

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

## I. The Feast of Stephen

A. Today, among many things, is the **Feast of St. Stephen**.

1. We read about St. Stephen in Chapter 6 of the **Book of Acts** where we learn that he was one of the first of the **Deacons** who were created to assist the Apostles in the newly forming Church.

2. It was the job of the **Deacon** to teach people about Jesus, to help the poor, and to assist with the administration of things—in other words, deal with the details—so the Apostles could continue to Preach and bring people to Christ.

3. And traditionally, that has been the job description for Deacons ever since.

4. So **Stephen** was in the Temple preaching about Jesus and caused such a commotion that the Jewish Leaders had him dragged from the Temple and **stoned** to death.

5. One of the interesting sidelights of this story is that one of those who witnessed the stoning of Stephen was a young man name **Saul**—yes, THAT Saul, who would **persecute** the Church and then become one of its greatest Apostles.

6. So, as the church's **first martyr** to die for the faith, Stephen received the Day closest to Christmas for his FEAST DAY.

## II. Good King Wenceslas

A. One of the Christmas Carols associated with this day is, “**Good King Wenceslas**”—who “looked out” on the Feast of Stephen—or the day after Christmas.

1. You know, there really was a **King Wenceslas**, and he WAS good! Although in Czech his name was pronounced “va-ti-slav-i”.

2. Wenceslas lived in the early part of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and was the Duke of Bohemia—which is now the northern part of the Czech Republic between Germany and Poland, with Prague as its Capital.

3. His father died when he was 13, so his mother, **Drahomira**, served as his regent until he became of age.

4. However, his Grandmother, **Ludmilla**, also was on the scene and oversaw his religious upbringing as a Christian.

5. Now, a dispute arose between **Drahomira** and **Ludmilla** over their political and religious differences, but primarily over the young prince.

6. Fearing losing influence over her son, and that **Ludmilla** was raising him more as a monk than a prince—**Drahomira**, in a plot right out of GAME OF THRONES, had assassins strangle **Ludmilla**.

7. For her troubles, when he ascended to the throne, **Wenceslas** had his mother banned from the kingdom for a time.

B. **Wenceslas** became Duke of Bohemia in 921, but life was not easy for the new Duke.

1. He had to put down an uprising from a rebellious Duke, and deal with constant raids from the neighboring Saxon armies demanding tribute payments.

2. He created a church within the palace grounds dedicated to St. Vitus, which has developed into the St. Vitus Cathedral today.

3. In 935, or perhaps as early as 929, **Wenceslas**' brother, **Boleslav**, conspired with a group of nobles and murdered **Wenceslas** to assume the throne.

- See, I'm telling you, "Game of Thrones" and all those shows with intrigue and death have nothing on these guys.

4. He thus earned the title **Boleslav the Cruel**, although Czech historians treat him fairly well, and it seems, in remorse for the killing of his brother, he continued the Christian reforms begun by **Wenceslas**;

- in fact, his son who succeeded him was known as **Boleslav the Pious**.

C. But upon his death, **Wenceslas** was hailed as a Martyr and a Saint, and the cult of **Wenceslas** quickly developed in Bohemia and England.

1. For by his death, **Wenceslas** did what he was unable to do while he was still living—he made Bohemia a Christian country.

2. Within thirty years of his martyrdom, the Faith was so strong that Prague was made a Bishopric with supervision for all Bohemia.

3. Within a few decades of **Wenceslas**' death, four biographies of him were in circulation.

4. These *hagiographies*—or life of a Saint—had a powerful influence on the High Middle Ages conceptualization of the *rex Justus* or the "righteous king"—that is, a monarch whose power stems mainly from his great piety, as well as from his princely vigor.

5. One of these *hagiographies* says of **Wenceslas**, "*rising every night from his noble bed, with bare feet and only one chamberlain, he went around to God's churches and gave alms generously to widows, orphans, those in prison and afflicted by every difficulty, so much so that he was considered, not a prince, but the father of all the wretched.*"

4. Now you might have noticed that in the Carol, **Wenceslas** is a King, yet, in real life, he was a Duke—this is not an upgrade from a zealous carol writer—the Holy Roman Emperor **Otto I** posthumously conferred on **Wenceslas** the title of King.

D. The carol “Good King Wenceslas” was written by John Mason Neale, and was published in 1853—some 900 years after **Wenceslas** lived.

1. John Mason Neale lived in England from 1818-1866.

2. He was a “High Churchman” at a time when anything remotely “Catholic” was looked on with suspicion—and had to endure a good deal of opposition for his sympathies.

3. But it is for his hymns that he is best known today.

4. John Mason Neale wrote or translated 45 hymns in our hymnal, including: “Good Christian Friends, Rejoice,” “Of The Father’s Love Begotten,” “All Glory, Laud and Honor,” “Come, Ye Faithful, Raise the Strain,” “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” and many, many more.

