

Re-membered into new life—resurrection hope
Acts 1:51-8:1a

“But Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit.”

This isn't an incidental detail in this story. Stephen being filled with the Holy Spirit is the center of the story; it's the beginning of the story; and it's end of the story.

Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, has been saying some hard things to his listeners. He's telling them that they've betrayed and murdered God's long-promised and long-awaited Christ. It's a hard accusation. A hard truth. The truth of it would set them free; but they refuse to let it in. Their hearts and their ears refuse to be opened. Instead, their emotions take over. They're so angered that they lose control. In their fury, they bare their teeth, ready to devour him.

But Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, surrounded by their rage and fury, knowing he's about to be consumed by it, doesn't let his eyes rest there. Oh, he sees their anger. He feels and hears their fury boiling over. He knows his life is in danger. But Stephen is filled with the Holy Spirit. So his eyes rest...not on their anger, not on their vengeance, not on the stones they're hurling at him...but filled with the Holy Spirit, his eyes rest on Jesus. As the stones land on his body, killing him, Stephen keeps his eyes on Jesus—the crucified, resurrected, ascended Jesus. And as he's dying, his eyes fixed on Jesus, Stephen prays, “Lord, don't hold this sin against them.”

This story of Stephen being killed looks very much like the story of Jesus being killed. Jesus too was filled with the Holy Spirit. He too spoke hard truth to his listeners. And when anger and fury could no longer be contained, they killed him. And as Jesus died, he too prayed, “Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing.”

Jesus and Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, keep their eyes fixed on the reality of the Kingdom of God while they are being killed. Just as they've kept their eyes on God's

reign in their living. The details of their stories are different, but both of them...in the middle of violent and murderous realities...both of them keep their eyes fixed on the reality of the reign of God. Their eyes are fixed on the love and mercy and grace and forgiveness of the Living God. Both men trust...they trust the aliveness of God. They trust...with their words and actions and emotions...they trust with their hearts and ears...they absolutely trust and keep their eyes fixed on the reality of God, the creating, resurrecting, eternally living God. They trust that the end is always within the Kingdom of God. And in the reality of God's reign, the end is life and aliveness; the end is gracious love; the end is release and forgiveness. The reality of murderous hatred is not the end. The realities of violence and injustice are never the end of the story. Gratuitous love and hope and possibility are the end.

This story of Stephen, told within the memory of the story of Jesus, is such a vivid and powerful story of what it looks like when we live our lives filled with the Holy Spirit. Of *what is possible* when we keep our eyes on the reality of God's Kingdom.

We are in the middle of furious and murderous realities. Death-dealing realities everywhere we look. The war in Ukraine. Palestinians living under occupation. Killing drought and famine from climate change. Immigrants dying in semi-trucks. Black and Brown bodies dying in white supremacist, anti-black systems. Women's bodies being legislated while refusing to legislate guns. The reality of Saul looking on as Stephen is being stoned...Saul watching, with approval, the murderous reality in front of him.

But when we are filled with the Holy Spirit, when our eyes are fixed on Jesus, there is another reality: the reality of the Living God; the reality of Jesus, the crucified and resurrected victim with us. The reality of Saul encountering Jesus. The reality of the transforming power of the Spirit of God.

What are the realities we see? What is the reality that we trust? Where are our eyes fixed?

When Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his eyes on the resurrected Christ, he wasn't doing so as a passive victim of violence. Not at all. He was absolutely courageous and brave. He was willing to risk everything, including his life because he knew and he trusted that death was not the end. Abundant and eternal aliveness is the end. So he risked telling the hard truth, the liberating truth of our humanity. Filled with the Holy Spirit, from his unshakable place within the reality of God's Kingdom, Stephen addressed his listeners, holding a mirror with his words, saying, "This is who you are. This is what you're doing." Not to shame them. Not to accuse them. But so that they could let go of their shame. So they could release themselves and each other from their judgments and accusations. So that they too could know themselves eternally beloved and belonging in God's Kingdom. Because Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, his eyes fixed on Jesus, knew the freedom...the release...the healing... the magic that happens when we see and tell the truth about ourselves. When we open our hearts and our ears to hear the hard and liberating truth. The way that Saul, now Paul, saw and told the truth about himself.

It's easy for us to hear Stephen's words, "You stiff-necked people, [unbaptized] in heart and ears" as words intended for "those" people, but not for us. We listen as though they aren't the truth about *our* humanity. Because afterall, "*We* believe that Jesus is the Christ. *We* are Christian. So we can't be betraying or murdering the Righteous One."

But I wonder. What if these words are, in fact, intended for us? What if they are telling the hard and liberating truth of *our* humanity? What if *we* are the same stiff-necked people Stephen is talking to? We may be baptized, but are our hearts and our ears living

into the reality of our baptism? Are our hearts and ears and eyes fixed on the reality of the crucified and resurrected Jesus? Or do our eyes stay on the violent realities around us?

I confess, when I see the killing realities—and I don't mean just the realities that harm bodies, but also the realities that harm the very spirit and soul and being of a person—when I see the violent realities, my heart gets heavy; and my ears cannot hear hope; and my eyes become blind to any good and goodness around me. And indeed, my neck gets stiff trying to power through one more broken relationship, one more church conflict, one more denominational division about who gets to be included in the church. My neck gets stiff from self-righteousness, from judging and accusing, from trying to protect and justify myself.

When our eyes rest on the realities of violence and injustice and whatever is wrong, surely we are betraying the crucified and resurrected Righteous One. Keeping our hearts and eyes and ears fixed on the realities of death is betraying the reality of God's Kingdom. Trusting the realities of war and politics, whether national or denominational or congregational, is not keeping God's law. Because the laws in God's Kingdom are the laws of hope and resurrection, the laws of life and aliveness, laws of gratuitous love and release, of possibility, of new creations. When we keep God's laws, we trust those laws with our words and our actions and our imagination. And our hope. To keep God's laws, we must...we absolutely must keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. We keep our eyes fixed on the crucified and resurrected Christ so that we remember...so that in the middle of

whatever crucifying reality¹ we're in...we remember that the end is always life and aliveness.

In the dailiness of our lives, the way to live within the reality of God's Kingdom is to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. Keeping our eyes on Jesus gives us the courage to trust the reality of God's Kingdom. Friends, we are living in the time of Pentecost...and the Holy Spirit has been breathed into us. The Spirit of God is already filling us...waiting for us to trust and breathe deeply. When we are filled with the Holy Spirit—and we *are* filled with God's life-creating and life-transforming Spirit—when we are filled with the Holy Spirit, like Jesus and Stephen, we will have the capacity and the ability to trust the reality of God's Kingdom. Only when we are filled with the Holy Spirit are we be able to see the crucifying realities around us without letting our eyes stay there, but looking beyond them and seeing Jesus.

May we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, trusting the reality of God's Kingdom.

May we imitate the gratuitous love of Jesus and Stephen.

May we keep our eyes on the end of the God-story...trusting that aliveness and resurrection and love are possible...trusting that we are living into the new humanity that Jesus and Stephen have shown us...trusting the reality of God's reign.

May it be so.

¹ Kelly Brown Douglas uses this term in her book, *Resurrection Hope: a Future where Black Lives Matter*.