

Theme: Our end is only a transition

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, you are with us in this life and in the next; we give you thanks and praise for your loving-kindness that transcends all that may befall us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

So, here we are, left behind. Did anyone have any friends or relatives disappear yesterday? As far as I know, everyone I know is still here. I also failed to see any hell and brimstone on my way to church this morning.

Remember when as a kid teams were picked and nobody wanted to be the last one picked? What can be worse than the last one picked? To be not picked at all. That would be all of us.

Harold Camping of Oakland has a radio show on which he predicted for the second time the rapture of the righteous, leaving the rest to burn in hell. This might be strike two. I first saw Harold Camping on a Sunday night when we lived in Yuba City and I was clicking through the cable channels. He was going on and on about what the Book of Revelation is saying. Except what he was saying Revelation was saying is not what Revelation says. So, I continued clicking.

When asked why his prediction of the rapture for yesterday was accurate when his previous prediction was wrong, Camping said that he failed to carefully examine the Book of Jeremiah. Now that he has done so, he is convinced that he has the day right.

Harold Camping uses a complex set of number values that he seems to have made up himself. He starts his calculations with the date of the flood in Genesis. He dates the flood to 4990 BC. Then doing a lot of ciphering with his imaginary numbers he comes up with May 21, 2011 as judgment day and October 21, 2011 as the end of the world.

Of course, there is no geologic evidence of a world-wide flood. And if there was a world-wide flood where did all that water go? Certainly, when you are in the midst of a cataclysmic flood, it seems like the end of the world. There were several cataclysmic floods in the Middle East in ancient times. They

probably thought it was the end of the world. Certainly for the people of the Mississippi River Valley, it seems like the end of their world.

The other problem is that there is no biblical warrant for a rapture. The people who believe there will be a rapture take various verses of the Bible and put them together to prove their own assumptions. Using this method, the Bible can support anything you want.

The third problem is what Jesus says. Jesus was very clear that when the end times come we will not know the day or the hour. In fact, Jesus might even take offense at Harold Camping for his trying to outwit Jesus. When Camping's judgment day comes, he will need to work that out with Jesus.

What we do know is that Jesus is with God and people have seen that with their own two eyes. We don't need to wait for a judgment day to know this. Our first reading from Acts emphasizes Stephen seeing the Son of Man in heaven at the end of his trial before the religious authorities.

It is interesting to note that the religious authorities had no problem executing Stephen when the same authorities claimed to have no authority to execute Jesus. Perhaps something changed politically or it really was the Romans who were intent on executing Jesus. The Romans were likely in cahoots with the religious authorities to bring about Jesus' death.

Stephen was blessed with the gift ecstatic visions. There are others who also had this gift and many of them wrote down their visions of what they saw and heard from God and particularly Jesus. We also have Old Testament stories of people who have these kinds of experiences. This is a rare gift. All of us have gifts given to us by God. God expects us to use those gifts to help bring about the kingdom of God.

But for our purposes today in Easter season, Stephen saw the Son of Man at the right hand of God. Well, what does this mean? Since Luke did not record details of what Stephen saw and Stephen may not have provided details, we can't know exactly what he saw.

The "Son of Man," in Greek, literally means the son of humanity. This could be any male. Perhaps it once referred to humanity as a whole. By the time of

the first century, it became an apocalyptic term. It is first mentioned in the Book of Daniel. When the Son of Man comes, it will be the end times.

We do know that this was the last straw for the religious authorities. They were so angry at this vision that they skipped past Stephen's sentencing and went directly to his execution. To have a being next to God implies there is more than one God. This is blasphemy. The penalty for blasphemy is death.

What were the charges against Stephen that caused his arrest and trial? But before that, who was Stephen anyway?

Early in Acts, the apostles are running the show. It was a mixed community of Jewish and Gentile converts. The Gentile widows were not being looked after in the food distribution and the Gentiles complained to the apostles for this oversight. The apostles determined that overseeing everything was too much for them and they delegated the care of the Gentile widows to seven men. These men we think are the first deacons in the church. Stephen was one of them. This left the apostles more time for prayer and meditation.

These deacons did more than distribute food. They did significant acts in helping to grow the church. Stephen began speaking publically about his faith. He garnered much attention and praise for his words. Stephen may have also performed miracles. When trying to teach the men of a synagogue about Jesus superseding the law, Stephen was accused of blasphemy. False witnesses were paid. Stephen defended himself admirably. Then he had his vision.

St. Stephen's feast day is December 26th and so we are usually not here to hear about him. In Acts, Stephen is described as one "full of faith and the Holy Spirit."

While they were stoning him, those responsible laid their coats at Saul's feet. It takes a lot of rocks to kill someone. It takes work, so much so that it is easier for arm strength and for comfort from body heat to take an executioner's coat off. To give them to Saul is to acknowledge Saul's authority for approving this death sentence.

When Stephen realizes that his life is ebbing, he repeats the words that Jesus said from the cross before Jesus' death. Violence is met with grace. Revenge

is met with forgiveness. Stephen's witness of grace at his death is the greatest witness a Christian can ever do. Those who condemned Stephen instead become the condemned. After this, Christians are persecuted and they flee Jerusalem.

The unintended consequence of this persecution and scattering is that the gospel is spread out to wider area. More people hear the story of Jesus.

This Saul, who approved Stephen's execution, went on to seek out and arrest other Christians. He even went as far as Damascus. While on the way, Saul was struck down and blinded by Jesus. Saul recovered and changed his name to its Greek version, Paul. He then became the greatest Christian theologian in history, St. Paul.

Stephen's life and death serves as a reminder of God's faithfulness for those who are in the midst of their own troubles. The Christian movement is tied to God's ultimate victory in Jesus. We are able to forgive in the image of God's victorious love.

Though many of us may never be asked to die for our faith, our faith still calls us to measure our priorities, to take a stand, and to express our beliefs through action. For those of us in this position, Stephen's story is still very much a relevant model of faithfulness and obedience.

Even if we missed the Judgment Day, whenever our end on this earth comes, we have life and have it abundantly. Our future is with God. This planet is not important to us in the long run. In the short run, we are to care for the earth: for those who come after us and for God. God's love for us transcends all that we know.

Text: **Acts 7:55–60** (NRSV)

⁵⁵ But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ "Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" ⁵⁷ But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. ⁵⁸ Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my

spirit.”⁶⁰ Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he died.^{k 1}

^k Gk *fell asleep*

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Ac 7:55–60). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.