John 10:1-10  4th Sunday of Easter  April 28, 1996

A long time ago I was talking with my sister-in-law. She spoke a phrase that I have never forgotten. She said, "I had a Sunday School faith, then."

A child's faith I think she meant. Faith that hasn't been tested. Faith that simply believes the stories of fiery furnaces and angel guarding the faithful. A faith that believes that lions will be like kittens when a Daniel is intended for their food. A faith that believes that all the Lord's lambs will always dwell in green pastures beside still waters.

A Sunday School faith she called it.

But reality had crushed that faith. An aneurism snuffing out the life of a brother-in-law. Young children, a loving wife left behind. The fire had burn, consumed, the lion had devoured, the wolf had come and she knew that the Lord's lambs were not always safe.

Maybe she remembered the story we heard today, of Stephen. Stones rain down upon him but in that Sunday School picture there is not a drop of blood. His face glows as he kneels in prayer, at peace, as he prays, Lord Jesus receive my spirit. And just as he is slipping into the quiet peace of death we hear his gentle words, Lord, do not hold his sin against them. And then the text says, he fell asleep.

Yes, I remember that story from Sunday School. I knew that I could be like him, so full of faith that nothing could touch him, not even stones. I knew that you and I could all be exactly like him, so full of faith that no lions teeth could ever break our skin, no fire could ever singe the hair of our arms. Our faith would give us perfect peace no matter what the challenge.

Then I grew disillusioned.
I couldn't find any Christians like that picture of Stephen. Sometimes they would say all the right words about forgiving and love, but I sensed a lot of pretending, especially when I was doing the talking.

I forgive, I would boast. But the hurt would come creeping back in, seeping back in.

And when I suffered there was no Sunday School material photographer there to record my faithfulness, only the ridicule of those who taunted me. This was not glorious, victorious but lonely and painful.

So what do I do? I give up hope of being like Stephen. I settle. And complain. And I find that I don't show your children and mine that picture, because I don't want them to become disillusioned as I did.

But today I have the responsibility of telling you of Stephen whether I like it or not. So I have struggled. I even wrote one whole sermon and threw it away. And decided to tell you the truth.

Forget the Sunday School picture of Stephen. If we had filmed the scene that day the movie would get an R rating, or even X for violence. Stones were crushing his skull, blood was flowing, bones were crunching, and our microphone would not catch a single word of Stephen over vicious screams of the crowd. They were a mob, angry enough to kill. Remember scenes of a handcuffed prisoner being kicked and beaten by police, and remember that he did not even die. But Stephen did.

That's what happened there that day. It happens all over the world today, in Liberia and Bosnia and Chechnia, and late on a Saturday night in Cleveland. It's not glorious, and when it comes on the TV screen we don't want young children to watch it.

That is the truth about Stephen's death.

But Luke tells it in a different way altogether. For Luke the camera is not here on earth, seeing as we see, but for Luke the camera with which
he records this death is the very eye of God and the microphone he uses to capture the sound is the very ear of God.

While stones rained down, and the sound of curses filled the air, God heard this prayer, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. When the eyes on earth could only see a body flattenened by stones, the Lord God saw Stephen kneeling in prayer, praying for the forgiveness of his tormenters. While on earth it appeared that all was lost, in heaven there were shouts of victory as Stephen fell asleep in love.

We cannot see faith in one another, but God can see. In a world where we so often see only what appears to be the triumph of evil, God is recording quite another triumph as Christians believe. Photographs in Bosnia and Liberia cannot record faith, but those who believe in Christ triumph in their suffering.

And here also. In injustice, in sickness, in loss Christ promises that he will give you faith to endure. And to forgive, and to love.

Trust his promise. Amen