



Carry This Story With You

TEXT
Acts 6:8–7
(Selected Verses)

May 7, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

I talked with one of you this week who said, “I think I am going to appreciate this sermon series. What are you preaching on this Sunday?” I said, “Stephen. Do you know that story?” There was a pause. Then he said, “I’ll tell you the truth, I don’t know my Bible like I should.” Well, I don’t know about “should,” but I think the story of Stephen might inspire us to want to know these stories.

Stephen stood before the council. He knew how this was going to end. It happened with John the Baptist. They had done this to Jesus. They would stone Stephen to death.

These were the last moments of Stephen’s life, and he has a lot to say. And what I notice is that with everything he has to say, I can’t find one hint of fear in him. I want to be like that.

Stephen was chosen by the church to take care of those in the church family who were in need. He was ordained to ministry. It is this ministry of caring that provides the inspiration for our current Stephen Ministry, a ministry of care. Stephen Ministry is a vital ministry here at Village and is inspired by Stephen, who was called to care for his church family.

Stephen was among the first to be ordained. He wasn’t a preacher, but he was a witness.

Being a witness is what we talked about last week. The Greek word translated “witness” is *martyr*. From the earliest days of the church, there has been a relationship between bearing witness to the love of God in Jesus Christ and martyrdom. In Greek, they are the same word.

In every generation, there have been those martyred for their faith. You know some of them. You know of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his courage in the face of Nazi Germany. From Tegel prison camp, Bonhoeffer wrote this poem:

Who am I?

*They often tell me I would
step from my cell’s confinement
Calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
like a squire from his coun-
try-house.*

*Who am I? They often tell me
I would talk to my warders*

*Freely and friendly and
clearly as though it were mine
to command.*

*Am I then really all that
which other men tell of?*

*Or am I only what I know of
myself,*

*Restless and longing and
sick, like a bird in a cage*

Struggling for breath, as

*though hands were compressing
my throat.*

*Who am I? They mock me,
these lonely questions of mine.*

*Whoever I am, thou knowest,
O God, I am thine.*

Bonhoeffer was a witness and a martyr.¹

You know of Oscar Romero, the Archbishop of El Salvador in the 1970s. He spoke out against his government’s undeclared war against the impoverished of its own nation. Romero gave voice to the poor. He trusted that caring for the least of these was the best way to find Jesus.

On March 24, 1980, he was shot by government death squads, while he was at the table breaking bread and pouring the cup.

Romero was a witness and a martyr.

Lesser known is Esther John. She was born in Pakistan and named Qamar Zia. As a young woman, she converted from Islam to Christianity and took a new name: Esther John. For years she kept her faith quiet, studying scripture in secret. She was captured by Isaiah 53: “The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.” As a young woman, she lived with Presbyterian missionaries. She

was a nurse, caring for the poor and the sick. She would ride her bike from village to village, teaching women to read. In February 1960, men broke into her home and killed her while she slept. There is a statue honoring her above the door to Westminster Abbey in London today.

Rev. George Lee was murdered in Belzoni, Mississippi, a small village tucked in the bend of the Yazoo River, not more than a hour's drive from where I was born. It was 1955, and he was engaged in voter registration among the black community. The local sheriff told him if he stopped, they would provide him protection. Rev. Lee said every American had a right to vote. A few days later, a passing motorist pulled out a gun and shot him. No one was ever convicted of his murder. In those days, like sometimes in these days, shooting a black man is not considered a crime. Rev. Lee was shot on May 7, 62 years ago today.²

Last month, bombs exploded in Egyptian congregations. We don't know the names of those who died, but they are known to God.

In every generation, people of faith are killed because of their faith. This is not limited to Christians. No, Jews are martyred for their faith. Muslims are martyred for their faith. It is too common in this world.

Stephen was the first Christian martyr. There is something important to learn from him. In the face of death, Stephen responds by telling the story of the faith. This is a story he carried

with him — the story that reveals the truth he knows.

He tells of Abraham, sent to a land he could not see, but a land that God promised to show him. "Just go!" Abraham left his home, trusting that God knows more about what home is than we do.

He tells of Joseph, sold by his brothers into slavery. Joseph rose up in Pharaoh's court; and when famine struck the land, Joseph had a chance to pay back his brothers — but he chose forgiveness instead.

Stephen tells of Moses, born in the bulrushes and confronted by God at the burning bush. Moses would stand up to Pharaoh's brutality and lead God's people from bondage.

This is the story he carries with him. They stone him to death, and Stephen's last words were "Do not hold this sin against them." If you don't recognize that language, these are words Jesus spoke from the cross. "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they do."

