

“Companions of Christ”
The First Sunday after Christmas
31 December 2023
Trinity+Saint Peter’s Episcopal Church
San Francisco, California

Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3

Psalm 147

Galatians 3:23-25, 4:4-7

Saint John 1:1-18

INI

Hidden in the days of the week that follows Christmas are three days that have gone by us, forgotten by some, but very important in our understanding of Christmastide. This is to be expected. In a meme posted on FaceBook it was noted that most Christians don’t even know about these days let alone observe them. Of Christians in the United State roughly a quarter of them are Roman Catholic, less than 1 percent are Orthodox, and Anglicans and Lutherans represent together about 3 percent of the population. These are the Churches who would have known about these days and would have in some of their parish churches observed their feasts. The remainder of American Christians choose not to observe these important days – a pause in the celebration during the 12 days of Christmas which help us how to understand and to celebrate the Nativity of Our Lord. What are these days, you might ask. On December 26th we observe Saint Stephen the First Martyr, and on December 27th we honor Saint John, the author of today’s Gospel. Finally on the 28th of December we remember The Holy Innocents of Bethlehem, the children murdered by Herod’s men. I’d like to take a moment on this First Sunday after Christmas to look back and play out for you the themes of these days’ observance.

Saint Stephen, Protomartyr

I have a happy memory of this day. We were the guest of friends, a Lutheran pastor and his wife who lived in Marblehead, Massachusetts. Living with them was the husband’s father, who was also a Lutheran pastor. He was affectionately known as “Groß” short for Großpapa – Grandpapa. As he descended from the upstairs bedroom on the 26th of December, I greeted him with, “Groß, a happy Saint Stephen’s Day to you.” “Ach, ja,” he replied. “You know if he had lived, he would have been much better than Saint Paul!” I have chuckled over that comment for some 50 years or more.

Who was Stephen? Well, he was one of 70 men who were appointed as deacons, whose job it was to look after the Greek widows and orphans in the early Church. The diaconate is an office and an order that we still enjoy in these times, and this congregation has benefited from the ministry of these deacons. Jan Cazden and Nancy Pennecamp come to my mind, there have been others. Stephen performed those duties and took on another duty – that of proclaiming the Gospel, the message of God’s grace to all those whom he served in his ministry. From that service stems the custom in our

Church for the deacon, not the priest, to read the Gospel when there is a deacon present. In the second reading for this day, a reading from Acts of the Apostle, the story is told of Stephen's arrest by officials in Jerusalem to which Stephen gives a stunning sermon, proclaiming the birth and ministry of Jesus Christ. In it he has a vision of Jesus coming in glory, a completion of our Advent prayer – Maranatha, Come Lord Jesus. For this act he is stoned to death, and present at his stoning is Saul, later named Paul, a later believer in the Jesus that Stephen proclaimed.

So why is this day important? For those who go to the manger, they finally must leave and go to a ministry of feeding the widow and the orphan, and telling the message of Jesus – More than a baby, but the redeemer of the world who proclaimed God's love for all people. In a mirroring of Jesus on the Cross, Stephen also prays for those who kill him. Stephen was a martyr in will and in deed.

Saint John, the Divine and the Evangelist

In the beginning...John looks back beyond the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke. He looks back to the beginning of time. He sees present at Creation, the Spirit breathing life over the Earth, and Jesus who with the Creator engenders humankind. Matthew and Luke both connect the birth of Jesus with the events of Salvation History, the history of Israel, chosen by God.

John remembers the ministry of John the Baptist, but gives us a warning. John was not the light, but Jesus was the light, which enlightens all of humankind. What I find most moving is the moment in the Gospel when John proclaims to us, "and the Word was made Flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth." It is the custom that at that phrase the reader, either deacon or priest, kisses the Book of the Gospels, acknowledging the beauty of that verse.

John had a special relationship with Jesus. He was called the Beloved Disciple, and is pictured in the description of the Last Supper as reclining on Jesus' shoulder, a sign of their relationship. This beloved one was not to be a martyr, however. He was exiled to the island of Patmos, there to die. So he was a martyr in will but not in deed. As we honor his sharing of the Gospel, we give thanks for the message that he preserves for us.

If you have gone to the manger, you need to leave it with the message, much as Stephen did, and with the message that John informs us of, that Jesus has been a part of our world from the beginning of time, that God was made flesh in him, that he is our sibling, our companion in life.

The Holy Innocents

Both Matthew and Luke borrow extensively in their telling of the story of Christ's birth. They borrow from the stories of Joseph and Moses. In the Moses story, the Pharaoh condemns the first born of Israel to death. In the story Moses is saved by his mother and his sister, who set him adrift in the Nile in a basket made of reeds. In Matthew's birth story, the King Herod (read the new Pharaoh) condemns the male children of Bethlehem to death. In a reversal of the story of Israel, Joseph, Mary, and the child

return to Egypt to escape Herod's wrath. All of this is in Matthew to fulfill the prophet's vision of "out of Egypt I have called my Son."

The remembrance of this day is important in that once we go to the manger and honor the word made flesh we need to leave to other responsibilities. One of these is to remember and to ask forgiveness for all the innocents that have been offered up before our time and in our time. Think with me – the innocents of Auschwitz, and the concentration camps in Europe, the children murdered in our taking lands from Native people here in America. The children murdered in Nanking in China. The children brought over to slavery. The innocents, homeless people who have lost their lives on the streets of our cities. These are those who were martyr not in will but in deed. I am reminded of the words in the confession "forgive us for the evil we have done, and the evil done on our behalf." That is what this day honors, the martyrs of every time and age. That it follows the Christmas feast indicates the cost of going to the manger, going and then leaving, such as the shepherds did and then told the story.

Let me close with the words of the psalm for today:

*He heals the brokenhearted *
and binds up their wounds.*

*The Lord lifts up the lowly, *
but casts the wicked to the ground.*

*He is not impressed by the might of a horse; *
he has no pleasure in the strength of a human being;*

*But the Lord has pleasure in those who fear God *
in those who await God's gracious favor.]*

*Worship the Lord, O Jerusalem; *
praise your God, O Zion;*

Let us adore him at the manger, and let us leave and do we God calls us to do in the midst of and for God's beloved – God's people!

SDG