

“What Now?...Living With Persecution”

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Don't just listen to the Sermon...Ponder how you can live it!

Use these questions as a starting point to dive deeper into the sermon each week. Can be used individually, with family and friends, or with your Life-group!

1. How do you react when you're missing a part of a story or a movie? What do you say or do to figure out what you're missing?
2. During this time of social distancing and coronavirus, where have you witnessed the Holy Spirit at work? Where have you heard the gospel proclaimed? Where or how have you experienced God's love?
3. Think about how you react to change. What is your initial reaction?

In your life, how have experienced change – a threshold – as an invitation and/or a promise?

Have you ever been dropped into the middle of a movie? You walked into the living room when someone was watching a movie, or you had to take a bathroom break at the movie theaters. Remember movie theaters...? Or walked into the middle of someone telling a story? You probably had no idea what is going on. You didn't have the context to put the pieces of the story that you did hear together.

That's kind of like our story from Acts today. Thanks, Revised Common Lectionary...we have no idea what is happening to Stephen here. All we know is he's filled with the Holy Spirit; he sees a vision and then he's killed. We don't know why. We don't know who Stephen is. We pretty much don't know anything. So, what's happening here? Let's try to answer some of those questions.

Well, we need to go back a chapter to where we are introduced to Stephen. Or maybe even to the beginning of Acts. You see Acts is the story of the early church. Acts tells us how the church got started after the ascension of

Jesus. Jesus has left the building so to speak and now Jesus' followers must share the good news, worship God, and serve others. We heard a little bit of that from Acts last week. We heard that their numbers were growing, they were caring for one another and giving to those in need.

Fast forward to Acts chapter 6. The disciples are presented with a problem. Not everyone is receiving their fair share of food in their daily distribution to those in need. The disciples were struggling to share the Word of God and serve others at the same time, so they decide to delegate. Seven people are chosen to serve, to make sure that those in need were fed, while the disciples – the Twelve – shared the gospel. Stephen is one of those chosen to serve. But Stephen quickly finds himself in trouble. He's serving those in need, but also doing “great wonders and signs among the people,” Acts tells us, so Stephen is arrested and tried before a council.

Stephen gives an impassioned sermon before those who are trying him. He tells the story of God's people: of Abraham, Moses, of slavery and wandering in the desert, of Joshua and David, of Solomon and the building of the Temple. Stephen makes a radical statement in his sermon. He proclaims that God cannot be confined to a building, to one place. That God is bigger than any box human beings try to put God into. That God's dwelling is all around us.

So, Stephen is killed, and his story is the beginning of persecution of the church in Jerusalem. In response to this persecution, the apostles leave the city of Jerusalem and are scattered to spread the good news of God's love elsewhere.

Hopefully, up to this point, you've been following what I'm saying. The main crux – the nugget – of Stephen's story is the relentless love of God. God's love cannot be contained. Persecution of the early church did not stifle the flame of God's love. God's love only spread further, wider. More people heard the good news, more people experienced the love of God.

And that brings us to today. Since March, the church has been scattered. A global pandemic keeps us in our homes, away from one another, unable to gather as the church. But just as persecution couldn't suppress the love of God and the sharing of the good news, coronavirus doesn't either. Even in the midst of a pandemic, the Holy Spirit is at work, the gospel is proclaimed, and God's love is shared.

Because of persecution, the early church had to pivot, change directions, adapt. We have had to do the same. Today, the church has entered uncharted territory, exploring new ways to share God's love, creating new avenues for God's people to worship.

Our world has changed and so must we. We keep hearing the phrase "the new normal." The effect of coronavirus on our daily lives is yet to be fully seen. We may not be able to return to normal, to the way things always were. Life will change.

Perhaps this change is an opportunity for the church today to pivot and adapt. Perhaps this is a moment for the church to reset and reform as we hear God say in the book of Revelation: "See, I am making all things new."

Maybe as soon as you heard me say the "c" word, you cringed. Change is hard. It is our natural human inclination to resist change. It causes us fear and anxiety. We like things to stay the same. Change makes us uncomfortable.

Perhaps this change is like a threshold, a chance to step into something new, to cross over into something new. Author John O'Donohue writes that thresholds carry both "an invitation and a promise." This threshold – the new normal – is no different. As God invites us into something new, God also makes a promise. God promises to be faithful to us, to be present among us. We don't take this new step alone. God accompanies us – the church – on this next step of our journey.

We see this invitation and promise in our gospel reading for today. Like Thomas, we also might not know the way. Right now, we are asking

Jesus for a roadmap, for direction: How will we know the way forward? And just as Jesus says to Thomas, he says to us now: "I am the way, the truth, and the life." This is the invitation. Jesus invites us into a relationship with him. He invites us into relationship to find the way, to figure out how to live our lives now, a relationship that will present the truth: the truth of God's love for all of us. That is the promise.

So, what now? How do we continue living as the church in this new normal? We take a step forward together. We listen for the stirrings of the Holy Spirit. We ask God to give us the faith to follow. We open ourselves up to something new; we open ourselves up to the invitation and the promise.

And we will find that God's love is more than we could ever imagine. We will find that God is bigger than coronavirus. We will find that God's love is relentless. God's love will overcome. Amen.

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