



“What Story Do You Tell?”

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Scripture (CEB):

Acts 7:54-60

⁵⁴ Once the council members heard these words, they were enraged and began to grind their teeth at Stephen. ⁵⁵ But Stephen, enabled by the Holy Spirit, stared into heaven and saw God’s majesty and Jesus standing at God’s right side. ⁵⁶ He exclaimed, “Look! I can see heaven on display and the Human One standing at God’s right side!”

⁵⁷ At this, they shrieked and covered their ears. Together, they charged at him, ⁵⁸ threw him out of the city, and began to stone him. The witnesses placed their coats in the care of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ As they battered him with stones, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, accept my life!” ⁶⁰ Falling to his knees, he shouted, “Lord, don’t hold this sin against them!” Then he died.

Sermon:

What on earth is going on?

It’s Easter time and shouldn’t I be preaching on resurrection, and happy things? Faith blooming like Spring flowers? New life and hope?

I have a colleague who is preaching on the five different stories of resurrection in the Hebrew and Christian testaments.

I know another who is preaching about Abraham and Sarah.

Why do we have this tragic story before us today?

Why do we hear about the death of young Stephen, while Saul (who will later be known as Paul) stands by and watches someone get beaten to death with rocks?

If we think about it at all, it is bloody, and violent, and cruel, and disgusting. It is also the punishment for blasphemy as prescribed in Leviticus 24.

What did Stephen, a devout Jew, say that was so wrong? What story did Stephen tell that was so blasphemous?

If you were to open your bibles and go to chapter 7 in the book of Acts, you would need to read from the first verses of chapter 7 through to 54.

And there you would hear a brief retelling of the entire story of the Jewish people as found in the books of Genesis and Exodus, the books of 1 and 2 Kings and the books of Chronicles. The story of Abraham, the patriarchs, of Joseph in Egypt, and then later, the people enslaved in Egypt. Of Moses, the child who survived mass murder, and arose later in life as the Hebrew liberator; and you would hear of their freedom from slavery, their wandering in the desert, finding their home, raising up their kings, building their temple, and struggling with their prophets.

That is the story Stephen tells.

There is no blasphemy in any of it. It is the story every Jewish person knows. And hopefully, the story every Christian knows as well.

But there is a crucial pivot as Stephen nears the end of his storytelling, and he says this:

Acts 7:51-54 Common English Bible (CEB)

⁵¹ “You stubborn people! In your thoughts and hearing, you are like those who have had no part in God’s covenant! You continuously set yourself against the Holy Spirit, just like your ancestors did. ⁵² Was there a single prophet your ancestors didn’t harass? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One, and you’ve betrayed and murdered him! ⁵³ You received the Law given by angels, but you haven’t kept it.”

⁵⁴ Once the council members heard these words, they were enraged and began to grind their teeth at Stephen.

What happened?

Stephen spoke truth to power, that is what happened.

He spoke what he saw of the corruption, blindness, cruelty and arrogance within his community. He spoke of their violence, and destructiveness. He spoke of their selfishness, clinging to power and wealth and oppressing their own people cruelly.

He told them God and God's Spirit were not with them, they were morally and theologically bankrupt.

And they hated him for it.

And killed him, with words in his mouth that echo the words of Jesus on the cross. An eerie similarity there.

This is not an accident.

To follow Jesus can be risky, and the stories of the early Christians are peppered with stories of persecution, misunderstanding, disrespect.

But what is the risk to you or me, in America today? Very low in terms of physical harm.

But if you had a story to tell, to explain your life and your faith, your presence here on Sunday morning, what story would you tell?

Story telling is a big thing these days; there are venues that charge money for people to come listen to other people tell personal stories, bitter and biting, sad or ironic or even humiliating stories of their lives. Sometimes joyous, too.

We are hungry for relationship that is deep and real and true, we seek connection with others and we want to find meaning in our lives. So we tell the stories of our lives. And sometimes they bind us to one another, in beauty and in power. Sometimes they drive us apart.

My story is full of my stubbornness as a child, fighting back against my epilepsy; and finding the great and challenging love of my life, my husband Jim. Many of them you have heard. And I tell the stories of my life through the filter of my Christian faith and its stories. The story of the woman bent over, whom Jesus healed. And she stood up straight and tall and free at last, and praised God. The story of Holy Week, with its betrayal, its cowards and cruel ones, its loneliness and abandonment, its darkness of death...and then, the unexpected, surprising, exhilarating glory of Easter, when all seems lost. I have lived, I do live, the story of Holy Week, again and again and again in my life.

What stories do you have to tell? How have they formed you? To whom will you tell them?

A few weeks ago some members of the church started conversations in the Social Hall. It is a season of listening to one another and our stories, our fears, our hope, our need.

We will invite more of you into story telling next week, and then even more. In telling our stories; in sharing our big stories, big joys, big fears, we grow. We learn to trust. We learn to listen. We learn what matters for one another.

And there is more...

When we tell our stories, we give others light and hope, and with us they share in meaning. Our Christian story is powerful. It is full of hope, full of light, full of meaning.

If you will not share it, if you keep it as a private treasure, sharing it with no one else, because of the danger, not like Stephen's danger, but the danger of being different or seen as silly...

Then the power of the story of the faith of the people of Westminster is diminished. The power of the story of the UCC fades, and so does our ability to make the world better.

Stories are powerful.

People need a good story.

I will just bet that each of you has a good story, stories within stories!

We have a small group ministry setting as a safe place to tell your stories. Why don't you join a group, or even start another one!

We have our "listening season"...2 weeks ago, next week, for as long as we want...come share your story at coffee hour next week!

Call me. Set up a coffee chat with me. Share your story with me!

Come to Westminster, again and again. To hear the stories of the early Christians, the ancient Jewish people, the stories of Jesus, whom we follow.

Share the story of Westminster, too.

This place, and our faith, are gifts of powerful stories. And the world is hungry for people who tell the good story, and listen with love and respect to the stories of others.

Westminster can do that. Westminster is like that.

We are a story, we have a story to tell.

It is a story of hope and love, welcome and safety, respect and challenge.

We tell the story of a God who is love and justice. And the story of Jesus who is freeing and challenging and welcoming and pushing and encouraging and loving. The story of the Spirit of God that spins through all life, heats our blood, urges us on with energy and power.

We are stories, great stories.

Listen to each other. Be compassionate with each other.

Then, what we do will be a great story, too!

Amen.