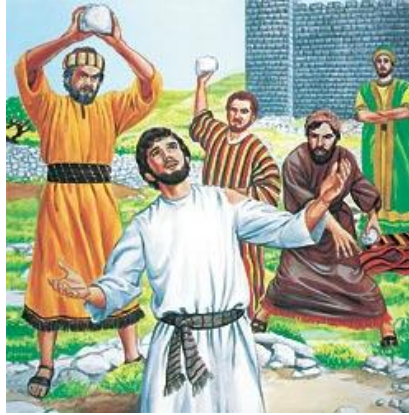


Sermon – October 1, 2023  
“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Acts 7:51-60

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill our open hearts, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them a blessing for your people. May these words ignite our continuing transformation into Christ's image and lead us to fruitful labor as those sent into Jesus' mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen*

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Good morning! It is a blessing to worship with you on this beautiful fall morning. We were blessed to spend time at the New Room Conference last week and to spend a few days in southern Texas with family where it has not yet cooled off as it has in Virginia. Thanks to Kevin for filling the pulpit last Sunday and thanks to God for the message that he shared with you.

Let's return this morning to the Book of Acts, looking at parts of chapters six and seven. When we come down to ground level in Acts, we find ourselves again at a trial of a follower of Jesus before the Sanhedrin. First, Jesus was tried in this court, then Peter and John, and now it is Stephen who is calling the Sanhedrin “stiff-necked people” as he stands before these judges. Before we can understand Stephen telling the Sanhedrin they are “a stiff-necked people,” we need to recall where we have been in the Book of Acts. At the high level in our journey through

the Book of Acts, the Google Earth view, we have learned that we have one job as followers of Jesus: we are to wait in prayer to be filled with power from on high and then to be Jesus' witnesses to all of the world. The disciples waited in Jerusalem, in prayer, for power from on high to come. That power, Holy Spirit, came on Pentecost and the church was born. Three thousand joined that day. Peter and John have continued to worship in the temple and as they entered one afternoon for prayer, they, in the name of Jesus, healed a man lame from birth who had begged for alms many years at the Beautiful Gate. As a result, Peter and John have been tried by the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of Israel, threatened and told to cease speaking in Jesus' name, and released. The outcome of the sign of the healing of the lame man protects Peter and John from action by the Sanhedrin; they cannot ignore a sign that has been done in Jesus' name. Following the healing and Peter's sermon, another 5000 men believe in Jesus. The church in Jerusalem is growing.

Now we need to leave our high-level summary and come down to ground level in Acts. It is not clear in Luke's writing how much time has passed between the trial of Peter and John and where we are in our Acts journey today. Some scholars place the time as years later; others see only a few days as having passed. For Luke, it is the next significant moment in the life of the growing church. Key details Luke does share about the time between the events are that the church in Jerusalem is growing and that many of the priests, those who minister in the temple, have become believers. As the church grows, it is beginning to impact the temple, and the temple leadership is beginning to notice and react. Within the church in Jerusalem, rapid growth brings trouble. The trouble Luke describes includes new demands to care for those in need as well as praying and proclaiming the Good News. The trouble Luke speaks to is the kind of trouble a growing church experiences as new believers bring new opportunities and require new responses from the body of Christ. The trouble they experience is a good thing. Turn to someone this morning and tell him or her, "Bring on good trouble in this place and let me be part of the response." Yes, we want to have the kind of trouble that comes with growth, with new Christians coming together and working together to follow Jesus and be his witnesses in this place and to be part of ushering in the kingdom of God. The trouble identified is part of a conflict between Hellenistic Jews and Hebrew Jews and the need to have better care for the Hellenistic Jews' widows. The apostles address the trouble by finding seven men full of spirit and wisdom and laying their hands on them to commission them to do the work that addresses the need in the

church. These are men who were not companions of Jesus; they are laity. These seven wait on tables and provide care for the widows, and Luke tells us that Stephen, who is one of the seven, is filled with Holy Spirit. Stephen goes out to be a witness to the Hellenist Jews in their synagogues, debates with them, and is very successful in making the case that Jesus is Good News. Stephen is so good in making his case that he makes the Hellenist Jews angry, but they cannot refute him with scripture, and they decide he needs to be put on trial for what he speaks. They find false witnesses to bring charges and spread false rumors about what Stephen has said among the elders and people, rumors of blasphemy. Through their efforts, Stephen is accused of speaking against the temple and the Law and is suddenly apprehended and placed on trial before the Sanhedrin. To help us grasp the seriousness of what is happening, we need to know that when Rome took over Israel, they took away from the rulers, think high priests, all uses of the death penalty for crimes except for those who were found guilty of speaking against the temple. If Jews were convicted of speaking against the temple, the Sanhedrin could, after a trial and guilty verdict, put them to death. The Sanhedrin tried to find Jesus guilty of this offense but failed and had to take Jesus to Pilate to have him killed. Stephen is accused of speaking against the temple, and suddenly he is on trial for his life. If he is not successful in defending himself, he will be put to death, even if the witnesses and charges are false.

