

# Christendom's Next Great Apostle

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The most famous Japanese Haiku is probably this one by Basho:

An old silent pond.  
Into the pond a frog jumps.  
Splash!  
Silence again.

The moment Basho describes is the jump of a frog into a pond. It's so ordinary, we probably wouldn't notice it if we were walking past the pond. But Basho sets the frog's jump off by telling us what came before and what comes after: an old silent pond...then silence again.

By framing the jump with the silence on either side of it, Basho teaches us to really see the jump, and hear it: Splash! We notice something we wouldn't have noticed before because the silence on either side makes us really pay attention. Sometimes it's important to look off to the side a bit in order to see what's really happening, to see the before and the after before we know what a moment means.

After the horrible events of the night and day of the arrest and crucifixion, and after the Ascension of Jesus, the Apostles stop, as Luke tells us in the beginning of his book The Acts of the Apostles, and they try to figure out what to do next.

Jesus had chosen twelve Apostles to be his inner circle, probably in order to replicate the twelve tribes that made up Israel. He was creating a new Israel, so he needed twelve new founders to represent the reset of the nation, a reset that was recalling Israel back to its earlier mission to be a light to the nations.

But one of those twelve, Judas, had betrayed Jesus, and now they were down to eleven. That wouldn't do. They needed a twelfth Apostle to make the symbolism work. They even found a Scripture verse to back them up in Psalm 109:8 "May another take his place of leadership."

So what did they do? They set out some conditions that would make the new Apostle as much like themselves as they could: it had to be someone who had been with them the whole time that Jesus was living among them, from the beginning in the times of John the Baptist right up to the end with Jesus' ascension, someone who was also a witness of the resurrection.

Completely reasonable terms. Sensible. Exactly what we would do, probably. They found two candidates: Joseph, also known as Barsabbas, with a Latin nickname: the Just; and a second man, Matthias, about whom nothing else is known.

They decided to let God choose which one God wanted as the new Apostle by casting lots. Now, I defy you all right now to tell me which person won that casting of lots. Which one became the new twelfth Apostle: was it Joseph the Just, or Matthias?

Nobody remembers this. Okay, it was Matthias, about whom we knew nothing before, had never heard about him, and about whom we still know nothing now. After he is successfully chosen, he disappears and is never mentioned again. As Basho might have written, There was silence, then Matthias splashed into the story, then silence again. Disappeared like a frog into a pond! The next verses settle over him like the ripples in the water.

As readers, it leaves us scratching our heads. Is this really Christendom's next great Apostle, as American Reality Game Show sensibilities might have called him. Did the judges get it right, or will we, as viewers, see something they didn't and insist on a different choice?

Well, it takes until chapter 6, but then there's big trouble in little Jerusalem. A little background: You have to understand that as Jewish believers came forward with their beliefs about Jesus being the Messiah, they were often kicked out of the synagogues.

This was problematic because the synagogues were the social welfare agencies of the day. If you were a widow or an orphan, you would head to the synagogue daily to get fed and looked after. Proclaiming that Jesus was the Messiah meant that you were also risking your only means of survival. Out of the synagogue meant out of the food distribution. There was nowhere else to go. Thank God for Social Security and Medicare, right?

Well, as the church got more widows and orphans, they had to become the new center of food distribution, taking over the place of the synagogues in these poor people's lives.

As it turned out, the Hebrew-speaking widows who were native to Jerusalem were a bit better at getting their bread than the Greek-speaking ones who had come from the Diaspora, that is, from the surrounding Greek-speaking world. This should come as no surprise, as anyone who has ever tried to ask for directions in a foreign language knows that the native speakers have a big advantage.

Both sets of widows were originally Jewish, so it's not a Jewish-Gentile thing, just a Hebrew/Aramaic and Greek thing. There were complaints, hard feelings, and hungry widows. The Apostles were dragged into it. They were in danger of spending all their time as waiters in the bread line, instead of out preaching about Jesus.

They found Stephen, a man full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and six others, to work the food distribution. You might have heard of the modern Stephen Ministry movement. Well, it's named for this Stephen. He was that great.

The text tells us Stephen did lots of wonders and miracles among the people. Already he's ahead of poor Matthias the Unmentioned.

Looking at Stephen, a man dedicated to serving the community, blessed by the Holy Spirit, a leader in bringing people to see Jesus as the Messiah, the early church must have begun wondering the same thing that we as readers begin to wonder: is *this* the one God really has in mind? Is Stephen the one who is really going to replace Judas? Is he Christendom's next great Apostle?

