

John Sampson  
“We Are the Martyrs”  
Text: Acts 7:55 - 60  
Preached at KVCC  
May 14, 2017

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer. AMEN.

The Book of the Acts of the Apostles is our book.

In some ways it speaks to the reality of our lives, to our struggles in faith, to the vision of our mission, and what it means to be the church, more directly than any other book in the Christian Scriptures.

That’s why I’ve chosen to share this story of the martyrdom of Stephen with you this morning. It may seem like a stretch. In our world, a world of interfaith dialogue, liberalized democracies, and

global economic integration, martyrdom can see like a bad memory, an unpleasant moment that has the potential to not only scare away anyone contemplating joining the church, but also to undo the understanding between people of different faiths that we have worked so hard to cultivate over the past millennia.

Before I speak about Stephen, before I offer a different reading of martyrdom, I want to tell you a little bit about the Book of Acts so you can understand its general contours and grasp why I think it has so much to offer us.

In the New Testament Acts follows the four gospels, the four books that focus on Jesus and his life and ministry. Scholars think Acts was written by the authors of the gospel of Luke sometime after Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70 CE. It continues the story the authors shared with their readers, and opens outside of Jerusalem with Jesus ascending into heaven to join God in

glory. The disciples are left wondering what's next. And then the story takes off. God sends her spirit to fill the followers of Jesus, and the church is founded. But the message of Jesus can't be contained. It leaks out of Jerusalem, and is embraced by wider and wider groups of people in lands far beyond the traditional home of the Jews. Those carrying the story are no longer people who knew Jesus, but those Jews and Gentiles who had met the resurrected Christ in their hearts, and in story. The narrative that begins in Jerusalem with a small group of frightened disciples ends with Paul arriving in Rome to be tried for his evangelism across the eastern Mediterranean region.

I say that Acts is our book, because almost the entire narrative takes place after Jesus has physically left the earth. In today's world we come to know him, just like those early believers, not by meeting him in flesh and blood, but through story and inner experience. Just like those who came to believe in Jesus and his message in the cities

of Corinth and Thessalonica, we live in a land far removed from where our teacher traveled and taught. And just as our story today passes from the disciples who knew Jesus personally to a younger generation, we are also the heirs to a tradition passed down to us by our spiritual ancestors.

Acts is our book because it describes a world that is post-Jesus and post-disciple, just like the world we try to navigate.

And so now we can turn to this story of Stephen, a man who never met Jesus directly, but who gathers together with disciples who traveled with Jesus and heard his message with their own ears.

Stephen is one of the next generation of leaders and his authority comes not from his physical connection to the Christ, but by his commitment to the message that he has heard, and by his openness to being invaded by God's Spirit.

And for all of this he is stoned to death.

For all of his good works, and preaching Stephen is recorded as the church's first martyr, as the first believer who dies for his faith. He is the first of many who will be executed for bringing Jesus' message to the ends of the earth, and for insisting that God's power is ultimate, and not temporal like the power of kings, presidents and nations.

Fortunately, this commonly held definition of what martyrdom means is false. It focuses on an effect, instead of the underlying cause.

The Book of Acts, like the rest of the New Testament, was written in a form of ancient Greek used by the lower classes. It's a streetwise Greek that was used in shops, and at the arena. I don't often share with you the Greek that lies behind the English translations of our

Christian scriptures, but sometimes I do when it matters. And today it matters. It matters that you know that the word “martyr” is a Greek word, and that it was commonly used by Christians and non-Christians, and that it doesn’t refer to persecution or execution for one’s beliefs. It simply means witness. And it has the two senses of witness that we have in English. It can mean to see or experience something directly, and it can also mean to speak about that which you have seen.

Stephen is a martyr not because he was persecuted and stoned for his belief. He’s a martyr because he is a witness; he is a man who both saw and shared what he saw. And what he saw was nothing less than a vision into heaven of God in glory, and the fact of the resurrected Jesus standing beside the Divine. His vision was so amazing and transformative that he couldn’t keep it to himself. He shared it with those around him, and even with those who couldn’t

receive the truth he proclaimed. So his enemies silenced him by stoning him.

Stephen is not the first martyr because our Bible tells us that since the beginning of history humanity has been invited to see God's presence in the world, and has been asked by God to share what we have witnessed with one another. Stephen is not the last martyr because God continues to offer us, and our children, the blessing of seeing and experiencing her at work in our lives, and in the wider world. But she also asks us to share the truth of her presence with all of those we meet in our daily lives.

