

Easter 6, Life after death – the counter narrative of life powered by God the Holy Spirit¹
Acts 7:51-8:1

As you've likely noticed, we skipped a number of chapters to get to this story this morning. We needed to get to this story for Ascension Sunday!

A lot has happened since John and Peter went to the temple that day and encountered the lame man, *seeing* him rather than giving him money.

In the first chapters of Acts, the revolution that is the Reign of God has begun. And it's new and exciting. The descent of the Holy Spirit and the gift of language is powerful and transforming, not only for individuals, but for a community. The Holy Spirit's power of love gives them a capacity to "hold all things in common" as they eat and break bread together, worship, and pray.

But over time the newness and novelty begin to wear off. And they discover that they are still human. And where human beings are, there are problems and conflicts. The stories in Acts of God the Holy Spirit aren't stories of some perfect human beings in perfect relationships. Not at all. Instead, we see the messiness of life, yes, even...or perhaps especially... of faithful and flawed human beings. The revolution is turning and the Kingdom of God is being built. *And*. And while people are experiencing the healing and liberating power of the Holy Spirit, they also encounter death. There's the story of Ananias and Sapphira. And the resistance and persecution the apostles begin to experience. But it doesn't stop them from being witnesses to Jesus!

The community grows in number; people are being drawn into the revolution of the Holy Spirit. And while that is happening, the problems and divisions of tribalism are also showing up. In chapter 6 we hear the Hellenists complaining that their widows are being

¹ *Much* credit for inspiration and content goes to Willie James Jennings and his *Acts Commentary*. The insight of God's *desire* and *waiting* is Jennings'.

discriminated against. *Holding all things in common* is, as we know, not a guarantee that community and the systems of community will function perfectly. They experience failure. And it is precisely in the places of messiness and failure where God the Holy Spirit is blowing and breathing, turning the old order of fear and death into a new order of love and aliveness.

In response to hearing about the failure of the current structure, the apostles gather the community. And together they decide to call seven leaders from within the Hellenist community. And that is how Stephen, “a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit” (6.5) emerges on the stage of today’s story. Stephen is a powerful witness for Jesus.

But his witness is experienced as blasphemy by many who are faithful children of God. They think Stephen is a threat to the Word of God given through Moses on the top of Mt. Sinai. So Stephen is called in for questioning and asked, “Are these things so” (7.1)? And he answers with story. Notice, he answers with story. He doesn’t say Yes or No. He doesn’t talk about what’s right or wrong or true or false. Instead, he tells the story of a God and a people, beginning with Abraham. He tells the story from the perspective of Jesus—*through* the body of the crucified, resurrected, ascended Jesus. It’s a long, slow story that reveals God’s desire for God’s people, a desire that is patient and full of loving kindness. A desire that calls people, from the beginning, to be sojourners. A God who is present in the vulnerability of life lived as sojourners and aliens. A God who is willing to wait through time, through lifetimes. Stephen tells a beautiful story of God’s desire *for* people, drawing people towards love and aliveness, through countless flawed and faithful human beings, including Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua.

Through the ages, there have always been leaders and prophets who have spoken the language of the Holy Spirit. And through the ages, there has always been tension between

the faith that was passed on by ancestors and the voices of the prophets calling for a new way. It is a tension that we who are faithful are always holding—holding what has been given to us while at the same time, looking and listening for resurrection and the counter narrative of God the Holy Spirit.

The story Stephen tells is magnificent. And as the story builds, we hear the fullness of the Holy Spirit rising up within him. Finally, there's a turn in the story. And this is where Keith picked up the story. "You stiff-necked people," Stephen says. "You are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do."

These aren't Stephen's words. These are God's words to the people that God loves, the people God desires, the people God has been and will always be waiting for. These aren't words of accusation or condemnation. No, these are words that speak and name a truth. Stephen's words tell the truth about how human beings have been responding to the fire of the Holy Spirit from the beginning. And it isn't pretty.

