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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Acts 7:55-60, John 14:1-14

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As I read aloud my opening text, please notice the posture - the physical bearing - of our Lord Jesus:

⁵⁵But [Stephen], full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus *standing* at the right hand of God; (Acts 7:55, RSV)

Let me begin this sermon on Stephen with a touching suggestion from the old preachers.¹ Why, do you suppose, is Jesus *standing* in our text? In the Creed, we speak of our Lord's elevation to the right hand of God the Father, but the restful word "seated" is used:

He ascended into heaven, and is *seated* at the right hand of the Father.
(*Apostles' Creed*, Second Article)

Yet, in the story of Stephen's martyrdom, the text says that Jesus is standing at the right hand of God.

Well, the old preachers suggested that our Lord can hardly bring himself to sit and calmly watch such a scene as this, the stoning of Stephen. He stands up as if appalled, as if heartbroken to behold such a sorrow. Or perhaps he stands up as did the father in the story of the Prodigal Son, so that as that father dashed toward his wayward son coming home, so Jesus stands up eager to rush to Stephen and welcome his saint home.

A similar eager restlessness can be detected in the famous opening verse in this morning's Gospel Lesson. Jesus is speaking to his twelve disciples, preparing them and comforting them for the sorrows soon to come, when he will suffer and die. Here is how the *King James Version* puts the sweet words of our Lord:

¹Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me.
²In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. (John 14:1-3, KJV)

¹ The 19th century English Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon refers to this notion in his sermon "Stephen's Martyrdom," preached in 1867.

This text speaks of a holy commotion. Jesus does not ascend to heaven in order to rest. He goes “to prepare a place for you.” Picture him as up and active, swinging a hammer as in his days in his father’s carpentry shop, preparing a mansion for you. Even more, picture Jesus brimming with excitement as he watches you on earth, as if on tip-toe, keenly beholding you and your adventures in his name. Picture him looking on at you with deep sympathy and hope for you. He is your Saviour, and he means to do it, to save you. But he has every right to hope that you will give him some help during your years on earth, that you will bear his name with some integrity, and that you will prove true to him even in times of trouble, as did St. Stephen so many years before us.

Today is the Fifth Sunday of Easter, which means that we are speeding onwards toward the high festival of Pentecost. Pentecost celebrates the Third Person of the Holy Trinity, that is, the Holy Spirit. In today’s story about the martyrdom of Stephen we get a prelude to the Pentecost story. As Gwen set the stage for this morning’s liturgy by playing Bach before our church bells started swinging, so today’s story of Stephen sets the stage for Pentecost’s celebration of the Holy Spirit.

For the Holy Spirit is a key player in the story of Stephen. For one thing, looking backwards a bit in the story, Stephen the deacon has become Stephen the preacher in accordance with the promise of our Lord about the Holy Spirit:

¹¹And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious how or what you are to answer or what you are to say; ¹²for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.” (Luke 12:11-12, RSV)

Stephen had been one of “seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (Acts 6:3, RSV) who had been appointed to administer the church’s charity there in Jerusalem. He must have been full of grace, for he did great wonders among the people and they gladly heard him. So opponents of the young church had caught Stephen, brought him before the council, and brought false accusation against him. When it became Stephen’s turn to speak, already it was as if the heart of Stephen was so filled with Christ that onlookers felt as if they were beholding an angel:

And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel. (Acts 6:15, KJV)

Then the man who had been waiting on tables gave his witness to Jesus. He had not worked out his sermon in advance. He had no manuscript to lay in the pulpit. He simply opened his mouth and let the Holy Spirit supply the words.

So, that is one way in which the Holy Spirit is part of the story of Stephen. The Spirit helped his preaching. The Spirit gave him the needful words.