To see the definition of martyrdom turned upside down, to reimagine it as a blessing and invitation by God to a deeper communion with the Divine, instead of a torturous punishment at the hands of the state, is good news.

But in a way it might not make martyrdom any easier for us to embrace and enact in our lives.

I think that this congregation, you and me, like many other congregations and people of faith, is challenged by God's invitation to witness. I think as followers of Jesus it is hard to see God and our teacher alive and active in our world, and in our lives. And this difficulty isn't necessarily a symptom of a lack of faith on our part. Our story of Stephen confirms that witnessing God and Jesus is hard. He had to be given the gift of the Spirit to be able to gaze into the inaccessible depths of heaven. There was no work on his part, no belief he held, no penance he endured that allowed Stephen to peer into the Divine realm. It was a moment of grace. Pure and simple.

And this grace is still open to us. Perhaps some of you already experience it. I'll tell you a story of how I came to see God moving in my world.



After I first started attending church in my early 30s I didn't pray. For years I didn't pray. I never got anything out of it. I was hoping for an electric connection with God, and all I ever got was...sleepy. I kept hearing about the power of prayer, but I thought it was a discipline for other, more faithful people. But one day, and I really don't remember why or when, I started praying at the end of the day. And my daily prayer consisted of nothing more than simply reviewing the day, giving thanks for any blessings I might have experienced, and giving voice to all of my challenges. I was surprised by the blessings I began to see throughout my days. Most of the blessings weren't very big at all. Most of the blessings I remembered were small, almost imperceptible. But they were there. And in those blessings I witnessed God's presence in my life in a way I had never been conscious of before.

I share this story with you not to draw attention to myself, but to encourage any of you here this morning that doubt God's presence in your life to try the type of prayer that worked for me. Or maybe there is another type of spiritual discipline, like reading the Bible, or even going out hiking, that will bring God's presence into your consciousness. Whatever the spiritual technology we use I fully believe, and this story of Stephen confirms for us, that God is right there in the midst of our lives, even if she sits in heaven and is hard to see.

I think that we are also challenged to live out the other sense of witness that we see in Stephen's story – the witness that shares what we have seen and experienced of God's work in the world with each other. Again, I think that today's story acknowledges and normalizes our shyness around sharing our faith. Stephen shared what he knew and saw of the truth and he was persecuted, and ultimately lost his life. In our lives we probably won't experience

this type of response, but we may experience disbelief, questions about how we could believe a bunch of myths, ridicule for assenting to the possibility of the supernatural, blanket rejection that faith could offer any benefit, and suspicions of blatant and illogical wish fulfillment on our parts. I've experienced these responses to my faith, and I know many of you have too.

But that's why we have church, why we have communities like this one. This is our training ground, the place we can safely explore and share what we see of God working in our world. So I invite us all, I challenge us all, to share something about our faith life with one another over the next week. Tell someone something about God and Jesus working in your lives with at least one person. Risk it. You can tell the other person that the only reason you're doing it is because I told you to do it. Blame me. It's OK. I can take it. But risk it. And if someone approaches you this week and shares something about their faith be gracious, create a safe space for them, and hear of

God's great works that may seem invisible, but which are ever present.

And then tell me about it, share with me your experience about seeing God where you haven't seen her before. Tell me about how you've had the courage to share your faith with someone else. Tell me what it was like for someone to come to you and share an intimate moment they have had with the Divine. Tell me, send me an email, or come and see me in my office, because I would love to here of your witness, of your martyrdom.

I challenge us to see God working in our world, and to witness to this truth not because it's neat, or cool, or hip. I challenge us to become more explicit and facile in sharing our faith because many of the problems of our world: climate change, the refugee crisis, the political turmoil here in the US, are not simply political, economic or social problems. They are also the spiritual problems. And they

need a spiritual response. And it is the martyrs, those of us who have experienced God, and who can speak about what they have seen, that have become essential to our nation's response to these challenges.

For without the martyrs our society will continue throwing stones, silencing critics and those with other views, covering our ears, and shouting out over one another.

For without the martyrs, without people like you and me, God's kingdom will never come, and will never transform our world into the paradise that God has desired for us since the beginning of creation.

We are the martyrs, and the world desperately needs us.

AMEN.