

St Stephen's Day

A Sermon Preached by the Rt Rev Lucinda Ashby

on September 13, 2026

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

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

Good morning everyone. Good morning for my birthday weekend because this is what we do every year. But that's not really why I'm here.

It is the sixth year of celebrating St. Stephen's Day with you. And so every year I come, and I think last year, I said to Father Ian, "You know, I keep preaching on the same scriptures every year. We might want to change them up a little bit." But we decided not to. And for that I am grateful. Because as it turns out, scriptures are often and always opening themselves up to further revelation. And this year was no different.

So I've been thinking a lot about our journey as we walk alongside Jesus. And you've been going through the gospel readings with Matthew all summer. We've been hearing the stories of the parables. The gospel of Matthew gives us 20 parables. Five on one particular Sunday. I'm always curious as to which one you preached on. And also then some miracles that that happen and we have Jesus walking on water, and we have the women and children. So we have all of that that is happening in the Gospel of Matthew, and we've been walking alongside Jesus as Jesus's disciples walk with him and are learning in somewhat of a bumbling fashion. It's often two steps forward one step back with the disciples.

So when I come to today's readings I am noticing something that I've been noticing all the way through which is that there is a clear distinction that begins to happen as we move through scripture where we have the time of walking alongside Jesus, and we then learn to hopefully become followers of Jesus.

Now let's look back. Let's look at Stephen for just a little bit and put him in context because Stephen was walking alongside hanging around there somewhere. We had all of this walking alongside Jesus and then we hit the crucifixion, and what happened? Everybody went into hiding, right? Except for the women. They went into hiding. So that's a marker that we have. And then we have the Pentecost experience, right? So the story could have ended with the disciples going to hiding, the story could have ended with the Pentecost experience, where everybody is declared drunk and perhaps dismissed for speaking in all these different languages. And then we come to another marker. And I believe that the story of Stephen, as brief as it is, is a significant marker for those who are following Jesus. Because if you look in the longer arc of the story, it is the story of Stephen that reveals to us the presence of Saul, who was there persecuting him. As the story progresses, Saul has a conversion experience on the road to Damascus and ends up becoming Paul and wants to join the band of followers.

Now here's where the marker is, because that band of followers, Peter in particular, now have some hard work to do in order to let Paul into the fold. And the hard work they have to do is one of forgiveness. How do you forgive someone who was part of murdering another follower?

Now, I know that in our present climate, it is popular for celebrities and people of renown to stand in front of the camera and declare with great nobility that they have forgiven someone. Yet, as a follower of Jesus, that ultimate forgiveness we know, that clear declarative forgiveness comes through God. Our work is one of process.

I learned this from a woman that I worked with when I was first ordained. Her name was Norma and Norma was at that point probably about 70. She served as my treasurer in my congregation, and she told me her story, not once but many times, because she wanted me to tell it to others. When Norma was in her 20s, Norma was young and newly married and she and her husband decided to open a pawn shop in one of the sketchier parts of the city. And things for going fine.

Business was good. They had set up a good model. It was all working. And then one day, a man came in with a gun to rob the pawn shop and right on the spot, killed her husband right before her eyes.

To make a long story short, the man was caught, and he was brought to trial, and Norma attended his trial day after day. And she was asked to make a statement if she wanted to, and she said, “Yes, I just don’t want him to do this again.” That was her statement. But Norma, in addition to her grief, was beginning to suffer from a lot of bitterness. “Why did this happen? Why me? Why him?” And her priest, himself wading into unknown territory, advised her to go and meet with her husband’s murderer. And so she eventually did.

She met with her husband’s murderer, and she heard his story. And she told me that what she said to him was, “I am forgiving you.” Note that she did not say “I forgive you.” She said “I am forgiving you.” As a follower of Jesus, She understood very clearly that it was going to be an ongoing process. One that she was telling me about well into her 70s, her entire life, so that she stayed on the path of love and mercy was that statement, “I am forgiving you.” There is so much that we learn about that process.

One of my favorite authors, CS Lewis says, so succinctly, “Everybody thinks until you have to do it.” Right? Until you have to do it. Our liturgy itself points us to that place of that deeper work of what it means to follow Jesus and enter into that space. Because in the liturgy of the Word, are listening and reading and learning. But when we go to the altar and we receive that bread and wine, we are transformed and we are reminded that as followers of Jesus, we are to engage in the world in a different way. And engaging in that world in a different way is inconvenient and it is uncomfortable and it is real.

It is also surprising and revelatory and transformative. When we come to the altar, we are experiencing that invitation to that mercy and that grace and that forgiveness that we are to work through and that we are prepared to model and to offer out to others. In a few minutes, we’re going to renew our baptismal

covenant as we prepare to baptize and confirm Jakobe today. We answer those questions. Those questions about seeking God, serving God, about proclaiming good news, about loving our neighbor as yourself, perhaps the hardest one of all, striving for justice and peace. All of those are reminders that we are a work in progress, that as followers are of Jesus we know of the difference and we work into the difference between “I forgive you” and “I am forgiving you.” Amen.

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