

Scripture Reading:

Acts 7:57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at [Stephen] with one accord; **58** and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. **59** And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." **60** Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Acts 8: "1 Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2 And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. 3 As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. 4 Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word. 5 Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them. 6 And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. 7 For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. 8 And there was great joy in that city."

'Joy Comes to Samaria'

For many weeks we have considered the work and ministry of Stephen... A man called to 'wait on tables' who served the Church faithfully, faced a very hostile Jewish Council and gave his life for the faith as the first Christian martyr.

- Now we get to consider the question of why and to take a look at the result of his ministry and death!

We must remember that it is MUCH easier for us to consider the question of why when we have the big picture given for us here in Acts and the rest of the New Testament! We see the complete picture of how when the great persecution broke out in Jerusalem that the Saints were scattered and how they preached the Gospel bringing great joy to Samaria... Something I want us to consider at some length this morning.

BUT if we go back and think about Stephen and the others in the Church who were called to service asking what their thoughts might have been as all of this took place we realize the picture would not have been quite as clear for them. Stephen may have wondered at times if he was serving properly when he seemed to always end up in debates and arguments with the leaders. I am pretty sure that when he went before the council he was not thinking 'oh boy, now I get to give my life for the faith!'

Stephen had all the human frailties that we all share and he would have had his share of doubts and concerns and yes a little fear & trembling. However, Stephen was faithful, doing what we are commanded to do in our Christians lives:

- Stephen trusted God by keeping His commandments and believing His promises

Stephen had given his life to the Messiah, served Him faithfully in the calling he was given and in the end he believed the many promises Jesus gave to His Disciples!

- Jesus promised that the Comforter would come
- Jesus promised the Comforter would give them the words to say when they faced such trials
- AND Jesus promised to be with him always, even to the end, where Stephen saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

What Stephen could not see clearly was how God was about to use what happened to him... We move very quickly from a peaceful church in Jerusalem that is growing rapidly and serving faithfully... To a persecuted Church that is being attacked on all sides and scattered outside the city.

- **Could you blame the leaders of the Church, if at this point they wondered whether things were going the way they should?**

-- Perhaps the Jerusalem Church had become too comfortable or forgotten the command Jesus had given

-- Or perhaps the time had simply come for the Spirit to carry out the next stage in the advance of the Son's Kingdom!

- **In either case God clearly uses the evil actions of this council and Saul to accomplish His goal.**

Listen again carefully to the final words of Jesus to His disciples before His ascension:

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth”

Now if we carefully examine these words of Jesus, they really rub against our free-will American individualism that even we reformers suffer under because it is SO prevalent in our age. Notice that Jesus said they WILL receive power from the Comforter! They did not have to ask or give their permission...

- **The Spirit would come and empower the disciples to build the Kingdom of God's Son!**

And please notice that Jesus said they will be His witnesses and He even went so far as to tell them where they would be witnesses... The Apostles and their followers have been faithful witnesses in Jerusalem and now it is time for the next step:

- **So the Spirit moves them out of the city to be witnesses for Jesus in all of Judea and Samaria.**
- **And of course eventually to all the earth as we shall see in Acts**

It is interesting how Luke moves his orderly account back and forth between comfort and conflict in this time of transition...

Think about the flow of what we have studied from the life of Stephen

- **Stephen faithfully serves in the church and gives an answer for his faith**
- **Stephen is brought before the council with false charges**
- **Stephen is confident in his presentation to the council**
- **The council responds with rage and gnashing of their teeth**
- **Stephen sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God**
- **The council rushes at Stephen and hauls him outside the city to be stoned**
- **Steven asks God for mercy**
- **Saul of Tarsus holds the coats and approves of his violent death.**

This pattern continued in our reading this morning from chapter eight:

- **A GREAT persecution breaks out against the entire church.**
- **But Luke quickly turns to the faithful who come and bury Stephen with great lamentations**
- **Luke then immediately goes back to Saul making havoc**

And finally in verse four we read that the scattered Saints “went everywhere preaching the word.” This is one of those verses that it is easy to pass over rather than to pondering and meditating on it to properly see just what is being said... Not only did they go everywhere as Jesus had planned, but they went preaching the Word, the Gospel. They were bringing glad tidings and this is confirmed in verse eight where we read, “And there was great joy in that city.”

