THE EPISTLE

Saint James' Episcopal Church

Livingston, Alabama

Volume XXXII, Number 12 December 2026



December 2026

This Month's Cover

Our cover this month is *The Stoning of Saint Stephen*, the fifth of ten tapestries designed by Raphael (1483-1520). It commemorates the stoning of the first Christian martyr, the deacon Saint Stephen (Dec. 26). Commissioned in 1515 by Pope Leo X, the tapestries were intended to be hung on the walls of the Sistine Chapel for the liturgical observances of the events that each depicts. The ten tapestries were *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes, Christ's Charge to Peter, The Healing of the Lame Man, The Death of Ananias, The Stoning of Stephen, The Conversion of Saul, The Conversion of the Proconsul, The Sacrifice at Lystra, Paul in Prison,* and *Paul Preaching at Athens*. Raphael drew the cartoons, and the tapestries were woven in workshop of Pieter van Aelst in Brussels, Europe's leading tapestry center. We think of a cartoon as a humorous line-drawing, but in the art world, it is the preliminary paper design for a work of art such as a painting, tapestry, or stained-glass window. Cartoons were done in fine detail and were themselves works of art. The tapestries are a mirror image of the cartoons because the weavers worked from the back of the tapestry while looking directly at the cartoon. Considering that there was almost no communication between Raphael and the weavers, the results are extraordinary. Unfortunately, while most of the cartoons for the Vatican tapestries have survived, the one for *The Stoning of Saint Stephen* is lost. The tapestries are now displayed in the Vatican Museum.

The story of Saint Stephen is told in Acts 6-7. He was one of the first seven deacons appointed to assist the Apostles in the ministry of the church, particularly with the care of the poor. Saul of Tarsus, who would later become Saint Paul, captured him and charged him with blasphemy. When Stephen saw a vision of Christ, they stoned him to death. He was the first Christian martyr. The tapestry depicts his martyrdom. In the upper right we see the vision of Christ to which Stephen is gazing, and on the lower right we see Saul guarding the robes of the executioners (Acts 7:58).

The Epistle is published monthly online at *www.rlosch.com* by Saint James' Episcopal Church, P.O. Box 446, Livingston, AL 35470-0446, the Rev. Richard R. Losch, Editor, email *rlosch33@gmail.com*. Copr. © 2026, Richard R. Losch. Permission is granted to reproduce text items in church newsletters or bulletins (but not on the Internet or digitized) as long as they are reproduced completely and in print, and credit is given.

Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino (Raphael) was an Italian painter and architect in the High Renaissance. He was part of the triumvirate of the greatest masters of the time, the other two being Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo Buonarroti. He was born in 1483 in Urbino, a small but highly cultured Tuscan city-state in the foothills of the Northern Apennines, near the northern Adriatic coast of Italy. His father, Giovanni Sancia, was the court painter to the ruler of Urbino. He was probably Raphael's first teacher, but he died when Raphael was only 11. Raphael helped manage the household and his father's studio thereafter, and continued his training in the workshop of Pietro Perugino, who declared him a fully trained master at the age of 17. He worked in several cities in northern Italy until 1504, when he moved to Florence and studied the works of the great masters there. In 1508, the year Michelangelo started working on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, Pope Julius II invited Raphael to Rome to work on the Apostolic Palace in the Vatican. It was there that he started working as an architect. He was at the height of his fame and productivity at his death in 1520 at age 37. Most people remember him today for his magnificent work on the huge paintings in the "Raphael Rooms" in the Vatican. During his career, he also did a several general drawings and tapestry cartoons, including the Saint Stephen tapestry that is our cover this month. He fell ill in 1520 and was ill for only about two weeks. The cause of his death is not clear. Most historians believe it was the result of a serious infection and too much bloodletting, which was common in those days. He was under enough control, however, to put all his affairs in proper order before he died. At his request, he is buried in the Pantheon in Rome.

