

## Acts 7:55-60

<sup>55</sup> But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup> "Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" <sup>57</sup> But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. <sup>58</sup> Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him, and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. <sup>59</sup> While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." <sup>60</sup> Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died.<sup>[a]</sup>

This is the word of the Lord. THANKS BE TO GOD.

## *Grounded & Gazing*

Well, this morning's text is not what anyone would say is a pleasant one. As opposed to wonderful stories we've been reading, Jesus appearing to his disciples on the road to Emmaus, the great imagery of him as the Good Shepherd, the affirmation of Faith by Thomas, yes, this is difficult to hear. But as difficult the tragic story of the stoning of Stephen is, it is an important one, not only because we witness the brave and inspired actions of Stephen, the first martyr, but we consider how we can then live our lives differently amid the difficulty that surrounds us.

First, we need to back up a bit. You recall what happened after the public execution of Jesus, after his resurrection, what happened after his appearances to his disciples. Well what happened was well, the Church!<sup>1</sup> Jesus' followers began to speak publicly, forcefully and eloquently. As common, ordinary and uneducated as they were, they began delivering persuasive speeches. And people, lots of people, were listening and nodding their heads in agreement. Many thousands stepped forward to be baptized and become part of the movement, a mass movement. But as with any mass movement there were growing pains. It's one thing to be a loose-knit band of disciples walking from synagogue to synagogue, it's another thing altogether to be a group dealing with thousands of converts with no building, no staff, no television or email no stewardship campaign. The apostles had to get organized, create an administrative structure, generate leadership, and commission the leaders then for service.

That's how Stephen emerges. He was one of several selected to distribute food. He was part of the diaconate, a deacon. (A deacon actually means one who waits on tables). The apostles ordained him to help feed the poor and gave him, in addition to the responsibility of distributing food, the charge to tell the story, if the opportunity or need arose, to tell the story of Jesus. And that's how Stephen then got into trouble. He told it like it was, not shying away from the painful truth, from speaking about the injustices done or glossing over transgressions committed. In short, his speech got him arrested. He then spoke truth to power, boldly pointing a finger at his his accusers, the religious leaders of the day. The crowd looking on became a

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<sup>1</sup> John Buchanan. "No Private Presents". <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/1999/050299.html> (accessed 5-5-23).

mob, a violent one, and they took Stephen out of the city and stoned him to death. A familiar example of the human condition repeated absolutely countless times over history. Horrible, Depressing.

But the text offers us a powerful and wonderful testimony regarding what Stephen did during this time of crisis. Stephen “*gazed to heaven*”. He gazed to heaven. The word in Greek is more than mere physical sight. It implies a deeper perception, an intentional focus. While everyone else was caught up in the drama and outrage, Stephen “*gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God*”. In a time of great crisis, Stephen, sought out and was given a beautiful affirmation of what he sought, the presence of his Lord with him.

And as a consequence, he maintained a steady focus, a peace that passes understanding, a calm beyond the noise. As Amy Oden says, “*Stephen gazed not to some escapist other-world, nor on his transgressors...they were not his concern, but to the reality of Emanuel God with us.*” Right. Stephen refused to give his consciousness over to the most frightening bully, but instead to proclaim the reign of God as being right here and right now. He showed that keeping his eyes fixed on Jesus, amid the hardship, freed him from being dominated by those who wanted to dominate him.

*One of my summer jobs when I was in high school was teaching swimming. At the end of their swimming courses, it was a tradition at the pool where I worked that the children would get the opportunity to jump off the low diving board. Most of my little beginners had never been to the deep end, let alone jump off a board. When they crept to the end of the diving board, they were always very nervous. I would be in the water below the board, treading water like crazy in order that I could put both of my arms up for them to jump into. I would also be loudly calling to them to look only at my face, to not look anywhere else but to focus on me, on my face, and to jump when I said, “jump”. Certainly, I did not want them to look at their mothers in the stands who looked more frightened than they nor to the other nervous children waiting their turns, and not beyond me into the depths of the pool. If they began to look*

*elsewhere, they would usually end up backing down. But if they kept their focus, their gaze on my face, they would take the step into my arms.*

Yes, Stephen's intent gaze allowed him to see "the glory of Jesus" with him, and remain calm, steady and clear. It also I think must have given him some clarity... clarity not only about his future situation, his future life with Jesus in heaven, but also his life with Jesus on earth. As he was about to move from one to the other, he realized the profound truth...that the journey of our earthly life is simply TO the heavenly future one. Stephen had been living his days, striving to model as closely as he could the Christ, whom he would soon be with in glory...he'd been feeding the poor, sharing the gospel with those who needed to hear it, even forgiving those who even now were killing him. He came to know that we are meant to live the present based on our future.

*Tom Long says it very well. He says, "When Christians gather at a graveside and announce their hope in the resurrection, it is precisely counter to all possibilities in the present tense. Christians cannot lay the cards on the table and predict how the hand will play out; they admit they do not know what the future holds. Will peace talks succeed? Will a child, struggling with leukemia, live? Will God's agents for justice in the world pass away in the blessedness of old age or perish at the hands of an assassin when young. We simply do not know. Our hope is based, rather, on the promise, that, whatever the future may hold, God is, in ways often hidden, shaping all human life redemptively and bringing all things to fulfillment in Christ. Christian hope is based on the conviction that God who has loved us and saved us in the past will give us grace sufficient for the present, and continue to be our savior in the future. "In short, Christians", he says, "do not believe, on the basis of evidence, in progress; rather, we believe, against much of the evidence, in a God who keeps promises."*<sup>2</sup>

*Long then goes on to tell of visiting South Africa and having the privilege of meeting a young Johannesburg physician whose specialty was AIDS. He labored in a dingy inner-city hospital where the beds of the sufferers spilled out of the wards and lay scattered through the*

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Long. *Journal for Preachers*. (Easter 1999), 13.

*narrow corridors like toppled bowling pins. The doctor said, "The numbers are growing at a fearful rate; in some areas, over half of population is infected and we don't have enough to help them. We don't have the medicine, the beds, the staff, the knowledge." "What keeps you going?" Long asked. "My faith," the doctor said quietly. He gazed out the window. "I am holding on," he said, "to hope." His eyes told him that the suffering and death all round him were a terrible word, a word that must be heard and heeded, and pushed back against with all our might, but his hopeful faith reassured him that this was not the final word.*

So, the is the take-away today, from this somewhat difficult-to-hear text...that we are meant to be Christians who live the present based on the future. We are to stay grounded. Grounded in Jesus. We are to live these days, walking as closely as we possibly can with him, learning and living out his ways of love. We are to live grounded in the knowledge that we can and must boldly tell his truth, even when it is painful truth, speaking at every and needed opportunity no matter what. But we are to also always keep our eyes focused, gazing on a promised future too, wherein Jesus will gather us and all creation unto himself, redeemed, made whole, living forever with him, the One who is eternally incarnated, eternally resurrected, eternally with us. Yes, Grounded in love, gazing in hope. Forever and always...in him.

To God be the glory through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.