

Fish Hoek Methodist Church – 10th May 2020

“With God, nothing is in vain!” – Story of Stephen

Scriptures: Acts 6: 1-8, Acts 7:54-60

Good morning and welcome to our time of worship this morning. As we come together in this time we are mindful of all that is happening around us, but let us still be thankful that we can at least meet like this. We look forward to meeting together in person - one day in the future. The one benefit of gathering like this is that we can truly “Come as you are to worship” – even in your pajamas, with your coffee and breakfast – just come as you are. There is no one to judge your bad hair day ☺

Call to Worship – **Psalm 117:1** – “All you people praise him because the Lord loves us very much, and his truth is everlasting.”

Lighting of the Candle – it is visual, it makes us pause and it serves as a reminder to us as we gather.

Prayer: (Delme)

“Loving and eternal God, through the resurrection of your Son, help us face the future with courage and assurance, knowing that nothing in life and death can ever part us from your love for us in Jesus Christ our Saviour; Amen.”

Today is a special Day – It’s Is Mother’s Day in South Africa and so we want to wish all our mom’s, grans, aunts and sisters a blessed day. We have a special poem to share with you – please enjoy this.

Special Poem and Prayer: (2 kids)

Prayer for Mother’s

Dear Lord,

Please bless our moms and comfort them. Help their loving hearts to continue to love and to give to others. Strengthen our moms when they feel down and give them hope when they are discouraged. Most of all, Lord, on this Mother's Day, give our mothers Your Great Love and Graces. Amen.

A Mother's Love

There are times when only a mother's love
Can understand our tears,
Can soothe our disappoints
And calm all of our fears.
There are times when only a mother's love
Can share the joy we feel
When something we've dreamed about
Quite suddenly is real.

There are times when only a mother's faith
Can help us on life's way
And inspire in us the confidence
We need from day to day.
For a mother's heart and a mother's faith
And a mother's steadfast love
Were fashioned by the angels
And sent from God above. - *Author Unknown*

I wonder if you have ever heard the story of Nathanael Saint?

Nate and four American friends(including Jim Elliot) first made contact with the widely-feared Auca people deep in the Ecuadorian rainforest in 1955. These people had never been contacted by the outside world. It was an exciting opportunity for the Gospel.

The Aucas - now called Waodani - not only received their gifts but gradually became more and more accustomed to the arrival of the plane. By the 6th week, tribesmen even attached a beautifully feathered crown as a return gesture. From then on, gifts were exchanged back and forth until Nate made plans to land.

Soon after Christmas in 1955, the group made one of their final flights to meet the Waodani people. They landed on Palm Beach on 3 January 1956, setting up camp on the fringes of Waodani territory, waiting for an encounter.

After 3 days, suddenly a group of naked Waodani appeared on the bank of the river opposite Palm Beach. Jim Elliot, Nate's closest friend, waded towards them; his open hand offering a warm invitation for the visitors to join for food. After a few minutes, all were relaxed, and the little group settled at the Americans' camp, drinking lemonade and jabbering in their mysterious dialect.

When their visitors finally disappeared back into the forest, the 5 friends could barely contain their excitement. This meeting was the one thing they had longed and prayed for.

Two days later, Nate's final call to his wife Marjorie said, 'Pray for us. This is the day!'

At 12 minutes past 3 on Sunday 8 January 1956, Nate's wristwatch was suddenly smashed against a stone. The hands stopped moving. This is believed to be the moment he and his dear friends lost their lives to Waodani spears. The missionaries' tragic martyrdom was only the beginning of a powerful message of salvation that has spread from Ecuador's remote Waodani community across the world.

What a waste of a life. Or was it? Legacy....

Steve Saint was 5 when his dad was martyred. The family lived in Quito where his father was a missionary pilot with Mission Aviation Fellowship.

After the death of Saint's father, the family moved to Quito where Saint attended school. It was during this time that his aunt, Rachel Saint, and Elisabeth Elliot successfully made

peaceful contact with the Waodani and were living with them in the jungle. At 10 years of age, Saint first went to live with the Waodani, staying with them during the summers. He learned about living in the jungle, and also developed relationships with many members of the tribe. In June 1965, "Babae", as he was called by the tribe, was baptized in the Curaray River by Kimo and Dyuwj, two of his father's killers who had since converted to Christianity

Today we are going to listen to the story of another Stephen – who is known as the first Christian Martyr - so let us pick up the last part of his remarkable story in **Acts 7:54-60**.
(Read by Nicole)

⁵⁴ When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

⁵⁷ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

⁵⁹ While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul approved of their killing him.

The end of Stephen's story is very dramatic and tragic, but perhaps we need to go back to the beginning first. How did Stephen get to become one of the key followers of Jesus?

Answer: From a problem – from a time of crisis. Stephen is chosen as one of the seven recruits to sort out an issue in the Church. You need to read the story in Acts 6, but let me summarise. (The Choosing of the Seven – Acts 6)

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic (Greek Speaking) Jews among them complained against the Hebraic (Hebrew speaking) Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. ² So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³ Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them ⁴ and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

⁵ This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. ⁶ They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

⁷So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.⁸ Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people

1. Out of a time of Crisis God can do something amazing!

These 7 new disciples came on board, because the original 12 understood their true calling was not to get involved in all the things on the periphery. This is the biggest danger any pastor or leader faces. Burnout. Trying to be the Jack of all Trades.

