



## Easter Seeds

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field  
The Fifth Sunday of Easter ~ May 10, 2020*

### Acts 7:55-60

Stephen, meanwhile, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked to the sky and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right side of God. "Look!" he exclaimed. "I see the heavens opened, and the Chosen One standing at God's right hand!" The onlookers were standing there, shouting and holding their hands over their ears as they did so. They rushed at him as one, and dragged him out of the city. The witnesses then stoned him, having laid their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. As they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "O Jesus, receive my spirit." He fell to his knees and cried out in a loud voice, "Please, don't hold this sin against them!" And with that, he died.

### Psalm 23

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| 1 In you, O God, have I taken refuge;<br>let me never be put to shame; *<br>deliver me in your righteousness.                                  | 5 Into your hands I commend my spirit, *<br>for you have redeemed me, O God of truth.                         |
| 2 Incline your ear to me; *<br>make haste to deliver me.   | 15 My times are in your hand; *<br>rescue me from the hand of my enemies,<br>and from those who persecute me. |
| 3 Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe,<br>for you are my crag and my stronghold; *<br>for the sake of your Name, lead me and guide me. | 16 Make your face to shine upon your servant, *<br>and in your loving-kindness, save me.                      |
| 4 Take me out of the net that they have secretly set for me, *<br>for you are my tower of strength.  |   |

### 1 Peter 2:2-10

Like newborn babies, be hungry for nothing but milk—the pure milk of the word that will make you grow into salvation, now that you have “tasted that our God is good.” Come to Christ—a living stone, rejected by mortals but approved nonetheless, chosen and precious in God's eyes. And you are living stones as well: you are being built as an edifice of spirit, to become a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ. For scripture has it, “See, I am laying a cornerstone in Zion; an approved stone, and precious.

Those who put their faith in it will not be shaken.” The stone is precious for you who have faith. But for those without faith, “The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,” and, at the same time, “an obstacle and a stumbling block.” Those who stumble and fall are the disbelievers in God's word; it is their destiny to do so. You, however, are a “chosen people, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people set apart” to sing the praises of the One who called you out of the darkness into the wonderful, divine light. Once you were “not a people,” but now you are the people of God; once there was “no mercy for you,” but now you have found mercy.

### John 14:1-14

Jesus said, “Don't let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith in me as well. In God's house there are many dwelling places; otherwise, how could I have told you that I was going to prepare a place for you? I am indeed going to prepare a place for you, and then I will come back to take you with me, that where I am there you may be as well. You know the way that leads to where I am going.” Thomas replied, “But we don't know where you're going. How can we know the way?” Jesus told him, “I myself am the Way—I am Truth, and I am Life. No one comes to Abba God but through me. If you really knew me, you would know Abba God also. From this point on, you know Abba God and you have seen God.”

“Rabbi,” Philip said, “show us Abba God, and that will be enough for us.” Jesus replied, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and still you don't know me? Whoever has seen me has seen Abba God. How can you say, ‘Show us your Abba?’ Don't you believe that I am in Abba God and God is in me? The words I speak are not spoken of myself; it is Abba God, living in me, who is accomplishing the works of God. Believe me that I am in God and God is in me, or else believe because of the works I do. The truth of the matter is, anyone who has faith in me will do the works I do—and greater works besides. Why? Because I go to Abba God, and whatever you ask in my name I will do, so that God may be glorified in me. Anything you ask in my name I will do.

I, like many of you, have been thinking about death a little more than usual. Thinking about the tens of thousands of people dying of COVID 19, about the tens of thousands of people working tirelessly to care for them and prevent death, and about those whose cluelessness/lack of concern for others/fill in the blank leads them to either ignore warnings and restrictions designed to protect them and others or, mind bogglingly to protest them. And so when I read the story of Stephen, a bit of whose story, the end of his story, we heard in our first reading this morning, I thought about those who have walked towards death willingly, but for the sake of others, for the sake of the Gospel-the good news of Jesus Christ.

