

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Easter 4 – May 12th and 15th, 2011

Acts 7:51-60

“You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it.”

When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Can you think of the worst day in your life? Maybe it was a day where just about everything that could go wrong actually went wrong. Maybe it was the day you lost your job, or something happened to one of your major possessions such as your house or car. Maybe it was a day that there was a terrible accident in your life or in the life of your family. It could have something to do with a diagnosis of a life-threatening disease. Maybe it was the death of someone near and dear to your heart. I would venture to say that most if not all of us here today have had one of those types of days that are vividly etched into our hearts and minds – a day we just want to forget.

This morning as we look at one of God's servants name Stephen, we can see that he was having one of those so called “worst” days. It was day that he most certainly would not want to repeat. Earthly speaking it was plain and simple a horrible day. I'm sure that it started out like many other days in his life, but it ended in way that seems very tragic. But was it really a tragic day? As we look at these words from Acts chapter 7, we soon realize on this Good Shepherd Sunday that Stephen had nothing to worry and that we living in this sinful world most definitely have nothing to worry about because:.

Theme: The Lord Is My Shepherd.

- 1. On my worst day**
- 2. On my last day**

Who was Stephen? He was a Jewish man who was the first man whom the first Christians in Jerusalem chose to help the apostles, not long after Jesus rose from the dead, ascended back into heaven and sent the Spirit in dramatic fashion on Pentecost. The Apostles needed help, the Christians chose seven Greek-speaking Jewish men, and the first on the list was Stephen, a man Luke first describes as **“full of faith and the Holy Spirit,”** then describes as **“full of God's grace and power,”** so that he did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. Some Jewish men tried to oppose Stephen, but verbally, **“they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke”**. Stephen didn't just know Psalm 23, see. He most likely knew the

Scriptures backwards and forwards. He knew that he was a sinner, and Jesus as the Messiah came to save lost sinners like him. The Scriptures strengthened Stephen and all who believed the Scriptures.

So those who wouldn't admit that Jesus died and rose again got Stephen arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling congress and supreme court. They accused Stephen of saying that Jesus would destroy the massive, impressive stone temple complex where they met on the northeast side of the city of Jerusalem. And when Stephen's face started shining like that of an angel, did they quit? No! They feared losing their power over the Jewish people and they were greedy for more power, wealth and human glory, so it didn't matter what the Bible said, or how thoroughly, knowledgeable and respectfully Stephen spoke about Israel's history and God's plan for God's holy temple among them.

When Stephen, completely convinced them that Jesus lives and that these men had been responsible for his death, they became more angry. When Stephen convinced them that the temple curtain being ripped in two when Jesus died proved that Jesus was the priest of God's people, and the chief priests and their sacrifices and the temple itself weren't necessary any more, they became even more angry if that was possible. Their hearts were not eager to hear the truth. Their hearts led them to ignore the truth that Stephen was preaching to them.

Stephen knew this as he yelled at them: **“You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it.”** You might ask yourselves, Doesn't he know they could try to kill him for saying such stuff? The truth is that he doesn't care. The Lord is his Shepherd. Stephen has no fear.

1. On my worst day

What about these men? Couldn't they have all recited not just Psalm 23 from memory, and maybe even most or all of the psalms from memory? They're rich, religious rulers. So can't they each say, “The Lord is my Shepherd”? Stephen says, no! They're not God's sheep, they're stubborn mules. They're stiff-necked brutes. They're not meek sheep. They're brutal killers. But, don't you earn the right to say, “The Lord is my Shepherd” if you're religious, or rich or ruling or right?

No, that's not what the Bible teaches and Stephen would show this to the wicked people. “The Lord is my Shepherd” is the faith and hope not of the bold and the beautiful, but of the bothered and troubled and betrayed, the ones who logically should be afraid. Luke says when the Sanhedrin heard Stephen, they were furious. They ground their teeth at him. They were stiff-necked just like he said. Stephen and all the Sanhedrin had to know that “stiff-necked” is what the Lord had told Moses on top of Mount Sinai that all the people below were, the people who went wild and worshiped the golden calf. He even went so far as to call them “uncircumcised.” He was trying to point out that they were no better than the Roman Gentiles who ruled over the country and Jerusalem.

Yet, Stephen kept saying, practically, “The Lord is my Shepherd.” He had such a comforting peace. Full of the Holy Spirit, he stared up, and somehow he could see God's glory, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God the Father. “Look!” he said, “I see the skies opened wide, and the Son of Man standing at God's right!” The Son of Man! That's who Jesus said he was, in this very Sanhedrin chamber, the night these same men had their kangaroo court to convict Jesus of blasphemy and send him off to Pilate to be crucified.

