Spirituality
Pencil Preaching



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“Good King Wenceslaus looked out on the feast of Stephen.”

Acts 6:8-10; 7:54-59; *Mt 10:17-22*

The words above are the opening lyric of the 19th-century English Christmas carol about a 10th-century Bohemian sovereign who went out barefoot at night in the wintry cold to care for the poor. At the end of the song, the servant accompanying him fears being lost in a blizzard, but the king tells him to follow his footsteps home.

On this first day after Christmas, we observe the feast of the first martyr for the Christmas faith. In the story from Acts 6-7, Stephen is stoned to death by a mob in Jerusalem for claiming he is seeing a vision of God on the throne and Jesus standing next to him. It is the same vision Jesus invoked at his trial that enraged the council of leaders as blasphemous (Luke 22:66 ff).

The feast of St. Stephen reminds Christians that the life Jesus began in a manger will end on the cross. Once we begin to follow Jesus, our discipleship will include many challenges to bring us to maturity in Christ. Stephen's death begins the persecution and diaspora of the Greek-speaking faith community from Jerusalem. The story also introduces the man who will carry the Gospel to the gentile world, Saul of Tarsus, first a persecutor, but destined to become the Apostle Paul after his conversion.

That conversion, celebrated on January 25, shows Paul experiencing the same vision Stephen had, of the crucified Jesus as the risen Christ. Paul will find his own martyrdom in Rome and his path to glory by following in the footsteps of Stephen.

The liturgical calendar urges us to keep the mystery of the Incarnation in full perspective. God is revealed as One among us, hidden in our humanity and especially in the poor. The joy of Christmas leads us to solidarity with one another in a way that claims our full participation in the spread of the Gospel. We are servants of salvation, heading out into a cold world to find those who have been excluded from the feast of life.

Our path is often obscured by storms of resistance, not the least of which is our own desire to remain safe and secure in our own warm beds. But if we accompany Christ, we will never lack the sure guide of his footsteps before us, leading us home to glory.