

Daily Devotions

May 8-13, 2023

Monday May 8

Acts 7:55-60

⁵⁵But filled with the Holy Spirit, [Stephen] 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.

For Reflection

Saint Stephen the Deacon is the first Christian martyr. (You could argue that the Holy Innocents, slain by Herod, are the first killed because of Christ, but Stephen is the first put to death because he bore witness, which is what “martyr” means in Greek, to Christ.) In Acts 7, he testifies to the religious council in Jerusalem that Jesus is the Messiah. He bases his argument on a retelling of Israel’s history, claiming that it all points to Jesus. When he claims to see him “standing at the right hand of God” in the heavens, this is too much. It is blasphemy – equating Jesus with God. And so he is stoned to death.

Stephen is not going to be the hero of any blockbuster movies. But he is the model for Christian witness that we need. We believe and confess that Jesus is Lord. He is not just a religious teacher, not just our personal example, not just the one who sends Christians along to a happy afterlife. He is Lord. He reigns over all, even if this reign is not yet fully seen. But this conviction doesn’t mean that we get to “lord it over” others in any way. Christians have, for centuries, found ourselves chasing after power and influence. Sometimes, this is simply a matter of self-interest. Other times, it is a genuine attempt to shape society along Christian lines. But it will never work. Christ’s kingdom is

not of this world. The Church's primary mission is to witness and serve. We cannot bring people to Christ through politics or manipulation or legislation. We cannot spread Christianity through force. All we can do is witness. We pray, we testify to what Christ has done for us and who he is, and we entrust the results to God. We can be thankful that in our day, this will not, for most Christians, mean risking death. But it will mean standing out from the world around us. It will mean holding unpopular convictions and resisting the ways of the world. Stephen shows us that it may mean suffering, and tragically, in some parts of the world, even death. But we can face this with grace and hope, knowing that Christ has overcome death for us.

Questions for Reflection

1. Who is someone you could share the good news of Jesus with? It is more and more likely that we know people who have no meaningful faith in Christ. The most powerful thing we can do is to pray for a chance to share the Gospel with them. Ask the Holy Spirit to prepare their hearts and give you the chance to share your faith with them!
2. What are circumstances where you feel pressured not to speak up about your faith? How can Stephen's example give you courage?

Read Psalm 19-21

Today's Prayer Focus: Pray for victims and communities grieving from gun violence. Pray for the safety of all people, especially in schools, for reasonable laws, and for resources to combat the mental health crisis in America.

Tuesday May 9

Read Psalm 22-23

Today's Prayer Focus: Pray for all students. Ask God to grant them learning, growth, friendships, and fun. Pray that they would increase not only in knowledge, but in wisdom and character.

Wednesday May 10

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

¹In you, O LORD, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me.

²Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily. Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me.

³You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake lead me and guide me,

⁴take me out of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge.

⁵Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.

¹⁵My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.

¹⁶Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love.

For Reflection

This psalm is a wonderful model of prayer. The psalmist both asks God for help and expresses his trust that God will help. The writer's need for prayer runs deep. He asks God to rescue him and to be a strong fortress to save him. His enemies are close by and so he prays for deliverance. At the same time, the psalmist trusts that God will do all the things he's asking for. He says that God is indeed "my rock and my fortress" (v. 3). He doesn't doubt that God can handle his prayer requests, save him from his enemies, and pour out his love on him. This is a good psalm to tuck away in your Bible when you are lacking the words to call on God for help or to express your trust in God. The psalmist says it for all of us, whatever our need might be, "Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love" (v. 16).

Questions for Reflection

1. Jesus says a line from this psalm as one of his last words from the cross: "into your hand I commit my spirit" (v. 5). Hearing this in the Easter season, having recently witnessed Jesus' death on the cross on Good Friday, how do these words strike you today? Are there times in your life that have been challenging or the future seemed unknown, when all you could do was commit your spirit to God? What was the outcome of that time? What did you learn about

your God and about your faith?

2. When you hear the images of God as a “rock of refuge” or a “strong fortress,” do you picture any real-life rocks or fortresses? How does do those descriptions of God’s strength help you trust in him? Or do you prefer different images for God’s power and for God’s work in your life?
3. Be quiet and still for a moment and imagine God’s face shining upon you. How does that feel? How does it give you peace?