No more of this madness! They screamed! They shouted! They held their ears tight and they rushed at

him, all together, with one purpose in mind. They threw him out of the city. They threw rocks at Stephen, and they kept throwing rocks at him, but before we get to what all happened with that, think about what would define the very worst day of your life.

So let's back everything up just a moment. We can say, "The Lord is my Shepherd"— from the very *first* day of your life. You're no accident, the day you're conceived, or the day you're born. You're a marvel, practically a miracle. You're tiny, you're soft, you're new, you're beautiful, you have fingerprints and a personality that nobody else in the world has. And very shortly after that the Holy Spirit entered your heart at Baptism and changed everything. Jesus became our personal Good Shepherd and we were one of his flock. The Lord was so good, so hands-on. The Lord was your Shepherd.

But what seems easy to see on the first days of your life seems impossible to see on the worst day of your life, doesn't it? Wouldn't the worst day of your life look a lot like this day, for Stephen? The worst things I can imagine would be 1) to be in terrible physical pain, with no likely way out, like Stephen getting all those stones thrown at him, bruising and ripping his skin and breaking his bones; and 2) to be surrounded by enemies, with no way to escape; and 3) to be completely misunderstood by people that should be on my side, and threatened and screamed at; and 4) to logically be full of fear and utter hopelessness, since realistically it can't get better.

But Stephen still seems to think the Lord is his Shepherd, here, doesn't he? And you can still say, not just on your first days, but on your worst day, "the Lord is my Shepherd"— why? Because Jesus lives, and Jesus rules in your hearts and lives. Jesus is at the right hand of God right now. He is totally equal with the Father, as he has been from all eternity, in all power and majesty. Even if others attack me, I don't need to be afraid. The Lord is my Shepherd. All I need I already have, by God's gift alone, bought by Jesus' blood alone.

2. On my last day

Back to Stephen's story, then. It's ironic. Inside the part of the temple, under a roof, Stephen somehow saw heaven open. Now he's outside, and it doesn't seem the vision of heaven continues, though the only thing above him is the sky. He no longer sees Jesus. Vicious men are throwing rocks at Stephen and he's going to die, clearly, in the ugliest way, in a mangled mess of blood. So does Stephen duck and crouch? I think anyone getting stoned to death would naturally try to cover his face to ward off the blows, but what struck me as I reread this story over and over this past week, even though I've read it many times before, is that we read Stephen prayed, "**Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.**" Then he bent his knees, and he cried out, more loudly, evidently, "**Lord, do not hold this sin against them.**" Then he died. He fell asleep.

You mean, they were pelting him with the biggest, sharpest rocks they could find, and he kept standing, even as he knew he was dying? He was standing during the stoning as he prayed, "**Lord Jesus, receive my spirit**"? Yes. No fear. The Lord is his Shepherd.

The day you and I die, we probably won't have a vision of heaven, but the truth here that Stephen not only saw Jesus in heaven, not only saw Jesus on the Father's right in heaven, but he saw Jesus *standing* in heaven— isn't that the best antidote to both fear, not only today, but on the worst day of our life, and on the last day of our life here? Jesus is *standing*. He's not sitting, relaxed. He's not lounging in heaven, with his feet up. He's the Good Shepherd. He's watching everything. He's guarding. He's actively ruling. Do good shepherds lollygag and lounge, as their frightened sheep bleat and scatter, as even death seems imminent? The day we die our Good Shepherd will not stop it, because he won't want us to stay any more in this wicked world. But he will

be in control of it all. He will *stand*, loved ones.

In contrast to which, as we close, Stephen's double fall says it all. First he falls to his knees. Then he falls completely to the ground in death. But he has prayed, and Jesus has heard. To his dying breath, Jesus kept Stephen's faith and courage up. No fear. "The Lord is my Shepherd."

And this he will do for you, too. If you die today or tomorrow, do you know how many people will die the same day as you? The U.S. Census Department says world-wide 151,729 people die every day. 6,322 people die every hour. 105 people die every minute. Don't they all become a big jumble in God's mind? Nope. Won't God be too busy to care for you as you die? Nope. In our Risen Savior we know God's heart. Jesus lives. Whether tomorrow is an average day, or your worst day, or your last day, Jesus' power cannot fail and his promises cannot fail. Jesus lives and reigns. No fear! I already have all I need. "The Lord is my Shepherd." Amen.