**The Book of Acts: *The Church in the Power of the Spirit***

**Sunday August 2, 2020**

**Acts Sermon #8: “Stephen’s History Lesson” (Acts 6:8-8:1)**

I find that some sermons are easier to write than others. Last week’s sermon on the choosing of the seven to conduct the food ministry of the early church (Acts 6:1-7) came together quite nicely. But that passage naturally lent itself to a discussion of leadership, spiritual gifts, and ministry within the church, a topic that is very relevant topic for us. This morning’s New Testament lesson on the story of Stephen offers many avenues that we could explore, which makes it a bit more challenging for the preacher.

We could look at this story from the perspective of the persecuted church. Stephen’s courage and grace in the face of death is an inspiring example of faith. It is also a solemn reminder that in many places in our world being a Christian is a life and death situation. Clearly, we need to be informed about and to pray for our Christian sisters and brothers who face dangerous situations because of their faith.

Voice of the Martyrs Canada (<https://www.vomcanada.com>) and Open Doors Canada (<https://www.opendoorsca.org>) are two Christian organizations that give information about, foster prayer for, and suggest ways to help the persecuted church throughout the world. While persecution is a reality for many Christians, we live in a country where we are free to worship Christ without harassment or danger to our lives. How does the story of Stephen speak to us when the threat of dying for our faith seems pretty remote? Let’s see what we can discover as we walk through this passage.

The focus of this story is upon Stephen, the first martyr of the church. We first met Stephen last week when we read about the appointment of the seven new leaders to the ministry of distributing food in Acts 6:1-7. When Luke lists the names of these seven emerging leaders, Stephen is mentioned first and described as “a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit” (Acts 6:5). It’s worth noting that when the church recognizes new leaders, they often go on to serve God in different ways than first anticipated. We’ll see this with Philip in Acts 8 and with Stephen here in Acts 6 and 7. While both these men were chosen for the meal ministry, their service for God wasn’t limited to that particular task.

As this passage begins, Luke tells us that, “*Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people*” (Acts 6:8). Stephen was doing what the apostles had been doing, which expresses that ministry is not only for those in the leadership limelight; it’s for all Christians. But Stephen’s troubles began when these miracles, done in the power of the Spirit, caught the attention of the members of a particular synagogue, called the Synagogue of the Freedmen. They began to debate with Stephen, but they couldn’t match wits with him because of “*the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke*” (Acts 6:10). Aggravated with their inability to overcome him in debate, they decided to deal with him through more nefarious means. They bribed some men to fabricate a false report about him. “*We heard him blaspheme Moses and God*,” they claimed (Acts 6:11).

This accusation stirred up the people and the religious leaders. So, they seized Stephen and dragged him before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish High Council (Acts 6:12). The bribed witnesses stepped forward and presented their false claims, which struck at the most cherished aspects of Jewish religious life – the Temple and the Torah. “*This man talks nonstop against this Holy Place and God’s Law*,” they alleged, “*We even heard him say that Jesus of Nazareth would tear this place down and throw out all the customs Moses gave us*” (Acts 6:13). Stephen didn’t react to these false accusations in the way that most people would. He was not enraged, red-faced, gritting his teeth, shaking his fists or staring down his opponents. Those on the High Council observed that at that moment he looked *angelic* (Acts 6:15). Neither angry nor vengeful, Stephen was at peace, confident that God was with him.

After hearing these charges the Chief Priest gave Stephen an opportunity to speak to them. “*Are these things so?*” he asked him (Acts 7:1). Stephen responded with the *longest* *speech* in all of Acts; an indication of the significance of this episode within the book. It was a watershed moment in the story of the early church. In response he gave the Council a crash course in Israelite history. The Council, comprised of religious leaders and scholars, knew the details quite well, so his aim wasn’t simply to retell this familiar story. He hoped that this history lesson would bring about self-awareness and change in the lives of his audience. In this instance, the role of history was to call people back to God.

Stephen, a devout Jew, was speaking to his fellow Jews, calling them “*brothers*” and “*fathers*” and sharing the family’s tales. Covering the main points of the story of the nation, he spoke about the well-known figures of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, and Solomon. He spoke of the positive aspects of the family story, such as God’s faithfulness to his promises and his enduring presence with his people, especially when they faced difficult times. He expressed high regard for Moses and the other key figures for the important role that they played in God’s plan.