I have not spent much time before a judge, but I am certain that calling a judge a “stiff neck person” is not a good strategy for defending oneself, especially if you might be looking for mercy from your judge or, in Stephen’s case, judges. If you have not read Stephen’s defense, let me suggest we take time to read it for ourselves and ponder how he defends himself, how he makes his case that he is not speaking against the temple and the Law, but is speaking to the fulfillment of them both.

Let me share the “CliffsNotes” version. Stephen makes key points in his defense from the Old Testament scriptures. We might ask ourselves, “If we were put on trial before judges in this world and given the opportunity to defend ourselves using the Old Testament, would we be able to make a defense?” The Old Testament is three quarters of our Bible and we need to be familiar with how it is fulfilled by Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. The Old Testament contains the story of God’s redemptive work through the Hebrews. Stephen will use some very familiar people from the Old Testament to make his defense: Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, and Solomon. The first claim that Stephen attacks is that the temple is the place where God resides

or that he is speaking against the temple. The Sanhedrin believed that God was with them in Jerusalem in the temple and it was the only place to worship God. Stephen makes a point through the lives of these Old Testament rock stars that God spoke to them outside of Jerusalem.

Abram's first call from God happened in the land beyond Canaan, think Ur and Huran. God was present in those distant foreign lands when He first spoke to Abram. For Moses, Stephen points to the burning bush in the wilderness on Mt. Sinai, where Moses removed his sandals because God was present, and he stood there in that foreign land on holy ground. Stephen reminds the Sanhedrin that God spoke to Joseph in Egypt, and that David and Solomon spoke clearly that the temple was not God's place of abode. Stephen does two things as he makes his case. First, he shreds the Sanhedrin position on the temple as God's exclusive abiding place, and he moves the interaction of God with His people out from Jerusalem to the world. Stephen shows how God has been and continues to be active and present in the world in the story of Israel, a story his judges know well. Keep the idea in mind that God is at work in the world and not just in the temple in Jerusalem. God in the world is a key theme in the Book of Acts and is a key idea for us as followers of Jesus here in Burgess and Ophelia.

The next charge that Stephen takes on is that of speaking against the Law. Again, he turns to scripture, the Old Testament, the only scripture they had, and begins to remind the Sanhedrin of the story of their ancestors and how their ancestors, whom God called a "stiff necked people," turned from obeying the Law God gave them and made an idol, a golden calf, to worship and to lead them in the wilderness. Stephen continues to draw from their story, reminding them that their ancestors worshiped "in the Tent of Moloch and the star of your god Rephan, other images they made to worship." Stephen lays out the case that his judges, like their ancestors who did not follow God, have also lost their way and are not following the Law as God instructed them to follow.

Stephen, as he lays out their story from the scriptures, reminds the Sanhedrin that when Moses came to their ancestors the first time in Egypt, they rejected him, and it was not until the second time when God sent Moses to him that they were led out of Egypt by Moses as the deliverer God sent. Stephen reminds the Sanhedrin that when Joseph came to his brothers and family to share with them that God was working through him to deliver them, they rejected him and sold him into slavery in Egypt. But when the brothers came a second time to Joseph in Egypt to buy food, he revealed himself to them as their ruler and deliverer. We should catch the

theme in Stephen's defense of the people's rejection of God's deliverer the first time and a returning deliverer who leads God's people to salvation the second time as it applies to Jesus.

