

Examples of bravery are sometimes hard to come by. Usually the bravest things we do are to go for a checkup, to mail in our 1040, to babysit that awful kid next door, to buy new underwear, or to step on a bug. For men, bravery is asking a stranger for directions.

The early church treasured its stories of bravery, especially the one about St. Stephen, the first martyr. He served as one of the first deacons of the church, and when persecutions began, they included deacons. Sure enough, the political leaders arrested Stephen. However, Stephen was not a quiet prisoner. He lectured his captors about Christ. St. Luke records his long speech in the Acts of the Apostles, and in the passage we hear today, we learn that a long talk does not guarantee a happy audience. The unbelievers picked up rocks. This speech produced hardness of heart, not conversion of heart. At this moment, Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, saw a vision of Christ standing at the right hand of God. His enemies took off their cloaks, piled them at the feet of Saul, and stoned Stephen to death. As he died, Stephen forgave his enemies, just as Jesus had done on the cross. Saul approved of the killing. Later, of course, Saul became Paul, and as one of his namesakes says, now you know the rest of the story.

Page 2.

We hear this story between Ascension and Pentecost because of two details from Stephen's vision. He sees the ascended Christ (standing at the right hand of God) and he is filled with the Holy Spirit. He sees the results of the ascension, even as he experiences the results of Pentecost.

This weekend the church offers us the example of a saint who performed bravely under extraordinary circumstances. This weekend our country honors its soldiers who did the same. The memory of these great figures will give us hope that on the days we can see nothing but diapers and bugs, the Holy Spirit will fill us with strength.