

The Heavens Speak
Acts 6:1-7:60 (*passim*), John 1:1-18
December 26, 2010

I.

I hope you all had a Merry Christmas, and are looking forward to the rest of the holidays. It has been a busy and fulfilling time here at St. Thomas. With our services today we will have celebrated seven Eucharists in five days, including a baptism, our service at Woodland Village, and three Christmas services.

And today is important for two reasons. First, it is a Major Feast day in the church; the day we celebrate the life and work of St. Stephen the Martyr. That's why the altar is red. The prayer book recognizes special days for the Apostles and other important leaders in the church's history. And there obviously is one chance in seven that the day will fall on Sunday.

The other significant part of this day is that it is the first Sunday after Christmas, which means that the Gospel reading always is the beginning of the Gospel of John. That never changes. And those verses, more than any other passages in the Bible, tell us who Jesus Christ really is.

And so, while one of the rules of preaching tells us to stick to just one subject, today I want to speak about both Stephen's story and John's Gospel, which relate to the same subject anyway.

II.

Let's begin with St. Stephen, a giant in the church. He was known for many things, and two of the most enduring are described in today's Second Reading from the Book of Acts. He was one of the first deacons on the church, and he also was the first recorded martyr, having been stoned to death for his faith.

The beginning of that reading is set during a time of explosive growth of Christianity in Jerusalem. There was such a demand among the people to learn more about the new Gospel of Jesus Christ that it became difficult for Jesus' followers to also care for the poor, and the sick, and the needy.

As a result, they appointed seven men to focus on caring for the community, thus leaving the others more able to devote themselves to prayer and speaking God's Word. And, by the way, this purpose of serving the community has continued to this day as the basic responsibility and call of the Sacred Order of Deacons. Deacon Dave's ministry goes back to that ancient time.

But it appears that even though Stephen was assigned to service so others could preach, he also did a little preaching himself. And that's what got him in trouble. Some of the Jews in one of the synagogues took serious objection to the powerful words about Jesus that Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, had been proclaiming.

And so they seized him and brought him before their council, where they presented false witnesses against him and found him guilty of trumped-up charges. As a result, they took him out of the city to stone him to death, and Stephen looked up in wonder and saw Jesus, the Son of Man, standing in the heavens at the right hand of God.

Then, two noteworthy things happened. First, the people who stoned Stephen gave their coats to a young man to hold while they were doing their dirty deed. That young man was named Saul, persecutor of Jewish Christians, who later after his own conversion became Paul, the leading Christian missionary to the Gentiles.

And the other important part of this story is that Stephen, as he was dying, prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Stephen died with the same words on his lips as Jesus himself had uttered from the cross a few years earlier.

So, Stephen was not just one of your ordinary martyrs, if there ever could be such a thing. And he wasn't just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Rather, he knew exactly what he was doing, and knew the risks he was taking in Christ's name. That is why we remember him today.

And at this point I want to mention two additional things that happened in the next two chapters of the Book of Acts. Even though they are beyond our reading, they are inextricably linked to Saul, who was one of the causes of Stephen's death.

First, in the next chapter, we would read that on the day Stephen died a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem. And it was not led by Romans as one might have expected, but rather by Jewish leaders who rejected Christ's divinity. And the ringleader was Saul, the same person who stood by while Stephen died.

Then, in the chapter after that, Saul himself encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus. We read of this last Easter as part of the well-known story when Jesus spoke to Saul from the heavens and asked why Saul was persecuting him. And we know that Saul was miraculously converted and later became the Apostle Paul, who wrote much of the New Testament.

And as we study the New Testament we see that until we get to the Book of Revelation, there are only two heavenly appearances of Jesus to humans in the New Testament. Saul figures in both. One was Stephen's vision when Saul was present, and the other was Saul's own direct experience.

III.

As we think of these heavenly revelations of Jesus, and the parallels between Stephen's martyrdom and Jesus' words before he died, we can look at today's Gospel from John as one of the most mystical expressions that describe our Lord and Savior. These are words with which both Stephen and Paul surely would have agreed. Let me read part of it again.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory."

Wow! What a powerful description! At first glance we might be tempted to dismiss these passages as a little philosophical or abstract. We might look for more user-friendly stories in the Bible. We might think this part of Scripture does not speak to us as some other parts do.

I would like to suggest, however, that we look no further. John's Gospel tells of the greatest drama ever to happen—God coming to earth. And John's version is not just the usual Christmas story with which we all are familiar, it also adds meaning and significance to that Christmas story because it explains exactly who that baby in the manger was.

For example, the traditional accounts in the other Gospels emphasize the human side of Jesus' birth. We are familiar with these Christmas stories in the Gospels and Matthew and Luke. We can imagine them. We see them on Christmas cards. There are pictures of shepherds, the manger, and the star of Bethlehem. Most of our Christmas carols are based on Matthew or Luke.

John's Gospel, however, is harder to visualize. Christmas cards usually don't portray this more cosmic aspect of our Lord. Nevertheless, it reminds us that this fully human baby also was fully God. He was eternally divine in heaven before he became also human on earth. As the Book of Hebrews says, Jesus is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of his very being (1:3).

IV.

And in addition to telling us who Jesus was, today's Gospel also extended to what Jesus did. It said that "In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

What did John mean by darkness? Certainly it was something more than just the absence of light. At some times the absence of light can be good, and not something to be overcome. Our natural cycle of day and night is part of creation. In the same way cold is the absence of heat, and silence is the absence of sound, and they aren't always bad.

So, darkness in the sense of John's Gospel means more than just the absence of something. It refers to a thing that has its own existence; its own reality. And that thing is the work of evil in the world that produces sin in our lives. Jesus was the Prince of Peace born into a world that also is home to the Prince of Darkness. And the light of Jesus overcame those dark works of evil.

Jesus as the light also worked in two other ways. Because he was both God and man, he was both the divine light and the worldly light. As the divine light he revealed God. He showed us who God is, how God loves us, and declared that we should love God. Jesus could do this because he was divine and knew God intimately.

But as the worldly light he shined on us and called us to love each other. That light shows us how to live in Christian faith in the world. Jesus could do this because he was human and knew us intimately.

V.

If we would take a survey of what people think is the most significant event in all history, we probably would get a variety of responses. They might include the discovery of fire, or the invention of the wheel. Those looking to more modern times might select any number of medical breakthroughs or scientific discoveries.

I would like to ask us, however, to think about today's readings as we consider that question. John's Gospel is unsurpassed in its description of how God actually came to earth and walked among us. And Stephen's story describes the commitment he requires from us.

Now, I am not saying that we are expected to be martyrs. We are fortunate in America, unlike some other countries, to be able to worship as we choose.

But these readings call us to worship and serve our Lord. They tell us that light and truth will win out, and that darkness cannot prevail. Those are messages we must hear with the ears of faith, and when we do we will act on them in the same faith. *Amen.*