In the end God’s plan is being carried out and it brings great joy, just as the Angels had proclaimed on the night of the Savior’s birth! Now I want us to focus on this joy this morning, but before we get to that, I want to consider why Luke goes back and forth in his orderly account:

- **I believe it is a picture of our Christian lives!**

As we discussed at lunch last week, there are often places where we must simply hold some things in tension. Consider the young Church here in the city of Jerusalem: A great affliction has broken out: Stephen has been stoned and Saul is on the war path going into homes and throwing Christians into prison. There would have been much discussion about the question that Steve asked: Is it a time to flee or a time to stand and fight?

How do we know?

There is no simple formula:

The principle is the same as what Stephen practiced facing this hostile council:

- **We must trust God to give us the wisdom and direction that we need in our time of trial.**

Sometimes, as with Stephen, there is little choice but to stand and fight no matter what the cost.

Afterward the Saints scattered and we can see that it was part of God’s plan!

- **They were right to flee, even if they may have been confused and even felt a little bad about it.**

You can imagine the discussions and even arguments that would have taken place... It is easy for us to think, well obviously they are to flee and spread the Gospel, that was God’s plan. However, it would have been quite different there in the midst of this new wave of persecution. A church that had grown dramatically, been of one accord, increasing in knowledge and service, by all appearances a very healthy Church. Now suddenly one of their servant leaders is dead and what Luke rightly calls havoc has broken out.

- **Should they hide?**
- **Should they seek a new hearing with the council?**
- **Should they try and reason with Saul?**
- **Or should they just run?**

From our human standpoint that last one seems the least dramatic and not very spiritual, right?

But it was what God wanted and I am sure they came to have a great peace about what was going on. The Apostles remained behind and we will see in future accounts from Acts that the Church in Jerusalem still had an important role to play in the growth of the early Church.

But for now, it was time for the next phase of God’s plan:

- **The Gospel was to go beyond the City of Jerusalem to all of the Judea and Samaria and then to all the world.**

Luke focuses here on just one man, Phillip in explaining what happened but we will see as we move on in the Book of Acts that many others went out to all parts of the world. This great mission continues down to our day where we are called to be the witnesses for Jesus and to disciple the nations, teaching them all that Jesus commanded us.

And we must remember that even in our day, we don't always clearly see the big picture...

I am sure that Stephen as he was listening to the latest complaint from one of the Hellenist Widows did not think, 'Wow this service is going to end up scattering the Saints everywhere and spreading the Good News abroad! He was probably focused on deciding how to get her more help.

When those tired Christians on the Mayflower gathered near the end of their voyage to write the Mayflower compact, they were not thinking, "We need something profound that will stand the test of time and be studied by Christians in the 21st Century!" They were thinking they needed something in writing so they would be protected from the unbelievers on the ship and to keep them from fighting among themselves.

When only half of them remained a year later, sitting down at what is considered the first Thanksgiving meal I doubt they were thinking, "well now we have shown the world how to establish a Christian civilization that will last for hundreds of years and grow to be the most powerful nation on the earth!" No, they were just honestly giving God thanks for helping them through a tough year and the first meager harvest they had brought in.

I could go on with a lot of examples but I think you get the idea. We will more times than not be unaware of how God plans to use our simple service in His Kingdom.

- Which of our young mothers is today changing the diapers for the next Governor Bradford, or John Calvin or Stephen?

And don't forget that God pays attention to ALL the details so the mother & father of these great men or their pastors, teachers and even home-builders or servants can be just as important:

- Who raised & trained them to be faithful in their service?

The same is true of our young men and their vocations: *[Here we really tend to think in terms of the secular verses the spiritual, but nothing could be further from the truth.]*

- Whether our sons grow to be pastors of large churches or workmen in a local auto shop, their calling is to serve well and trust God for the results.