Just when we are becoming convinced of it, Stephen is grabbed in the street and brought before the San Hedrin council, charged with wanting to destroy the Temple change the Law handed down from Moses.

From what we know of Jesus and the early church, Stephen was probably saying that the Temple wasn't necessary anymore because God could be approached directly through Jesus. Likely, he was preaching that the Law should be understood as Jesus had interpreted it in his disputes with the Pharisees, rather than in a more traditional way.

In other words, he was guilty of interpretative disputes about the meaning of Scripture and the Messiah, but not of trying to destroy the Temple or destroy the established order.

Stephen stands before the San Hedrin Council and gives his defense, which is a spirited rendering of Israel's history, pointing out the various times that Israel messed up before God, as when they made and worshipped the golden calf just as Moses was up the mountain getting the ten commandments, and Stephen ends by saying that they have royally screwed up again in putting Jesus to death.

This went down with the Council just about as well as you could expect. They were so angry that they wanted to stone Stephen, and that's just what they did. And that's where our text picks up today: on the day that this great new Apostle candidate was killed.

They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. All eyes are upon Stephen as he cries out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And then he knelt in prayer as the stones were pouring in on him, and he cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Stephen forgave his enemies even as they were killing him, echoing Jesus' own prayer from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Truly, Stephen was a great Apostle and would have been a worthy successor to Judas, but it was not to be.

But Basho, the Japanese haiku poet, has taught us to look off to the side, away from the things that normally hold our attention, away from the main action, and see what we might otherwise miss.

And standing on the side, holding everyone's cloaks and cheering on the stoners like crazy, is a boy, 11 or 12 years old, not a man yet, not yet 13, not yet old enough to participate in the stoning himself.

The boy is named Saul, and he grew up to hate the church with a deep passion, hate the people he associated with that horrible man Stephen whose death he had watched with such glee.

When he was old enough, Saul led his own raiding parties, breaking into people's homes all over Jerusalem, and if he found people gathered there to listen of stories about Jesus, he dragged them off and imprisoned them.

Christians in Jerusalem grew to fear the knock at the door that might mean Saul and his thugs were about to round them up.

Yet it was this man, Saul, whom we know as Paul, whom God had chosen to be the replacement Apostle for Judas, at least as far as Luke, the author of the Acts of the Apostles is concerned. The entire second half of the book of Acts of the Apostles is about Saul, now called Paul.

That little boy holding the coats at Stephen's stoning, he's the one God had chosen! That young man leading the thugs and breaking into Christian's homes, he's the one whom God has called.

Paul met none of the early church's conditions for replacing Judas, and was probably the last person on earth they ever would have thought of, both at the time, since Paul was still just a boy, and later, when Paul had become the persecutor.

Yet the boy with the cloaks was the one, and Christianity has been shaped by Paul's understanding of who Jesus was almost as much as by Jesus himself.

And Paul's understanding, his new way of reading the Scripture to see that it predicted Jesus as the Messiah who would suffer and die for the people, as the Messiah who would offer forgiveness to anyone, even someone who was persecuting him, surely that understanding started to percolate in his brain as he stood and listened to Stephen reinterpret the Scriptures to show that the Messiah was going to be persecuted, and surely it worked its way into his heart as he listened to Stephen praying to God for forgiveness for those who were stoning him to death.

It took a long time to settle there, but once this new way of reading the Scriptures did settle in his brain and in his heart, nothing could hold him back. History has shown that Saul, under his new name of Paul, was Christendom's next great Apostle, the one God had chosen, the most unlikeliest (*sic*) one of all.

In this time when America is divided, where enmities are rising, where hatred is beckoning, where patience and understanding are short, it pays to take Basho's advice

and look off to the side, to see the little boy at a stoning, who was learning so much from the grace and forgiveness of a man he hated.

When Stephen called on Jesus as the stones began to fly, and when he called down forgiveness on his enemies as the stones took his life, he was like a frog jumping into a pond. He sent out his ripples of faith and forgiveness.

Sometimes, as Basho noticed, the ripples just disappear, and everything goes back to the way it was. But sometimes, the ripples spread out, and rock another lily pad, and another frog jumps, with more ripples and more frogs until the whole pond is awash with ripples and croaking, all because of that first frog.

In this time of anger and bitterness, it pays to remember that there are little boys and girls off to the side, watching what we do and how we treat those who are on the other side.

It pays to remember that not every ripple that goes out from our lives will settle back into silence on the pond. Some of them will continue through time until, with God's grace, they may settle in a heart where they will change the world.

You never know who is watching unnoticed in the corner. You never know whom God may be calling to be Christendom's next great Apostle in our age.

Amen