

The Festival of St. Stephen, Martyr  
St. Matthew 23:34-39  
December 26<sup>th</sup>, 2023  
St. Bartholomew Ev. Lutheran Mission, UAC  
Fort Myers, FL  
Pastor Jerald Dulas

## I Send unto You Prophets

*In Nomine Iesu!*

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

### **Sermon Text:**

“Therefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: some of them shall ye kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city: that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of Abel the righteous unto the blood of Zachariah son of Barachiah, whom ye slew between the sanctuary and the altar.”

### **Prayer in Pulpit before Sermon:**

O Lord, send out Thy Light and Thy Truth, let them lead us. O Lord, open Thou my lips, that my mouth may show forth Thy praise. O Lord, graciously preserve me, lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be rejected. Amen.

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior + Jesus Christ. Amen.

My dear friends, for many the season of Christmas is about joy and happiness. Sorrow and strife are not allowed to make an appearance. Also for many, they have already shut down Christmas. They have packed up the tree, taken down the decorations, and are already moving on to the next holiday. Apparently, the joy and happiness of the season was just too much. For us Christians, however, the joy and happiness of the season of Christmas is because our Lord God has come down from Heaven to take upon Himself our flesh. We are overjoyed that we have a Lord God Who desires to save us by being one of us. The joy and happiness that encompasses our celebration is because of Who our Lord God is and what He does for us.

Furthermore, our celebration of the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord is celebrated as a twelve-day season. This twelve-day season begins with an Octave. An Octave is a full week-long celebration; a full eight days of feasting. Today is not the day to shut down Christmas and pack everything up until next year. No, my friends, today is just the second day of the Feast of Christmas. Today is just the second day of the Octave in which we find ourselves. The celebration of our Lord's Incarnation has just begun. We should give it its full due and honor. For without our Lord becoming man, we can know no salvation. For only the Lord God in our flesh can fulfill the Law for us. Only the Lord God in our flesh can suffer and die in our place and have His sacrifice be for us too.

Our celebration of the Incarnation of our Lord and Savior + Jesus, the Christ has just begun and continues for twelve days because without our Lord's Incarnation we would not have a Redeemer and Savior. This is why the first three days after the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord are celebrated as Festival days. Today is the Festival of St. Stephen, the first martyr. Tomorrow is the Festival of St. John, the Apostle and Evangelist, who wrote several Epistles, the Book of the Revelation of + Jesus Christ, and the Gospel that bears his name. On Thursday, the Church celebrates the third Festival after the

birth of our Lord: The Festival of the Holy Innocents. Those who were killed on account of King Herod's rage and jealousy that there was born in Bethlehem a King of the Jews.

All three of these Festivals celebrate martyrs, people who gave their lives for the Lord + Jesus. These are they who gave their lives in either deed or word, and often times for both. Those who gave their lives in deed, were those who were actually killed because of the Lord + Jesus. St. Stephen and the Holy Innocents are both martyrs in deed. They are martyrs because of their deaths. Those who gave their lives in word, are those who preached about the Lord + Jesus regardless of the consequences. St. John, the Apostle and Evangelist and St. Stephen, the martyr, are both martyrs in word. For they both preached about Who our Lord + Jesus is, and what He did for us poor sinners.

Make note, my dear friends, that St. Stephen, the martyr who we remember and celebrate today is a martyr in both word and deed. We heard his words in that quite long Epistle reading from the Book of Acts. He began his preaching about our Lord and Savior beginning with the Patriarch Abraham and took us all the way through the time of Moses and the wilderness wanderings of the Israelites. For it was at that time that the Tabernacle of Meeting was built, and the sacrificial system was established. He concludes with the Temple of Solomon, for it was in this house of the Lord God that He established His presence in the city of Jerusalem among His people the Israelites. The Tabernacle and the Temple both point to the true Temple, our Lord + Jesus, the Christ. For in them was the sacrifice of animals that paid for the sins of the people. But in our Lord + Jesus we have the one, true sacrifice for mankind: His suffering and death on the tree of the holy cross.

