Midweek Lent 1

The Stoning of Stephen Acts 7:54-60

March 4, 2020

The Stoning of Stephen

Have you ever been in a place where someone started to speak, and the crowd got up in the emotion of the thing being discussed? Maybe a Superbowl victory speech by the coach or the MVP of the game. Another example would be Martin Luther King Jr and his speech I have a dream. "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." When we allow freedom to ring when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men, and white men, Jews, and Gentiles, Protestants, and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: "Free at last! Free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

Another example perhaps not as positive, is the recent Impeachment trials and the acquittal of President Trump. Then there are the headlines about the Covid 19 virus. There are concerns about a pandemic and development of a vaccination, travel restrictions, and the mass hysteria that is already having economic impacts. It's the mass hysteria takes over the crowds and causes irrational things to happen.

Tonight - that is the situation we find ourselves listening in on as we eavesdrop on Stephen and the Sanhedrin. That is to say, all of the religious leaders of the day. To put it into context for you imagine sitting in on all of the District Presidents and the Synodical President. At the Synodical Headquarters. Everyone seated there in a large circular table that holds about 40 people. A Pastor comes in to call them to account for their deeds. That's the scenario that plays out before us. It also requires us to look at our sins of arrogance, fear, jealousy, pride. It requires us to look at our positions, or the status of those positions being threatened. It requires us to examine our insecurities. Many of which are challenged. The response of rage that is present for those in the room. All of which results in the murder of Stephen or the pastor who has called the leaders of the Synod to account.

Stephen's speech to the council started this way, "Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, **3**and said to him, 'Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.' **4**Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living. **5**Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child."

Stephen's speech recounts the history of God's chosen people Israel. He concludes his speech with these words, "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."

Notice what comes next the response of the council with these actions and words. "**54**Now when they heard these things, they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. **55**But he, (Stephen) 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."

The question before you tonight is, "Has there ever been a time when someone said or did something that it so enraged you, your ground your teeth at them? Have you ever wanted to harm them physically? Or maybe you went beyond wanting to harm them and hurt them with a punch or a slap or some other form of violence. Jesus calls this murder in His own words recorded in the Gospel of Matthew the fifth chapter, "21 You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' **22**But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire."

Reflect for a few moments and consider your sins of anger, fear, jealousy, murder, and rage. Perhaps even with me as the pastor or messenger. God has placed several pastors here over the last 95+ years. Each pastor with his gifts has shared God's Holy Word with you as best he could. Has there ever been a sermon or a bible study that resulted in you feeling angry towards God or the Pastor he has sent to you to proclaim Christ's message to you? Each pastor has been called here to help you grow in your faith. Hopefully, you have been challenged at least once to take an honest look at yourself and your spiritual life. So, if that has not occurred before, I invite you to do so now. We now pause for a few moments of silent reflection and individual silent confession. ***(Go to the rail and kneel).*** Now we corporately confess our sins together to conclude our sermon. Amen.