Stephen does not tell the story of Jesus; the story of Jesus shows up in Stephen. Stephen was a witness and a martyr. So why go through this? It's not likely that any of us will face martyrdom, so why would this story matter to us?

I want us to note how Stephen responds to crisis. When Stephen faces the worst moment in his life, he leans on a story that he has always carried with him. It is the story that reveals the truth that he sees. The men of the council believe they control this moment, but Stephen said, *I see*

Jesus at the right hand of God. It is not you, but he who is Lord of this moment. This moment does not belong to you; this moment belongs to God.

This moment stands not in isolation, but is in a long line of what God has done in the past. God was there with Abraham, and every day led him toward a promise.

God was there with Joseph and gave him the capacity to see, in his brothers, better men than their own actions might indicate.

God was there with Moses, pushing back oppression and making a way out of no way.

Now God is here with me, and you can cast your stones, but he will raise me up.

This moment does not belong to you; it belongs to God. For Jesus is Lord.

A few years after we moved to Village, my friend Brant gave me a couple tickets to a KU basketball game. He said, "Take Nathan, and be sure you get there in time for the 'movie.'" Nathan went to see the game; I went to be with Nathan. We arrived in time for the "movie." It's on the big box, with music playing *loudly*.

In a few moments, they show the history of KU basketball. James Naismith is there. He invented basketball in Springfield, Massachusetts, and shortly thereafter became the first basketball coach at KU. Fogg Allen is in the video. After all, it's his house. Wilt Chamberlain makes his patented hook shot. You see Danny Manning as a player in the '88 championship — and, of course, Mario's miracle which

sent the '08 championship game into overtime. It's all there.

The point is clear. You may think you are there for a single game in December, but there is more going on. Tonight is only a small piece in a long story. And unless you see that there is something bigger than just a Tuesday night game in December against Emporia State, you don't understand what this moment is about.

I think that is what Stephen knows. This moment that you think you control is just a small moment in a long story of God's work of redemption in this world. And because Stephen knows that, he is not afraid. This is the story that Stephen carries with him.

I think this is helpful for those times when you find your own life in the midst of the storm. There will be moments when you will need to remind yourself: "I don't have to be afraid because Jesus is Lord, and this moment belongs to God."

I want to say to our confirmation class, this is big day for you and for all of us. But you need to know that what you are doing is becoming a sentence in a long story of service and praise to God. It is a story you belong in, a story that claims you — but a story that is much bigger than you, bigger than all of us. Every moment of your life is the stage on which God is working redemption. The days of your life do not live in isolation, but are just part of a long story that reaches back through the generations. And to know the truth of any given moment, you need to carry that story with you.

I want to tell you about my friend Jeff Krehbiel. I saw him six weeks ago at the NEXT Church gathering. He was a pastor in the DC area for about as long as I have been here. He is one of the best teachers I have known. But more than that, Jeff always lived his life on the front lines of compassion.³ You could always find him where people were in need.

Jeff went home from the NEXT Church conference and wasn't feeling well. He went to the doc, and the healer said it was pancreatic cancer.

That was late March. Last week he died. He was my age and has kids about the age of ours. Yesterday in Washington, DC, folks gathered from across the church. Shannon Johnson Kurshner preached his service, and she reminded us that Jeff was Jeff in part because he carried with him the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000. Jeff said, "This is an important text for us to remember these days. The needs of this world are overwhelming, but just offer what you have, and let the crowds offer what they have, and miracles happen."

We carry this story with us.

So I want you to do something for me today. I want you to take the index card that we gave you. I want you to write down stories — moments of teaching — that matter to you. Maybe you want to write down the Christmas story; the prodigal son; the least of these; the Beatitudes; the story of creation; the Exodus; maybe the brave story of Stephen. Just write it down on

that card, and I want you to carry that card with you.

If you are thinking, "I don't know this story like I should," we can help you. We will help you every week in worship. Or join a class or sign up for a Village Connect group; we can help you.

I want you to carry this card with you this week. Put it in your pocket. Put it in your wallet or your purse or your calendar. I want you to carry this card as a physical reminder that, as people of faith, we carry a story with us. It is a story that reminds us that Jesus is Lord, so this moment, this day, every day, they stand not in isolation, but are just one moment in a long work in the same direction; a long march of God to redeem the world.

Remember this truth in your best moments; remember this truth even in our worst moments — and maybe like Stephen, we won't be afraid.

¹Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers From Prison* (1953/1978), p. 347

²The Southern Poverty Law Center

³I am grateful to Rev. Shannon Johnson Kurshner, who made this statement in the sermon she preached for Jeff Krehbiel.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.