

During the season of Easter, as we continue learning to see our lives & the world in light of the risen Jesus, let me invite you to turn your eyes to **the Gospel windows** (first shall be last; last shall be first). Each of the gospels have a different animal or character (explain). Luke is the only one who gives us a sequel in the book of Acts. Every year we read Acts during the season of Easter. What we learn today is that the *sequel to the Resurrection includes suffering*. That's surprising bc the Gospels end with triumph. They end with the defeat of death. Easter is the most festive day at church in the entire year. So without the sequel we might be tempted to see Easter as one more conquest or triumph. We find triumph, for sure, in Acts but not the kind we expect.

There's a formula in the book of Acts for the way that *witnesses* of the risen Jesus spread their message. It happens in ever-expanding circles from Jerusalem, Judea (South Shore), Samaria (North Shore), to ends of the Earth. That's how the witnesses of Jesus are going to spread as we're told by Jesus himself in the 1st ch of Acts. Then we hear the formula **sneak into the narrative**, but we'll miss it if we're not paying attention. One of the reasons we can miss it is bc it doesn't happen like we expect. Sure, large crowds gather. Sure, large numbers are added to the group of Christians. But when Luke wants us to hear how it spread -- he almost always includes persecution & suffering (Acts 8.1-2).

Now, that's a surprise. **Think about how you'd spread a message** if you had something really important to share. How would you do it? Targeted marketing. Refined messages. You'd tap into the best resources available -- from social media to glossy mailers. And there's nothing wrong with that. People have been finding & joining the

church with great production value for 2,000 years. But our surprise during Easter is that Xsty spread, I mean it took off in the ancient world, in the midst of suffering. According to one theologian, one of the “primary” messages in Acts is that, “persecution leads to a broadening of the [Christian] base.”¹ And here's the really interesting thing: that **suffering comes with joy**. In the chs. leading up to today's reading, we hear that the apostles, “rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of [Jesus'] name,” (Acts 5:41).

Suffering is the surprising sequel to the Resurrection of Jesus & his defeat of death. That's what leads us to the story of the **martyrdom of St. Stephen**. Now, let me invite you to turn your eyes to the stained glass windows in the All Saints Chapel (last shall be last, first shall be first). Here we find Stephen kneeling in agony; suffering in the face of his death. And we don't hear it in today's reading but Stephen is basically getting stoned for a sermon. That's what happens right before they kill him. He preached. And he let 'em have it. It's been said that any struggling “preachers should take some comfort here. If their congregations merely complain or fire them, at least they do not stone them.”²

The important thing for us is this. Stephen's death is described in a way that **mirrors Jesus in the closest possible fashion**. If we look at the imagery in today's passage, we can even see that the stoning of Stephen mirrors **the baptism of Jesus**. He's filled with the Spirit, and the heavens are opened to reveal the glory of God & the person of Jesus. It's a baptism scene, except here we're invited to see that Stephen, the

¹ *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, vol. 2, 453.

² *Ibid.*, 448.

first martyr of the Church, is baptized into the death of Jesus. That's one of the hallmarks of early Christianity. As we hear from Paul in Romans: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (Romans 6:3). Baptism into the death of Jesus how we explain the surprise of suffering in the sequel to the Resurrection. But our suffering doesn't lead to our shame. It leads to resurrection with Jesus. Or again, from St. Paul, "if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." (Rom 6:5).

Suffering in the book of Acts is about following the way of Jesus. It's about being united with the life of Jesus. If you remember the baptism of Jesus, right after he's baptized & filled with God's Spirit with the heavens parted to reveal the glory of God; right after that each of the Gospels use some surprising language; even violent language. After his baptism Matt, Mark & Luke each tell us that Jesus was "cast out" to be tempted in the desert for 40 days & 40 nights. Jesus is cast out with the same roughness that he "casts out" demons from other people. And we find a similar kind of parallel today with Stephen in Acts. At the baptism of Jesus, the voice of God speaks from heaven. At the stoning of Stephen, the crowds "covered their ears" and rushed against him. At the baptism of Jesus, he's cast into the wilderness. At the stoning of Stephen, he's "dragged" out of the city and killed by an angry mob. The last 2 verses of our reading from Acts echo Jesus on the cross: committing himself to God (echoing today's Psalm, 31:5) and praying forgiveness for his executioners. We get baptism & death in a few short verses.

