

# *South Buxton and Talbot Street Pastoral Charges*

*Fifth Sunday of Easter – May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023*

**Prelude:** by Christie Coatsworth

## **Welcome & Announcements:**

Thank you for your support of all our past services, which are posted on our websites - [Southbuxton.ca](http://Southbuxton.ca) and [Talbotstreet.ca](http://Talbotstreet.ca)

## **Lighting of the Christ Candle:**

### **Call to Worship:**

**Eric:** Like the multi-hued pebbles gathered onto a beach, we come from many places.

**People:** Like river stones, smooth from life's surges or chipped in the world's torrents, so we come worn and wounded.

**Eric:** Like precious stones, chosen, crafted and valued, so we come, cared about and loved by God.

**People:** Like the stones of a building, so God brings us together.

**Eric:** Come, as living stones, into God's presence and worship!

### **Opening Hymn:** VU 421 "Lead On, O Cloud of Presence"

Lead on, O cloud of Presence, the exodus is come.  
In wilderness and desert our tribe shall make its home.  
Our slavery left behind us,  
new hopes within us grow.  
We seek the land of promise where milk and honey flow.

Lead on, O fiery Pillar, we follow yet with fears,  
but we shall come rejoicing though joy be born of tears.  
We are not lost, though wandering,  
for by your light we come,  
and we are still God's people. The journey is our home.

Lead on, O God of freedom, and guide us on our way,  
and help us trust the promise through struggle and delay.  
We pray our sons and daughters  
may journey to that land  
where justice dwells with mercy, and love is law's demand.\*\*

### **Opening Prayer:**

**People:** Creator, you have shaped a place for us made of love and held in grace. It is filled with the whispers of the ancients who followed you and sculpted our faith. Breathe into this place again, that we may know your way, your truth, and your life. Amen.

## **Children's Story & Lord's Prayer:**

### **Children's Hymn: VU 356 "Seek Ye First the Kingdom..."**

Seek ye first the kingdom of God  
and God's righteousness,  
and all these things shall be added unto you.  
Hallelu, hallelujah.

Ask and it shall be given unto you;  
seek and you shall find;  
knock and the door shall be opened unto you.  
Hallelu, hallelujah.

We do not live by bread alone,  
but by every word  
that proceeds from the mouth of God.  
Hallelu, hallelujah. \*\*

### **Scripture: Acts 7: 55 - 60**

**But Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit. He looked toward heaven, where he saw our glorious God and Jesus standing at his right side. Then Stephen said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right side of God!" The council members shouted and covered their ears. At once they all attacked Stephen and dragged him out of the city. Then they started throwing stones at him. The men who had brought charges against him put their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. As Stephen was being stoned to death, he called out, "Lord Jesus, please welcome me!" He knelt down and shouted, "Lord, don't blame them for what they have done." Then he died.**

### **Reflection: "Letting Go in Faith"**

Stephen's story is the first story we hear of the death of a martyr for Jesus. Stephen's death follows the similar path as Jesus' death with words of "Take me Jesus", "Forgive them, they do not know what they have done." We talked last week of how the wider community challenged the early church in ways that defined and refined the early church. This story is of inter-faith tensions that persecuted the early church. On the sidelines was a young man named Saul.

We move from the early Christian community enjoying the "goodwill of all", to the push back that the apostles and the early church was experiencing. In the next chapter after last week's idealist early church, we read that Jewish leaders came to Peter and John "annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead". The leaders ordered Peter and John to cease their witness. Peter and John did not stop, and the number of Jews

who believed Jesus was God's Messiah continued to grow. A chapter later, there is an account of the growing tension between these two groups within the Jewish community. As the Body of Christ grew, the disciples appointed elders – individuals to care for the physical needs of the members. One such individual was Stephen.

In the chapter before our story today, we learn that Stephen “did great wonders and signs” and spoke with “wisdom and the Spirit.” The temple leaders charged Stephen with blasphemy – showing contempt or a lack of respect for God. According to Leviticus, this charge was punishable by death. Stephen stands trial and defends his witness in a fiery sermon, recorded in the first part of chapter 7 in Acts. In today's story, we hear that Stephen has stopped speaking, and the stage is set for the sentence for the charge of blasphemy.

Today's story starts with Stephen facing his executioners. Stephen “gazes into heaven” and “saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.” This is the Easter message embodied: Christ reigns in glory. Those who heard this covered their ears to block out what were, to them, words of blasphemy.

Then we hear the parallel between Stephen's dying words and Jesus' dying words. Stephen entrusts his spirit to the resurrected Christ. Like Jesus, Stephen prays that his executioners' sins not be held against them. We might wonder what effect these words of forgiveness may have had upon those who took up the stones to kill another. What effect may have these words of forgiveness have upon the young man who held their coats, known in this story as “Saul”? We know that Saul raged passionate persecution upon the leaders of the early church. Then we remember the story of Saul on the road to Damascus, going to the town to straighten out the early church leaders in Damascus. Saul is blinded on the road, visited by Jesus, converts to follow Jesus versus persecuting his followers, and Paul himself becomes a faithful leader and witness for Christ.

The story of Stephen is part of the enduring witness of the early followers of Jesus. The story of the early church takes a turn in the next chapter as from persecution the early Jerusalem church scatters to outlying areas. But very soon, those who are scattered begin to preach, and the gospel message disperses.

We have been jumping around the first seven chapters of Acts this morning to determine who Stephen is, and why “they” want to silence Stephen, by stoning him to death. It is important to know the rest of the story.

We as the modern day Christian Church can see ways that we are silenced today. Maybe not so much with power against us, but by the lack of power we hold today in Canada as fewer and fewer Canadians follow in Jesus' way. At one time the moderator of the United Church of Canada was an adviser to the Prime Minister of Canada on issues of faith, justice and ethical issues. Not so much today. When the moderator gets the audience of the Prime Minister today, it is because we as the United Church are protesting some unfair government policy.

