

Happy May Day to you! This has definitely been a week of “greening,” of bushes and trees, although the yellow forsythia bushes have been shining forth for a few weeks now. Nature speaks of resurrection and new life, at least in our northern hemisphere. Again, we are in the season of Eastertide in the Christian church, and we hear of the powerful faith of the early disciples, what they said and did. This morning we read about Stephen, not one of the first twelve, but a devout follower of Jesus, and we probably remember Stephen by the fact that he is known as the first Christian martyr, that he was stoned to death for holding to his convictions.

Yes, it is a horrible story, and an example of religious oppression and violence in the days of early Christianity. Yes, some of the first Christians were stoned, some were crucified, and some were sent into an arena with hungry lions. But aside from the manner of their being silenced, we focus on their teaching and preaching.

So to find out *why* Stephen was stoned, we need to read the context around that story. Like Peter and Paul, Stephen was preaching to the religious leaders and testifying about his faith in Jesus. He gave a rather long speech, relating highlights from the entire history of Israel, how God came to them over thousands of years, and how they continually turned away, doing things that were evil in the sight of God. The end of Stephen’s speech, of course, ends up with how God came to them in the person of Jesus, whom they did not listen to, but had him killed. Stephen’s sermon was a direct challenge and criticism of the religious leaders of his day, who thought his words were blasphemy against the one God of Israel. The penalty for blasphemy, in Old Testament Law, was death by stoning (Leviticus 24:10).

It is hard for us to relate to the example of actually being killed for our faith; we don’t want to be martyrs. However, from the example of

Stephen, Peter, Paul, and others, we do see virtue in standing up for what we believe in, standing up for all that is good and true. I, for one, will always stand up for peacemaking and diplomacy. Many call it “speaking truth to power.” I will always speak up that war should only be a very last resort, an act of defense. I will always speak up for Jesus’ rejection of violence, not to mention the 10 commandments themselves that say “Thou shalt not kill.” Jesus lived his truth that divine justice is always tempered by divine *mercy*. Jesus was all about mercy, forgiveness, redemption. Theologians also call it “*restorative justice*.” I think Jesus would have strong words for people who say things like “we will show no *mercy* on the enemy,” or “a whole civilization will die tonight” if they do not do as we say.

I will always speak up for humane treatment, even of those who have broken the law. Regarding detention centers, we hear too many stories of *inhumane* treatment of detainees. We are reminded that entry across a border without papers is a misdemeanor, not a criminal act. And yet the vast majority in detention centers are merely undocumented immigrants, not violent criminals in any way. We hear they are treated inhumanely, which is not moral, even for criminals. Efforts for prison reform in this country look for ways to rehabilitate people. There is good reason why prisons have been called “Correctional” facilities. But we are sending many people, with the simple misdemeanors, to detention centers that are like concentration camps.

Jesus was a prophet, Stephen was a prophet. The job of prophets is to challenge and criticize the powers, especially kings, when they were going against the ways of God, when they were oppressing or ignoring the poor. In modern day, people like Martin Luther King Jr. and Desmond Tutu and Pope Leo are obvious prophets, who challenge the brutality of rulers. These days we have

prophets that still speak up for the poor, like Rev. William Barber for the “poor people’s campaign” in this country, and other prophets who speak up for the thousands of poor children around the world who have died when our government slashed funds for US AID. And we have prophets that speak up for the earth, like Bill McKibben and our own UCC Rev. Jim Antal. More on this another time!

This weekend, with the Newburyport Choral Society, sings of the prophet *Elijah*, so powerful a prophet that Jews reserve an empty seat at the table for Elijah on festival days. The *Elijah Oratorio*, by Felix Mendelssohn, tells some of the dramatic highlights of the prophet Elijah. Yes, Elijah was battling the kings, especially a king named Ahab, who eventually sought to kill him. So why did King Ahab want to kill him?

Well, Ahab had married his queen, Jezebel, a name that has become almost synonymous with evil. Jezebel got Ahab to worship the god of nature called “Baal.” Ahab would worship around a tall pole called an Asherah pole, some sort of fertility symbol. So Elijah the prophet, inspired by God, has to warn King Ahab about idolatry, worshipping a false god. Even more, Elijah announces that there would be a drought sent by God, a punishment on the whole nation for what Ahab and Jezebel were doing. It is noted in the bible that the worshippers of Baal would dance, cut themselves and bleed, as a form of sacrificial offering to Baal.

Elijah challenges Ahab to gather all his prophets of Baal on the top of a mountain, and prepare wood with bull meat on top, and Elijah would do the same. Then they would call on their God, to see which God could come down with fire and burn up the offering. Spoiler alert, for those of you going to the concert this afternoon (or for those of you who would rather read it yourself in first book of Kings) ... Naturally Elijah wins the contest, even dumps water on his offering,

and lightning comes down on his offering, burning it all up, even the water!

Well, hold on, the drama is not over. The wicked Queen Jezebel is so mad that her prophets of Baal have lost the contest and been killed, that she seeks to kill Elijah, who flees and hides in a cave. He prays fervently for the Lord God to save him, and that is where we get the famous saying that God was not in an earthquake, nor in a wind, but in “*a still small voice.*” Elijah finds comfort and strength while hiding and praying in that cave. He will then continue his prophetic ministries. At the end of his life, Elijah passes on his spirit to the next great prophet Elisha, and we read the famous words that Elijah ascended to the heavens with “chariots of fire.” (We may recall the movie, *Chariots of Fire*, all about courage and strength ... and we probably know the spiritual “Swing low, sweet chariot,” echoing the Elijah story, about going home to God).

In “conclusion,” Comfort and Courage are both the hallmarks of prayer. Elijah has courage to face the king of his day, and finds comfort in a quiet cave, hearing the “still small voice” of God, which strengthens and guides him. Stephen, has much courage in the face the religious leaders, and while being stoned, he prays and finds comfort in his union with Christ. We recall that when Stephen was dying, he said “O God, do not hold this against them” ... which is really an echo of what Jesus said while dying, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Courage and Comfort are bound together as the gifts of prayer. Courage to do and say what is true, even speak truth to power.....and Comfort that God and Christ are *present* with us in our struggle... that the Lord IS indeed our Shepherd, our King of Love. Let’s continue to pray and go forth into the world with courage, confident that the Holy Spirit, the spirit of Christ IS present with us.