–Richard R. Losch+

A Word from the Editor

The thing I hate most about the commercialism of Christmas is hearing people continually gripe about the commercialism of Christmas. My response is, "Lighten up!" Christmas is the celebration of God coming into the world in the person of His incarnate Son. That is something to be joyful about. Wherever there is money to be made there will be people scrambling to make it, many of whom will be loud, tasteless, and vulgar about it. That does not require us to be loud, tasteless, or vulgar. Anything as important as the birth of Christ requires preparation, and that's what the season of Advent is all

about–preparation for the coming of Christ. If people choose to celebrate Christmas during Advent, it is not our responsibility to condemn them, but to teach them (sometimes with words, and sometimes just by example) that the celebration is enriched and even more joyful when we have prepared for it properly, both spiritually and ceremonially. Remember the old Heinz ketchup ad, "Anticipation." Looking forward to something and preparing for it is often as pleasurable as the celebration itself. We get jaded with a month or six weeks of celebration, but a month of preparation and anticipation can heighten the joy of the feast when it finally comes. Christmas has become a major cultural event that requires a lot of preparation of worldly matters. That is fine, if we also remember that it is a major spiritual event that requires preparation by prayer, fasting, and penitence, not just by baking cookies and buying presents. Leaving out the spiritual preparation is like going to the ball in the sweatshirt and jeans that we have been wearing all day. Prepare, and rejoice!

–Richard R. Losch+

The Date of Christmas

Every year someone raises the question of why we celebrate Christmas on December 25th. Some claim that this date was the real date on which Jesus was born, and surprisingly, there are some good arguments for its being at least very close to that. Notwithstanding, most scholars question that as being the true date, although many acknowledge that since Jewish weddings usually took place after the last harvest, his birth may well have been sometime in the very late fall or early winter. There are many theories of why December 25th was chosen. The issue is confused by the fact that in Egypt and most of Western Asia, Christmas is celebrated on January 6, while in the West that date is observed as the day the Magi visited Jesus in Bethlehem. The most popular explanation is that the early Christians tried to supplant the pagan Roman observance of the Saturnalia (a harvest festival honoring the pagan god Saturn) with a Christian festival, and the birth of Christ seemed the likely candidate for that. This theory is widely taught and accepted, but many scholars believe that it is incorrect. There are good reasons for rejecting it.

The Bible gives no clue whatever to the date of Jesus' birth. There are details that clearly define the day and time of his death, but nothing is said or even implied about the date or even the time

of year of his birth. Some argue that the shepherds tending their flocks in the fields indicates that it was either spring or fall, because that was the only time the grass flourished in the region around Bethlehem. In fact, that is not true. This small detail is mentioned only by Luke, and it is insignificant in his narrative because he is clearly focusing on the theology and the significance to mankind of Jesus' birth rather than on the history of it. Also, in the climate of that region the only time that sheep might not have been grazing would have been in mid-summer, when the grass is dried up and the heat is intense.[1] The image of the shepherds huddling in the bitter snows of winter is a medieval European construct that is inconsistent with the Palestinian climate. Much of our traditional Christmas imagery surrounding Jesus' birth, such as the thatched wooden stable (or even a stable in a cave) came from medieval Europe.[2]

Birthdays were very important to the Romans. They believed in astrology, so even the exact date and time of someone's birth was significant because it was necessary to know them to prepare a horoscope. The Jews, on the other hand, rejected astrology as pagan, so birthdays were completely unimportant to them.[3] What mattered to them was the person's ancestry, not the date of birth. They would sometimes acknowledge it on a very broad basis, such as identifying the year of birth if that had any historical significance, but they were not interested in the specific date.[4] The very early Christian church,

---

[1] Sheep herding was a major industry in Bethlehem at the time. Sheep were raised there for the specific purpose of sacrificing in the Temple in nearby Jerusalem. Sacrifices went on constantly, with 1,100-1,500 sheep being sacrificed annually. They were bred for that purpose, and then transported the 6 miles from Bethlehem to the Temple in Jerusalem. Some interpreters have tried to tie the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem to the fact that he was the final Paschal Sacrifice, but this connection is tenuous. The reason he was prophesied to be born in Bethlehem was that Bethlehem is the birthplace of King David, and the Messiah would be his descendant.

[2] See my essay, "No Room in the Inn." Go to *www.rlosch.com* and click on the "Essays" tab at the top.

[3] Hellenized Jews and false Jews like Herod the Great believed in astrology and augury. Herod based many decisions on his horoscope.

[4] St. Luke identifies it as the time when Quirinius was governor of Syria, but his chronology is off by about six years (Lk. 2:2).

being primarily made up primarily of Jews, had little interest in the date of Jesus' birth, but we see great interest in his genealogy (e.g. Matt. 1, "the begats"). It was not until there was a large population of converted Romans and Greeks in the Christian Church that it became interested in celebrating Jesus' birth.

The reasons why are now obscure, but in the very earliest times the Church set the liturgical date for the Feast of the Annunciation (the conception of Christ) as March 25. This was an important festival long before the Church was paying serious attention to the celebration of the Nativity. Since December 25 is nine months from March 25, it seemed logical to choose that as the date of his birth.

