**Homily for October 6, 2024 Acts 6-7, selected verses “Resistance Is Futile!”**

Now Stephen, an appointed servant and a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke. Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, “We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.” So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They produced false witnesses, who testified, “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.” All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel. Then the high priest asked Stephen, “Are these charges true?” To this he replied: “Brothers and fathers, listen to me! “You are surely a stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him - you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.” When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.“Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Welcome! Welcome back to our little sermon series from the Book of Acts, ***All You Need to Know about Christianity, a Drama in Eight Acts.*** Today is the fifth act, as it were, and normal expectation would be that we would move on to the *fifth* chapterof the magnificent book of Acts. But you have met me; normal does not really apply, so this *fifth* act comes from the *sixth and seventh* chapters of our new favorite scriptural book. Anyway, today, friends, well…I’ve got good news, and I’ve got bad news. Just like the popular joke format…"I have good news and bad news," a defense attorney told his client. First the bad news: The blood tests came back, and your DNA is an exact match with the one found at the crime scene." Oh, no!" cried the client. "What's the good news?" "Your cholesterol is down to 110."

The good news and bad news with which we begin today has to do with hearing selected verses from the Scriptures. The good news is that the passage is more manageable, easier to listen to, auditorily digestible. The bad news of selected verses is that we miss a *lot* of context, so much today that I feel the need to back up and fill in a few rather large blanks. The first of these is where this Stephen character came from in the first place…and where he came from was the extraordinary success of the apostles. The good news is that the Church was growing by leaps and bounds. The bad news was that it was really more than the original disciples could handle, so they look among the followers and pick seven of the most righteous, holy, role-model Christ followers they can find, and Stephen is among them. So is Phillip, and his story has literally changed the world, end we will get to Phillip next week. But for today, Stephen, our Stephen, a kind and caring and compassionate man ordained by the apostles to manage the needs of the new converts. What could possibly go wrong?

Another joke: 0ne day, the pope's assistant comes up to him with good news and bad news. The Pope asks him for the good news first. "We have Jesus Christ himself on the phone”, and then the Pope thinks to himself, well how could there be bad news? Jesus is calling him! Naturally curious, he asks for the bad news. "He's calling from Mecca." And that was Stephen’s problem, right there: fellow converts from places *other than* Jerusalem were expecting the traditional portrayal of the rabbi Jesus with whom they were in thrall. But they had missed all the localized activity of the Holy Spirit, not just at Pentecost, but in the healing of the lame man, the new social order that was evolving among the Jerusalem faithful, and something pretty miraculous just about every day. The Jesus that Stephen was representing had evolved considerably from the Jesus that had been preached about in Alexandria and other outposts of the kingdom. And whereas the Church was growing steadily more inclusive, opening to Gentiles even, the North African believers had not gotten the memo, and wanted this new version of Judaism to remain *just that*, Judaism. So they plot and meddle and charge Stephen with trying to undermine the laws of Moses and the traditions of the faith as they understood them. We have been talking about Jesus together for fifteen years, friends, and you aren’t shocked anymore, but think of the most traditional church you know about, and send me there to preach, and I bet the same thing would happen. The good news for the Kingdom is going to be bad news for poor Stephen.

Here's ANOTHER good news/bad news joke: An attorney representing a wealthy art collector called his client and said to him, "Paul, I have good news and bad news." The art collector replied, "I've had an awful day; let's hear the good news first." The attorney said, "Well, I met with your wife today, and she informed me that she invested $5,000 in two pictures that she thinks will bring a minimum of $1-2 million. I think she could be right." Paul replied enthusiastically, "Well done! My wife is a brilliant businesswoman! You've just made my day. Now I know I can handle the bad news. What is it?" The attorney replied, "The pictures are of you with your secretary."

So…Stephen is brought before the Sanhedrin, the religious and legal Supreme Court of Judaism, and this dynamic is about to shorten his life considerably. He tells them – in really extensive detail that we did not read this morning – the truth of their faith foundations. He shows them, metaphorically, the pictures that will convict them of messing around, of not being truthful or faithful. And his premise is literally the oldest in the book: beginning with Abraham, whom God promised would have offspring as numerous as grains of sand on the beach, but is pushing a hundred years old and still not a dad. But Issac comes along, and then Joseph and Esau, and then twelve sons and a daughter born to Jacob. These twelve boys will become the patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel, and one of them, Joseph, will make big diplomatic impact in Egypt. Sadly, a change of Pharoah results not only in Joseph getting canned but all of his people becoming enslaved. Centuries of this, and then Moses comes, and liberation is hard won, and then a series of kings, some great and others just terrible. And through all of this, God is showing the Jewish people, the people of the Covenant, the people of the circumcision, the same picture, the picture of a Messiah who will come and resolve things for the good. Stephen shows them this elaborately photographed picture of the history of Jesus, for whom they claim to have waited and waited, but they were busy with other secretaries. Not only do they shun this Jesus, but they plot and plan and assassinate him! This holy history is what Stephen rubs in their faces when he finally says, *“Brothers and fathers, listen to me!* *“You are surely a stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit!**Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him -* *you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.”*

Our Stephen, apparently, was a sincere man but not a clever one. After this speech, his remaining lifetime can be measured in minutes, and they are minutes filled not only with hope, but with the agonizing end of being stoned to death. But he has done, at great personal cost, the evangelist’s job: he has shared the Good News, the life-saving, world-changing news of God’s chosen Messiah, Jesus, the deliverer of the people. And he has demonstrated the Wesleyan truth that we hold dear, that God will prevail, that Love and inclusion will win, and that, free will notwithstanding, resistance is futile. God is playing the long game, and hasn’t counted us out yet. We may be stiff-necked, unwilling to participate in the covenant just yet. Headstrong, self-serving, duplicitous, all of that and more. Even so, the victory will be for God and Love and inclusion and the redemption of the entire created order. Resistance is futile.

Our final joke this morning takes us back to Egypt, where the ship’s captain has good news and bad news. The royal barge returns to harbor after a long day ferrying the Pharaoh up and down the Nile. The captain says to the tired oarsmen 'Right, lads, I've got good news and bad news. Which do you want to hear first?' The oarsmen consult among themselves and decide they fancy some good news first. 'The good news,' says the captain, 'Is that from now on your rations are doubled. The oarsmen cheer and start talking excitedly amongst themselves. 'The bad news,' says the captain, 'Is that Pharoah wants to try water-skiing after supper.' Some things never change, friends; corrupt, self-aggrandized leaders always want to push regular folks around. It seems like one of the threads woven into eternal reality, but I assure you, that isn’t the case. We’ve read the end of the book. We know who wins. This too shall pass. And as they say, it may pass like a kidney stone, but it will pass. Amen.