

Where Are You Looking
Acts 7:55-60
May 10, 2020
First Presbyterian, Luling

Just this week I was remembering a close call with a youth ministry friend of mine. If you've ever been to the Main Auditorium at Mo Ranch, there's a large grassy lawn out front, but there are quite a few oak trees sprinkled throughout. It's nice, because they make shade in the summer, but it can make playing football or frisbee a little challenging. And that's exactly what happened on this day. Kids were playing football, one of them was running to catch a throw from his buddy, looked toward the ball—which if I understand correctly, is exactly what you're supposed to do if you're receiving a football pass—and ran smack into a tree. Knocked himself out. Had to call EMS, which is a bit of an ordeal at Mo Ranch. He ended up being ok, not even a concussion. But, really, how many times do you have to tell someone "Look where you're going!" or "Heads up!"

Early on in Acts, very first thing that happens is that Jesus ascends into heaven. Not surprisingly, everyone is standing around looking up toward heaven, to see where he went. They get scolded a little, by "two men in white robes" which is also Luke's description of the men at the empty tomb. They get scolded for looking up toward heaven, when they should have known somehow that Jesus had gone to heaven and would come back the same way and they have work to do and should get on with it. "Why are you looking to heaven? Look where you're going!" is effectively the message there.

Today's story is a bit of a weird one, and we're just hearing the very end of it. I will try to summarize quickly. To solve an injustice over food distribution, there was a committee of men appointed to oversee the distribution, to make sure that all of those who needed food were getting an equitable share. Stephen was one of the people on this committee. They apparently got procedures and processes in place—maybe they were early Presbyterians?—to make their committee work efficiently and fairly. Because Stephen has extra time that he isn't spending waiting on tables and distributing food.

In fact, he does what Acts calls "great wonders and signs," but doesn't describe them further, and he makes long speeches. The longest speech recorded in Acts, which is saying something. And his speeches get him cross-ways with some powerful folks, who don't take too kindly to what he is saying about Jesus. So he makes more long speeches to try to convince them and defend himself. They are not convinced, rather the opposite.

They are offended, violently offended. Acts says they "ground their teeth" at Stephen, which kind of makes me giggle. It was just an expression. So we might say something more like "they were so mad at Stephen they couldn't see straight." They're

furious, beyond rational thought. In their view, he's attacked the foundation of their faith, the Temple, and they react from that illogical, out of proportion, fear that we feel when everything we hold onto is threatened. That fear rises up even when we don't consciously think through why it is that we are so upset, out of proportion upset.

And they do not restrain their fear nor their anger. They allow it to spiral out of control, fed by the anger of those around them, a literal mob mentality. They rush him, drag him out of the city, and stone him. In more modern terms, it's a lynching. An action by a group of people, fueled by irrational anger, which in turn is fueled by fear, and a whole bunch of bystanders who get caught up in the action and never ever stop and think "what am I in the middle of?" Doubtless some of the bystanders may have participated in the stoning, or at least approved of it. But I also have to think there were a bunch of people who just didn't speak up against it, because they too were afraid. And I have to think that because I have too often been one of those people.

While all this horribly frightening chaos is building, what is Stephen doing? Well, he's looking where he's going. Heads up, literally. When they start grinding their teeth, Acts says he looks up toward heaven, and sees the glory of God and Jesus sitting at the right hand of God. And then he tells the mob that, which is when they get even madder and drag him out of the city walls toward his death. The rest of the telling of his death is deliberately meant to evoke the death of Jesus, to put Stephen in the life and sacrificial suffering of Jesus. He prays "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," and then kneels down and cries out in a loud voice (just like Jesus on the cross) "Lord do not hold this sin against them."

Stephen is looking where he was going. His focus is not on the scared and scary crowd surrounding him but on the Christ he has preached and trusted and witnessed to.

The stoning of Stephen is not a particularly uplifting story. Because it reminds us of what we'd rather forget: that faithfully following Jesus and faithfully bearing witness to Jesus in word and deed means that we will face opposition, sometimes irrational and angry and violent opposition. Following Jesus means following Jesus all the way to the cross. Following Jesus tends to make the powers-that-be upset, because Jesus said the powers-that-be will become the powers-that-don't-have-power, and those that were squashed and oppressed will become first in line. And when the powers-that-be get upset, Stephen can tell you exactly what happens.

Stephen kept looking at where he was going, kept looking at Jesus, despite the angry mob around him. He remained faithful to the end. When Jesus's message turns our world upside down, let's also look where we're going and remain faithful.