In the early Church, some local communities (generally those strongly influenced by Greek or Roman populations) began acknowledging and celebrating Jesus' birth, but the dates that they used varied widely. The general trend in the West was to celebrate it in the early winter or late fall, while in the East it was usually in January. Although December 25 had been the most popular date for oner a century, it was not until AD 336 that the church finally settled on that as the official date. Even then, there was no formal proclamation of the date. It was more by mutual acceptance. The Eastern Church, using the Julian calendar, tended more to observe it on January 6 or 7, although many Eastern churches also used December 25. Most scholars reject the theory that the date was chosen to replace the Saturnalia. December 25 is the winter solstice in the Roman calendar, and that was the time of the Saturnalia, but there is no evidence of any Christian intent to try to override the Roman festival with a Christian one. Another theory is that December 25 was selected because it was the date of the winter solstice, so that was the date of the Roman festival of *Sol Invictus*, the Unconquered Sun. That argument is very weak, however, because the festival of Sol Invictus was very unimportant in Roman worship until well after December 25 was the commonly accepted date for Christmas. In fact, there is some evidence that by the late third century, most Christian churches were observing December 25, so in AD 274 the emperor Aurelian elevated the cult of *Sol Invictus* to primary importance to try to override the Christians' festival. Ultimately, we just don't know. There are many theories floating about why December 25 if we focus on is the date of Christmas. Many of them make sense, while many of them are fanciful or imaginative. The bottom line is not only that we don't know for sure, but it doesn't

really matter. All that matters is that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). If we focus on that, then when, where, and how become nothing more than unimportant details.

–Richard R. Losch+

Palestine

Many people use the name Palestine as if it referred to an ancient Middle Eastern country in conflict with the State of Israel. In fact, there has never been a country called Palestine in the entire history of the Middle East. The Israelites lived in that region for over 1300 years, despite having been conquered and ruled by other nations several times. The Romans ruled Israel for about two hundred years, during which time the Jews were frequently in rebellion against them. Finally, in A.D. 66, a series of uprisings was the final straw for the Romans. In A.D. 70 they destroyed the city of Jerusalem, leveled the Temple, and crucified thousands of Jews in retribution. The Temple was never rebuilt. Its rubble remained on the Temple Mount, but the survivors slowly rebuilt the city. It was nothing compared to the city that had been destroyed, but in time it developed a large population. In A.D. 132, Simon bar-Kochba raised another insurrection. After years of brutal fighting it was suppressed, but the Romans had had enough. They blockaded the city, and after a long siege the population was almost starved. Jerusalem fell, and again the Romans slaughtered thousands. In A.D. 135, the Emperor Hadrian expelled the Jews from Judaea and barred any Jew from ever entering Jerusalem under penalty of death. Judea was part of the Roman province of Syria. As an insult to the Jews, Hadrian renamed the region *Syria Palaestina*, Philistine Syria, invoking the name of the Philistines, the ancient enemies of the first Israelite settlers in Canaan. He renamed Jerusalem Aelia Capitolina, and erected a temple to Jupiter on the spot where the ancient Temple had stood.[1] The surviving Jews dispersed all over the known world, with only a tiny handful remaining in Judea. Hadrian then repopulated Israel with people from all over the Roman Empire, many of them veterans. The city would not be called Jerusalem again until the Crusades, almost

---

[1] In AD 691 the Caliph Abd al-Malik cleared the ruins of Jupiter's temple and built the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the gilded Dome of the Rock, which still stand on the Temple Mount today as a sacred site to Muslims.

nine centuries later. Over the centuries, because of the name Hadrian had given it, that region of the Levant came to be commonly called Palaestina. The word was not used as the name of a nation, however, but simply to designate a region. It was used much as we use the term Middle East to designate the area of the Levant on the eastern end of the Mediterranean. It is also like our use of "Middle West" to refer to a group of states in in East Central United States, or "the South" to designate a group of Southeastern states. Neither term specifies borders of any kind, but rather just indicates a region. Until modern times, the word Palestinians meant people of any ethnicity or faith, including Jews, who lived in that region. In the late 20th century that people started using the name Palestine as if it referred to a specific nation or people. It was first used in that context when the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was founded by Arabs in 1968 in opposition to the State of Israel.