The truth about our flaws and failures is never pretty. To hear that our best intentions of being faithful have been wrong or misguided is, at best, hard to hear. Even when it is spoken by Stephen, full of faith and the Holy Spirit. When we hear such raw truth spoken, we have a choice: We can listen and receive the message; or we can reject it.

Those who hear Stephen are not willing to listen or receive. They remain stiff, unwilling to be turned in the revolution. And their rejection turns from rage to deadly violence.

But the Holy Spirit can not be thwarted. The power and aliveness and love of God the Holy Spirit doesn't flinch; and neither does Stephen. Stephen has been turning in the revolution of life powered by the Holy Spirit. He has been turning in the story of Jesus—the crucified, resurrected, ascended Jesus. As Stephen hears the rage of grinding teeth, he turns

his gaze toward heaven. Full of faith and the Holy Spirit, Stephen turns his eyes to see the “glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.”

Stephen *knows* the story of Jesus’ ascent into heaven. A story that included the words of the two men in white that showed up promising, “This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” Stephen, full of faith and the Holy Spirit fully expects Jesus to come again, to be present with him in this violence and death. And his hope is fulfilled.

As we hear this story of Stephen being killed, we cannot help but recall the story of Jesus being killed. As the stones are hitting Stephen, he keeps his eyes on Jesus and tells him, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” But before he dies, he has one more request of Jesus from his place at the right hand of God, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

Stephen is imitating Jesus. Or, as Jennings says, “Stephen performs Jesus.” In forgiving the men who were killing him, he is performing the same action of Jesus on the cross. The revolution of the Holy Spirit had so profoundly formed and transformed Stephen that he is able to do the same thing that Jesus had done. The Holy Spirit filled Stephen with God’s desire *for* people. His desire for people is so great that he can love and forgive them, even as they are killing him. Stephen understands that the love of God is patient and willing to wait. And love that is patient and willing to wait is love that will forgive, even when we are at our worst. Even when we do the worst.

But there is something else going on in this story. In the middle of the drama, the storyteller tells us that coats are being placed at Saul’s feet. Saul, who will become Paul. And when Stephen has died, the storyteller again directs our attention to Saul, telling us that “Saul approved of their killing [Stephen].”

Stephen was full of faith. And Saul was also faithful. This is the ongoing drama, the eternal tension that is present wherever we human beings find ourselves. *Both* Stephen and Paul intended to be faithful. But the difference we see so clearly revealed here is that Saul's faith demanded the *taking of life*. His faith required sacrifice. We recognize this as the script of empire. But the counter script of *life powered by God the Holy Spirit* is that God is a living and loving God, a God who hates sacrifice and is instead, willing to *be killed*. The counter narrative of the Reign of God is that God's love is so powerful and complete that God is willing to die, and *will die* rather than take life.

This is why we who are turning in the revolution tell stories. And we always tell our stories from the vantage point of the crucified, resurrected, and *ascended* Jesus. When we are in the middle of life's drama, so that we can imitate Jesus, we turn our gaze toward heaven. And when we see the glory of God and Jesus at God's right hand, we remember that we *are* full of faith and the Holy Spirit. And that God's love and desire *for* people is filling us. We don't have to concern ourselves with judgment and right answers but can instead trust that God the Holy Spirit will reconcile the tensions and divisions. When we live lives powered by the Holy Spirit, we are free to trust the Spirit of God to bring new life in impossible places. Because God's love and desire will wait for us. Just as God waited for Saul to turn his stiff neck, God will wait for us to turn our necks!

The story of Stephen ends with "devout men bur[ying] Stephen and ma[king] loud lamentation over him." This detail in the story assures us that life powered by the Holy Spirit, glorious and wonderful as it is, is also full of pain and sorrow. Life powered by the Holy Spirit is *human* life. We will continue to experience the full range of our humanity. And, while that is happening, we also have full access to the glory of God and Jesus at God's right hand.

As we turn in the revolution, may we live...fully, deeply, full of faith and the One God,
the loving, living God.