

First Sunday of Christmas
December 26, 2021
Southampton, MA

Scripture: Col. 3:12-17

Today, is the Feast of Stephen. Stephen first appeared in Acts 6 when the Greek disciples complained to the Jerusalem disciples that their widows were not receiving their food distribution. After discussions, the disciples selected “seven men of good standing” as deacons to carry out this task. Stephen was among them. Later, a dispute arose with members of the synagogue who were former slaves. They brought Stephen before their council and leveled charges against him for speaking blasphemy against Moses and God. Stephen rebutted the charges with a stirring speech summarizing their faith beginning with Abraham leaving Haran. His forceful rebuke angered them, which led to his stoning.

Today, we celebrate Stephen as the first deacon and a martyr, which, coincidentally, connects to the Christmas carol *Good King Wenceslas* through its first line, “Good King Wenceslas looked out on the Feast of Stephen.”

Wenceslas lived from 907 to 929. He became Duke of Bohemia in 921. A very pious man, he established many churches, including the Church of St. Vitus in Prague. He was exceptionally kind and took care of the poor, the orphans, the widows, and the sick through charitable deeds. His attempts to forge closer ties with Germany, however, led to his assassination by his brother Boleslav.

Boleslav stabbed Wenceslas as the latter headed to mass. According to the story, blood stained the cathedral’s doors, but three days later they disappeared. Furthermore, reported miracles at his tomb led Wenceslas to be canonized. He is the patron saint of the Czech Republic.

The carol begins with Wenceslas' legend. One winter night while looking out from his castle over his snow-covered fields, he saw under the moonlight a poor man dressed in rags pulling something from the bushes. Wenceslas summoned his servant, Otto, and sent him to learn the man's identity.

He soon returned and informed Wenceslas that the man was Rudolph the swineherd. He lived near the Saint Agnes Fountain. He was collecting wood because he had no food or wood. He didn't want his family to suffer from the night's bitter cold and stinging winds.

Wenceslas immediately sought to remedy this unacceptable situation. He ordered Otto to get some provisions so he could bring Rudolph food and wood. Otto urged Wenceslas not to make the trip because of the fierce cold and the distance was long. Wenceslas replied that he would take the food and wood by himself, regardless whether Otto went with him. Not wanting Wenceslas to make the trip alone, he went with him.

Wenceslas, wanting to feel the cold as the poor did, did not dress as he might have to stay warm. He carried the wood, and Otto carried the food. Wenceslas walked briskly into the cold and Otto, dressed similarly to Wenceslas, followed.

Though Otto began this trek with hearty determination, he soon faltered. He wanted to turn back, but he couldn't let Wenceslas to continue on his own. When Otto could not go further, he told that to Wenceslas, who instructed to Otto to walk in his footprints. As he did, Otto's energy returned, and he felt himself warmed. Their mission to provide food and wood for Rudolph and his family was an act of love. That singular task enabled them to overlook winter's challenges. That was their cloak.

Paul wrote this letter to the church in Colossae while he was imprisoned. This particular section was an ethical admonishment, particularly in light of people who sought to influence the

community in ways contrary to the Christ's teachings. Paul urged them to set aside and leave behind those earthly issues and actions "fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)." (3:5b)

Paul encouraged them to strip off the old self and put on a new self. This cloak of love was the new self with threads made of "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience." (3:12b) The Colossians were to be imitators of God. "Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive," (3:13) he wrote.

We are coming to the end of a most trying year. We see or read all sorts of year-end reviews, and we may do likewise for ourselves. We will likely have lots of things to put in the "glad that's over and hope we won't suffer through it again" column.

Let's not despair, however. Practicing loving acts will lift our spirits. Let's don a new cloak for 2022, and like Wenceslas not fear the cold winds that blow around us.