

SERMON TEXT FOR EASTER 5A

PREACHED MAY 14, 2017 AT ZION LUTHERAN, ENOLA PA

TEXTS: Acts 7.55-60; Psalm 31.1-5, 15-16; 1 Peter 2.2-10; John 14.1-14

Good guys and bad guys. Dark forces vs. The Empire. Law enforcement vs. the gangsters. Good and evil. This is the stuff of almost every **action** movie, be it a western or sci-fi. We **root** for the good guys, the positive forces, for **goodness** to win out over evil.

Surprisingly, the **Bible** has these kinds of stories too! Today's lesson, from the 7th chapter of Acts, is a story about **two opposing forces**. In this instance, **Stephen** is the white-hatted "good guy" and the **bad** guy is - **surprisingly, Saul** who became **Paul**, one of the greatest missionaries of all time.

So, first a little **background** on Stephen, since all we read about in today's lesson is of his **death**. Not long after Jesus' death, when Christians were trying to carry on Jesus' legacy, the twelve apostles realized that they needed help administering the day-to-day operation of the church. They directed the church to select "*seven men of good report, full of the Holy Spirit and of wisdom*" for this task. One of the men chosen was **Stephen**, described as "*a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.*"

The early Christian community chose him to take care of the money used to care for the widows, orphans and poor people, and to feed the hungry. But Stephen seemed destined for **more** than waiting tables or counting change.

As scripture records, "*Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.*" But some of his fellow Christians apparently became **jealous** of Stephen, and tried to **argue** with him. "*But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke.*" So a few of them got other people **stirred up**. They **confronted** Stephen, **seized** him, and brought him before the council, accusing him of speaking "*blasphemous words against Moses and God.*" They set up **false witnesses** against him. Yet all that the Council saw was that Stephen's face was "*like the face of an angel.*"

Asked whether the charges were **true**, Stephen responded by preaching a sermon that recounted a good deal of Jewish history. He closed his sermon by **turning against the crowd**.

"You stiff necked, inflexible people. You people are hard hearted and your hearts are not soft to God. You people have wax in your ears and you don't hear the words of God. You people, your fathers persecuted the prophets, and now you betrayed and killed the Messiah. You people, you are the ones who killed Jesus."

Well, Stephen's bluntness made everybody **angry** (no surprise there!). And to make a long story short, the Jewish leaders took Stephen outside the

town, threw him into a **pit** and started to throw **stones** at him. This was the **normal** way the Jews executed people: throw that person into a pit and throw rocks until that person was dead.

While they were stoning Stephen, he **prayed**, "*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.*" 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**.

Much of Stephen's death parallels that of Jesus: from Stephen being **attacked** by an angry crowd, **put on trial falsely** and taken **outside the city**, to his **last words** pleading to God for mercy for those who had wronged him. Instead of **hatred** for his killers Stephen, like Jesus, **prayed** for their **forgiveness**. Stephen was the first person to **die** for his belief in Jesus. He is considered the first **Christian martyr**.

So, we've heard **one side** of the story. But what of the "bad guy" in today's story? Well, as I said, that moniker belongs to **Saul**, who would become **Paul**. **Saul**, a devout Jew, had never **met** Jesus, but he had received a letter of permission from the Jewish authorities to arrest and imprison newly converted Christians in Damascus. Saul was present at Stephen's death. In fact, the witnesses laid their coats at his feet. "*And Saul approved of their killing [Stephen].*"

Saul, who had studied the law, believed fervently that by **opposing** this **Christian movement** he was **upholding** and **adhering** to the Law of Moses. **As zealous for the risen Lord as was Stephen, so was Saul for the Law.**

Saul did not **know** it yet, but soon he would turn God's witness and become one of the **good guys**. On his way to Damascus to imprison those newly-converted Christians, Saul was overcome by a bright light, blinded, and heard the voice of Jesus asking Saul why he was harassing him.

Saul changed his **way of living**, changed his **name** to Paul, and became the **greatest missionary** we have ever seen in the Christian church, traveling throughout most of the known world at that time.

Now, this story of **Stephen's stoning** and **Saul's witness to it** comes in **sharp contrast** to all of the **good** that the apostle Paul did to spread the news about Christ in the early church. **It's almost hard to believe that Saul and Paul were the same person.**

Yet this is how Christ can change our lives in such a dramatic way. When we are following Christ and his teachings, we will **preach boldly**. When we are following Christ and his teachings, we will **feed the hungry and care for widows**. When we are following Christ and his teachings, we will **pray for our enemies** and those who persecute us. We may not do these things in as **dramatic** a fashion as Stephen or Paul ever did, but what matters is that we **do** them. Good guy, bad guy, bad guy-turned-good-guy. Which will **we** be? AMEN