5. And in 1853, he published his carol about “Good King Wenceslas,” which he translated from a Czech poem.

6. In the carol, much like in the *hagiography*, **Wenceslas** is seen as caring for the hungry and the poor, as he and his page set out to take food and drink to a poor peasant.

7. The miracle in the carol comes when the page, who is freezing from the cold and cannot go another step, is told to walk in **Wenceslas’** footprints in the snow and is warmed up by them, so they can complete their mission.

8. The moral of the story is plain: “*Therefore, Christian men, be sure, wealth or rank possessing, Ye who now will bless the poor, shall yourselves find blessing.*”

### III. Being Wenceslas Today

A. So what is the moral of all this today, and why talk about it now?

1. I believe our world is crying out for more of us to be like **Wenceslas**—for more of us to be givers—DEEP GIVERS—of our money and our time.

2. **Wenceslas** didn't just send his page or a couple of servants—he went HIMSELF: both in the carol and in the Saint's legend—he went himself to see to the needs of those less fortunate.

3. How do we see to the needs of the less fortunate here and now?

4. It seems that so many people, nowadays, say “I've got mine, you get yours,” when it's not as simple as that.

5. So many people have the deck stacked against them by circumstances they may not even be able to control—and so they need some help.

6. How can WE help those in need? How can we truly SERVE?

7. Just this morning we learned of the passing of that great Champion of Justice and those in need—**Archbishop Desmond Tutu**.

8. Writing about Bishop Tutu's death, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry said, *“While on this earth, he sought to follow Jesus of Nazareth in God's way of love and life. In so doing, he showed us how to live God's dream as children of the one God and creator of all. So, even in our sorrow that he is no longer walking among us, we can thank God that he did.”*

9. Bishop Curry goes on to say, *“Perhaps we best give thanks by honoring his legacy—not merely with lip service to racial justice and reconciliation, but with lives dedicated to this work. We do this by learning to live together as the children and family of God, no longer hurting each other or God's creation, but together living the dream God intended. For in God's dream, as the Hebrew prophet Isaiah said, “they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”*

B. The New Year is a great time to add a resolution to do a bit more serving in our lives.

1. Right here, close to home, both Project Hope and our new St. Columba's pantry could use some help.

2. Project Hope can use help preparing the bags of food and distributing them to Seniors on the second and fourth Thursday mornings, and handing things out to families on Thursday evenings.

3. And St. Columba's Pantry needs help packaging and distributing food on the first and third Thursdays.

4. And if you're not able to physically help—put a few extra cans of food, or pasta, or cereal in your cart at the store, and then bring it along on Sunday.

C. And there are other volunteer programs both here and around the community that could use your helping hands.

1. All of us are besieged at this time with “year-end giving” opportunities.

2. But, what we really have to ask ourselves is how much of my gift will actually go to help those in need—and more and more the answer is **surprisingly little**, as more and more is eaten up in administrative costs.

3. Episcopal Relief & Development is another great way to assist those in need while making sure where your money goes.

4. Food Share is another place that can use support, as their revenue streams dry up—they have to look for new ways to continue to provide food for those in need.

## Conclusion

These are just some of the places who can use your help; I'm sure there are many more, but the bottom line question for us is:

- "How can I be like **Wenceslas**; How can I be like **Stephen**?
- How can I work for justice and reconciliation like **Bishop Tutu**?
- How can I be about in the world SERVING those who are in need, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ?"

As I read this carol—I invite you to think about this very thing:  
"How am I serving those in need?"

*[READ carol]*

1. Good King Wenceslas looked out on the Feast of Stephen,  
When the snow lay round about, deep and crisp and even.  
Brightly shone the moon that night, though the frost was cruel,  
When a poor man came in sight, gath'ring winter fuel.
2. "Hither, page, and stand by me, if you know it, telling,  
Yonder peasant, who is he? Where and what his dwelling?"  
"Sire, he lives a good league hence, underneath the mountain,  
Right against the forest fence, by Saint Agnes' fountain."
3. "Bring me flesh and bring me wine, bring me pine logs hither,  
Thou and I will see him dine, when we bring them thither."  
Page and monarch, forth they went, forth they went together,  
Through the cold wind's wild lament and the bitter weather.
4. "Sire, the night is darker now, and the wind blows stronger,  
Fails my heart, I know not how; I can go no longer."  
"Mark my footsteps, my good page, tread now in them boldly,  
Thou shall find the winter's rage freeze your blood less coldly."
5. In his master's steps he trod, where the snow lay dinted;  
Heat was in the very sod which the saint had printed.  
Therefore, Christian men, be sure, wealth or rank possessing,  
You who now will bless the poor shall yourselves find blessing.

REPEAT: Therefore, Christian men, be sure, wealth or rank possessing,  
You who now will bless the poor shall yourselves find blessing. AMEN.