The other way in which the Spirit helped Stephen was the grace and courage with which Stephen faced his martyrdom. Listen again to the opening verse of our text:

⁵⁵But [Stephen], *full of the Holy Spirit*, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; (Acts 7:55, RSV)

Not only did Stephen see Jesus standing at the right of God, who also gave his testimony to that vision:

And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God. (Acts 7:56, KJV)

It was necessary that he do this. It was necessary that he speak of the resurrection of Jesus. So far, he had spoken of the good life and the cruel death of Jesus. But that is not yet the Gospel. The Gospel is that this good man, Jesus, who died such a terrible death, nonetheless lives and is in charge of things.

So, Stephen gave his Easter testimony, but it cost him his life. Soon the heavy stones were crashing into his body, for his opponents whisked him away to be stoned:

⁵⁷ Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, ⁵⁸ And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: (Acts 7:57-58, KJV)

Soon, the stones were breaking his bones, bruising his flesh, crushing his life. And so it was that with his dying breath Stephen imitated the Jesus he was permitted to see at the right hand of the Father, and so he forgave his enemies:

⁵⁹ And as they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ And he knelt down and cried with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:59-60)

This is what the Holy Spirit can do for a man, a woman, a child: the Holy Spirit can take an ordinary person and make that one extraordinary. The Holy Spirit can take a sinner and make that one a saint. The Holy Spirit can take a coward and make that one brave. The Holy Spirit can take a lowly wanderer on earth, of no special merit or accomplishments, and make that one shine with nobility. For it is the ministry and the eager desire of the Holy Spirit to make us holy.

That is how Martin Luther describes the work of the Holy Spirit. He summarizes the Creed by speaking of the work of the Three divine Persons:

Hence the Creed could be briefly condensed to these few words: “I believe in God the Father, who created me; I believe in God the Son, who has redeemed me; I believe in the Holy Spirit, *who makes me holy.*” (Luther, *Large Catechism*)

Creation is “now behind us,” Luther says. And “redemption has also taken place.” But the work of the Holy Spirit is just getting started. It is just getting started in you and me:

This, then, is the article that must always remain in force. For creation is now behind us, and redemption has also taken place, but the Holy Spirit continues his work without ceasing until the Last Day, and for this purpose he has appointed a community on earth, through which he speaks and does all his work.

Luther means the Church. The Church is the “community on earth” used by the Holy Spirit to make us holy:

How does such sanctifying take place? Answer: Just as the Son obtains dominion by purchasing us through his birth, death, and resurrection, etc., so the Holy Spirit effects our being made holy through the following: the community of saints or Christian church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. That is, he first leads us into his holy community, placing us in the church’s lap, where he preaches to us and brings us to Christ.

I think that many of us know this, as a matter of theory and theology. We know that the ministry of the Holy Spirit is to make us holy, and we know that the Holy Spirit uses the proclamation of God’s Word in the Church as the very means by which he makes us holy. But I fear that perhaps we have not sufficiently grasped a certain point about the Holy Spirit: the work of the Holy Spirit precisely *is not* theory or theology, but rather the conversion of our souls. I mean you. I mean me. The Spirit wants to work with you and me to make us holy. This is not simply about St. Francis or Mother Teresa. This is also about you and me. In our individual station in life, in our schools, hospitals, banks, military, this pulpit, the Holy Spirit wants to make us holy.

Before the Holy Spirit took hold of Stephen, he was an unknown follower of Christ. But there was something about this unknown follower of Christ that perhaps no one anticipated: what they did not know about Stephen was that he was learning the story of Jesus not only with his head, but also with his *heart*. Day by day, the story of Jesus was transforming him. And so it was that Stephen resisted not the Holy Spirit, but yielded himself over to that Spirit as he meditated on the sacred story. And in the yielding, Stephen became a saint. In the yielding, men

felt themselves to be seeing an angel when they beheld the man. In the yielding, Stephen became a martyr. And in the yielding, Stephen became a “little Christ on earth,” commending his spirit into the hands of God and praying for the forgiveness of those who stoned him.

See what the Holy Spirit can do for a man, a woman, a child. Why, the Holy Spirit can transform us and endow us with the beauty of holiness, even the beauty of our beautiful Savior, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.