

Grace and peace to you my friends and fellow sojourners from Jesus Christ - risen.

Our first reading today from Acts 7 is, in fact, closely linked to our gospel reading today. In these two readings, we see the life and death of Stephen mirror the life and death of Jesus. But first things first, before we can look at that mirroring, we need to look at who Stephen is. Stephen bursts on the scene one chapter earlier in Acts 6 where the Sundays and Seasons introduction says, “Stephen was one of the seven followers chosen by the apostles to serve tables so that the apostles could be free to serve the word. Stephen does more than distribute food, however. For his preaching of God’s word, Stephen becomes the first martyr of the faith.” In her commentary on this first reading from Acts, Jennifer Pietz says, “Stephen is introduced as ‘full of faith and the Holy Spirit’ when he is appointed by the 12 apostles to a group whose ministry is to distribute food equitably within the Christian community, allowing the apostles to focus instead on preaching the gospel.” I think this points out that within a church community, we are appointed or called to specific duties or jobs but that those are only our primary focuses but that we are expected to also do whatever needs to be done to benefit others even when **we** are not comfortable with the task at hand. Jennifer Pietz does say in her commentary that the account of Stephen’s martyrdom calls the church, you know – us - to acknowledge both the costly nature of serving the risen Christ and the reality of God’s presence in the midst of suffering and injustice. I must admit that I am often amazed at how many Christians in the United States complain about persecution and suffering because someone disagrees with them or they feel slighted. There are just not too many Christians being killed for their faith here in the United States unlike elsewhere in this world or even for Stephen.

So, how are the stories of Jesus and Stephen similar. First, like Jesus, even though Stephen was supposed to be taking care of food distribution, he is soon performing signs and wonders and preaching the gospel with wisdom and the Spirit’s power. He is thereby cast into the same prophetic mold as Jesus in the Gospel of Luke which was written by the same author as Acts. Second, just like Jesus, false charges are brought against Stephen that lead to a sham trial and an unjust execution. And finally, just like Jesus, Stephen surrenders his life while asking for mercy for those who killed him.

Jennifer Pietz identified five types of reactions one or more of us might be having to this story, they are:

- Anger at the injustice of an innocent man being brutally executed.
- Sadness that Stephen’s promising life and vocation are cut short.
- Fear that we too might be persecuted for our faith, or simply for being misunderstood.
- Being inspired by Stephen’s Spirit-empowered trust in God.
- Feeling convicted that at times we are like the accusers who fail to recognize God at work around or in them.

Do any of these touch a nerve for you? Do not worry about but recognize it for its pure existence. Not all Christians are called to literally die for their faith but we should also recognize that the gospel in word and deed will meet with opposition in this world of ours. This reading should also, however, remind us that we should not just lament other people’s suffering, but that we should also stand against injustice and act in solidarity with those in need. Once again, our call is counter cultural.

We had the first few verses of our gospel reading today just two weeks ago for Zel's memorial service. Karoline Lewis in her commentary tells us Chapters 13 – 17 are known as the Farewell Discourse in the Fourth Gospel. Chapter 13 narrated the foot washing, the last meal shared between Jesus and the disciples, and the departure of Judas to the dark side. Chapter 14 then picks up with direct words from Jesus to the disciples about Jesus' departure. They are words of comfort and hope, promise and plain speech, and little mincing of words as to what is soon to take place. You might even be wondering why this particular reading shows up during the season of Easter when Jesus is risen and back with the disciples.

This reading fits within the theological context of the Gospel of John. Jesus has been talking with the disciples about the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. We know because of the resurrection that death is not the end all. We also know because Jesus talks about the ascension that the resurrection is also not the end all. As Karoline says, "The resurrection presumes that there is something even beyond itself, the ascension." Karoline goes on to say, "The beginning of Chapter 14, in fact, a good portion of the Farewell Discourse as a whole, describes not resurrected life but ascended life with God." Every week, I start each homily by calling you fellow sojourners, which means we are on a journey together. Just like a road trip, every journey has different stages. We begin with life before belief and then we have life as believers in but not of this world. Then death, resurrection, and ascension come. I cannot tell you a lot about these last three stages because, well frankly, I have not yet experienced them. What I can say that I believe is that each stage is an improvement on the previous stage and that each stage brings us closer to that ultimate stage of being in and with God.

