May 14, Fifth Sunday of Easter

Acts 7:55–60; Psalm 31:1–5, 15–16; 1 Peter 2:2–10; John 14:1–14

by Enuma Okoro in the April 26, 2017 issue

In theory, I like the idea of being close to God, intimate to the point of speaking regularly with God—and receiving clear directives. Whenever I was confused about something, I could just ask God and get clarity on the matter. I'd never have to wonder about what my next step should be. God would lead me and guide me and maybe even use me to get an important message across to other people.

It sounds divine! Except that in the Bible, an intimate relationship with God usually sends people's lives into chaos. It makes them widely unpopular as messengers; it sends them to the margins of society. It also quite often gets them killed.

This Sunday's reading from Acts picks up Stephen's story at an odd point. All we have at first is an unidentified man who is filled with the Holy Spirit, peers into heaven, and catches a glimpse of God and Christ. For some reason this is the last thing the people around him want to hear, and it has the effect of turning them into an angry mob. They rush after this holy man with intent to kill him. Then we learn that the man being stoned is named Stephen, and in the midst of the attack he prays for God to receive his spirit—and to forgive his killers. Then he dies almost peacefully, though his is clearly a violent end.

On its own, the passage makes little sense. Who is Stephen? Who is in the crowd, and why are they so intent on killing him? The larger context of chapter 7 offers answers to all these questions. But simply staying with the assigned passage raises hard questions of its own.

First of all, why are we reading this story this week? We are finally out of the wilderness of Lent and basking in the victory of the resurrection. The Easter season is a small reprieve from the injustices of the world, a time to delight in a resurrected Christ who plays in 10,000 places. Is this really the best time to bring in Stephen's

martyrdom?

What's more, given the witness of scripture as to what happens to God's chosen ones, I should maybe take Stephen's story in stride—the violence, the murder, the holier-than-thou prayer for others to be forgiven. But I can't. Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, a faithful man of God who even gets to see God, is gruesomely killed. He is killed for bearing witness to his vision of God and to his beliefs—and, as the rest of the chapter reveals, for holding the religious authorities accountable. Is this what it means to be "God's own people," as the passage from 1 Peter describes its readers? Is this how Jesus will come and take us to himself, as he promises in John? Is this how God might respond to a cry like the psalmist's to "rescue me speedily," to "be a strong fortress to save me"? Back to 1 Peter, is this a taste of the goodness of the Lord?

If this is the kind of thing our faith leads to, who wants it? It's a question I find myself asking whenever I read a passage like the martyrdom of Stephen. Didn't Jesus come to save us, to protect us, to give us abundant life? Wasn't he already murdered for us, crucified for his own courage, testimony, and divine allegiance? Now we get to get in on that, too?

I struggle with this part of the call, with the reality that following Jesus will sometimes mean being treated like Jesus. Proclaiming our Spirit-filled visions of God and speaking truth in ways that offend others can have dire consequences for our lives. Not martyrdom perhaps, at least not for those of us living in free and democratic societies, but certainly consequences that can change our lives, that can put us in unfavorable positions with people in authority and even within our own families and communities.

The lectionary, by not including the events that precede Stephen's violent death, leads me to wonder if the specifics always matter. Perhaps it's more important sometimes to recognize that the faithful always risk being persecuted for bearing witness and speaking truth—in any context, be it cultural, religious, or political, where people do not have the ability to see or discern God.

And by assigning the story during Easter, the lectionary points us to the inevitability of such trouble, even in the midst of a season of abundant life. It reflects the life of faith and the call of faith in an active world, the bizarre tennis match in which light and darkness constantly rally off each other. Rarely is any one season all joy or all

sorrow. So as much as I dislike this passage, I do appreciate that it shows up when it does. It bears witness to the reality of the sort of world we live in, both inside and outside the church. It reminds us that children of God can and do turn against one another when we hear truth that offends our pride and threatens to crumble our cardboard temples for God. And it reminds us that bearing witness against falsehood is a calling that always has a personal cost.

We can sit in the discomfort of this truth for one Sunday, without tidying it up. Sometimes this is a bold act of faith in itself.