Do you remember the saying we used on the playgrounds when we were in school? "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." That may be true, but in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century we have discovered that names do hurt us. Social Media name calling and "putting down" have been instrumental in many deaths of young adults. We in today's society still struggle with racism, sexism, ableism, classism, and ageism. Words can hurt and sometimes break our spirits, leading to different kinds of death. Even our Canadian Armed Forces dispense "justice" in the name of "freedom" and "peace."

Where have we as the Church dispensed justice in the name of freedom and peace? We in the United Church in Canada have a tainted past – even if we thought 90 years ago we were doing the right thing – the Christian thing. In today's society we would not allow those injustices to be done.

Today's reading in Acts is one of many with its cruelty of humanity done in the "name of God." Those who heard Stephen's discourse on scripture – his sermon – were enraged when it convicted them of the wrong ways of the ancestors in faith. They covered their ears in fear of contamination of what they heard as blasphemy and then hurried to silence the one who accused them.

When do we silence those today whose words hit too close to home? Or we do not feel they have a right to judge what we do? Or they are not of the social standing that would allow us to hear them? It is tough to hear that the food you are offering in the Food Bank is not healthy for their family – or its always the same food, can of pork and beans and Kraft Dinner. Or when the women who were pregnant and sent out of their community to Covenant House in Toronto to have their baby, which was put up for adoption, and today they say we didn't have a choice?

When are we like Saul standing idly standing by holding the cloaks and watching?

Today's story of Stephen and other martyrs throughout time challenge us not to hold back, but to get out there and proclaim God's love for all and to offer forgiveness to our accusers. We are being challenged in our own commitment to Jesus' way as we think about the circumstances surrounding Stephen, the first martyr. Not many of us are called to the ultimate test of surrendering our lives, as Stephen did. Yet we are all called to trust God and listen to the hurting world around us with open hearts and minds. We are not alone. God is always with us. Thanks be to God.

**Reflection Hymn: VU 344 "How Sweet the Name..."**

How sweet the name of Jesus sounds  
in a believer's ear!  
It soothes the sorrows, heals the wounds,  
and drives away all fear.

It makes the wounded spirit whole,  
and calms the troubled breast;  
'tis manna to the hungry soul,  
and to the weary, rest.

Dear Name! the rock on which I build,  
my shield and hiding-place,  
my never-failing treasury, filled  
with boundless stores of grace.

Jesus, my Shepherd, Brother, Friend,  
my Prophet, Priest, and King,  
my Lord, my Life, my Way, my End,  
accept the praise I bring.

The effort of my heart is weak,  
and cold my warmest thought;  
but when I see you whom I seek,  
I'll praise you as I ought. \*\*

**Invitation to Share Our Gifts:**

**Eric:** As we celebrate Christ's resurrection, we also celebrate that as we share Christ's Resurrection, we also share the ministry of Jesus, helping the poor, visiting the lonely, healing the sick and caring for all of creation. Let us give, according to our faith.

**Offertory: VU 541 "Praise God From Whom..."**

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;  
Praise Him, all creatures here below;

Praise Him above ye heavenly host;  
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

**Offertory Prayer:**

**People: We listen with God, to the hurts and pains of this world. We are paying attention to where love is needed. Take these material stones to remember that you are alive in God's love and called to offer mercy and grace. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.**

**Chorus to Prayer: MV 121 "Hey Now! Singing Hallelujah**

Hey now! Singing hallelujah!  
Hey now! The morning has come!  
Hey now! Singing hallelujah!  
The tomb was empty at the rising sun.

**Pastoral Prayer:**

**Closing Hymn: VU 238 "How Great Thou Art"**

O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder  
consider all the works thy hand hath made,  
I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder,  
thy power throughout the universe displayed.

*Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to thee,  
How great thou art! How great thou art!  
Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to thee,  
How great thou art! How great thou art!*

When through the woods and forest glades I wander,  
I hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;  
when I look down from lofty mountain grandeur  
and hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze. R

But when I think that God, his Son not sparing,  
sent him to die, I scarce can take it in,  
that on the cross, my burden gladly bearing,  
he bled and died to take away my sin. R

When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation  
and take me home, what joy shall fill my heart!  
Then I shall bow in humble adoration  
and there proclaim, 'My God, how great thou art!' R \*\*

**Benediction:**

**Eric: Go to live in God's way - in the name of Christ and the power of the Spirit, now and forever more!**

**Closing Chorus: VU 884 “You Shall Go Out With Joy”**

You shall go out with joy  
and be led forth with peace;  
the mountains and the hills  
will break forth before you;  
there'll be shouts of joy,  
and all the trees of the field  
will clap, will clap their hands!

And all the trees of the field will clap their hands,  
(clap, clap)  
the trees of the field will clap their hands,  
(clap, clap)  
the trees of the field will clap their hands  
(clap, clap)  
while you go out with joy.

**Amen, Amen, Amen.** *(5 Part Amen)*

**Postlude:** – Christie Coatsworth

**Prayers:** - Please include these people in your prayers this week.

We have offered prayer for these people each Sunday morning just before the Zoom Service.  
It was suggested to share these names with the total group – as “In the Spirit We Are One”.

**Cancer:**

**Carol  
Cheryl  
Susan  
Barb  
Margie  
Marcus  
Ingrid  
Jerry  
  
Larry  
Kerigan  
Ken  
Natalie  
Ruth  
Dave  
Marj**

**Sue  
Evelyn  
  
Richard and Evelyn  
Elaine  
  
Gary  
Janet  
Tracey  
Abby  
David  
Cleveland Family**