Is there a great big mansion someplace with many rooms? Many believers think so, but I am personally not so sure. Why? I think Karoline Lewis has a fairly clear look at what I believe. She said in ancient Judaism, "that 'dwelling place' is no 'place' unless it means being in the intimate presence of God, or better yet, in the bosom of God." Finally, Karoline points out that Thomas hears Jesus' promises on a literal level. Probably exactly how we all so often think. We need diagrams, maps, or GPS, something tangible that will get us to the right location because sometimes in these matters, faith just is not enough. But, my friends, faith should always be enough, even when it is unbelievable, well because it is unbelievable. Jesus says, "You know me, I know you." Again. "You know me and I know you." And again. Just like sheep and their shepherd.

Hear then the good news:

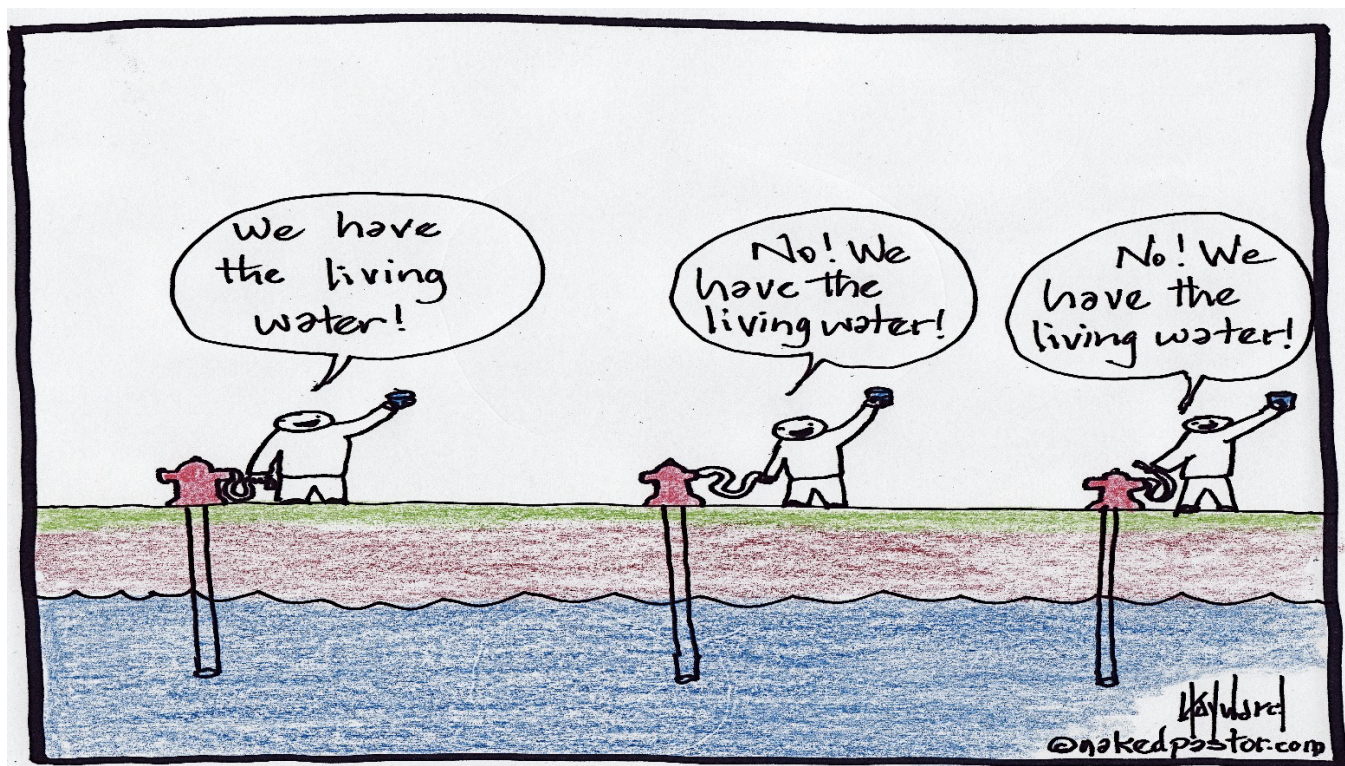
God loves you.

God loves all of creation.

In John 10:16, Jesus says, "**I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.**"

How can we know where or who those pens are?

This Naked Pastor graphic demonstrates my perspective on this perspective in a different way.



Grace and peace to you my friends, this week – trust God. Trust God's grace, love, mercy, and promises. Have faith.

Amen