It was not that they couldn't do the job – and even that they didn't want to, but what would then happen to the work they had been called too? That would be neglected.

By releasing these 7 guys, including Stephen – God's word spread and more and more people heard the Good News.

Notice the spiritual qualifications that these 7 guys were expected to have – **“well respected, full of the Spirit and have wisdom.”** These are not 2nd class ministers. These are people who can do their jobs and honour god with their gifts.

Coronavirus – pain in the butt for most of us, but have you seen how this crisis has moved the church out of our comfort zone and driven us back to our knees – to the true source of our Spirit lives. God is our strength.

God uses crisis to work in ways we cannot understand or fathom.

Sometimes we may have to wait for it But it will be there. Wait and See.

We are very forgetful people. I am probably the worst of the lot. What do I mean? God redeems us and restores us – God works in mysterious ways and brings us out of the trouble we find ourselves in and we quickly forget God's hand.

God works in the storms and crisis moments. Just ask the disciples. How many times did they get into a tight fix and then see the miraculous hand of God bail them out.

Romans 8:28-30 – I have refrained from referring to this passage up until now, in case we just quoted it glibly, but there is great truth in this scripture.

- “We know that God is always at work for the good of everyone who loves him.^[a] They are the ones God has chosen for his purpose” – CEV

2. Even in a time of Crisis we can Witness for Christ

Martyr – Witness

Stephen – a man full of God’s grace and power. Do you notice which comes first in Acts 6:8. Not the miracles and wonders. Nope, the fact that Luke and others saw that this guy had been touched and changed by the Spirit of God’s mercy and grace.

If I was going to the one tasked with writing an Epitaph for Stephen –I would use verse 8 as the words to remember him by.

There was a problem in the Church/Synagogue – people didn’t like Stephen. They were jealous. They also tried to sully his reputation. There is a similar connection with Jesus in what happens. Stephen gives a powerful speech and changes the attitude of some people, but riles up others.

A commentator writing on the life of Stephen says: “To a few men it is given to make their mark upon history in a very short time.”

How true. Stephen had a lowly beginning in Christian service, but his gifts and abilities made room for him to make as great an impact upon the life of the early Church as some of the apostles.

On the cross, Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” ([Luke 23:34](#)). In imitation of His Lord, Stephen’s dying words were, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” That prayer was answered in the conversion of Saul.

Jesus imitated. ***Follows Jesus even in his death***
Giving his life to the Lord. Everything that he had.

“Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains a single seed.” -

3. God’s ways are not our Ways

No matter where we come from, God can use our past to shape our testimony and witness.

Stephen had both a Hellenistic and Jewish background. This helped him to preach to multiple audiences. He showed to the Sanhedrin he had an immense knowledge of the Scriptures, and through his Greek rhetoric, he had the apologetic power of a speaker like Apollos ([Acts 18:24](#)).

We see multiple examples throughout Scripture of how God uses one’s upbringing to shape their testimony and how they speak to various audiences. Joseph in the Genesis story – it was tragedy that God used for his purposes later on. He needed to be in Egypt to save his family and the lives of millions of people.

For instance, Paul was a Jew with a Roman citizenship. This allowed him to speak to both Jewish and Gentile audiences.

So, let us imagine we were first century believers and we were meeting together to plan and discuss spreading the Gospel. How should we do it? Let’s have some revival meetings, let’s go to schools and tell them about Jesus. Let’s have a massive rally at the Roman stadium down the road. Or not! How does God do it...

Sends them running for their lives**Acts 8:1-4** (The Church Persecuted and Scattered)

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. ² Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. ³ But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

⁴ Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

Out of this incredible mess, God was busy orchestrating some amazing miracles.

Seeds planted in Saul's life. His conversion was still to come.

- Testimony of people who have turned their lives to God in the most amazing ways.
John Newton – Amazing Grace – I once was lost, but now am found!

People scattering all over the world now, because of persecution and in doing so, they took the most precious possession they had – Jesus. And so the Gospel was shared to all who were willing to hear.

Churches in lockdown. More online than ever before.

Conclusion:

Normally, the Scriptures speak of Jesus now sitting at the right hand of God, having accomplished the work of our redemption (Heb. 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; Eph. 1:20). But in this story of Stephen's death, we note that twice it says that Stephen saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Why the difference?! Don't really know.

Most commentators agree that Jesus was standing to welcome home His faithful witness. Steven Coles once remarked:

“Jesus always stands with those who stand for Him. He gave this courageous man Stephen, on the verge of death a vision of the glory of heaven to support him in the terrible moments to follow.”

It reminds us of the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who refused to bow down before the image of Nebuchadnezzar. In his fury, the king had them bound and thrown into the furnace heated seven times hotter than normal. But to his shock, when he and his men looked into the flames, they saw not three men bound, but four men unbound and walking around without harm. And the appearance of the fourth was “like a son of the gods” (Dan. 3:25).

The Lord was there with the 3 witnesses in their moment of trial, to support and encourage them for their faithfulness to Him. He spared them from death, but not Stephen. Why – I am not sure!

God stands with you and me in our trials. Whatever tomorrow holds, God is still there.