The big question is *why*. Why was it important for these early Christians to see

such a tight connection between baptism, suffering & death? I think it has everything to do with the way they witnessed to Jesus. It's about their identity as the continuing presence of Jesus in the world; as the body of Jesus in the world. After all, the temptation Jesus faced after his baptism in the wilderness was about using his status & his identity. Three times a tempter confronts him with a challenge. "If you are the Son of God..." make bread, throw yourself from the temple, take command of some armies. But each time, Jesus rejects the temptation to use his divine status or identity to serve himself. Each time, he entrusts himself to God. "Into your hands, O Lord, I commit my spirit."

That's what we're invited to see in the suffering of the early Christians. We're invited to see them entrusting themselves to God as they follow the risen Jesus and continue spreading his presence in the world. We're invited to see **Stephen as the first one whose embodies the "way" of Jesus in both his life and death**; Stephen, whose life "stood out among the believers" for exceptional grace & power. Stephen is the first one who embodies the way of Jesus in both his life & death. Because as we hear in John's Gospel: the "way" of Jesus is utterly unique.

In the Gospel Jesus tells his followers, *You know the way to the place where I am going...* Thomas says, *How can we know the way?...* Jesus says, *I am the way... No one comes to the Father except through me; my way...* This "way" of Jesus; a way that maintains deep assurance - even joy - in the midst of suffering is unique in the history of the world.

It's unique because it doesn't put God in the place of a big **bully** (cf. Iliad)

It's unique because it doesn't reduce our lives to a kind of temporary *inconvenience* until our souls escape (cf. death of Socrates).

It's unique because it doesn't call *judgment* on our persecutors (Maccabees).

The way of Jesus holds together deep trust in the midst of our suffering. Not because we believe our God is a bigger bully. Not because we believe this life is merely a shadow. Not even because we have the hope of future judgment against our enemies. But because Jesus has revealed his way as the path that overcomes the power of any death; both the death of our hopes or dreams in this life, and also the death of our bodies in the grave. That's why suffering & joy have such a close connection for the early Christians. Bc paradoxically, their suffering reveals how the way of Jesus is stronger than the way of violence, oppression, or persecution. I wonder if it's also what Jesus meant when he told his followers that they would do greater works than he -- because he's going to the Father. I wonder if he meant that, sustained by the gift of God's Spirit, God's people across the globe through time & space would continue embodying the way of Jesus; the way of life-giving love in the midst of any suffering, oppression, or pain; entrusting themselves to the God of our faith.

Maybe this "way" of Jesus also help us understand that last phrase in the Gospel about asking anything "in my name". Asking in the "name" of Jesus means asking in the "way" of Jesus. We ask in the way of his same spirit; the spirit that loves enemies in the midst of suffering; the spirit of entrusting ourselves to God whenever we're tempted to use our status to simply satisfy ourselves or to conquer others. If we ask anything in the

spirit or “way” of Jesus' self-giving love -- God will sustain us.

And here's good news: we're never invited to do it alone. We're never invited to simply grit our teeth, clench our fists, and somehow try really hard to live the “way” of Jesus by ourselves. We're invited to live this “way” as we're built into a community; or what 1 Peter describes as living stones built into a spiritual house, a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices (1Pet. 2.5). It's a great image for Mother's Day. He says “like newborn infants, long for pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation - if you have tasted that the Lord is good,” (1Pet. 2.2-3). He says, *Together* we are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a nation; so that *together* we may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into light.

You see, if we're going to be witnesses to the risen Jesus, one of the messages of Scripture is that we need each other to see Jesus in our midst. If we're going to **witness** to the risen Jesus we need to **see** the risen Jesus. And if we're going to **see** the risen Jesus alive and working in our midst then we need to see him at work in each other; week-by-week as we gather for fellowship & prayer, the breaking of bread & the sharing of the cup. The sequel of the Resurrection that we find in the book of Acts is about the way God uses individuals for the transformation of the world — from Jerusalem & Judea, to Samaria & the ends of the earth. It's about the way God looks at utterly diverse and even opposing people and says, “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,” (1Pet. 2.10). It's a surprising journey of resurrection & hope in the midst of any suffering or pain.

Brother, Give Us A Word:

“Joy will not spare you of suffering, nor did it Jesus. We are not spared the cross; we’re shared the cross... but also the joy that follows. Joy will give you a place in your heart to be well, to be passionately alive, even amidst the changes and chances and sufferings of your life.” -Br. Curtis Almquist, Society of Saint John the Evangelist