

SAINT STEPHEN'S DAY

by Leah Wall

After the long Advent wait, Christmas is full of feasting and celebration. For our family, and many others, there are visits with loved ones and gifts shared. If the food isn't the best we can do, it is at least easy so that there's room for other festivities. Rightfully, we rejoice! There is light in the midst of darkness! God has become man! The Prince of Peace has come to rule and the government is on His shoulders! We tuck little ones in, or call someone we love to say Merry Christmas to all, and go to sleep in heavenly peace.

On the morning of December 26, if you pray the daily office, you will begin your morning with a more somber note. It is another day of feasting and Christmas celebration, to be sure! But it is punctuated with reminders of something beyond the sentimental. Something that awakens us from our cheese and wine celebration into the truth of the power of Christ's life. It is a day of remembrance for St. Stephen, the first martyr of Christ's church. And it is strange that the early church, not recording his exact day of death, chose for the remembrance of that sacrifice to be the day after Christmas. You can read the story of Stephen in the book of Acts. Stephen was a deacon of the church. He is remembered especially for his fairness towards widows (Acts 6) and his angering of those teaching in the Synagogues (Acts 7).

His apology before the Sanhedrin (Acts chapter 7) is a powerful explanation of the way of Jesus. His defense of his faith before the rabbinic court angered the audience who were Jewish, and he was taken out of the city and stoned to death. His final words, like Jesus', were a prayer of forgiveness for those who killed him.

As I considered this chapter, I began to wonder why the church would choose to recall such a somber story on this day. Surely we could recall another moment in the history of the church that is more joyful or hopeful? But can we? I realized that my own sentimental, luxurious, American celebration might be getting in the way of understanding true celebration. I am reminded of what true celebration is--a word that implies a commemoration of an event, an honoring. The Christmas lights, silver and gold, and fires in the fireplace can be a part of that celebration. But the truest celebration will be based on and swirl around the action that deserves highest honor. Stephen, as a man who beheld the face of the incarnate Christ, offers himself up to Christ completely. He follows in the sacrifice of Christ who did not consider "equality with God something to be grasped" (Philippians 2:6). Stephen does not consider his own life something to be clung to but "being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, 'Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God'" (Acts 7:55-56). What greater Christmas gift is there? What higher honor?

Through Advent, we have prayed for this. With the hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," we've prayed for "wisdom from on high" and "victory over the grave." We've prayed:



*O come, O Key of David, come
and open wide our heavenly home.
Make safe for us the heavenward road
and bar the way to death's abode.*

We pray and long for these things. In Jesus, but also in the life and death of Stephen, we see them. We see his hope in the truth of Jesus and his victory over the grave. We see that his way to Jesus is safe – even from the stones of the enemy. And from his death, we see a seed planted in Saul who participates in his death. Saul, who later responds to the call of God to join his brother in faithful proclamation of the Kingdom of Jesus and in death.

*O come, O King of nations, bind
in one the hearts of all mankind.
Bid all our sad divisions cease
and be yourself our King of Peace.*

Saul and Stephen, who were enemies, become bound together in the life of Christ. In the Collect of the day for December 26, we pray "Grant that in all our sufferings here upon earth we may love and forgive our enemies, looking steadfastly to Jesus Christ our Lord." In the life of Jesus, we see the fulfillment of our longing, as Stephen did, and we rejoice. We see that this celebration is not only for our loved ones and family but for all the world, even our enemies. In Stephen's story we continue in our true Christmas celebration and rejoice! For Emmanuel has come to the world.

JESUS IS NEAR

by Lisa McCowen

My love of Advent goes back as far as my earliest childhood memory of worshiping at church. I've always loved the candles and special music, and the purples and blues signaling the season. Walking towards the darkest part of the year, I have felt deeply connected to the sense of longing, anticipation and preparation that mark the season. My heart offers a weekly amen to the celebration of hope, love, joy and peace found in Christ. I treasure the preparations for celebration of the Nativity of Christ, the opportunities to reflect on the Incarnation, and how Advent directs our hearts to when He will come again in glory.

This year, I see how my life is on an Advent track in a unique way. Along with a Greensboro cohort of others from our diocese, I entered a season of preparation in beginning seminary studies. Several years ago, the Lord began to direct my path toward ministry in the church. As I've served in a few capacities on staff, I've discerned a call to the diaconate and my ongoing desire for further theological equipping has only grown. With teenagers approaching college, moving or putting work on hold to pursue a degree didn't seem prudent. Holding this desire for more training before the Lord, I echoed the prayer of Hebrews 13:21--"may the

God of Peace...equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen." The opportunity to begin an affordable program at a (mostly!) doable pace alongside other folks in ministry at my church and in other Anglican churches felt like a direct and specific answer to my prayer. The Lord saw my desire and made a way for me--in the middle of my mid-life vocational redirection, my work in ministry, my calling as a parent and spouse. Gratitude and joy are my response!

This season of preparation and anticipation will shape my Advent celebrations. The joy of studying God's Word and learning about His church (this fall: OT 500 - Introduction to the Old Testament and CH625 - Early Church History) will mark Gaudete Sunday. Each of the weekends our class gathers in person, I will give thanks for the incarnational presence of Jesus. The hospitality of Church of the Redeemer to host us as students, to make this opportunity possible, is a gift that will shape not only my next few Advents (Class of 2024!), but also my life and ministry in Jesus' name.