Stephen was the first person recorded to have died for following Jesus. On the face of it, he is an odd choice to die first. He was not one of the original 12 nor was he chosen to replace Judas. He was a solid, good, faithful person who was all about serving others."he knew how to run a soup kitchen like it was his job. He was the first person the church named as a deacon—"a term that means "through the dust." So, one who serves others through the dust.

The problem for poor Stephen was that he was really good at his job. He was out and about, feeding people, healing a few, supporting the grieving—he was on fire for Christ. And people noticed. Especially the religious leaders. They watched. They listened. And they did not like what they saw and heard because what they saw and heard was a man who had no respect for the law of Moses. So they did what angry leaders did and still do, they lashed out. They dragged Stephen before the council and charged him with a long list of offenses which boiled down to being disrespectful of holy places, holy laws, and holy customs. After they were finished reading the charges there was a long silence. And, as the council looked at him, Stephen's face began to look like that of an angel-which I presume means looked steady, calm, and seemed to glow. And then he spoke to them-preached a barn burner of a sermon-a sermon that we do not have in its entirety, but that ended with what we heard in the reading this morning, "You stiff necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. And given that powerful people, leaders both then and now, do not like to hear the truth about themselves, their response was to drag Stephen out of the room, out of the city, and stone him to death-throwing rocks at him until he died of multiple traumatic wounds.

Stephen. Jesus. There is a theme here-which seems to be that Christians who are successful, who tell the truth clearly, make people so mad they want to kill them-and occasionally do so. Now I realize that "truth," at least about some things, can be highly subjective. And I am well aware that there are people who bother you about faith so much that you finally have to tell them to go away and they go off complaining about how hard it is to be a Christian—thinking of themselves as martyrs.

But I think actual martyrdom is less about running around seeking death and more about being so caught up in the Spirit, so intent on following Christ, that you suddenly realize it is raining rocks. Stephen is a dramatic example. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who died for leading a part of the church in Germany to oppose Hitler is another. As is Jonathan Myrick Daniels, a young Episcopal seminarian who, after hearing Martin Luther King Jr. speak, went to Selma to help register black Americans to vote. He was arrested and placed in jail. He and four others were unexpectedly released and took refuge from the heat inside a store. A few minutes after they arrived in the store a 16 year old black teenager named Ruby Sales tried to come in. A man with a gun started cursing her. Daniels pulled Ruby aside to protect her and was shot and killed in her place. He died not because he wanted to but because he wanted justice for all God's children. There are countless others on the church calendar. Countless who never made it to the church calendar- including those right now who are so focused on caring for others that they don scrubs and masks every day while virus particles rain down on them like stones. They do not leave the house looking to be martyrs, they are just so focused on being compassion and healing in action, on being the hands and heart of Christ, that they carry on.

Of course, not all of us are called to be a martyr-some of us work pretty hard at not being martyred. And of course God loves all of us, and does not desire the death of any of God's beloved children. But I think, especially now in Easter, now in a time of pandemic, it is good to remember that some have believed in being Easter people so much that they have risked everything, have put something and someone else ahead of their own safety. Most of them, like Jesus, didn't run around looking to die. It is just what happened to them while they were living into and out of Christ, living the fullest lives they could know and trying to make that same life available to someone other than themselves. What their murderers found out, each and every one of them, was that killing one was not at all successful in wiping them out. That it worked about as well as trying to get rid of dandelions by blowing on

the fluffy part. All it does is scatter the seeds even further.

Some of those seeds blew all the way to us, to this time, and this place. And as much as blood talk in church can put me off, it is fair to say that the blood of the martyrs sustained the church, sustained us. That they were seeds spreading around the world, revealing the immense power of love, nurturing and encouraging the faith of all who came after them—all who proclaim the Easter truth, the Easter miracle of death turning into life.