

Acts 7: 51-60

⁵¹ “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. ⁵² 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. ⁵³ You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.”

⁵⁴ When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. ⁵⁵ But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ “Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” ⁵⁷ But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. ⁵⁸ Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he died.

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“Beholding the Vision”

Have you ever noticed what gets St. Stephen stoned? While Stephen is on trial he says a lot of curt things to the council. He asks them which of the prophets they *didn't* murder. He accuses them of not being faithful to God's law. To top it off, he calls the temple council a bunch of, “Stiff-necked, uncircumcised of the heart, forever opposing the Holy Spirit people.” That's as harsh an insult as we'd find in our New Testaments. You “stiff-necked, uncircumcised of the heart, forever opposing the Holy Spirit people!” But his words aren't what gets him killed. It's what happens after the insults that really get their gourd. “Look” Stephen says, “I see the heavens opening and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” After hearing Stephen's vision, the high council covers their ears, drags him out of the holy city as the stones go flying. The insults they can handle, but the vision threatens everything they have come to know about God. If Jesus is at God's side it means there is far more to God than they realize. It is the vision that makes Stephen a martyr.

At the outset, we admit the church needs vision. It is our vision that drives us forward. When we have a vision, it causes us to live in a certain direction. Maybe you remember the days before Trinity had a fellowship hall. You'd walk into the hallway and there just past the library was a dead end. But wasn't it during a congregational meeting one year when Bill Raiford spoke up from the back row: “we need a fellowship hall” and snap the vision was set. A while later there it was. A couple stewardship campaigns ago, it was decided we needed a Director of Christian Education. The vision was set and snap a year later there it was. At our last session meeting, we listed our desires for the next year. There was one word that kept popping out at us: children. Imagine, someone said, if children were no longer shamed for not being able to afford lunches in school. Imagine, a few others said, if children were more involved in our worship service. You can hear a vision starting to manifest itself. It's like watching one of those HGTV shows, where they are renovating an old home. Before they pick up a sledge hammer to demo the place, they have to have some vision for what the home is going to look like. Same thing happens for us.

When we have a vision, it causes us to live into the picture in front of us. It is our vision for what could be that keeps moving us in a direction.

Well, it's great to have goals or dreams to follow, but notice: our world is not kind to the visionary. Just ask Stephen as he was buried under an avalanche of the council's judgement. Just ask the prophets in the Old Testament about the mockery they endured. Just ask Jesus how his vision for the Kingdom of God worked out for him! We've watched visionaries like Nelson Mandela, Latricia Mott, Sojourner Truth, Malcom X, William Wilberforce all pay the price for speaking their visions out loud.

During the civil rights movement, there was a big Presbyterian church in downtown Seattle that was going to host the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The day before he was expected to come, however, the church's session held an emergency meeting where they decided that the publicity of having Dr. King speak might be too costly for their church. So at the last minute they canceled the event. Having a visionary in the room is a dangerous thing, perhaps especially in the church. Why? Because a visionary disrupts the status quo and challenges the narrative we have selected for ourselves again and again. God is bigger than our past success stories. Wider than our customs and traditions. Larger than the institutions we create to organize our beliefs. Sure, in hindsight our visionaries are heroes and sheroes who changed the world, but in the moment, they are a problem to be dealt with. It is one thing to follow a vision, it is another to be the visionary.

But guess what? You've been the visionary before. You've envisioned the kingdom that God has opened up before you and you've stepped into it. In one of the most segregated cities in the country, you've worked on forming interracial friendships. You've been meeting with Dellabrook PC every year now for 40 years. Twenty years ago, you opened your arms and hearts to the LGBTQ community, decades before our denomination said it was okay. Even after the editorial pages of the newspaper condemned you, you endured knowing that there is more to God than we realize. You have worked alongside people of other religions and have spoken up for immigrants and marched for equal rights and have hosted dinners for Syrian refugees. Of course, you might not feel like a bunch of visionaries, but you have lived into a wider vision for the world and, at some points, have trail blazed a path for others to follow.

But still there is more to God than we realize. God's vision will always be expanding out in front of us for us to say, "Look." Maybe that's why Stephen looks to the heavens as they are opening up in front of him. And do you remember what he sees? He sees Jesus *standing* at the right hand of God. Standing! Most testimonies of Jesus' ascension are of him *sitting* at the right hand of God. But here Stephen has brought Jesus off his seat to his feet. Maybe it is a salute to Stephen's courage. Or perhaps Jesus stands as if to say, "Keep your eyes locked on me, you are not alone." Maybe Jesus simply can't stay on his seat for someone who is about to give their life for a vision that includes us all.

The world needs new visions these days. We need new visions for our government. We need new visions for our healthcare. We certainly need new visions for the church. In order to have visions we need visionaries, like you, who say "Look!" And who might one day even move Jesus from his seat to his feet. All because of a vision that begins with knowing that there is always more to God than we realize.