–Richard R. Losch+

Be Wordly Wise

Speaking French

It is often claimed that a large number of English words came directly to us from Latin, but in fact this is not so. Only a very few words, mostly scientific, legal or highly technical terms, are Latin. About 40% of English vocabulary came from French. Most of the rest have Germanic roots, English being one of the Germanic family of languages. Most of the words that we think of as Latin were French words that came from Latin, then came to England with the Normans in 1066 and thereafter.[1] English has an amazing number of synonym pairs, one coming from its Germanic (Anglo-Saxon) roots and the other from the Norman French. We generally tend to think of the Germanic words as being unpretentious, and the French words as being more sophisticated and genteel. For example, we have pairs such as rise (*G*)/ascend (*F*); house (*G*)/manor (*F*);

---

[1] The Normans were not French. They were Norsemen who had raided and colonized northern France in the late 9th century AD. They intermarried with the locals, adopted the French language, and did homage to the King of France as the vassal Duchy of Normandy. William the Conqueror and his Plantagenet descendants were primarily responsible for bringing the French language to England. They were mainly Normans, not Frenchmen.

standing/status; hearty/cordial; king/sovereign; friendship/amity; jargon/patois; and jail/prison. At dinner, the animal that provides our food is often German, but the meat is French: pig/pork; deer/venison; lamb/mutton; cow/beef, etc. When someone asks if you speak a second language, answer/respond, "Yes, I speak French."[1]

–Richard R. Losch+

A Touch of Trivia

One of the most common surnames in Naples is not from a place of birth, clan or trade, as is the case with most surnames, but rather from an unfortunate start in life. For centuries almost every church, monastery, orphanage and hospital in Naples had a *ruota degli esposti*, or "wheel of the exposed." It was a revolving compartment set in the outer wall where impoverished women and prostitutes could leave their babies anonymously. They put the baby into the compartment and turn it to the inside without ever being seen or identified. The Church would take care of the babies and find them homes. Since they were anonymous, every one of them was given the same surname: Esposito, which means "exposed" or "placed outside."

–Richard R. Losch+

Forty Years in the Wilderness

One of the most common misconceptions about the Exodus is that the Israelites, after escaping from Egypt, wandered for 40 years in the wilderness and then arrived at Canaan, where they sent in spies to scout out the possibilities of conquest. Numbers 13 tells a very different story. Even with as large numbers as the Bible tells us there were, if the Israelites had walked directly from Egypt to Canaan, it would have taken only a few weeks at most. The most direct route would have been along the north shore of the Sinai Peninsula,[2] but that was a major trade route. The Egyptians had forts all along it. Even though messages could travel only as fast as a horse or a

---

[1] On the other hand, almost all our vulgar "four-letter words" including the "f-bomb" come from Danish and were brought to us by the Vikings. When you try to excuse a vulgarity you shouldn't say, "Pardon my French," but rather "Pardon my Danish."

[2] It was a direct route. There was no Suez Canal in those days.

fast runner, if the Israelites had taken that route and Pharaoh changed his mind (which he did), a message could get to the forts well before the Israelites arrived. They would be either destroyed or driven back to Egypt. For this reason, Moses diverted from that road and led the people through the Sinai wilderness. That added several weeks and took them to Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:1), where the people received the Law. If all had gone as it should, they would have then gone directly from Mount Sinai to Cana, conquered the land, and settled in the place that God had promised them. At Sinai, however, was their first major rebellion when their loyalty to God flagged. They were already complaining about the difficulties of the journey, and while Moses was on the mountain, they built the Golden Calf and worshipped that Egyptian pagan idol. God punished the people directly involved, and delayed the entire journey, requiring the people to wander in the wilderness to wherever he led them by the pillars of fire at night and cloud by day. They did not arrive at Canaan until 15 months (not 40 years!)[1] after they had left Egypt (Num. 10:11f). It was then, only a little over a year after they had escaped Pharaoh, that they camped at Kadesh-Barnea just outside the borders of Canaan. They selected spies to enter Canaan and scout out the possibilities of conquest. One man was chosen from each of the twelve tribes, including Joshua from the tribe of Ephraim and Caleb from the tribe of Benjamin. When they returned, they confirmed that everything that God had said was true. It was indeed a land flowing with milk and honey, with rich harvests and vast grazing lands. They even brought back a sample of the magnificent growth of vineyards in the land. It was then, however, that ten of the twelve spies showed their complete lack of faith in the God who had led them out of Egypt. They reported that the cities were large and well-fortified, the people were physically huge, the armies were vast, and that there was no chance of their conquering that land. Joshua and Caleb, on the other hand, reported that even though everything the other ten had said was true, with God at their head, there was no way that they would not defeat the Canaanites and inhabit the land. The people

