

Feast Day of Stephen, Deacon & Martyr
A Sermon Preached by The Rt Rev Lucinda Ashby
on September 7, 2025

Jeremiah 26:1-9,12-15 / Acts 6:8-7:2a,51c-60 / Matthew 23:34-39 / Psalm 31:1-5

It is so good to be with you here today, again, for the Feast of Saint Stephen.

My yearly visitation to you happens at your request on the Feast of Saint Stephen, except that for the past six years I've been preaching the same exact scripture to you every single time I come. I'm going to have to talk to Father Ian about switching out the scriptures.

There's only one that mentions Stephen, and that is for a reason. But you know, here it is. Here we are. And again, we have the same scriptures and the story that we are centered on today is celebrating this feast day, which celebrates the martyrdom of Stephen.

Think about that. You know, it's rather a gory scene, isn't it? We have Stephen who is standing up to the powers that be in Jerusalem and he speaks truth to power. He says what needs to be said and of course he makes them mad. So they take him outside the walls of the city and they stone him to death. How lovely.

Then, and while that is happening, what they do is those who are there, we're told they are the witnesses, they take off their cloaks and lay them at the feet of Saul. And we know that Saul has been the persecutor of the followers of Jesus. We are told – when you do a little research – that taking off their cloaks and laying those on the ground at Saul's feet is rather an interesting piece to that scripture. Because when you went to stone someone, you removed your cloak so that you wouldn't get blood all over it. So they did this and laid it at the feet of Saul.

Now there are some scholars who say, well really this is about one Jewish faction against another and it was a reversal of power. Okay, but nobody really knows. What we do know is that this gesture happened and that it's mentioned and given some emphasis in the reading.

So here we have this really gory scene. Here we have people acting in ways that are violent and are actually horrendous. And we have this nameless, faceless crowd that is present in this story. And that is what interests me. Because we all know that there were people present who were there condoning and perhaps cheering on the violence. And there were people there who were watching and taking note.

Here's the thing about this story. This story would have just died there. It would have been nothing. It would have had no significance except that the followers of Jesus kept the story going. This is historical because it occurs in the book of Acts, which is considered a historical book in the Bible. And the followers of Jesus kept the story going. Why? Because that story serves to point to what is absent. It is a story about injustice. It is a story about violence. It is a story that shows no respect.

As followers of Jesus, we are called to a different story. We are called to one of justice and peace and respecting the dignity of every human being. Sound familiar? It does, doesn't it? Because where do you find it? Baptismal covenant, right?

So the thing is today, as we do every time I visit, we renew our baptismal covenant. And when we do so, we have a list of questions that are called the examination. This is the last question: *Will you strive for justice and peace, and respect the dignity of every human being?* Our gut tells us when that's not happening. We know about this, right? So when Elijah is being received today, we go through this with him so that he is with us in this community every time we reaffirm our baptismal covenant.

I was really struck by this, in our baptismal covenant by the verb to strive. *Will you strive for justice and peace? Will you strive?* And we hear that a lot. And those of you who are overachievers, of which there are many in this room, you know about that verb, right? It means to work hard to achieve greatness, right? And it calls for us to have a lot of individual effort in doing so, right? We study hard, we work hard, we do all this, right? We strive.

Yet, I did a little more digging. And what I noticed is that in the Greek, the translation is actually to strive together. It's about what we do together. So when we are renewing our baptismal covenant and we are saying that we will strive for justice and peace and respect the dignity of every human being, we're saying we're doing it together. We're saying we're doing it together because trying to do this by ourselves invites fear. It's overwhelming. We can go into the place of hopelessness or retreat, as one of my friends says, into the bubble, because there's so much going on in our world that we wonder, how can I, how do I affect any of this, right? It's too much!

But striving together is a different story. Alone our fear will hold us back. Nelson Mandela says, courage is not the absence of fear, but the triumphing over it. And we do that best when we're doing it together.

A few months ago, a couple months ago, I was at one of the rallies and I was in Salinas, and I was standing there just kind of watching the crowd that had gathered. And a car door behind me closed, and I turned and looked and there was this older couple, older than anyone else gathered, getting out of their car. helping each other to get out of the car. And they picked up some signs they had. These signs were about this big. And they were paint stirrers taped to the back of cardboard. And these two, this elderly couple took each other by the hand, and they walked to where the gathering was, and they stood there. And they held up, each held up their sign. And one said *justice*, and the other said *peace*. And they stood there holding those paint stirrers, about 30 minutes. They just stood there. They didn't say a word. 30 minutes passed, and I watched again as they took each other's hands and they walked back to their car.

Now they had probably done this before. They knew about attaching paint stirrers to the back of cardboard. And they knew about striving, striving together. All over the world we see people striving together. All over the world this is happening. It's a continual call to us to strive together, to strive together for justice and peace. To remember to respect the dignity of every human being, all you need is a piece of cardboard and a paint straw. Let that be our guide.

Amen.