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St. Stephen, Martyr

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“A ‘White’ Christmas or ‘Red’ Christmas?”

Text: Acts 6:8-7:2a, 51-60

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Although you may not have ever celebrated the Commemoration of St. Stephen the day after Christmas before, you know of this day. You know of it from a familiar Christmas Carol: “*Good King Wenceslas went out, on the Feast of Stephen.*” That’s today. The Feast of Stephen. The day the Church remembers the first Christian martyr. The first Christian killed for his faith.

Not very Christmas-sy, is it?

Or *is* it? Perhaps it is we who have a wrong idea about Christmas! Maybe our romanticized picture of Christmas – with the calm, peaceful town of Bethlehem, the nice, swept out stable, the gentle shepherds, the angels singing, the stars shining brightly, the happy couple and the tearless baby – maybe those thoughts prevent us from thinking of Christmas *rightly*. Those sentiments are nice, but would Joseph and Mary even recognize their own story if they wandered into our world today? And so maybe St. Stephen has something to say to us, and teach us, this day after all.

For not everyone celebrates Christmas like us. In fact for many, Christmas is celebrated more along the lines of what we heard in the readings today – under the threat of blood and death. Christians in Communist China, or in Muslim countries like Iraq, Iran, or Sudan, celebrate Christmas knowing that if caught, they will likely die. For example, listen to this e-mail that I received just last week about some of the Christian persecution happening in our world today. It is from a pastor who is a missionary to Muslim people.

God has blessed us by the conversion of a member of the royal family in Saudi Arabia, early this month. Unfortunately he was arrested last Friday [for this] and he is jailed now. . . . Also an Imam [that’s the leader of a mosque] in Algeria, converted to Jesus last week and they converted the mosque into a church, after baptizing them. About 25 newspapers in the Middle East are publishing and writing many articles about this miracle, and they ask the terrorist Muslims to go and kill all those new Christians.

The truth is that those celebrations of Christmas – in jail and under threat of death – are much more like the first Christmas than our celebrations. That first Christmas not as we most often picture it, but the one with the hardship of new taxes, the stigma of an unwed mother, the murderous threats of King Herod, the slaughter of all the male babies in the Bethlehem area, and the new family having to flee to Egypt to protect their new son. Not exactly a Hallmark moment! We may be dreaming of a White Christmas, but the truth is those first Christmases, and even some today, were pretty red. Blood red. Martyr red.

Johann Sebastian Bach captured this idea in his Christmas Oratorio, which I love to listen to, especially at this time of the year. For what he does is, right in the midst of the telling of the Christmas story, he inserts a chorale which speaks of welcoming our new born King. Now, nothing unusual about that! Except that it is not the words that he uses that grab your attention – it is the *music* that he uses. For he puts those *Christmas* words to the tune for his *Passion* Chorale, the hymn *O Sacred Head Now Wounded*. And so in the midst of such a joyous piece, a solemn tune, to connect Christmas with Good Friday. To remind us of Christmas red. Blood red. And of why this King was born – not to live a victorious, purpose-drive life; but to die. The incarnation leads to the atonement.

For our Lord's suffering did not begin with the cross, but with His birth. Suffering would be the mark of His kingship. Then, and now. ***“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*** (Mt 5:10) We often want our lives to be like our Christmas packages – perfectly chosen, carefully wrapped, and with a large, beautiful bow on the top. But that's not life, is it? Life can be messy and unpredictable. Things happens when you least expect or want them to happen. Not everything comes together in the end as it seems to always do on the TV shows we see.

But the thing is, acknowledging that does not make Christmas any less joyous. In fact, you could argue the other way – that ignoring our problems and troubles so that we have a happy and carefree time at the end of the year makes it even worse when we plunge back into reality after New Year's! The problems are still there. The troubles are still there. The bills and debts and sorrows and struggles are still there. And Christmas was a sham. Its joy and release packed away until we try to revive it again next year.

And so maybe St. Stephen can help us here after all. To once again discover that having a “red” Christmas is *better* than having a “white” Christmas. For a red Christmas does not ignore our suffering and struggles, but calls a spade a spade. A red Christmas puts up no false facades to mask reality. A red Christmas sees the baby in the manger not as just a baby, but as the eternal Son of God, born to die a horrible death. Receiving His human flesh from Mary in order to hang that human flesh on a cross. Which all sounds perfectly joy-killing the day after Christmas, until you know that Jesus would do this **for you**. That He would do this *because* of your suffering, because of your sin, to do something about it. To

do something *permanently* about it. Not just *hide it* for a while, but take it away. For the sin and guilt that He bore, the mocking and punishment that He endured, the death that He died, was yours. None of that belonged to Him! It was yours! But He made it His, to set you free. So that although you struggle now, those struggles would not conquer you. That although you suffer now, those sufferings would not have the last word. That although you are a sinner now, that is not what you would be for eternity. He came to change all of that. To give us hope. To give us life. To give us forgiveness. And to pay for it all – not on credit! – but in His blood. With His very life.

And that is what Stephen saw as those who could not stand to hear his words hurled stones at him to kill him. As we heard, He saw “***Jesus standing at the right hand of God,***” the Father. But what does that mean? It means He saw Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter. He saw the flesh and blood of the baby born in Bethlehem. He saw in that flesh, the nail holes and pierced side of Good Friday. And he saw that flesh, once dead, alive again. And not just alive, but on the throne of God, reigning as the King. Reigning as the King who died to forgive all sins – his own, and those who were stoning him. Reigning as the King whose mark of kingship was suffering. Reigning as the King who was now going to call Stephen home to his Kingdom. . . . And so what a Christmas for Stephen! Oh, not that it happened on Christmas Day – I don’t know when it happened. And there certainly weren’t any perfect packages with big bows for Stephen that day! But that day was Christmas Day for Stephen, as he – like Mary and Joseph, like the shepherds, and like the Wise Men – got to see and touch the flesh and blood of Jesus, his Saviour, that day. And therefore like Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and the Wise Men, he was filled with joy and peace. Even while being pummeled with stones. Even as his life was being taken from him.

And so too for you and me. We often say in the church that every Sunday is a “little Easter,” as we celebrate and receive the resurrection and victory of our Lord. But each Sunday is also a “little Christmas,” as like Stephen, we get to touch and taste the body and blood of our Saviour, as He comes to us here in a manger of bread and wine, giving Himself to us to fill us with the joy and peace of His forgiveness. A joy and peace which can withstand the assaults of Satan, the pummelings we often receive from the world, and the persecution that Jesus promised would come our way. All of those things may be able to take away our “white” Christmases. But none of those things can take away a “red” Christmas! In fact, you will find, as the Christians celebrating Christmas in jail and under threat of death find – that those things only make the celebration of Christmas even better! For in persecution and suffering, we come to know our Saviour. And we know that when these things come, it is because He has joined Himself to us. For Satan is raging against Him in us. Suffering is the mark of His Kingship. Then and now.

Not very Christmas-sy? Actually, I was thinking just the opposite! For when you strive for a white Christmas instead of a red Christmas, you wind up getting neither. But having a red

Christmas, you actually get both! For red Christmases *lead* to white Christmases. For the red of his blood washes away the stain of our sins and makes us white. And not just for a time, but for eternity. And what could be more “Merry” about Christmas than that?

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.