



Pastor Steven Billings

Sermon for The Feast of St. Stephen
December 26, 2021

The Opened Gift

Acts 6:8—7:2a, 51–60

⁸ And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. ¹¹ Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” ¹² And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, ¹³ and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.” ¹⁵ And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

¹ And the high priest said, “Are these things so?” ² And Stephen said: “Brothers and fathers, hear me.

⁵¹ “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, ⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

⁵⁴ Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. ⁵⁸ Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

My mother used to say, “There’s nothing more over than Christmas.” Now, you could debate the veracity of that statement – and, believe me, as a teenager, I could hardly restrain myself – but, from the standpoint of the world, I think she had a point.

For us – for *Christians* – though the Feast of Christmas is past, we are still in the



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Christmas season – and will be through the Feast of Epiphany – but, as far as the world is concerned, Christmas is already over. The displays in the stores by now are gone – with the possible exception of “after Christmas” sales – but even that indicates that the celebration is over. It’s time to tidy up the living room, wash the dishes, and send the guests on their way; the party has concluded.

But, as I said, for us the Feast continues. In fact, there are several other festivals to observe before we’re through. There is the Feast of the Holy Innocents on December 28th, the Circumcision and Naming of Jesus on January 1st, and the aforementioned Feast of the Epiphany on January 6th. And then there’s the festival we observe today: The Feast of St. Stephen, First Martyr for the Faith.

But, you may ask, why would we spend a day in sadness over a martyr – the first leader of the Church to be killed for the Faith – when we have just celebrated the joy of Christmas? Perhaps we need to adjust our perspective so that we may understand that this is not a day to mourn, but, rather, a day to celebrate, a day to thank God for the ministry He gave to St. Stephen, for the *Word* he was given to confess, indeed, the Word for which he was to give his life.

But, still, you may wonder why. Why is the martyrdom of St. Stephen important, and why should we thank God for him? Who is this St. Stephen, anyway?

Stephen was a deacon in the early Church. As a deacon, his task was to assist the Apostles in the ministry. The Twelve were no longer able to minister the Word and Sacraments *and* run the Church’s charitable endeavors, as well. Since the Word and Sacraments were their primary responsibility, sadly, the Church’s charity work was beginning to suffer. In particular, some of the widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. The Twelve called all of the disciples together and instructed them to choose “seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom,” to whom the duty of distribution would be given. Stephen was one of the seven chosen to assist the Apostles, and was, therefore, one of the first deacons of the Church. This was the birth of lay offices in the Church, which today extend to any number of boards and committees, all of which share in the care of God’s people in one way or another.

Stephen was passionate about his Lord, “full of faith and power, [and] did great wonders and signs among the people” (6:8). He was a man filled with the Holy Spirit. But, his work and his speaking angered those who refused to believe in Jesus as the Christ. They tried to silence him by charging him with blasphemy, of speaking words against Moses and God, against the temple and the law. You see, they were still clinging to the law of Moses, including all the ceremonial laws, even while violating God’s moral Law by accusing Stephen falsely. They said, “This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us” (6:13-14). They were twisting the facts to suit their evil purposes, for Stephen spoke only what the Apostles gave him to speak, and that was what they themselves received from the Lord. As did Jesus Himself, Stephen spoke not of the building constructed on the



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temple mount in Jerusalem, but of the temple of Christ's body, which was destroyed, but was raised again on the third day.

Stephen further angered the Jews by recounting their history of repeatedly despising the Word of God and those God had sent to proclaim it to them. He called them stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, saying they were just like the Jews of old, who persecuted the prophets. They knew it was true, but they couldn't bear to hear it. Neither could not they bear the gift God had granted to Stephen: the vision of heaven being opened to him so that he could see the Lord sitting at the right hand of God. So, in their intense anger and hatred, they threw him out of the city and pelted him with rocks until he was dead.

So Stephen died for the Faith, for proclaiming Christ as the Son of God and the only Savior of mankind. But, in the process of being killed, Stephen received an amazing gift: he was allowed to see heaven opened, and the Lord, who would soon call him to Himself, seated beside the Father.

How many gifts did you receive this Christmas? How many will you return? In our day, many gifts are given that are not wanted, are the wrong size, the wrong color, or just plain wrong. The Lord gave St. Stephen a gift that none of us – I hope – would ever refuse: He opened heaven to Stephen, not just to look at, as in a vision, but opened so that he would go there once he had fallen asleep, once he had died.

Stephen suffered at the hands of stiff-necked people who refused to hear the Word of God. Today Christians suffer even here in our own land for the sake of the Gospel. Christians are being persecuted for wanting to celebrate Christmas; even *saying* "Merry Christmas" is considered by many to be offensive. Sacred Christmas music is not allowed to be sung in many public schools. School principals all across our land have canceled Christmas parties altogether or have renamed them "winter festival" parties, some even calling them by their pagan name: "Saturnalia" festivals.

And – are you ready for this? – Christians today are being accused of wanting to keep Christ in Christmas! Imagine that! Worse yet, some are accusing us of wanting to *hijack* Christmas – a festival rooted in the celebration of the birth of – need I say it? – *Christ!* Hello, world! Facebook can cancel me if they want to, but I'm saying this anyway: Christmas is not a generic holiday; it's a festival in which Christians celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, who came in the flesh to bear our sins and to be our Savior.

Now, it is true that the pagans had set aside December 25th as the date for worshipping their sun god, Saturn. The early Church decided to celebrate the birth of Jesus on this same day, based on estimates of His conception date. But, for the secular culture in which we live, it wouldn't matter what day we picked to celebrate Jesus' birth. If we picked February 2, they'd accuse us of trying to hijack Groundhog Day. Their real agenda is to kill Christmas and to silence Christians, to deny you of your rightful celebration of the birth of the Savior. They want you to be as bitter and empty as they are. They want to deprive you of the hope you have. Those who seek to remove Christ from the Christ-Mass are in for a rude awakening, however, when one day they see heaven opened and the Son



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of Man barring their entry on account of their unbelief.

Our day of judgment will come one day, too, of course, and, because of our faith in Him, we will see heaven opened and the Son of Man descending to gather us to Himself. He will welcome the faithful to be with Him, even as He welcomed Stephen. And we will sing His praises at the eternal Feast, the praises of Him who died and rose again. By faith we will join St. Stephen, and all the faithful of every time and place, around the heavenly banquet table, for heaven has been opened to us by the death and resurrection of God's own Son.

As the Lord opened heaven to Stephen, so the Father opened the tomb to show that death had no hold on His Son. Now He opens heaven to *us*, as He comes to us in His Word and Sacraments, opening our minds to understand the Scriptures and our mouths to receive the very body and blood of our Savior. At Christmas we celebrate the newborn King of kings. Every Lord's Day we celebrate the resurrected Lord, who "by His glorious resurrection opened to us the way of everlasting life" (Common Preface). Today we celebrate the life and the Word which He gave to St. Stephen. Every Lord's Day we celebrate the new life He has given us in Holy Baptism, by which He has opened heaven to us and given us His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. Glory be to God! In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen