

First Sunday after Christmas; St. Stephen, Deacon and Martyr; December 26, 2021

Acts 6:8-7:2a, 51-60

“This Is What Christmas Looks Like”

Now Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. Some men who were from what is called the Synagogue of Freedom (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia) rose up and disputed with Stephen. But they were unable to stand up against the wisdom and the Spirit by whom he was speaking.

Then they secretly induced some men to say, “We heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.” They stirred up the people, the elders, and the experts of the law. They came, dragged Stephen away, and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They presented false witnesses who said, “This man never stops making threats against this holy place and the law. In fact, we heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs of Moses handed down to us.”

All those who were sitting in the Sanhedrin were looking intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel. Then the high priest asked, “Are these things true?”

Stephen said, “Gentlemen, brothers and fathers, listen!...You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit! You are doing just what your fathers did. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who prophesied the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers – you who received the law as transmitted angels, but did not keep it.”

When they heard these things, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed up into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. He said, “Look, I see heaven opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

But they screamed at the top of their voices, covered their ears, and rushed at him with one purpose in mind. They threw him out of the city and stoned him. The witnesses laid their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul.

While they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” Then he fell to his knees and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this against them.” After he said this, he fell asleep.

If you close your eyes and think Christmas, what do you see? What does Christmas look like to you?

It may depend on what’s meant by “Christmas.” If by “Christmas” we mean our celebrations of Christmas, then it may look like this: ornaments on top of trees and gifts beneath, lights draped across rooves and dangling from eaves, wrapping paper ripped and crumpled, cookie platters with only crumbs left behind. This is what our celebrations of Christmas often look like.

If by “Christmas” we mean the actual night of Jesus’ birth, then it looks more like this: a virgin leaning over her son, God’s Son, as she treasures and pondering, as that little baby, God in the flesh, sleeps in a manger. We see angels singing, shepherds running, and a star rising. This is what the original Christmas night looks like.

Or, if you want to see what Christmas looks like...just watch St. Stephen, whom the Christian Church honors today, so very close to Christmas.

As the number of Christians in Jerusalem grew, the apostles were becoming overwhelmed with what they called "waiting on tables." There were so many requests for assistance from widows and others in need that the twelve apostles could not keep up. In fact, they were swamped and finally said, **"It is not right for us to neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables."** So they chose seven deacons to distribute assistance while they devoted themselves fulltime to preaching and teaching. These seven they called deacons. And they called one of them, Stephen, the leader.

But it turns out Stephen did more than wait on tables. He did miracles and wonders. He spoke about Jesus Christ. Some people didn't like that. The number of believers in Jerusalem was growing, but those who disbelieved were becoming harder and more violent. So people argued with Stephen. But, St. Luke tells us, **they were unable to stand up against the wisdom and the Spirit by whom he was speaking.**

This is what Christmas looks like: the people of God speaking the truth of the Spirit, the wisdom of God. On Christmas night the shepherds ran to tell the good news of what they had heard and seen. As we celebrate Christmas we gather to hear children tell the good news in their beautiful and straight-forward way, and we proclaim Christ to each other with word and song. Christmas is speaking the message of Christ, the wisdom of the Spirit.

If you want to see what Christmas looks like, watch St. Stephen. He spoke the wisdom of God the Holy Spirit. He spoke Jesus. The people Stephen spoke to did not like that message one bit. They had rejected Jesus, becoming what Stephen called **his betrayers and murderers**. Even still, Stephen did not give up preaching Christ, the wisdom of God. He did it even though he was threatened and attacked and placed on trial and finally martyred for it. He couldn't help it. He couldn't stop. He wouldn't stop.

And that is what Christmas looks like. Once you understand that the Son of God lowered himself and made himself nothing to come in the womb of a virgin, you speak. Once you know that Jesus is born to grow and to speak the truth of the kingdom of heaven, you speak that truth, too. Once you watch him live without sin and then become sin for you on the cross, you speak Jesus. You watch him rise, and you open your mouth. The arrival of Jesus on Christmas moves his people to speak. If you want to see what Christmas looks like, watch St. Stephen.

And then, do what Stephen did. Take to heart the gift of God's own Son that he sends on Christmas. Cherish the salvation that Jesus comes to win for you. And speak it. Start at home, by speaking Jesus to your own family. Speak him here, speak him the world, give and pray for his missionaries and pastors to proclaim him all over the world. This is what Christmas looks like: God's people speaking the saving truth of his Son, Jesus Christ.

And if you want to see more of what Christmas looks like, just keep watching St. Stephen. Because when the time came for Stephen to pay the ultimate price for the truth of Christ, he died without flinching. **They threw him out of the city and stoned him. The witnesses laid their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"** This is what Christmas looks like. It looks a believer, at the moment of death, looking up to Jesus. It's a believer calling out to Jesus (if not out loud, at least in the heart), "Jesus, take me home."