St. Stephen preached that the Lord God had sent prophets unto them to preach to them about the coming of the Messiah, so that the people of Israel might believe and be saved. Even as our Lord + Jesus says the same thing in the Gospel reading from the Apostle and Evangelist St. Matthew. One theme is unique to both the Epistle and the Gospel. Those who were sent as prophets by the Lord God were rejected by the people. In the Gospel, our Lord + Jesus mentions, Abel, the very first martyr, who was killed by his brother Cain out of jealousy. We also hear of Zachariah, son of Berechiah, who was killed between the alter and the temple, because the Jews did not like his preaching. St. Stephen brings it all to a point, however. For the Jews did not just kill the prophets of old, but they killed the One Who the prophets foretold. They killed the Lord + Jesus on the tree of the holy cross. They murdered the Savior of the world, out of jealousy and because they refused to receive His preaching.

This was the preaching of St. Stephen that makes him a martyr in word. It was because of this preaching that the Jews also made him a martyr in deed as well. For they stopped up their ears, refusing to listen to the preaching of the Law, and dragged him out of the city, and stoned him to death. Witnessing this death is another who would be killed for preaching about the Lord + Jesus, a young man named Saul, who would become known as Paul. He would eventually stop his murdering of the Church and become one of its greatest preachers. Such is the work of the Holy Ghost.

St. Stephen shows the true spirit of a Christian, for he does not revile those who are killing him, but instead prays for his murderers, and asks the Lord God to forgive them. A perfect example of loving one's enemy. The world makes itself our enemy. The world does not want to hear about the Lord + Jesus. The Jews to whom St. Stephen preached, the high priest and the Sanhedrin, certainly did not want to be reminded of the murder that they committed towards the Lord + Jesus. People do not want to be reminded that their sins will only give them death. Eternal death awaits all those who cling to their sin and rebellion against the Lord God.

This is the Festival which we celebrate today. This is the saint which we celebrate today, St. Stephen, the Martyr, the one who is both a martyr in word and deed. But one may ask, "Why such a bummer of a saint and festival in this Octave of the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord? Is this not supposed to be a happy and joyous time?" My dear friends, our happiness and joy comes from the knowledge

that our Lord + Jesus has come to be with us. He came for one reason only to offer up His innocent life as a ransom for all mankind, so that all those who cling to Him in faith might have life and salvation. He was treated shamefully, suffered, and was crucified. We who preach Him, who cling to Him in faith, like St. Stephen, can expect similar treatment from this world and all those who hate the Lord + Jesus.

But such things to not worry or stress us; they do not take away our joy and happiness, for we know that after this life—after this vale of tears—we have the promise of a joyous and happy eternal life with our Lord and Savior + Jesus, the Christ. The Kingdom of Heaven awaits us! There we will have an eternal celebration. It will not last eight days, or twelve days, but will last forever and ever. There we will celebrate with all the faithful, those who forsook the temptations of this life for the hope of an eternal life in Heaven. This is why we continue to sing with joy on this Festival day of a martyr, the first martyr of the New Testament era, for our Lord has come down from Heaven to be born as a man. He was wrapped up in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. And He went willingly to the tree of the holy cross to shed His blood for us so that we might have forgiveness of all our sins. Thanks be to our Lord and Savior, + Jesus, the Christ. In the Name of our Lord + Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

**Prayer in Pulpit after Sermon:**

Almighty God, be pleased to accompany Thy Word with Thy Holy Spirit and grant that Thy Word would increase faith in us; bring into the Way of Truth all such as have erred; turn the hearts of the unrepentant; and for sake of Thy Name grant succor to all heavy hearts and those who are heavy-laden, that they may through the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ be relieved and preserved so that they succumb not to the temptation of despair but rather that they gain the victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, Who liveth and reigneth with the Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever One God, world without end. Amen.

**The Votum:**

The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

*Soli Deo Gloria!*