

St. Stephen, Deacon and Martyr (December 26, 2021)Text: All Lessons  
**“Merry? Christmas”**

*Have a holly, jolly Christmas; It's the best time of the year.  
I don't know if there'll be snow, But have a cup of cheer.  
Have a holly, jolly Christmas, And when you walk down the street,  
Say "hello" to friends you know And everyone you meet.*

So with that, we think, we have our theme for the season: Santa is jolly; *“Frosty the Snowman was a jolly happy soul . . .” “Deck the halls with boughs of holly, fa-la-la-la-la, la-la-la-la, ’Tis the season to be jolly, fa-la-la-la-la, la-la-la-la,” “Jolly old Saint Nicholas,”* the song requests, *“lean your ear this way!”* so that requests can be made for all the bounty we want you to bring. A children’s book, The Jolly Christmas Postman, tells a story that follows the postman as he delivers cards and packages to the folks of fairytale land.

Without question, and without exception, Christmas is to be a jolly, jolly time. Even the maudlin and melancholy piece by Mel Torme invites us to have ourselves a *“merry little Christmas.”* There are to be no tears at Christmas, just visions of sugarplums, dancing snowmen, “happy little trees” (as the TV artist Bob Ross would say).

Except some startling encounters with reality move in . . . The Christmas season has the highest suicide rate of any time of the year. The Christmas season accounts for murders and acts of violence second only to the stifling heat and humidity of summer. More acts of drunkenness and disorderly conduct happen around this time, as well as calls to the police for domestic violence. For a jolly time of the year, there seems to be quite a bit of decidedly un-jolly behavior.

Today, it would appear that we are adding to the non-jolliness with a focus, not on the birth that we so vibrantly praised on Friday night, but on a death, a most violent death at that. Every year, the Church calendar insists on trotting out before the faithful, right on the heels of the celebrations of the Nativity of Our Lord these three commemorations of

death and suffering: St. Stephen, St. John the Divine, and The Holy Innocents.

The Day of St. John the Divine, December 27 commemorates the beloved disciple of Jesus who spent his final years in exile where he died on the island of Patmos. The Holy Innocents, commemorated on December 28, are the children massacred by King Herod in Bethlehem in his rage to find and kill the child he had learned about through the Magi, and who he imagined was a threat to his throne. And today — today we commemorate St. Stephen, the first martyr for the Christian faith. Apparently the Church calendar has indicated that too much jolly isn't good for us without a healthy dose of gut-wrenching mayhem.

Some years ago, C.S. Lewis, in a book with the title God in the Dock (the American equivalent would have been God on Trial), wrote an essay he titled, "Exmas and Christmas." In that essay he presented a mythical island kingdom called Niatirb (which is Britain spelled backward) and described their rather odd customs around a festival they call Exmas. Part of the observance of this festival Lewis called "the Rush" which involved spending huge sum of money of gifts, food, and especially wine.

But there were a small segment of Niatirbians who at the same time observed a festival they called Crissmas, for which *"they rise early ... with shining faces and go before sunrise to certain temples where they partake of a sacred feast. And in most of the temples they set out images of a fair woman with a new-born Child on her knees and certain animals and shepherds adoring the Child. (The reason of those images is given in a certain sacred story which I know but do not repeat)."*

Lewis' point, of course, is that the secular celebration of Christmas and the sacred one are two very different events. They just happen to use the same name.

Many Christians get their undies in a bunch that the secular world has usurped "our celebration" — but the fact is that Saturnalia and celebrations of the winter solstice preceded any celebration of the

Nativity the Church had in mind (the date of Christmas as December 25 wasn't fixed until well into the fourth century!). The Church took over the pagan rituals and "Christianized" (or some may say, "sanitized") them. The tone of the Lewis essay has him in high dudgeon about the contrasts between Exmas and Crissmas, but I think we need to just let go of this idea that somebody is trying to "steal" our Christmas, and simply ignore whatever is going on elsewhere. As my mother, the kindergarten teacher, would say to some child who wanted to report what another child was doing, *"You just pay attention to what you're supposed to be doing, and things will be fine."*

So to what should pay attention that we are supposed to be doing? In much the same way that many Christians would love to ignore Good Friday and just focus on the excitement of Easter, so would many want to have nothing but sweet carols, happy carolers, and even happier times of worship. But this is not life, and this is not what our faith is supposed to provide for us.

Life is tough. We all say we know that; but sometimes we act as if we could click our heels and get back to Kansas at any moment. I know for many of you 2021 has been a particularly tough year: Job losses at an all-time high; cuts in pay and/or hours; all manner of disruptions from illness (especially Covid), surgeries, accidents to yourselves or loved ones.

I sat with a man last week who had tried to kill himself the day before because his employer had pledged that paychecks would come before Christmas Eve, and then pulled back from that pledge, and this man could not endure the look on the face of his children when he had to tell them that there would be nothing for them for Christmas.

People have been facing foreclosures, evictions, repossessions, decades-long businesses now closed.

I don't need to tell you that life is rough, and while this year may have been bit more difficult than some others, it is by degree only — every year seems to have its rough edges. If you have a faith that is focused only on the jolly, the happy, the sparkling, and the delightful, good luck

with that faith when those rough edges begin to cut, and cut deep. Such a (in my estimation) dopey faith would want Easter without Good Friday and Christmas without Stephen, John, and the Innocents.

