginable, the unthinkable, we can actually forgive those that hurt us, because we have been forgiven our own offenses against our Father.

Even Satan himself, when he failed at tempting Jesus in the desert, when he failed to cower Him with the visions of his imminent death in Gethsemane, when he failed to bait Jesus into the justifiable and Godly rage that could have delivered him from the Cross, could not impose the appearance of death over the reality of the dominion Jesus has over it and the devil. The devil delivered Jesus to the door of death, as he had delivered Adam before Him, and Jesus denied that destiny, kicked the door down, preached the good News of forgiveness and salvation to the souls that had been in waiting. Then He opened the doors to the gate of heaven, reconciling the Creator with his creation, bringing us home to the unfailing love of the Father.

The juxtaposition of Christmas and the celebration of the lives of St Stephen wasn't accidental or odd. It was done purposefully and powerfully. The purpose of the Incarnation, the willingness of God to allow His only Son to take on our meaningless and lost lives, was so that we could join St Stephen in exposing the lie that is the appearance of death. Jesus transforms death so that we don't have to die ourselves.

He comes to us with forgiveness to teach us there will be no point to vengeance in heaven, to give us the hope that we can persevere in our imitation of Jesus until the life that is in Him, truly becomes that Life that is in us. His life grows and transforms us until our very lives are made eternal and ecstatic in the unfailing love of the Father. As we enter the new Year, we can aspire to emulate St Stephen to live lives of service witness and forgiveness.

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