

Back in the good old days, way back when we could still go to see movies in theaters, (😊) I always tried to get there in time to see the previews before the show began. Sure, I may have heard about some movies coming out soon, but just looking at a title and a description isn't enough for me. I want to watch the preview and see if the movie is really worth watching in the theater, or should I wait for it to come out on DVD, or should I just skip it altogether.

What I love about previews, or trailers as they're sometimes called, is that they often take some of the most powerful scenes of the film and weave them together in a way that gives you a glimpse of what the movie is about. Previews show you moments of great action or emotion woven together in the bare outline of a story. It does all this by showing the major turning points.

In our reading today from the book of Acts, we have the account of the stoning of Stephen. But, please notice: We don't have the full story. Since it would take too long to read the whole account from Acts, we have excerpts. Scenes. We have highlights from the film, so to speak. So, if you think about it in film terms, not only has Stephen been stoned; now thanks to our lectionary reading he's been spliced! Poor Stephen!

First, at the beginning of chapter 6, we see Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. He's been set apart in the church to distribute food. Next, we see him not distributing food but doing great signs and wonders. Then, by the time we pick up with his story at the beginning of Acts chapter 7, he's seized by religious leaders. Then we're whooshed away to the end of that long chapter and Stephen is hoarse and tired after giving a lengthy speech. We overhear his closing words of condemnation. Then, we see him being put to death by stoning. And, just for a moment, high above the sky, we see Jesus. Standing at the right hand of God.

This story has it all. Care for the poor. Miraculous powers. Murderous threats. Stirring, impassioned speech. Glory shining in the heavens and blood flowing on the earth. And somehow, God is ruling in the midst all these things. But what exactly is God doing?

This morning, we're going to take a moment to meditate on scenes of God at work. We will see how God is at work in the ordinary and the amazing and trust that God continues to work in our lives today.

As the text opens, notice how Luke, the writer of this book, directs our eyes from the apostles to Stephen. Luke wants us to see the many, various ways in which God is at work. It would be easy to see God's work as happening among those who dedicate themselves to reading and teaching the Scriptures. And it

would be easy to see God at work among disciples performing miraculous signs and wonders. But those who give food to the poor? What is so special about that? Yet that's what Luke is interested in. He names all the people who are called to give food to the poor. He notes the importance of the Spirit being among the people who are chosen to do this task. And even though Stephen was doing miraculous signs and wonders, Luke doesn't tell us what those signs and wonders were. What Luke focuses on is that Stephen was chosen to distribute food to the poor.

It can be compared to this: Let's say Luke was looking at our congregation today. He sees the pastors, studying the Scriptures and getting ready for sermons and Bible studies, the DCE coordinating preparing devotions and activities, the teachers working on their lessons, and parishioners coordinating work to help others in the community like collecting food for the food shelf, or distributing church bulletins and newsletters for shut-ins, and much, much more. And then Luke stops and talks about all these people. The Holy Spirit is involved in all these things—in the Word that is proclaimed and in the working of mission and in the acts of service—but Luke wants us to see God at work in the ordinary. Luke wants us to see that parishioner gathering food for the poor and know that God is there.

When Christ came into this world to bring about salvation, His work extended from the amazing to the ordinary. Yes, He walked on water, gave sight to the blind, raised the dead . . . but He also welcomed children, asked His disciples to watch a widow giving two small copper coins to the church, and talked with a woman at a well. "Every hair of your head is numbered," Jesus said. "And not a sparrow falls to the ground but your heavenly Father knows it" (see Mt 10:29–30).

So often, we can pass by the simple ways in which God works in our lives, and yet Luke, in this scene from the story of Stephen, asks us to see that God is at work in what our world would call the ordinary. When Jesus suffered for our salvation on the cross, He took upon Himself every sin, great and small, that He might bring us into God's kingdom, where we experience every wonder, great and small.

Not only does God work in the ordinary, but He also works in the amazing. Later in the account, we have scenes from the death of Stephen. Here, we see God at work in an amazing way.