Having now reminded his judges of their story, the story of God working through Israel, Stephen makes his defense. He begins to tell his judges that he is not speaking against the temple and the Law but is sharing how Jesus fulfills the Law and replaces the temple. Stephen tells the Sanhedrin that they are the ones breaking the Law and not worshiping God, just as their ancestors failed to do throughout the story of Israel. Stephen then drives his last point in his defense home. It is a lasting point. The Sanhedrin, those who reject Jesus, are law breakers like their ancestors. He tells them, "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it." We should hear echoes of Peter's speech to the crowds at Pentecost and at the healing of the lame man where, when he accused the crowds of killing Jesus, they turned to Jesus for forgiveness. We have come to a key moment in Stephen's trial. It is a moment when wise, righteous judges might stop and ask themselves if Stephen could be correct, if the new insights he has shared about God at work in the world and not just in the temple in Jerusalem could be true. It is the moment in Stephen's defense when they might realize they are wrong, turn to Jesus, ask for forgiveness, and seek to be followers of Jesus and follow God's will for them. Twice we have seen the crowds to whom Peter proclaimed the Good News do just this: hear the Good News and turn to Jesus. That is not the reaction of the Sanhedrin. Instead, they become enraged and grind their teeth at Stephen. He has made his points from scripture. They offer no defense or response in kind. They are condemned but do not repent. Instead, their hearts grow angry at Stephen.

Stephen then looks up to heaven and sees a vision of the throne room of God with Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Jesus is not sitting in judgement but is standing as if to welcome Stephen or act on Stephen's behalf. Stephen's words of the vision of Jesus cause the Sanhedrin to cover their ears and rush together against Stephen, dragging him outside of the city where they begin to stone him, putting him to death without giving a verdict of guilty. Don't miss that those who take up stones lay their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. Luke introduces the next servant of Jesus in the story of the early church at the execution of Stephen.

Stephen is not quite done. As the stones fall around and on him, we see the image of Jesus more clearly in this follower of Christ. Stephen asks Jesus to receive his spirit just as Jesus asked the Father to receive his spirit on the cross. Stephen also kneels down among the falling stones and, as Jesus did, cries out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." In the midst of the falling rocks, Stephen falls asleep, a peaceful end to the life of the church's first martyr.

Pause here for a moment this morning and think about what has just happened. Stephen has stood in the midst of the Sanhedrin and refuted their charges by showing them that they are the ones who break God's Law and are using the temple to limit God's reach into the world. Stephen has spoken truth to power. Jesus has stood up at the right hand of God and given peace to Stephen as the first martyr of the church. There will be more, many more, martyrs in the history of the church, many more in our lifetime as persecution grows among our brothers and sisters throughout the world. Think for a few moments about what job Jesus gives his followers: to be those filled with power from on high and his witnesses starting in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to all the world. Are we ready to be filled with power from on high and to be Jesus' witnesses? Does Stephen's story begin to redefine our concept of being a witness from sharing the Good News with our neighbor to even standing trial for the Good News? Could our witness become that of a martyr? Are we bold enough in our witness to speak truth to power?

Let me close with a couple of points for us to take with us as we go out into our community this week. First, realize that Stephen was martyred for the faith, the first disciple of Jesus in the Church to give his life fully for Christ. But Stephen, in his arguments before the Sanhedrin, also gives new understanding of what the Church is to be. The Church is not a Jewish church centered on the temple in Jerusalem. The body of Christ, those with Christ in them sent out into the world, are the Church wherever God through Holy Spirit sends them. Stephen makes it clear that God is not limited to any temple, that where God is present there is Holy Ground and on that Holy Ground lives are transformed through the love of God seen in the cross. Finally, just as Joseph, Moses, and Jesus were initially rejected by those they were sent to, those who seek to obey Jesus' command and be his witnesses to all the world should expect rejection and persecution. But as followers of Christ, we have one job, to be those filled with power from on high, witnessing for Jesus to all the world. Today is World Communion Sunday. We have the opportunity to come to Jesus' table in this place and join believers all across the world, wherever the body of Christ stops today, to gather at Jesus' table and feast with him.

Don't miss that what Stephen spoke before the Sanhedrin has happened. The church has gone forth into the world and today we celebrate Communion with our brothers and sisters across the globe. Let us prepare our hearts to meet Jesus in this holy meal, to be open to being filled with power from on high and then going out into the world to be Jesus' witnesses.

*Pray with me. Jesus, our hearts are anxious to be filled with power and to be your witnesses until we realize the cost that might require. Help us to commune with you at your table and fill us with power from on high that we might seek with all our hearts to be your witnesses in this place to all you lead us to. Lord Jesus, help us to be bold witnesses for you right here, right now. Lord, we ask you to strengthen those who face persecution in your name. Give them peace and receive their spirit. Amen*

**“The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Linger before God in this place, wait for power from Jesus and then go out as one sent to walk the Long Road. Go forth into Jesus' mission to all people. Amen**