

5.10.20 Er5 Formed by Christ

- If you are like us, we have been watching a lot more television during these days when we need to stay at home to prevent the spread of the coronavirus
 - So when evening comes, there are lots of shows and movies that we like to watch
 - But other nights... not so much. We search and search the channels, and then if we don't find anything we want to watch we go to "on demand" and scroll through dozens and dozens of free movies
 - Then we face unknown choices – that movie sounds stupid, that one sounds too crude, that one is too scary, that one is too violent, and finally we settle on something that we've usually never heard of... and sometimes the movie is a delightful discovery, and sometimes the movie is just plain awful
 - I suspect that many of you may have experienced the same thing during these long evenings – hundreds of channels, thousands of choices, lots of time, but good stories are hard to find!
- Although there are lots of good stories, sometimes it seems like there are even more bad stories
- But there IS one place where I know that there are lots of good stories, and that place is here – in the Bible, which sometimes has been nicknamed "The Good Book"
 - Now don't get me wrong, there are some really boring parts in the Bible – just ask anyone who has tried to read through the census in the book of Numbers
 - And there are some strange and difficult to understand parts of The Good Book, often because it's hard for us to wrap our minds around a language and a history and even a writing and story-style that's anywhere from 2000-4000 years old
 - However let me be clear – The Good Book does more than tell great stories. The great Bible stories lead us and inspire us into faith in God the Father, God the Son, and God and Holy Spirit
 - In other words, the Spirit of God uses The Good Book to DO something to us. The Spirit creates, evokes, and sustains faith

- So in one of today's scripture lessons, we heard the very end of one of the great stories of the early church – a story that is both a great read AND a story that seeks to inspire us
- But we really have to go back to the very beginning of this good story about a man named Stephen
 - His story, his witness can be found in the sixth and seventh chapters of the book of the Acts of the Apostles, and I invite you, perhaps when you can't find a television show or movie that interests you – I invite you to go to your Bible and read the story in Acts, starting in chapter six
 - Now Stephen was not a Jew, so he did not grow up knowing the Hebrew scriptures like the apostles and most of the early followers of Jesus
 - Stephen was a Greek-speaking citizen of the Roman empire, and like many other people who had not known the stories of Moses and Abraham and the prophets, soon after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ he was brought to the Christian faith
 - Now by the time we meet Stephen in the early church, there already was a problem
 - So many Greeks-speaking Romans, so many outsiders, so many people foreign to the Jewish roots of early Christianity had come to believe in Jesus Christ, that when the early church gathered and distributed food at a daily meal, some of the poor and elderly Greek widows didn't get their share, and they went away unfed
 - Now this was not only a problem about hunger, this revealed even in the early church a tendency to favor one group – those who were Jewish Christians – over another group, the newcomer non-Jewish Christians, so the body of Christ, and its mission of living out the gospel and caring for one another was threatened
 - But the original apostles responded to this problem when it was brought to their attention, by inviting the whole community to choose from among themselves seven more leaders – people who were faithful and wise, so that these new leaders would see to the fair and loving

distribution of food to all believers, while the disciples dedicated themselves to prayer and preaching

- These seven newly chosen leaders were gathered together, hands were laid upon them with prayer, and these seven were later called DEACONS, which means servants or ministers, and one of these seven was this man named Stephen
- So Stephen and the other new leaders devoted themselves to serving the poor, the hungry, and the widows, and soon they too were also preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ to the public throughout the city of Jerusalem
 - But then the trouble started
 - A few people who heard Stephen preaching argued with him
 - And in a lengthy sermon that you can read in your Bible Stephen used the Hebrews scriptures that he had not grown up with, but which he had just learned – he used what we call the Old Testament to trace God’s loving work from Abraham through Moses to King David and Solomon and then the prophets, and finally he connected all that to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ
 - But here’s the thing, Stephen also connected the rejection of Jesus, with the rejection of his message by the hostile listeners, and then in the words of today’s scripture lesson, “When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. [7:54]”
 - Then Stephen looked up and declared that he saw heaven opened with the Risen Christ standing at the right hand of the throne of God, and then the angry listeners dragged him out beyond the city walls, and there they stoned Stephen until with his dying breath he cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” And then he died
 - And ironically, one of the bystanders to this murder was a young man named Saul, who approved of the stoning, but who later would see the Risen

Christ appear to him on the road to Damascus, and we would come to know him as the Apostle Paul

- So Stephen was the first Christian martyr, and as the first of so many witnesses and martyrs, one day a year was set aside from among the very earliest church holy days, to remember his witness.
- But it is important for us to hear that this great story from The Good Book is about more than a martyr's death
- This story is about a life that has been formed and shaped by the Good News of Jesus Christ
 - Born without knowing the promise of God's love shown to such people as Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, David and Solomon, and the enduring words of the prophets – born without this, Stephen learned the Jewish scriptures that we call the Old Testament
 - Then chosen by the community for leadership, he oversaw the distribution of food so that everyone, including the poorest widow, no matter where she came from or what language she spoke, was fed
 - Stephen preached – that is, he shared the gospel of Jesus Christ crucified and raised, and when hostile listeners rose up against him, he learned from Jesus to look to heaven and even to forgive his enemies
- Not only his death, but Stephen's life was a witness for us
- It's a great story from the Bible – The Good Book filled with good stories
- And if we read the stories enough, and if we listen to them and remember them, then God will also use the good stories of The Good Book to shape our lives, to shape our witness, and to shape our lives of service and discipleship.

A note for people reading this sermon on paper... Although this scripture is appointed for today, the day still set aside to remember Stephen's witness is December 26, which is why these otherwise puzzling words appear in an 19th century English Christmas carol, with a tune from Finland, about a King from Bohemia name Wenceslas. This is why we have a Christmas song that is not about the birth of Jesus, but about the good witness of a man on the second day in the Christmas season:

“Good King Wenceslas looked out on the feast of Stephen...
when a poor man came in sight” – and the king takes food
through the snow to feed him.