

Welcome

About ten years ago, I had the chance to travel to the Holy Land with my friend Thomas. We stayed at the Ecole Biblique, which is a French Dominican Archaeology School - it's the place where the people who brought the Dead Sea Scrolls brought them to figure out if they were important or not (spoiler: they were!).

Now, the city of Jerusalem is over 3,000 years old, and as you can imagine, the archaeologists at the school are experts in the expansion of the city over those years. The school is about half a block from the Damascus Gate, one of the entrances to what's called the Old City. It's called the Old City because the walls as they stand now have existed since about 100 years after Jesus was born.

The school was founded in the late 1800s, when outside the Old City walls was nothing but ruins and olive trees. And it wasn't too long before the friars there decided they should probably build a chapel. So they chose a spot and started digging.

And they hit ruins.

Good thing they're an archaeological school, right?

So the dig turns into a DIG, an excavation, and they discover a 3rd century church building that was dedicated to the martyrdom of St. Stephen (who we're going to meet today).

You may remember last week we talked about how executions had to happen outside the city, in the wild. Well - Stephen was stoned to death. And it almost certainly happened in this spot. (One of the reliable indicators is when stuff is older than the 4th century - that's when Constantine legalized Christianity. If stuff is older than that, it means it was technically illegal, and much more dangerous for Christians to venerate. This church they discovered was from the 200s!)

So the Ecole Biblique built their chapel - on the exact original floor-plan of the Church of the Martyrdom of St. Stephen. When you visit today, you can see the ancient mosaic floors, lovingly preserved by these archaeologist friars who call the school home.

I gotta tell you: as stories go, it's basically perfect. I heard it for the first time standing in the church, looking at those beautiful mosaic floors.

Of course they didn't have to do any of that. They could have simply built a chapel somewhere else and excavated the old chapel, treated it as just a preservation site.

But... wouldn't that have been a little bit of a let down? To see a chapel over there, and the ruins of an ancient chapel here?

Isn't the story of a bunch of archaeologist friars building their chapel on the site of an excavated chapel way more interesting, satisfying and cool?

Of course it is. It resonates. And we love stories that resonate. We love it when a whole bunch of seemingly unconnected threads come together into a surprising picture.

I want to suggest today that this is what God does with us - God makes our stories make sense. God rescues us, turning outsiders into insiders. Turning rejects into winners. And as God's church, it's our job to become the same kinds of storytellers.

Message

Last week, we celebrated Jesus' resurrection. We're observing the Easter season this year with a series called Church in the Wild. Hip hop fans will recognize that as a play on the song by Kanye West and Jay-Z, from their album Watch the Throne. On that song, they meditate

Human beings in a mob
What's a mob to a king?
What's a king to a god?
What's a god to a non-believer
Who don't believe in anything?

Will he make it out alive?

No church in the wild. – “No Church in the Wild” by Jay-Z and Kanye West

My friend and hip hop scholar Dr. Daniel White Hodge observes that there's a progression in this verse, from human to mob to king to god. But then they ask the game-breaking question: what's even a god to a non-believer?

Does any of this matter to the person who just refuses to play by the rules? Does any of this affect the unbeliever who refuses to try to climb the ladder of success?

Kanye and Jay-Z call that space “the wild”. The place outside the status quo. What we might call “out of bounds”. The opposite of “wild” is “civilization”. Where the streets are paved and the streetlights stay on. Where fences keep out the bad.

They insist there's no church in the wild.

But we're insisting that there is a church in the wild... because Jesus himself is wild. Jesus is radical, revolutionary, wild, untamed. And so should his church be. Jesus calls us to follow him into the Wild, to be good news for those who don't fit in, who claim the Wild as their home.

Welcome to the Wild.

When we talk about Wild in the religious sphere, we use a different word. Inside the Church, inside the walls, inside the congregation is sacred. And outside, in the wild, is profane.

I bet you most readily associate the word profane with language. Profanities are words you don't say at church. They're bad words. Low words.

But the church has a long history of treating people as profane, too. People who aren't holy enough for church. People who don't belong. Religious stories are powerful stories, and when we tell them poorly, we mark those created in God's image as profane.

But there are no profane people. Everyone belongs. Remembering that, acting that out, is one way we show the world who Jesus is.

Turn with us to Acts 6.

This is the story of the first church in the months following Jesus' resurrection, when they experienced explosive growth. Stephen is one of seven Greek-speaking Jewish men who has been anointed as a deacon to oversee the program of food-distribution.

