

Texts: Acts 6:1—7:2a, 44-60

Subject: Stephen is Martyred

Theme: The Resistance

Third Sunday of Easter, Apr. 18, 2021; *Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and our Risen Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

We heard last week how the resurrected one met two on the road to Emmaus, and was revealed to them in the breaking of the bread. From there, He went to meet His friends as He said he would, opened *their* minds to understand the scriptures, called them to be witnesses, and finally ascended to be with the Father in heaven. From the tomb and the temple, to the community and the kitchen table, we move into the next part of Luke's orderly account of the good news - from the life and ministry and death and resurrection of Jesus, to the next chapter: the formation of the early church, the Gospel for all the nations - this is the sequel. The book of Acts tells us what happened next as the apostles received the Holy Spirit and took up the mission of the church in the world. The Spirit of God fell on faithful Jews from all over the world at Pentecost, and thousands were baptized and believed.

But then things get more difficult. There are divisions. Conflicts arise.

Many of you remember and have shared the stories, and If you drive through small towns in the midwest today, you can still see this at work - Lutheran churches on opposite corners, who trace their histories to different waves of immigration. There was a German church and a Norwegian church, or a Swedish church, or a Danish church, maybe even an Icelandic one, and they didn't always get along. Each one chose to worship in their own language, and serve their own communities. As the generations

passed, some combined and found the divisions between families still existed, and this at times might have made serving their neighbors more difficult.

That same type of conflict was already in the early church. Before Paul wrote about there no longer being Jew nor Greek, there was a collision of cultures. The local Jewish community spoke Hebrew and Aramaic, while throughout the empire, many spoke the Greek language, and as they had emigrated into Jerusalem and the surrounding areas, these ones known as Hellenists - they found that some of their widows were not being served. This inequality led to conflict, and the issue was brought to the twelve apostles. Lutherans know that we believe in the priesthood of all believers, and teach that we all have vocations to serve and a ministry to participate in. Pastors can't do it all themselves, *nor should we*. This was the beginning of the use of deacons in the church, and seven were appointed to take care of the needs of the community, while we're told the apostles focused on the Word of God. (And in case you didn't know it) We do have deacons in ELCA today, those men and women who are ordained for the ministry of Word and Service, just as our pastors are ordained for the ministry of Word and sacrament. In our church, deacons might work with food pantries community outreach, schools, and synods - to serve in lots of different ways, and many also participate in preaching in local congregations. The needs in all our communities are great, and all the baptized, every member of the body of Christ is valued and gifted to serve.

So these seven immigrant men are appointed as deacons, and among them is Stephen - who is a standout in his class. He serves, but He also speaks like a prophet, and they accuse him of speaking against God and the Temple. He "pulls a Jeremiah" on the people, accusing them of resisting the new things God is doing among them. He

reminds them of the ways the people had turned away from Moses and worshipped the golden calf, how they failed to recognize how God was at work, and seems to speak out against their idolization of buildings, reminding them of God's presence in the tent and tabernacle. He even uses the words of Moses, "You stiff-necked people" he says. They've resisted the movement of the Spirit among them, they've resisted the power of God that is moving them outward, resisting the Words of Christ and the voices of the prophets before him, and he calls them to account.

Well, when you speak like a prophet - you might die like a prophet.

The people are enraged, and engage in a lynching - an execution not sanctioned by any official body, but we hear someone named Saul mentioned as the one who approves.

When the moment came, Stephen "gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Look, he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" Stephen takes a knee to die, his focus in not on the ones who accuse and murder him, but on the face of God, and his words echo those of Jesus who forgives those who persecute Him. He becomes one of the first martyrs of the church. The story spreads.

Change generates opposition. We hear it throughout the bible. Every time God pushed forward, people resisted. Maybe it's our human nature to push back against what is new, to regress to what we know and seek comfort. We know what it's like to miss the church building, to miss doing things the way we used to, to miss the America of our memories, and what always seemed like 'a simpler time.' Words of the modern day prophets make us angry, and we can name ways in just the last few months that we have seen people lash out against individuals as well as institutions we rely on.