Why does Christmas look that way? Because Christians like Stephen know why Jesus came on Christmas. Jesus didn't take on human flesh to come and moralize and tell us how to be nice people. He didn't come to make us feel good or make our lives in this world easy. He came to give us eternity with him. He came to open the kingdom of heaven to every believer, so that every believer can look at death without fear, but instead look up and say, "Jesus, take me home. You earned it for me. Now it's time to take me there."

If you want to see what Christmas looks like, then, once again, watch St. Stephen. Christmas is proclamation of Christ. Christmas is confidence in Christ, confidence that because of what he has done, he will receive our spirit when our time here is through.

Is that how Christmas looks in your life? Do you look into Bethlehem's manger and then go speak about who that child is and why he has come as one of us into our world? Are these the words that fill your home and your neighborhood and your world whenever you're around? Me neither; not often enough, anyway. What about the way you view death? How does Christmas affect the way you see it? Is your confidence that Jesus will receive your spirit full and fierce? Or does part of you still see death with the eyes of unbelief, viewing physical death not as the beginning of life eternal but the end of life, period.

The impact of Christmas will be seen in the lives of God's people, as it was seen in St. Stephen's life. Knowing that God has come as one of us to bring us back to himself – that Christmas truth must be seen in a Christian's witness. Knowing that God's Son came on Christmas to live and die to win us heaven, and rose to conquer death – that Christmas truth will be seen in the way Christians view death.

For the times that hasn't been the case in our lives, we now delight to see one more aspect of Christmas in the story of St. Stephen. If you want to see what Christmas looks like, keep watching St. Stephen and see forgiveness.

At the moment of his death, Stephen sounded a lot like Jesus on the cross. First, Stephen said, "**Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!**" which echoed Jesus' words: "**Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.**" And then Stephen did it again: "**Lord, do not hold this sin against them.**" As his Savior pleaded for forgiveness for his executioners, Stephen does the same for the men stoning him.

Christmas looks like God's people proclaiming Jesus, like St. Stephen. It looks like God's people staring down death without fear, like Stephen. And Christmas looks like full, free forgiveness for every wrong. This is what Jesus was born to bring us: forgiveness from God. Every sin, every failure to proclaim Jesus, for every fearful look at death, Jesus forgives. He is the holy one who lived for us. He is the Lamb of God whose sacrifice takes away the sin of the world. Christmas is all about forgiveness, because that's the mission on which Jesus came into this world: winning forgiveness for every sinner, for every sin.

And so, one last time, when we look at Stephen's story, we see what Christmas is all about. And we rest easy knowing that in Jesus all our sins are forgiven.

And now, as we leave this place, we ask God for strength to let the truths of Christmas be seen in our lives. When others look at us, may they see the beautiful truths of Christmas on display as brightly and clearly as they were in St. Stephen's story.

May the proclamation of Christ's love be on our lips. The shepherds proclaimed him Christmas night; Stephen proclaimed him boldly; that's what Christmas looks like. God, give us hearts that look for any space and any place to proclaim the reason that you sent your Son into this world. Give us wisdom to

choose our words and openings carefully, but not so carefully that we never open our mouths. Stephen spoke to the truth of Christ to men who he knew would hate him for him, try him for it, and probably kill him for it. He did it anyway! God, remove the cowardice in our hearts and make us brave to proclaim Jesus to those who like him and those who do not. That's what Christmas looks like: God's people boldly speaking the truth of Christ.

May God also take the fear of death out of our lives. May he help us recognize that no matter how many precautions we take, and no matter how healthy we try to be, and no matter how much medicine we take, we're going to die eventually. That's the wages of our sin. But for those who trust in Jesus, the fact that we're going to die isn't a bad thing. It's a blessing. You get to leave a messed up, ugly world and let Jesus receive your spirit by his side in heaven. He earned it for you; it's yours; death is the way there. So don't be afraid of it. See it as the way to Jesus forever. That's what Christmas looks like: God's people unafraid to die.

May God also give us hearts that embrace his forgiveness for ourselves. May he remove any thought – even the least idea! – that any payment for our sins still needs to be made. Jesus paid the full price. And in the delight of knowing that God has fully forgiven us in Christ, may we say about all who do us wrong: **“Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”** This is the heart of Stephen, and it reflects the forgiving heart of Jesus. Look into Jesus' manger. Remember that his Christmas arrival is all about delivering forgiveness to us from God. And forgive like him.

What does Christmas look like? It's bold proclamation of Jesus. It's living free from the fear of death. It's pure, Christ-like forgiveness. This is what we see in Bethlehem on Christmas night. It's what we see in the life of St. Stephen. Now, may we show in our own lives what Christmas looks like. Amen.