

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 1/1/2024

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

ONE AT ONE – *Every day this week beginning on Tuesday, January 2 you are encouraged to pray for one minute at one o'clock. This week, pray for yourself. Ask GOD to give you eyes that see the good in people and a voice that lifts people up.*

Unless you follow the Christian Church calendar, there is a lot that we miss between Christmas and Epiphany, the day the church celebrates the arrival of wise men to worship the CHRIST child. Of course, December 25 is Christmas, the traditional celebration of the birth of JESUS. We tend to celebrate this more often on December 24 because we think of HIS birth as being at night, when the shepherds were keeping watch over their flocks. We also like the candles that remind us of the stars in the sky.

December 26 is the Festival of Stephen, Deacon and Martyr. Stephen was one of the seven deacons appointed by the early church to help oversee the distribution of food to the widows in Jerusalem, as recorded in Acts 6. This narrative describes Stephen as “a man full of faith and the HOLY SPIRIT,” and of “GOD’s grace and power.” Acts tells us that Stephen “performed great wonders and signs among the people.” Stephen was confronted by the leaders of the Synagogue of the Freedmen who then were unable to stand up to the arguments given by Stephen through the wisdom of the SPIRIT. So, they sent out false witnesses who lied and stirred up the people. Eventually, Stephen was seized and brought before the Sanhedrin, the rulers of the Jews. Stephen preached a message that demonstrated his great knowledge of the Scriptures, from the time of Abraham and leading to the coming of GOD’s MESSIAH. However, his confrontation with these leaders infuriated them (It’s never a good idea to call those to whom you are speaking “stiff-necked people” and “murders.”) so that they took Stephen and stoned him to death, making him the first martyr of the Christian church.

December 27 is the Festival of John, Apostle and Evangelist. This day celebrates the ministry of this disciple of JESUS during and after the resurrection. John was the younger brother of James; together, the sons of Zebedee. John was perhaps the youngest of the twelve disciples. His is the fourth and last of the Gospels written and contained in the Bible.

December 28 commemorates the Holy Innocents and Martyrs. In particular, it is a remembrance of the children under the age of two who were killed by King Herod. Having received information from the wise men regarding the birth of the ONE who would be called King of the Jews, Herod, threatened by this news, ordered the killing of all the children of Bethlehem born at the time when JESUS would have been. (Ironically, we remember this event nine days before we celebrate the arrival of the wise men in JESUS’ home, though it helps us to remember that they came perhaps two years after JESUS’ birth.) Holy Innocents and Martyrs is a tragic occasion that recalls the unjust murder of many who were unaware of why the government was doing this, as well as others through Christian history who died because of their faith and commitment to the LORD.

January 1 is called the Name of JESUS and remembers the day of the naming of JESUS. Going back to the time of Abraham, all Jewish boys were to be circumcised on the eighth day after their birth. The tradition was that on the day of circumcision, the child was given his name. Joseph and Mary followed the instructions of GOD, given by an angel, and named him JESUS, the Aramaic version of the Hebrew name Joshua, which means “GOD saves.”

Because these days infrequently fall on a Sunday and because we tend to focus on the Christmas story, we miss hearing the messages of these Lesser Festivals. Nevertheless, they are important. They tell us much about the world into which JESUS was born and they reveal to us stories of faithful people and great unjust tragedy. In just a few days, we hear about how great the world needs JESUS and how much HE can change things for GOD’s good plan.

In CHRIST's love,
Pastor Jeffrey