What is the world coming to? Snow in Syracuse on Mother’s Day weekend? A plague of locusts in Africa, again? And a world-wide pandemic that keeps us apart, all the while taking more lives – among the old and the young – in frightening and new ways. What is the world coming to?

Last week we received some mail from someone who’s return address was a t-bone or pork chop sticker. In it was three pages of stuff entitled “Verses about God’s power to deliver from plagues’, ‘A world in crises 2020’, and ‘Build your faith and fight fear during the coronavirus crisis’. Interestingly, that last page included a verse from John 14, our Gospel for today: “Do not let your hearts be troubled…” I don’t know who sent us the packet, it was postmarked from San Antonio, Texas and I don’t know anyone with the name or nickname of TBone or Porkchop, but it did get me thinking. Why do bad things happen to good people? Why isn’t faith enough to protect us from harm? What is the world coming to?

Our lessons today are lessons of hope and comfort, for the most part. Hope and comfort can be found in the words of Jesus – I am the way, the truth, the life; I go to prepare a place for you and will bring you to live with me; don’t be afraid. Hope and comfort can be found in Peter’s words – once you were not a people but now you are God’s people. Hope and comfort are in the Psalm, too – be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe. Hope and comfort, for the most part.

But our lessons begin with the stoning of Stephen. Not much comfort there. Why are these lessons put together? Why is the stoning of Stephen part of the Easter season? And who was Stephen, anyway???

Stephen was one of seven deacons that the disciples – or apostles, as they were called later – laid hands on and commissioned to take care of the early church’s widows and orphans. Jewish law commanded care for the widows, the orphans and the foreigners who lived among the people. As the disciples of Jesus became the church, the community had to take care of their own widows, orphans and foreigners. The twelve disciples did the work initially, but the church grew and the disciples were busy and not all the people were being taken care of… So the twelve appointed seven other men to serve the church. These were the church’s first deacons.

According to the book of Acts, Stephen not only took care of the widows under his charge, but was an outspoken preacher, as well. It was his preaching that got him into trouble. He was called before the High Priest and the council. Some accused Stephen of preaching against Moses and the Law. He told the Council that they were the ones at fault – killing the prophets just as their fathers before them had done. Not words of comfort or hope.
Stephen’s words angered the Council and he was convicted of blasphemy. And so he was sentenced to stoning. Stephen was the church’s first martyr, killed for his outspoken faith in Jesus.

Why put Stephen’s martyrdom in with the rest of our lessons of comfort and hope? Perhaps as a reminder of why we need comfort and hope. Perhaps as a reminder that our comfort and hope are not found here, but found in God. Perhaps as a reminder that what we do find here, in this world, is not always comfortable, not always hopeful. Life is good. And life is often difficult and sometimes painful.

It would be nice to think that if we do all that God asks of us – obey the Ten Commandments, come to church almost every Sunday, give money to the church, if we are loving and kind – if we are obedient, then God will bless us and our lives will be free from sickness and adversity. It would be nice if Good Christians were always blessed with everything we could ever need or want and Bad People were always punished with illness and death, with crop failures and loss of jobs. It would be nice if the world would work that way. We would know how to protect ourselves from hurt and loss – we would just need to live the right way and do the right things and then our lives would be beautiful and easy.

But the world has never worked that way – so down through the centuries the writers of Scripture have lamented and struggled to understand…

The psalmist cries out, “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?”

The writer of Ecclesiastes says, “In my vain life I have seen everything; there are righteous people who perish in their righteousness and there are wicked people who prolong their life in their evildoing.”

Stephen is stoned for preaching the Gospel.

Jesus dies for teaching that God loves us all.

We live within the ancient struggle to understand why – why do bad things happen to good people? Why do the wicked prosper? Why isn’t life more like the fairy tales where Good triumphs and Evil is vanquished? Why? What is the world coming to?

We live in one small chapter of the entire story of God and humankind. Our stories join up with all the stories of God’s creation. There is an ultimate story; a long narrative in which evil IS overcome and Love does finally triumph. Just as we were not around for the beginning of the story, we do not yet see the end of the story. We don’t yet see the final chapter in the story of humankind and God. So we need comfort and we need hope to face our part of the story.

Whatever our lives may be like today – full of joy or full of sorrow or mostly some combination of the two, our lessons today remind us that living obedient, godly lives does not guarantee us freedom from harm or hurt or sorrow. And they also remind us that in the longer story of God’s dealings with us, we belong to God, we are God’s people, we have a home towards which we are
traveling, and Jesus walks with us on the journey, so that we are not alone. We are beloved children and Jesus is our Way home.

Almighty God, hold us gently and keep us steadily following in your Son’s way of love, even through the valleys of life and in the shadow of death. Amen.