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Sermon notes
9/22/19
Acts 6:8-8:4
James 2:1-13

I want to do a little sermon recap/followup from last Sunday. Before Jesus' ascension, he tells his disciples to "Go!" They are to go into all the world, baptizing the nations, making disciples, and teaching all that Jesus has commanded (Mt. 28:16-20). But by the time we get to Acts 6, when Stephen and the other first deacons are chosen, a few years have gone by and the Christians are still bunched together in Jerusalem. Jesus said "Go!" but they have not yet gone anywhere! The early Christians had such good fellowship, and so enjoyed receiving instruction from the apostles, that they were reluctant to fan out from Jerusalem into the rest of Judea, Samaria, and beyond.

But after Stephen's death, everything changes. Acts 8 tells us that after Stephen was martyred, and the persecution against the church intensified, "they were all scattered throughout the the regions of Judea and Samaria... Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word" (Acts 8:1, 4). The death of Stephen was a pivotal point: it produced the church's diaspora. Before he was stoned, Christians had not yet moved out from Jerusalem; afterwards, they went to places like Antioch, Lydda, Cyprus, Lystra, and eventually Thessalonica, Athens, Rome, and indeed all over the Greco-Roman world. God used Stephen's death for the good of his people, to spur them on in the mission Jesus gave us; God worked through this horrible tragedy, bringing light out of darkness. (Rom. 8:28). Persecution actually led the church to spread and grow. As Tertullian said, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. The church is an anti-fragile institution — the more bad things happen to her, the stronger she gets. Nassim Taleb defines anti-fragility this way: "Some things benefit from shocks; they thrive and grow when exposed to volatility, randomness, disorder, and stressors and love adventure, risk, and uncertainty. Yet, in spite of the ubiquity of the phenomenon, there is no word for the exact opposite of fragile. Let us call it antifragile. Antifragility is beyond resilience or robustness. The resilient resists shocks and stays the same; the antifragile gets better." That's a pretty good description of the church in Acts — and beyond!

As Stephen dies, he becomes like his master. He dies, pleading that his murderers might be forgiven just as Jesus did. Just as Jesus committed his spirit to his father in death, so Stephen commits his spirit to Jesus at the moment of his death. Stephen is following in the footsteps of Jesus.

When Stephen died, he saw heaven opened and the glory of God revealed in Jesus (Acts 7:55). Jesus even stood up from his throne to welcome Stephen into the heavenly sanctuary, the true Holy of Holies. In other words, Stephen got to see what every Jew longed to behold — the glory of God. In their envious rage, they proceeded to stone him. But in his death, it became clear that the glory of God is shown to all who trust in Jesus — an affront to Jews who wanted to have a monopoly on God's presence.

But Stephen's sermon was already developing this point that was confirmed at the moment of his death: the glory of God has always been mobile, moving around to wherever his faithful people are. Stephen's sermon is a kind of homiletical map, tracing the journeys of God's glory all over the the ancient world. The glory of God appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia of all places (Acts 7:2)! God appeared to Abraham in a pagan land. Later, God's glory appeared to Moses in the wilderness — not in the land of Israel, not anywhere near the future site of the temple, but in a pagan place, God told Moses, "you are now standing on holy ground" (Acts 7:30). Even when Solomon built the temple, he made it clear that "God does not dwell in temples made with hands" (Acts 7:48). The glory of God has always been mobile. God is not stuck or static; he is active, dynamic, and like Aslan, "on the move."

This was a message the unbelieving Jews needed to hear. The temple was never going to be God's permanent place of residence any more than the tabernacle or the burning bush or the theophany

given to Abraham. Jews mistakenly believed that they possessed the temple, and therefore could control who had access to God's presence and blessings. But God cannot be put on a leash. God does not do our bidding. He will not serve as a mascot for our family, tribe, nation, or even denomination within the wider church. God cannot be tied down. The Spirit blows where he wills. If the Jews were presumptuous, hypocritical, and rebellious, God was not going to remain in their midst. If they became idolaters — even turning the temple itself into a kind of idol — they would lose the blessings God had granted them as a people. God would pack his bags and move out. Indeed that is exactly what had happened, and it is why the temple became obsolete and had to be destroyed. Stephen was making it clear that the temples' days were numbered. They should not keep seeking God there. They should seek God in Jesus. They should go to the true temple of the church.

But this was also a message the Christians needed to hear — indeed, it was the perfect lead into their dispersion amongst the nations. Stephen's sermon shows that God is with his people wherever they are, wherever they go. And so the Christians could know that as they followed Jesus' command to "Go!" that he would be with them. The glory of God would move with them out from Jerusalem as they dispersed into the world. As we carry out the mission we've been given, proclaiming the Word throughout the world, God's glory goes with us. We are temples of the Holy Spirit, that is, we are mobile containers for the glory of God. Wherever we are when we pray, we come before the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16). But the throne of grace is just the heavenly reality that was symbolized by the ark of the covenant in the temple in the Most Holy Place. In prayer, we draw near to the Glory. And of course, this is especially true in worship. Wherever two or three of us gather, Jesus — the Glory of God — is with us (Matt. 18:15). Hebrews 10:25ff tells us that in worship, we enter the heavenly Holy of Holies, as we draw near to God through the torn veil that is the flesh of Christ. In Revelation, John ascends on the Lord's Day to behold God's glory and share in the heavenly liturgy (Rev. 4-5). What Stephen experienced belongs to all believers.

In short, Stephen's sermon and martyrdom is a gateway to the message of the whole New Testament. We have seen that the diaspora of Jewish Christians following Stephen's death is the context for the letter of James (James 1:1), but it's really the context for almost the entirety of the New Testament, and especially the history recorded in the book of Acts. While we meet Stephen as a newly chosen deacon in Acts 6, and say goodbye to him very soon afterwards as a martyr in Acts 7, his ministry is of vital importance to understanding the mission and worship of the church. He provides crucial clues to the way the gospel spreads in the new covenant era.