[1] Forty is an ancient Hebrew idiom meaning a very large number (in the same sense as we use the expression, “I’ve told you a thousand times”). Forty days or 40 years does not mean exactly that many, it just means a very, very long time. In the context of this story, it means long enough for an entire generation to live and die and be replaced.

rallied behind the ten doubters and started calling to go back to Egypt. At that point God had had enough of their rebellion. He pronounced that no one who had left Egypt would live to enter the Promised Land. The only exception would be the two spies who trusted in God, Joshua and Caleb. Otherwise, every single Israelite who entered the Promised Land had been born in the desert. This even included Moses himself. It was a whole new generation of people who had never known directly the "good old days" of slavery in Egypt. The Israelites remembered their time in Egypt almost with fondness, forgetting the wretched misery of slavery they had endured there, and ungrateful for the goodness of the God who had led their escape from it. Moses was allowed to see the Promised Land from the mountaintop, but even he was not allowed to enter it.[1] Joshua, who had been Moses's aide, became the leader of the people, with Caleb as his aide. The land promised to Abraham's descendants still went to his descendants, but not to the Egyptian slaves. It went to a new generation that had never experienced the old ways before the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai.

–Richard R. Losch+

Noah's Wife

In biblical tradition, two matriarchs are identified as the Mother of All Mankind, because every human alive today is a direct descendant of both. They are Eve and Noah's wife.[2] Because the story was told and written in a patriarchal society, Noah's wife does not

---

[1] Aaron and Miriam, Moses' brother and sister, were not allowed to see or enter the Promised Land because they had challenged Moses' authority (Num. 12). Moses was allowed to see it, but not to enter it, because in anger he had disobeyed God in the incident of bringing water from the rock at Kadesh (Num. 20:1-13).

[2] This is the biblical tradition, and while it has great allegorical validity, most readers of the Bible do not take it literally. Cytology has proven that there was a single woman known to scientists as "Mitochondrial Eve" who lived around 175,000 years ago. Due to a mutation, she was the first of the genus Homo, Man, and is thus the ancestor of all human beings. Evolution does not remove God from the picture. He was the Intelligent Designer of all mutations. Evolution is not inconsistent with the belief that God is the creator of all things. It teaches that creation was a long-developing process. It does not teach that God did not oversee that process.

get the honor that she deserves. We don't even know her name. Notwithstanding, she is a monument to faith, fidelity, and obedience to God. Consider what she went through. She and her family lived in a decadent, corrupt, and dangerous world, and yet she was able to raise three honorable sons who married honorable women in a world where, according to the Bible story, they were the only such family. Her husband had a revelation from God that the world would be destroyed in a flood, and she stood by him. He built an ark when everyone thought he was crazy, and she stood by him. She went into the ark with all those animals, convinced her sons and their wives to join them, and helped care for the animals. They were sealed into the ark, and she stood by him. She emerged from the ark into a world where they were the only human beings alive. Everything and everyone they had ever known had been swept away, and she stood by him.

In the thousands of years that this story has been told, it has troubled scholars that this great woman was not identified by name. To the Jews, a person's name was very important because they believed it defined him. She remained faithful through the greatest disaster conceivable, became the matriarch of all humanity, and yet remained unnamed. Whether she was real or allegorical is irrelevant because what she represents is so important.[1] The first known reference to her by name was in 160 B.C. in the non-canonical Book of Jubilees (4:33). There she is called Emzera (אמזר), Mother of Princes (that passage also claims that she was Noah's first cousin).[2] This name is also found in other contemporary Second Temple literature including the Dead Sea Scrolls, so it was a tradition by that time. It seems that it was not universally accepted, however, because a midrash in late antiquity refers to her as Naamah (נעמה), the daughter of Lamech and sister of Tubal-Cain (Gen. 4:22). A medieval midrash, apparently uncomfortable with her being a descendant of Cain, calls her Naamah the daughter of Enoch. In the long run, it is not important what she was called. What matters is what she represents.

–Richard R. Losch+

---

[1] The story of the Flood, in one form or another, is found in almost every ancient culture in the world. Scholars have concluded that although you cannot claim any specific variation of it to be true in detail, the story of the Food can in general be said to be true.

[2] It also identifies his mother, unnamed in Genesis, as Bitenosh (בתנוש).