

If I say the world is a difficult place, it's not going to be news for any of you. You will know that for yourselves. You will know from experience, that the world is lonely. That those we have loved dearly, leave us, and we miss them. You know that we don't always fit, aren't always welcome, aren't always seen as we should be seen. You will have had these experiences. You will also know someone for whom something truly terrible has happened.

There is no answer for calamities like these.

The world is a difficult place.

Our faith doesn't dodge these things, it doesn't make light of them, nor does it provide us with simple answers. Rather it challenges us with what it means to be human, what it means to be a faithful people, and what it means to see life, as believers in Jesus, as opposed to the way the world sees it. I have always thought this requires courage, toughness, and quite a bit of steel, to peer in to the mystery of life ... and hold on.

The readings for today challenge the idea that life as a believer is easy. These readings are about tough stuff. Difficult stuff. Living in the furnace of what being faithful can cost us. These readings are about faith; hard, tough, tenacious faith.

Faith for a difficult world.

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The gospel we read about here is a real-world, real-life gospel. A hard times gospel. And this gospel, tells us one thing, very simply ... that there is only one end to life worth worrying about ... and that end is one in Jesus the Christ ... the Son of the Living God.

In John, Jesus says he is leaving the disciples. They will be alone. All their hopes and dreams, desires and longings will be dashed. They will be bereft, grief stricken and they will be in mourning.

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But he also says, that he will prepare a place for them, and will come back for them.

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But for that to be helpful, they must believe it.

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In Peter; a rejected community, denied their old life because of their faith in Jesus Christ, have been turned out of the synagogue. They no longer fit in, they are no longer welcome in their familiar places, they have now become lesser beings to those around them, and it will be like this always.

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But Peter also says to them, that Jesus was the stone the builders rejected, that he became the head of the corner, the most important stone of all. Peter tells his people ... this is who you will be, too.

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But for that to be helpful, they must believe it.

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In Acts the story of Stephen is told for the readers of this book. It says very simply, that he was murdered. Stoned to death because of his proclamation and beliefs. The truly terrible happens.

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But as the readers move on with the story, they see it is written, that Stephen looks to heaven and sees the glory of the God, as the rocks rain down. That in the midst of this horror, there is only one end, and that end is Jesus the Christ, the Son of the Living God

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but for that to be helpful, the readers must believe it!

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The world is a difficult place.

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In the difficult place of loneliness and grief, rejection and sadness, horror, and death, we are faced with the difficult task of believing ...

That Jesus is the victor over all that assails us.

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What these readings want us to understand ... is that a faithful life can be difficult. But in this faith that we have been gifted; this hard, tough, tenacious faith, we have what we need to survive. No matter what we are facing.

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But for it to be helpful, we must believe it!

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Because, none of these things are the end.

Not even a murderous death.

Jesus is the Victor over it all.

For John, For Peter, For Stephen ... and for us.

Amen.