Not long after that, Stephen gains a reputation as a Spirit-filled man. And as you'll see here, Stephen gets into a debate with some other foreign-born Jewish men. They're debating religion and politics (always a good topic with strangers, right?). As the text unfolds, I want you to pay attention to the role storytelling plays (both good and bad):

Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed amazing miracles and signs among the people. But one day some men from the Synagogue of Freed Slaves, as it was called, started to debate with him. They were Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and the province of Asia. None of them could stand against the wisdom and the Spirit with which Stephen spoke.

So they persuaded some men to lie about Stephen, saying, "We heard him blaspheme Moses, and even God." This roused the people, the elders, and the teachers of religious law. So they arrested Stephen and brought him before the high council.

The lying witnesses said, "This man is always speaking against the holy Temple and against the law of Moses. We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the Temple and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

At this point everyone in the high council stared at Stephen, because his face became as bright as an angel's.

Then the high priest asked Stephen, "Are these accusations true?"

This was Stephen's reply: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me. Our glorious God appeared to our ancestor Abraham in Mesopotamia before he settled in Haran." -- Acts 6:8–7:2 NLT

As Stephen announces the good news of Jesus' resurrection, as he proclaims the new life available to all listening, the other men gathered find themselves unable to counter his story. So they revert to a tactic as old as time: they lie about him.

As theologian Willie Jennings observes in his reading of Stephen's story:

The accusations against Stephen are false, but they are also angled. They push Stephen's words and actions into the most damaging narrative that one can have as a Jew... Stephen stands before the Sanhedrin and the chief priests, and there he must answer the question, "are

these things so?” But another question is there with that question, right at the surface and easy to see. It is simply, “Who are you?” Are you one of us, one with us, or are you an enemy, bound to false teaching and a false teacher?

This is the same line of inquiry that was drawn around the body of Jesus, and now it encircles Stephen’s body.”

— *Acts*, Willie James Jennings

The men who lied about Stephen did so with an agenda: they wanted to tell their story such that Stephen was profane. He was a blasphemer - against Moses and God. Of course, these accusations weren’t true, or rather, they were only true from a particular perspective.

For those who rejected Jesus’ fulfillment of Moses’ covenant, Stephen’s witness was blasphemy. For those who refused to see that Jesus is the fullest revelation of God’s person, Stephen’s witness was blasphemy. So they are rejecting not Stephen, but Jesus as Stephen revealed to them.

Stephen has become an image of Jesus. The messenger has become the message. Stephen and his story have become one. They resonate.

No wonder they said his face looked “like an angel”. Again, Jennings has a provocative suggestion here:

What does an angel’s face look like? We don’t know, but could it be that the particular characteristics of his face are not at play here, but rather its orientation? Stephen looks as though he is now inside a new reality of heaven and earth, one that can only be imagined as being of angelic body. Stephen in fact looks out at the Sanhedrin from inside a reality that has captured them, but they refuse to see it. So he will make it plain.

— *Acts*, Willie James Jennings

Those who have heard Stephen’s words, who have seen his witness, have two options: they can acknowledge the truth of Stephen’s story. To do this, however, is to admit their own sin. They did not recognize God when he came among them, announcing good news and offering signs. They did not recognize him cleansing their temple or interpreting their texts. They did not recognize him when Pilate offered his life up. They did not recognize him when he asked God to forgive them or when he was raised from the dead.

To acknowledge Stephen’s story as truth would require them to face the new reality into which Stephen is inviting them, a reality that would require them to humble themselves and repent.

They can’t do that. So instead, they decide Stephen is profane. He’s out of bounds. His words are not salvation but blasphemy.

In what follows (which is going to be your homework this week), Stephen retells the story of God’s people, beginning with Abraham and working his way to Moses. And it’s not a neutral

telling of the story. It's a telling that highlights both God's faithfulness and the people's faithlessness.

Why tell it that way? Because Stephen is trying to help them see that their response to Jesus is nothing new. And that's actually good news because it means God is just as faithful to them as God has been to every generation of God's people. Their negative response to Jesus doesn't negate God's faithfulness to them, and now it's time to turn back to God!

Jennings, one more time, reflecting on the nature of Stephen's story:

[Stephen's sermon] is first a performance. It is a storyteller at work inviting his listeners to move from death to life.

— Acts, Willie James Jennings

Stephen redrew the lines of the story being told. He made the story align with reality - Israel's religious leaders had a long history of violence against God's prophets, and God remained faithful and ready to receive them if they would repent.

