

Hope and Faith versus Hate and Death  
Sermon on the Feast of St. Stephen, Martyr  
Sermon Text: Revelation 7:9-17



<sup>9</sup> After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, <sup>10</sup> and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" <sup>11</sup> And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, <sup>12</sup> saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." <sup>13</sup> Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" <sup>14</sup> I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. <sup>15</sup> "Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will shelter them with His presence. <sup>16</sup> They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. <sup>17</sup> For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and He will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Stephen was the first to die by stoning. His death hit the church hard in the heart. He was one of the leaders of the church. With his death, the church was supposed to finally disappear from the stage.

Many say: it's that time again. Because the church is struck in the heart when worship services all over the world must be cancelled. Corona restrictions are not to be equated with or compared to the persecution of Christians. Generally, we must not compare the disadvantages that we as Christians experience here in the West with the persecution of Christians that happens throughout the world. Christians who live in North Korea, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, among other countries, know about the relentless hate that is directed at them. Years ago, many of these countries were the cradle of Christianity. Today, the light of Christian faith is almost extinguished in these countries. We shouldn't be surprised because Christianity has always been and always will face opposition. There is no place for God's Word in this world. Just as Jesus didn't find a place at an inn as a child and found His bed in a manger, so God's Word doesn't find a place in people's hearts. Instead, bitter resistance. The hostility against God and His message has many variations. This hostility is not just in the countries where Christians are being killed. We ourselves also know hostility towards God's Word and indeed, in our own hearts! I know exactly what God's commandments say. I also know exactly that these commandments are good and right. Why don't I act like it then? It's because the same spirit that fights against God worldwide, is also within us. The same sin that gripped Cain's heart and was revealed first with jealousy and then with ice cold hate is also working within us. And whenever God's Word is preached or God's Church is built, this opposition also arises. The fight against God and His commandments remains bitter and hard. Be it in the many countries where Christians are persecuted or also here in Europe or even in our own hearts.

And yet God's Word shines in the midst of the darkness. Hope and faith shine also where Christians are persecuted. For us Western Christians, they are a reminder. Following Christ can mean that I must pay the ultimate price. Following Christ can also mean that we must take up the cross and bear the bitter hate of this world. It can mean that we must lose everything for the sake of faith. Today on the feast of St. Stephen, we remember these people. Stephen is a special role model for us because he was the first. Even in death, Stephen could hold tight to God and trust God. Stephen shows us how love and trust in God can break through the walls of Satan.

Stephen's gaze opened under the stoning of hate and he saw heaven. John opens his eyes and sees heaven before him. He saw the many who had died and the many who were yet to come. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Dear congregation. Especially in these times, we don't want to let the world remain as it is. We want to see heaven with the eyes of John and with the eyes of Stephen. We want hope. We want faith. Our world needs this viewpoint so badly! Jesus Himself is the guarantee for this hope! Jesus Himself experienced the bitter consequences of hate. And yet He didn't allow hate and death to stay there. Jesus' entire life is a protest against death and against hate and against hopelessness. His resurrection radiates towards us and shows what awaits us. Through it, He showed us all where the road leads. Not to the grave, not to hopelessness, but to resurrection. To new life. Do you see that? Then your life can and should be like one protest after another for life. That means we can shine towards our neighbors. We can paint before their eyes a picture of the God who stands against death and for life. We can bear witness to this hope through Jesus Christ and His Word and through His Church here on earth. Even in the face of death we can do this: Dietrich Bonhoeffer took his last steps to execution and said: "Now everything is at an end. Something completely new begins for me."

Do you see, like Bonhoeffer, this new beginning in the middle of death. Do you see, like Stephen, this new beginning in the middle of sadness, even when everything speaks against it. Even if you can't

always see it, Christ sees you and He makes everything new, truly new. He will wipe away every tear from your eyes, too. Amen.