But he also spoke about the sad and unpleasant parts of the family story. Like the time when the patriarchs, the founding fathers of the nation, became jealous of their brother Joseph and sold him to some Egyptian slave-traders (Acts 7:9). Even the central story of the Exodus was tainted with the failure of the nation. On the heels of their dramatic liberation, the people resisted the leadership of Moses and longed to return to Egypt (Acts 7:39). Dissatisfied with their situation, they descended into open rebellion and idol worship (Acts 7:40-41). By sacrificing to the golden calf, the wilderness generation sacrificed their relationship with the One, True God (Acts 7:42). There was also a misunderstanding about their most revered place of worship, the Temple. God gave the tabernacle or the tent of testimony to the people when they were in the wilderness and they brought it with them when they entered the Promised Land. David asked God for a permanent place of worship and Solomon built it. But in their reverence for the Temple, they treated it as ground zero for the presence of God and forgot that the God who made heaven and earth isn’t limited to a house made by human hands (Acts 7:48-50).

After his direct quotation of the prophet Isaiah (66:1-2), Stephen adopted the tone of a Hebrew prophet and launched into a passionate indictment of the present generation, “*You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do*” (Acts 7:51). Stephen’s final verdict was that this pattern of resisting God and silencing his messengers was still prevalent within the nation (Acts 7:52). Sadly, that pattern was repeated that day when the angry mob silenced Stephen, dragging outside the city walls and brutally executing him. His sharp words hit a raw nerve and his vision of the exalted Christ proved to be too much for the enraged crowd and they decided to silence him forever. But they didn’t really silence him that day because his voice still resonates through Scripture.

So, what is Stephen saying to us today? His recitation of Israelite history was intended to move his audience toward self-evaluation and a change of heart. The role of history is to call people back to God and to his kingdom values. As a Christian church we are blessed to have the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, within our canon of Scripture. At many points the words of the Old Testament move us toward *self-criticism* and this is a much needed thing in our lives and in our church. The Hebrew Prophets are especially valuable in holding a mirror up to us. These guys held nothing back when they spoke to God’s people about their disobedience to God, their unjust treatment of the marginalized, and their false worship of idols. Isaiah’s words to us are powerful and haunting:

“*The vineyard of the Lord Almighty  
    is the nation of Israel,  
and the people of Judah  
    are the vines he delighted in.  
And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed;  
    for righteousness, but heard cries of distress*” (Isaiah 5:7).

What is our response to the words of the prophets? What does our history say to us? Like Stephen we need to have the courage to tell and listen to our story with complete honesty. That means talking about the good, the bad, and the ugly. The story of the Christian church is filled with many episodes where people did horrible things to other people in the name of Christ. The Crusades, the European conquest of the Americas, the Atlantic slave trade, and the Holocaust are just a few examples. In Canada, the church’s involvement in the residential school system is an awful chapter in our history with regard to the treatment of Indigenous people.

Like Stephen, I bring up these episodes from our history so that we can learn from them and live differently in the present. Historian, Howard Zinn notes that the point in telling history is to not accuse, judge, or condemn figures like Columbus *in absentia.* “Its too late for that,” he writes, “it would be a useless scholarly exercise in morality. But the easy acceptance of atrocities as a deplorable but necessary price to pay for progress – that is still with us” (Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States,* pp. 8-9). Wrestling with our history compels us to evaluate our personal views about the world and to reflect on how these shape our actions and attitudes toward others. When I read the history of the treatment of the Indigenous people of the Americas, I’m heart-broken and I feel helpless to know what to do. Howard Zinn writes, “Those tears, that anger, cast into the past, deplete our moral energy for the present” (p. 10). The most important thing is what are we doing right now! We can’t neglect or bury the past, but we can be cognizant of history and allow it to prompt us to compassionate action for others, especially for those who are marginalized, oppressed and deeply wounded.

So, what will God find when he looks at his world today? Justice or bloodshed? Righteousness or cries of distress?