Read Psalm 24-26

Today's Prayer Focus: Pray for the ministry of Reformation Lutheran Church, that we would be devoted to serving God, bearing witness to the Gospel so that others may come to believe, and serving our community so that we may bless others.

Thursday May 11

1 Peter 2:2-10

²Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— ³if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

⁴Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and ⁵like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶For it stands in scripture: “See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” ⁷To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,” ⁸and “A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.” They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. ⁹But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

For Reflection

When we read this passage, it's important to hear it addressed to the whole Christian community. When Peter begins this letter, he states that he is writing "To the exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:1-2).

Peter is inviting followers of Jesus, whether they are scattered or gathered together, to become more mature in their faith. As the believers "grow into salvation" (v. 2), they'll be better equipped to share the good news of all that God has done through his Son. They'll be able to proclaim the great news of the mercy that God has poured out on the world through Jesus. He was the cornerstone for the faith of the exiles in Peter's time, and Jesus is our cornerstone, too. Through him, we have become "God's own people." Peter doesn't want us to keep that great news to ourselves but to share it! That way, more and more people will be invited into our "spiritual house," become part of our "royal priesthood" of all believers, and experience the joy of being disciples of Jesus.

Questions for Reflection

1. What are some of your favorite memories of being part of a congregation or a group of Christian believers? How did that sense of belonging and joy strengthen and support your faith in Jesus?
2. When you reflect on the mercy God has shown you throughout your life, what events or experiences come to your mind?
3. What are your hopes and visions for what Reformation will look like as a "spiritual house" over the next 5-10 years? How do you think God is calling us to share the good news and serve our neighbors as a chosen people and as a royal priesthood?

Read Psalm 27-29

Today's Prayer Focus: Pray for the spiritual growth of yourself and all our members, that we would be filled with the Holy Spirit, increase in our knowledge of God's will, and overflow in love for each other and the world around us.

Friday May 12

John 14:1-14

[Jesus said,] “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going.” ⁵Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” ⁶Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” ⁸Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” ⁹Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? ¹⁰Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

¹²Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”

For Reflection

In John’s Gospel, Jesus makes a series of great “I Am” claims (“I am the good shepherd; I am the light of the world,” etc.). The Greek for “I Am,” *ego eimi*, is the same phrase that Greek translations of the Old Testament used when the Lord revealed his name to Moses from the burning bush (“I Am who I Am,” Exodus 3:14). John wants to leave us no doubt: Jesus *is* the Lord God. When we look at Jesus, we are seeing God.

This conviction is often considered arrogant and exclusionary in today’s culture. (Pastor Eric’s sermon will deal with this extensively.)

But from the beginning, Christians have confessed that Jesus is “true God from true God.” Jesus reveals God as infinitely merciful, loving, and generous. He is a God who heals, brings life, and embraces all people with grace. This should never make Christians arrogant. We trust in Jesus, but we don’t have the answers to all questions. There is much we do not know. What we do know, however, is that in Christ, God himself has drawn near to us to bring us home into life that is true and eternal. If Jesus really is the revelation of God, if he is the way, the truth, and the life, then we can take heart that God is the one whose love will never fail.

Questions for Reflection

1. How does the assurance that the person of Jesus really is who God is give you confidence to pray? What is it about Jesus that most makes him trustworthy to you?
2. What are some questions you wrestle with in the faith? Does it help to know that even if we can’t figure out everything, Jesus is the one who is truth itself? Or that even if we can’t figure out a path forward, Jesus himself is the way?

Read Psalm 30-31

Today’s Prayer Focus: Pray for peace in the world, especially in Ukraine. Ask God to sustain those who suffer under persecution for the name of Christ. Pray that all people would have freedom and good government.

Saturday May 13

Read Psalm 32-34

Today’s Prayer Focus: Pray for police, fire fighters, all emergency workers, health care workers, and those who serve in the military. Pray for farmers and those who transport food. Ask God to grant well-being to all in our community, and to stir up generosity to meet the needs of those who lack food, shelter, or other needs.

The Mission of Reformation Lutheran Church is to:

Invite our neighbors as Jesus invites us.

Engage in a community of graceful discipleship.

Equip our members to grow in faith and ministry.

Embody the love of Jesus in our world.