Who was more critical to the reformation: John Calvin who penned the Institutes of the Christian Religion, or Johannes Guttenberg who figured out how to make a printing press? *[he was a gold-smith by trade so it might have just been a hobby!]*

While that question is worthy of great debate, we must not forget to always consider the innkeepers who fed and sheltered such great men and of course the mothers who reared them. Knowing Mr. Calvin as we do from his writings and history, I for one would not be too surprised to find his mother and/or wife wearing the greater crowns in heaven!

Of course I say all of this to remind us again in this season of ordinary time, that we must be faithful to the calling that God has given us:

- Children, you are to honor and obey the parents that God has given you... Not the ideal parents that you wish you had!

- We have talked often about how our marriages are to be constant witnesses to the world about the love of Jesus: God intends this to take place with the partners He has provided for us!
- And as Pastor Wilkins so rightly points out our singles are also witnesses as the world watches closely to see how faithful they are in their singleness and their proper pursuit of marriage.
- And of course we are all to be faithful in our everyday callings and vocations as the example I have used should demonstrate.

And finally, do we do all this so that we can be happy and fulfilled?

- I would certainly hope this would be the result BUT it is NOT the ultimate goal.
- These Saints in Jerusalem were not scattered so they would feel better about themselves or find a happier life

I am sure many left great possessions behind and precious family and other relationships were seriously disrupted.

- IF they had been looking for what was in it for them, they would have taken a very different path!

They were scattered so they could preach the Good News, the word, the glad tidings and they were preaching for the benefit of others! The result was great joy in that city!

As we study Phillip's ministry in Samaria next week we will see more clearly what a major step this was for the advance of God's Kingdom! So it should not surprise us to see the result described in this way: Now joy is a subject that fills the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, but here Luke says there was GREAT joy...

- Interestingly we see GREAT joy at key moments in the history of God's great plan of salvation!

-- When Solomon is made King to reign after his father David it says, "and the people went up after him, and the people played the flutes and rejoiced with GREAT joy, so that the earth seemed to split with their sound."

-- This great joy returns to Jerusalem after King Hezekiah's revival which we will consider at the Table this morning

-- When Nehemiah completed the walls they held a great dedication where we read, "Also that day they offered great sacrifices and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with GREAT joy; the women and the children also rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off."

-- The angel announced to the shepherds on the night of Christ's birth, "I bring you good tidings of GREAT joy which will be to all people."

-- When the star returned to the sky for the wise men they, "rejoiced with exceedingly GREAT joy.

-- The women left the tomb after hearing about the resurrection of Jesus, "with fear and GREAT joy and ran to bring His disciples word."

-- After the Ascension of Jesus the disciples, "returned to Jerusalem with GREAT joy."

-- As we read in our text the bringing of the Gospel to the Samaritans filled the city with GREAT joy.

-- When Paul and Barnabas returned to Jerusalem telling of the conversion of the Gentiles, "they brought GREAT joy to all the brethren."

And finally we should ponder the words Paul addressed to his friend Philemon and the other Saints in the local church there:

"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 4 I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, 5 hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, 6 that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. 7 For we have GREAT joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother."

- Yes, great Joy came to this city in Samaria as God fulfilled His great plan bringing the Good News to them.

I hope you can see that our work for the Kingdom is not focused inward by asking:

- What is in it for me!

It is focused outward, bringing the Good News in which we rejoice to others by the example of our lives and the words on our lips!

This will bring GREAT joy in the lives of others and true joy and peace in our lives as well.

- Our heartfelt desire should be to bring GREAT joy to Northern California, to the United States and to all the World

For we know that one day we too will see Jesus standing before us and we will long to hear those comforting words: "well done good and faithful servant."

Communion Meditation: II Chronicles 30:

"1 And Hezekiah sent to all Israel and Judah, and also wrote letters to Ephraim and Manasseh, that they should come to the house of Jehovah at Jerusalem, to keep the Passover to Jehovah God of Israel."

19 But Hezekiah prayed for them, saying, "May the good Jehovah provide atonement for everyone 19 who prepares his heart to seek God, Jehovah God of his fathers, though he is not cleansed according to the purification of the sanctuary." 20 And Jehovah listened to Hezekiah and healed the people. 21 So the children of Israel who were present at Jerusalem kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with great gladness; and the Levites and the priests praised Jehovah day by day, singing to Jehovah, accompanied by loud instruments.