Our nation is struggling through conflict. In a week that has included:

- the ongoing trial of a Minneapolis police officer for the murder of George Floyd,
 - the accidental killing of Duante Wright, another Black man just 10 miles away,
 - communal outrage in Chicago over the killing of 13 year-old Adam Toldeo,
 - the pepper-spraying of a uniformed active duty soldier by police in Virginia Beach,
- along with more gun violence, and mass shooting events, including just days ago at a FedEx facility in Indianapolis, we cannot help but wonder how our nation and our society will find its way through this epidemic of violence.

We long to find solutions, and make peace, even before communities have been able to properly grieve the loss. How are followers of Jesus to give witness? How can we acknowledge the pain of our siblings of color and love all our neighbors now? Where is God in this pain and what does justice look like? These are difficult questions to answer, but at the very least we can hold space for those who grieve, and the righteous anger that seeks an end to suffering.

For the first followers of Jesus, the crucifixion was a crisis - their expectations had not been met, their anticipated outcomes were unrealized, and they were trying to make sense of it all. Maybe their initial vision was too small. God's mission was much larger than they could know, and now through the power of the Holy Spirit they were being led in a new way, for new reasons, to new people and places. They did what we all might do. They resisted. They squabbled over how to move forward, what to believe, who was welcome, and how to serve best.

Has anything changed?

Winston Churchill is remembered to have said one should “never let a good crisis go to waste.” Mark Granquist of Luther Seminary writes that, “after momentous events people simply want things to go back to the way they were before; they want things to go back to *normal* (whatever that is). And here is where a dangerous clash is possible, between those who wish to use the crisis as a means of significant change, and those who want things to go back to normal.” We’ve been through crisis after crisis in our lifetimes. They are **global**: wars, pandemics, mass migrations. They are **local**: attacks on the capital, natural disasters, gun violence. They are **personal**: disease, divorce, and death. How we move forward depends on our resistance to change and the voices that cry out for it, our resistance to taking an account of our own actions, and the blessings and gifts we have been given, and our resistance to God’s healing offered through word and sacrament, word and service.

God is and always has been about change and transformation: repentance.

Humanity and the world is always inclined to resist it.

God overcomes the resistance in our own hearts. With love. With grace. With mercy. We are witnesses to the new thing God is doing. By the Spirit we repent and return and reset and are renewed in Christ - who died and rose for us, who sends us power from God, who welcomes us even though we push back and fight and continue to turn away. We confess each time we gather that we have failed to do what was required, what the prophets taught and the voice of Jesus commanded: to love God and one another, to feed His sheep, to make disciples, to proclaim forgiveness to all the nations.

We have been through the crisis of His death and have seen the glory of His resurrection. In this season of Easter, as we long for the coming of the Holy Spirit again and tell the story of God's love and forgiveness and mercy for all, we welcome those whom Christ has welcomed, to be changed - transformed for the kingdom - and we get up and go to care for the sick and blind and widowed and homeless, and eat with addicts and adulterers, and sing with siblings of every race and color, gender and sexual orientation, and know that we are one in Christ Jesus. Because we are not here for ourselves - like Stephen we have been transformed through the Spirit and we are not afraid to be the witnesses God has called us to be. There's nothing holding us back from speaking and serving, and sharing this Word of new life, freedom, and release with all we encounter on our journeys.

It's not what we do by our own power. This is God's work. We are created to love and live for God and our neighbors. We are forgiven and freed in Christ Jesus. We are transformed by the Spirit that is doing the work in us and on us.

Our vocation as baptized children of God, the body of Christ in the world is to speak what we have heard. By the Spirit, we believe in the One God has sent, are formed to be faithful, and faithfully discern how God is leading. We hear the Word speaking and catch the wind of that Spirit that blows among us here at Reformation Lutheran Church, and are sent to the streets - to places and spaces where God *is* already, and find ourselves empowered to overcome our resistance - any resistance - and give bodily witness, to follow in the path of Jesus, our resurrected Savior.

He is risen!

He is risen indeed. Amen.