But a real and vibrant faith, a faith that can support you through those rough times, recognizes the hand of God not just in the moments of mountaintop experiences, but in the deep, deep valleys that life has us fall into. Such a faith not only recognizes that hand, it comes to realize that such a God who is present in the pain is the very God we need. And it is a faith that then trusts that such a God will provide what we need in time of need.

Stephen had such a faith. He was described by Luke earlier in the Book of Acts as *“a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit.”* It was a faith that was very soon to come against some very rough edges, indeed. While *“full of grace and power, [he] did great wonders and signs among the people.”* Apparently this made him a target, for some came to argue with him, and when they could not overcome his spiritual authority, they sought to have him silenced. Thus Stephen was a martyr.

Let me focus on that word for a moment. I recently read a piece in which the writer wrote, *“A martyr is a person who dies for his or her belief in Jesus Christ.”* [Edward F. Markquart, Sermons from Seattle]. Wrong! A martyr is a person who witnesses to what he knows to be true. The Greek word μαρτυρεια (martureia) simply means “a witness.” To be a witness you have to have seen, heard, or experienced something that you can then share with another. Yes, when Stephen gave his witness, those who heard were so upset that they killed him over it. But the killing did not make him a martyr, nor did his dying at their hands; his witnessing to the truth makes him a martyr.

I need to bring that into focus because we so misuse the term “martyr” in our contemporary context. That same author went on to write: *“Today, martyrs are getting bad press because of the martyrs of the fanatical Muslim terrorists that bombed the Twin Towers and claim to be martyrs*

*for their faith. There is an enormous difference between a crazed terrorist and a true martyr. A crazed terrorist kills other people; a true martyr dies so that others might live. A false martyr takes the lives of others and kills innocent people. A true martyr is just the opposite of a false martyr: a true martyr dies because they offer themselves as a living and loving sacrifice for Jesus Christ in order that others might live.”*

He still has it wrong about martyrs necessarily dying (and his grammar is a bit off); but he is dead on target in suggesting that the goal of martyrdom is life-giving. Every person who claims to follow Christ is expected (not suggested, not commanded even, and not asked — expected!) to be a martyr! All of us, as this author said, are to offer ourselves “*as living and loving sacrifices for Jesus Christ in order that others might live.*”

That does not inherently mean that we will face stoning, or lions, or firing squads . . . it does inherently mean that we have something to share that is life-giving and that there may be — no there will be — obstacles we will need to overcome to provide this giving of life.

As we read the account of Stephen, there are a few features of the narrative that captivate.

The first is Stephen’s vision, the part of his witness that so infuriated his accusers: “***Look, he said, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!***” Ever had such a vision? No? Why not? In John’s Gospel, when Jesus first encountered Nathanael, within the first three minutes of their association, Jesus said to him, “***Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.***” This came, not after years of teaching and modeling what it would mean to be one of His followers, this was given to Nathaniel from the outset.

It should be no surprise therefore, that a person like Stephen, so filled with faith and the Spirit, would sluice right into that epithet for a disciple.

What should surprise, or maybe disturb, us is that the description does not apply to us. It may tell us something is missing in our discipleship.

What empowered Stephen as a witness was, I think, threefold: His strong faith; his connection with the Spirit; this vision. That tells us that these same components are necessary for us as we seek to follow Christ. Which suggests that all of us have some work to do.

Now settle down ... faith is gift ... Spirit-connection is gift ... vision is gift — so no, you cannot get hold of this like some merit badge. But, there are disciplines (you know, the kinds of things done by disciples?!?) that can position us to be more open to what God is doing and wants to do more in our lives.

Get into the Word more — by yourself, and even more so with other Christians — delve in and be immersed in what the Spirit says through the Word (there is no better resource for Spirit-connection). Be where God's people gather — in worship, in study, in service, in fellowship. Spend quiet time just sitting with God . . . meditate, pray, reflect, journal . . . all of these Christian throughout the ages have found valuable to enhancing their sense of God's presence.

How much time? Okay, you're going to love this answer: As much time as you need. Don't mess that up! I didn't say "as much time as you think you need" nor "as much time as you want to give it;" I said "As much time as you need." Well, how much time is that?! Start in, and at some point the Spirit will help you to know. I think, as a general rule, three minutes a month probably isn't going to benefit you greatly, but if that is where you need to start, then start there and let the Spirit guide you to where He knows you need to be.

Which leads me back to this whole business of being "jolly." The secular image of Christmas (or, as C.S. Lewis labeled it, "Exmas") demands that everything be jolly. Fine. The Christian image of Christmas requires something altogether different — that everything be dedicated.

Stephen was dedicated; he would not step away from his witness, he would not forego his serving, he would not shy away from doing what God called him to do. Dedication does not eliminate joy — indeed dedication enhances joy.

So, instead of wishing each other “Merry Christmas” or worse, “A holly jolly Christmas,” let’s pray over each other the blessing that the Spirit dedicate us to Himself — that we see Jesus at the right hand of God — and that we rejoice to bear witness to His love and grace at work in us.

Amen.