Accustomed to the way movies work, we might expect God to come into this account of Stephen and perform some mighty act of deliverance. God, the superhero, like Captain America, Superman, or Mr. Incredible could rescue

Stephen from the rubble and bring about a happy ending here on earth. But God doesn't intervene like that. And God also doesn't just sit back in heaven, unconcerned about the things that are happening on earth.

No, God works. But He works in an amazing way. God works in a way where the amazing and the murderous are woven together with one another, and Luke wants us to know that God works wonders in the suffering of this world.

Listen to how Luke tells the story. Stephen is dragged out of the city and stoned. When this happens, he falls to the ground. Yet, when Luke records this, he tells us that Stephen bends his knees. He kneels in reverence to God. You would think there would be a difference between being knocked to the ground with stones and kneeling in prayer. But, according to Luke, sometimes they look the same.

As Stephen is dying, he cries out. We can see the scene. A man is hit with stones and cries out in pain. Yet, when Luke records this, he asks us not to overhear screams of pain but a prayer of faith. Stephen cries out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60). As Stephen dies, we hear echoes of Calvary—Jesus crying out, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34). Finally, when Stephen breathes his last breath . . . when Stephen dies from stoning . . . Luke tells us that he falls asleep.

Luke reveals that there is nothing beyond the reach of God. Stephen is bloody, stoned, suffering, and dying, and yet God is at work in an amazing way. God is able to enter into conflict, into suffering, even into death itself, and nothing can stop His work of love.

Jesus entered into this world, suffered, and died in order to take away all sin. And in rising from the dead, He revealed to us that He has conquered all sin, all evil, even death itself. Nothing can separate us from God's love.

God is at work in the world. Not in the way skeptics say—hovering above the world, never touching down in the lives of real people, merely a figment of our imagination. And not in the way some people think—entering into situations of suffering and making it all better. No, God is here, in the midst of suffering, transforming that suffering into the glory of His kingdom. As Stephen is joined to the suffering of Christ, He's also joined to the glory of Christ. Nothing can separate us from the love of God, who is active and at work in our lives and in His world.

In fact, this was the whole point of Stephen's speech. Although it has been cut out of our reading, Stephen's speech focuses on this wonderful work of God. Stephen proclaims that God "does not live in houses made by men." Rather, God is known by His powerful word that is at work in all places of the world.

Abraham in Mesopotamia. Moses at Mount Sinai. Israel in the wilderness. Even now, in Jerusalem, after the crucifixion of Jesus, God is making Himself known. When persecution arises, the disciples will be scattered from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and to the ends of the earth. But God will be there. Doing His work. Bringing to all people the saving work of Jesus, who has died and risen and ascended into heaven and now rules over all things.

Previews have a purpose. They are there to encourage you to watch the film. So, too, these scenes from the life of Stephen have a purpose. They encourage you to see God at work in your world. Yes, even in a world that's been turned upside down by quarantine and social-distancing.

Now, to be clear, this reading from Acts is not like a movie that we can choose to see or not. God is at work in our lives. We have no choice about that. God rules over all things and works in our world. He created us, claimed us as His own in our Baptism, calls us to serve Him in our various vocations, and promises to raise us up to live with Him in the new creation.

Often, though, we don't think about God at work in our lives. That is, we have scenes of Him working on Sunday, through Word and Sacraments, but then forget about Him during the week. We look at the food on our table and remember buying it at the store. We don't see God at work through farmers and grocers to feed us. We look at the paperwork mounting on our desk and wonder how we are going to get it all done. We don't see God at work, calling us to our vocation as an administrative assistant in this world.

The beauty of this preview of Stephen, as short as it is, is that it assures us of God at work in the world. God is not distant from the world, and He is not always bringing about the happy ending that we desire. But God is at work. Nothing—not even death—can separate His people from Him. And everything—even death—can be used by Him to share His message with the world.

These scenes from the life of Stephen, then, invite us not to sit in front of a movie but rather to enter into the world, knowing that God is at work in the ordinary and the amazing in our lives. Amen.