But they refused to receive Stephen's story. Instead, they lynched him, taking him outside the city and stoning him to death:

The Jewish leaders were infuriated by Stephen's accusation, and they shook their fists at him in rage. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed steadily into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honor at God's right hand. And he told them, "Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God's right hand!"

Then they put their hands over their ears and began shouting. They rushed at him and dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. His accusers took off their coats and laid them at the feet of a young man named Saul.

As they stoned him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." He fell to his knees, shouting, "Lord, don't charge them with this sin!" And with that, he died. -- Acts 7:54-60 NLT

Stories are how we decide who is sacred and who is profane. Who is in and who is out.

I'm sure you remember back in 2016, after the killing of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling. In response to these killings, San Francisco 49ers QB Colin Kaepernick began kneeling during the National Anthem as a visible protest of the plight of Black Americans and the killing of unarmed black men by local police.

Response to Kaepernick's protest was loud, and quickly two stories emerged: one was that America still has not done enough to live up to the promise of our founding documents. We are still not a country where everyone has equal ability and opportunity to pursue life, liberty and happiness. The other was that Kaepernick (and by extension, those black Americans who agree with him) are ungrateful for what they have, and by kneeling he is disrespecting American troops - those who fight for the very freedom he has to protest.

Do you see the line being drawn there? By kneeling, Kapernick is profane. He's not a 'real' American (unlike those who despise his kneeling). It's a story that allows those who disagree with Kapernick, those his protest made uncomfortable, to discount him and continue to live unchanged lives.

The truth of the origins of Kapernick's protest emerged a couple of years later, after the 49ers let Kapernick go and no other teams picked him up. In an interview with NPR, a former active-duty Green Beret named Nate Boyer shared how he convinced Kapernick to kneel.

For three games, Kapernick sat on the bench while the rest of his team stood for the anthem. Boyer was bothered by this - he felt it was disrespectful to him and other troops. So he met with Kapernick and they discussed it. Here's what he said:

"We sat in the lobby of the team hotel, discussed our situation, our different opinions and feelings about all this. And I suggested him taking a knee instead of sitting even though I wanted him to stand, and he wanted to sit. And it was, like, this compromise that we sort of came to. And that's where the kneeling began." — Nate Boyer

Kapernick, along with an army veteran, chose the kneeling posture as one that communicated both protest of the treatment of black people in America and respect for those who serve in the military.

Now, of course Boyer doesn't speak for all veterans any more than Kapernick speaks for all NFL players or black people. But we cannot be a people of truth and say that his actions are intended to disrespect anyone, any more than Stephen's opponents could say he was blaspheming Moses and God.

The question is how we respond to prophets: will we hear their invitation out of death into life? Or will we convince ourselves they're profane? Disrespectful? Blasphemers? Will we exorcise them from among us? Or will we humble ourselves and say yes to their invitation to life?

The question before us today is, "What story am I living in? What story am I telling?"

Are you living in a story that says you're profane? Has someone told a story that says you're outside of God's love? That you're not worthy of being named a child of your creator?

Friends, that story is wrong. You need to hear the story of Jesus, the story that says that you bear the image of an infinite creator, and that makes you someone of infinite worth.

I don't know who told you that story - maybe it was someone in your family. Or a church. Maybe it's a story you heard in school, or a story you experienced from a partner or spouse.

Could you hear today, the words of Stephen, offering you a new story? One that names you as a child of God and invites you into a new reality?

Others of us might be the ones telling the bad stories. We've been deeply uncomfortable during this worship because, like those to whom Stephen spoke, we recognize that we've been telling

false stories, drawing lines between us and them. Marking ourselves as sacred while they are profane.

Friends, we have the same choices before those men who faced Stephen: we can deny Jesus' invitation into a better way of living - a way that names every person a beloved child of God, a way that works for justice for every human. A way that knows that loving God is the same thing as loving our neighbor is the same thing as loving ourselves.

We can turn our back on that and demonize those who tell that good story so we have an excuse to exorcise them from our midst.

Or we can listen. We can humble ourselves. And we can follow Jesus into this new reality.

Communion + Examen

Jesus sets a place for us. Will we receive it?

1. What story have I listened to in the last week?
2. What story have I told in the last week?
3. What does it look like for me to hear God's good story this week?
4. What does it look like for me to tell God's good story this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Write your story this week. Tell it to someone!