

Devotion: September 1, 2020

Acts 7:55-60

⁵⁵But 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!' ⁵⁷But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. ⁵⁸Then 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. ⁵⁹While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' ⁶⁰Then 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.

Too many of us have known the pain of disease, the loneliness of divorce, the sting of death, the agony of betrayal, the ache of rejection. There have been times in our lives when we were not having the time of our lives. We can identify with Jesuit theologian/preacher Walter Burghardt when he confesses that in his own living, "Life, at times, does seem to seal tombs, bury hopes, nail dreams to hard wood."

There are those who say there is no way out of the darkness. There are those who say that life is but a series of passing through gates of darkness. And, the darkness is getting deeper and deeper.

There are those who say we must get used to the darkness and stop searching for the light.

Then there are those who say that we had better get used to the darkness because when the dark is lit up, only more darkness is revealed.

Are We Becoming a Country of darkness?

Consider the range of rage today: rap lyrics, the hatred of foreigners, the rage between blacks and whites, the anger at cops, the no win side of "us" versus "them", red states versus blue states. Nobody needs to be reminded of the horrors of mass killings, or the violence that we inflict on each other.

It seems that hatred and darkness is on the rise, a hatred we cannot simply blame on bad economic times or political motives or a pandemic.

The Bible presents another way, an alternative to wandering forever in the dark or getting used to the dark or seeing only more dark. It is found in the biblical doctrine of hope. In the Book of Acts Stephen incarnated that hope when he looked beyond the darkness of the human evil closing in on him and perceived Christ's comforting presence near at hand.

Christians are people who refuse to live under the domination of hate and fear. Martin Luther King, Jr., taught us that no just society can be built on fear and hate. Hate is always reactionary. Christians, as Stephen so vividly demonstrated, are even called to love haters. We don't have to

like people who hate. "Liking" someone is the absolute minimal. But we are called to love the hater, even if we have to do it through clenched teeth. Liking someone is an emotional response. Loving someone is an act of the will, an act of good will, an act of God's will.

Augustine said that hope was the best of the three virtues; faith only tells us that God is; love only tells us that God is good; but hope tells us that God will work God's will.

In our reading, Stephen is a symbol of hope in the midst of a chaotic, swirling darkness of violence and madness that is corroding our minds and destroying our societies. But what hope, you may ask, is answered in Stephen's story? In fact, the blood lust raised at his stoning gains momentum and starts centuries of Christian persecution.

But Stephen turned towards the heavens, seeking the light of Jesus as the darkness closed around him. That's why Stephen was not overcome by the hatred hurled at him with every stone. Stephen's witness lasted far beyond his final personal confrontation with the darkness outside the gates of Jerusalem. Because Stephen demonstrated how all believers, no matter what their earthly status, could incarnate Christ in themselves, his martyrdom became not a tombstone, but a burning bush for the infant church. Who knows but that Stephen came to his humble position for such a time as that.

Who knows but that you are where you are for such a time as this? Who knows but that God is waiting to bless some simple act, that God is waiting in the darkness for you to appear? Who knows but that you are a sign of daybreak, the light that will signal the end of night.

As Christians we must leave our security behind. We must be willing to say and do things that will make us a target. Being a light in the darkness requires that we put everything on the line - our past, our present, our future. But "Who knows"?

God, we have heard that we are a chosen people, but sometimes we think of ourselves as nobodies. We know that you have called us out of darkness into your marvelous light, but often we hide from brightness and prefer to remain in the dark. Forgive us for failing to accept your love and your call, and help us to be your people and do your will. As persons grateful for your mercy, may we proclaim your mighty acts in our words and our deeds. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.