

**Sermon - Rev. Amanda Henderson Bolton**  
**Kirk of St James**  
**Sunday, May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2026**

One of the commentary writers was reflecting on the passage in Acts today and said, "Perhaps all unsuccessful preachers should take some comfort here. If Acts chapter 2 portrays the best response ever given to someone's first sermon (when 3000 people were saved); here Stephen receives the worst response imaginable to what was definitively his last. Perhaps all unsuccessful preachers should take some comfort here. If their congregation merely complains or fires them, at least they do not stone them." Re-assuring words for sure. In all seriousness though, events in the book of Acts are rapidly moving along. A mere five chapters ago Peter received an incredible response to his address to the crowd, and then today we see the first recorded Christian martyr in history. It did not take long before early Christians began facing persecution. We also first meet Saul, a persecutor, murderer, and witness to the death of Stephen, who will later undergo a dramatic transformation.

Looking at this passage it is clear there is tension and hostility growing toward the Christian community. During the past few chapters in Acts the church has been growing, the gospel is being shared, and people are believing. As it spreads throughout the region tension begins to build; people do not know what to do with these Christians. Stephen was a man described as being full of God's grace and power, and he performed signs and wonders wherever he went. When members of the synagogue argued with him, they got frustrated because he was so wise. They could not come up with a case against him so, they convinced people to be false witnesses, and bring false charges. These witnesses testify that Stephen has been speaking blasphemous words against the temple and Moses. Blasphemy was a serious charge in the ancient world and was punishable by death by stoning. The serious charges and testimony of the false witnesses almost guarantee that Stephen will be found guilty.

Instead of defending himself Stephen faces the angry crowd and delivers a message that accuses the people of rejecting the prophets and Holy Spirit. A bold move, and a brave move, but one that only angers people further, and it is here our reading today begins, with the angry

crowd dragging Stephen out of the city in order that they may stone him. Stephen was to become the first Christian martyr of many.

The word martyr itself means “witness”--literally to be a martyr is to bear witness. Jesus often told his disciples they were to be a witness to others, but this case was to the extreme. One interesting thing I came across in my reading this week, was that “in courtrooms an expert witness may be called to testify about things they know from study, but most of us are asked to say what we have seen or experienced. The same goes for us when we are asked to be a witness, we tell what we have seen and experienced of Christ. That is also what the Christian martyrs did for the first three centuries.” Polycarp is the perfect example of this, when people pleaded with the aged and kindly bishop of Smyrna, asking him to renounce Jesus he did not lecture them. Instead he replied “Eighty-six years I have served him, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”

As Stephen was giving his testimony he looked up into heaven and saw a vision, which is not an uncommon occurrence in stories of martyrdom (there are recorded examples of this throughout history). Then as he is dying during the stoning, he asks for the forgiveness of those who are killing him. You may notice there are numerous parallels with the death of Jesus, such as him forgiving those who called for his death.

I have been thinking about Stephen and martyrdom a lot this past week. Martyrdom is something I associate with history, but not so much the modern world. We know in the past that Christians have been martyred throughout history under various circumstances. For example Christians being taken into Roman coliseums and being killed by wild beasts. At least in my way of thinking, it is more a past event than a present.

That being said in Sudan in 2014, there was a young woman named Meriam Ibrahim who faced an unimaginable fate. She was a 27 year old married woman, who was 8 months pregnant when she was sentenced to 100 lashes, and to then to be hung, because she refused to renounce her Christian faith. She had been Muslim but married a Christian man and converted to Christianity I cannot imagine the type of faith, and unshakable resolve she held. Hers is a reality that that is difficult to fathom. Sometimes in my western mindset it is easy to be

comfortable, it is easy to take things for granted. What would you do if you were in her shoes? I do not think I would have the courage that she has. Martyrdom is still a reality in the world today, the experiences that Stephen had hundreds and hundreds of years ago, are still a part of our world. Some people are bearing witness in ways that we cannot imagine. Luckily a number of different countries interceded and she ended up having her baby, and meeting Pope Francis.

After the death of Stephen things go from bad to worse. Widespread persecution breaks out against the Church and men and women are dragged off to jail or worse. Families are torn apart, and injustice reigns, as people are scattered and driven from their homes. The Bible points to one man as the driving force behind it. In fact it says in chapter 8 he went into home after home dragging men and woman off to prison, and ravaging the Church. While the man is little more than a footnote in the account of Stephens' death, he becomes one of the leading persecutors of Christians. His name was Saul. During the stoning he stood and watched, and people laid their coats at his feet. This suggests that not only did Saul watch the death of Stephen, he approved it. Then he sets forth and wrecks havoc among believers. In this moment these two men could not be more unlike. Stephen who has just died a martyr's death, who clung to his faith, who trusted in God, versus Saul, murderer and persecutor. If you had told anyone in the ancient world that Saul would have later become Paul, no one would have believed you. You would have been laughed right out of Jerusalem. I often wonder how hard it was for Christians during that time period to believe that Saul had changed?

It was Saul's experience with Christ on the Damascus road that changed his life. It was from that encounter that he developed his own witness account of what he had seen and experienced. It is hard to believe how much a life can change when it comes in contact with the living Christ.

There is a story I have told a number of over the years here, and I thought of it for this morning because it aligns with the lectionary reading of Peter and it's called "if you know who you are you will know what to do." It came out of World War 2 when a group of people went to a lay Dutch missionary to asked him what to do, because their Jewish neighbours were being rounded up and shipped off. Missionary Dr. Kramer replied, "I won't tell you what to do, but if

you know who you are you will know what to do.” Then he pulled out his Bible and read these words from 1 Peter 2: 9-10. “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” “That is who you are” said Dr. Kramer. They thanked him, left his home and that night began the Dutch Resistance Movement

When we know who we are—or perhaps more importantly whose we are, it changes how we live our lives. Our own witness in the world is the story of how we came to be a Christian, and how that relationship shapes our lives. We don’t need to be preaching and converting three thousand people at a time, although if so inclined please do. But rather our Christian witness is about how we choose to live and move about in this world. That is something we all do on a daily basis. It is amazing that even amidst persecution Christianity not only persisted but also in some cases flourished. It is a bit like stepping on a dandelion trying to stamp it out and instead only releasing its seeds on the breeze. Do not underestimate your potential to make a difference in the world in meaningful ways simply by allowing your life to be shaped by your beliefs.