

Read also Jeremiah 26:8-16

The world is a violent place. During the last 100 years the world has experienced extraordinary violence. These scenes are recognizable to all of us. (See video of sermon at www.fpcd.org for pictures.)

- Tribe against tribe
- Nation against nation
- Violence sells. An article in The Dallas Morning News tells us people lined up at midnight to buy the video game “Call of Duty: Black Ops.” It broke all sales records. Over five and a half million sold the day it went on sale.¹

Violence is not new, of course. We serve a crucified Lord. The world is a violent place, poised against God. Our Lord said,

"If the world hates you, remember that it hated me first" (Jn 15:18).

Stephen was the first leader of the church to experience intense hate specifically for his faith. Let's hear how Stephen became a leader. READ Acts 6.

The church was growing rapidly and that was stressful. Jewish believers from Jerusalem and believers from the surrounding Greek speaking areas clashed. There was too much work and too few people to do the work. So the apostles elected more leaders. Stephen was one of them.

Notice that these deacons preached. So even though they did the day-to-day practical work that happens at a church, they were spiritually devoted people; mature, and Spirit-filled. And because of that, thousands became devoted to Jesus Christ, including many priests.

When you are growing spiritually, when your faith is vibrant, it shows. As you step into spiritual leadership, speaking up about your faith, it's infectious. And it births new Christians. People are drawn by the Spirit in you.

But notice that Spirit-filled people and spiritual activity also draws opposition.

So we have Stephen doing great works for God and all of a sudden a whole slew of people come up against him. And they were people from his own region – Greek speaking Jews.

- That's like being attacked by someone from your hometown.
- That's like being called on the carpet by someone you knew in high school.
- That's like having your close friend turn against you and question your motives.

Jesus predicted this.

He said, “You will be dragged . . . to trial . . . because you are my followers. But this will be your opportunity to tell them about me. So don't worry in advance about how to answer the charges against you, for I will give you the right words and such wisdom that none of your opponents

¹DMN, *New 'Call of Duty' obliterates entertainment sales records*, 11/12/2010, p. 3D.

will be able to reply or refute you! Even those closest to you-- your parents, brothers, relatives, and friends-- will betray you. They will even kill some of you” (Lk 21:12-16).

But did you hear it? Jesus said *I will be there to give you the right words.*

During World War II a family named Ten Boom hid Jews in their home in the Netherlands in a small secret room. Once during a raid of their home the guards asked her aunt point blank if they were hiding anyone in the house. The aunt had a policy to never lie. What would she say? Everyone held their breath. And she did tell the truth, “Yes we hide people.” But then she began hysterically laughing. Thinking she was mocking them, the guards left the house.

Jesus gives the right words – or the right laugh – when needed. Even though you might face opponents, Jesus will be with you and you will never face them alone. That’s the way it was for Stephen.

As Stephen began his defense his face shone. (Remember our study in Exodus – Moses’ face shown from being in God’s presence. And, Jesus’ face shined when He was transfigured.) Stephen, therefore, was God’s appointed and approved spokesman, rising to the occasion.

What would you say if you were dragged into the Duncanville court to defend what you believe? What if Duncanville City Council demanded to know the reason for our assembly here at First Presbyterian Church?

Before the Jerusalem Council would Stephen crater? Would he abandon his confidence? Would he say, “You are right; Jesus wasn’t really the truth; I’m mistaken; never mind!” Well, we know the story. He began to preach. He met them on common ground. Beginning with Abraham he traced their faith history, connecting the dots. Stephen answers the question: *Are those who believe in Jesus as the Messiah renegade Jews? Or do they have it right?*

You see, the Bible is all one story. Do you remember on the Emmaus road when Jesus met two disciples after He was resurrected? He said, “Wasn’t it clearly predicted that the Messiah would have to suffer all these things before entering his glory?” And Jesus took them through the writings of Moses and all the prophets, explaining from all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Lk 24:26-27).

Stephen said:

- Abraham received the promise; a promise that was God’s plan for a great future. But before it was enacted, the people had to suffer.
- Joseph, the heir of the promise, was hated by his brothers and exiled to Egypt, where the people suffered for 400 years.
- Moses was elected redeemer by God, but Moses was rejected by the people numerous times.

There was suffering and it was extremely hard at times. But God reversed all these negative circumstances. God was with Abraham, Joseph, and Moses freeing them from afflictions, giving them favor, empowering them, even though God’s people often rejected them.

Do you see the pattern? People suffer; people resist God; leaders are rejected, and then suddenly God moves in surprising ways. God is not always predictable; but God is always in charge.

Next Stephen talked about the temple. It started with Moses in the desert when God designed the mobile tabernacle, and then King David wanted to later build a permanent dwelling for God. The Jews, you see, loved the temple because they believed God resided there. But when Solomon completed the temple, even though God directed its building God said, "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what can man build for God?"

God does not demand ritual, Stephen said; God desires obedience. God is not present because the temple is there; God is present by the Holy Spirit inside us, calling us, moving us, asking for obedience, giving promises, sometimes making us wait or even suffer; redeeming adverse circumstances, and giving surprising blessings.

Is that the way you experience God? God calling you, moving you, asking for obedience, giving promises but often saying wait, then later reversing adverse circumstances, and bringing surprising blessings.

Or is God to you a ritual found only on Sunday in the sanctuary; something you alone do on your own volition, with very little personal connection with the power of the Holy Spirit?

Stephen invites them to step over from ritual into real faith. Stephen got it. How about you? Do you get it?

He called out. "Name one prophet your ancestors didn't persecute!" "You are just like your ancestors – resistant."

They couldn't stand his words. (READ 54-56)

Stephen saw Jesus standing because Jesus was present with him and Jesus stood to honor His child and receive him in glory. No one faces persecution alone. (READ v. 57-60)

Saul agreed with the murder. But Saul would never forget what he saw and heard.

As he and Luke traveled together years later, I wonder if Luke pulled Saul aside and asked him, "What did Stephen say?" And perhaps Saul was the one who told Luke about the sermon Stephen preached that day.

Although Saul continued to rage against the church, it wouldn't take long before Jesus overcame Saul's hate on the road to Damascus, challenging him to take up the cross of real faith. Have you let the faith so penetrate your life that you confront hate head on to show a different way? When you do, you make a difference; you cast a different vision from violence and hatred so often found in the world. You proclaim a way of forgiveness and hope, just like our Lord.

My prayer is: may the Lord Jesus help us all to stand.

AMEN