

Acts 7  
Hope-filled Speech  
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell  
11/4/16

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It was perhaps the timeliest rain delay in baseball history. Forecasts called for clear skies all day over northern Ohio... but for one small cell that meandered down out of Lake Erie, settling over Progressive Field at the most opportune of moments. The last two innings had seen the Cubs' fire: throwing closer, normally untouchable, squander a three run lead in the eighth. Having limped through the ninth, the Cubs' spirits were broken, destiny all but defeated as they exited the field for the clubhouse weight room to weather the storm, heartbreak looming.

Addison Russell, who'd made a critical error in the 8<sup>th</sup> to put runners on base, and Aroldis Chapman, who'd given up a double and game-tying homerun, were weeping before their teammates. Morale was less than zero. That is, until Jason Heyward stood up. The same Jason Heyward who was acquired for \$15 million during the offseason, and who was basically absent from the post season, hitting only 3-20 with zero RBIs. This quiet, otherwise-reserved teammate stood before his brothers and delivered a speech that echoed all the way back to 1908.

And 16 minutes later, when the clouds parted and the Cubs emerged, a different team took the field. One timely speech had reminded them who they were. A few truthful words had breathed hope back into a disoriented, disjointed, discouraged group. This is what hope-filled speech does.

This morning, we're beginning a new series of messages during the month of November, in which we'll be looking at the idea of hope—specifically how placing our faith, not in a ball club, but in a Savior who gives us the courage to share hope with others.

Here at WPC, our Mission Statement is simple. Say it with me, “We exist to Love people with the heart of Jesus in the heart of Wabash.” And love that bears all things, believes all things, endures all things is girded by this one thing: hope in the redeeming and transforming love of Jesus Christ.

As Amy so wonderfully put it last week, the God we worship plants seeds of faith, seeds of hope, seeds of promise in your life, just as he did with Abram. Sometimes hope puts a spring in your step, propels you out of bed for the holy task at hand. Other times, hope is more like a burden we bear.

No matter what you're going through, I want to suggest that Jesus Christ stands in the middle of it all with mercy and grace, a new story to offer, and a hope that is worthy of your life.

This morning, as we look at what it means to Share Hope in Jesus Christ, we are looking at a *hope-filled* speech. Stephen is an example of someone who was bold in his hope. He had to be. How else would someone have the courage to stand before the Jewish Council and call them **stiff-necked, uncircumcised, opposers of the Holy Spirit?** Not exactly a great way to win friends.

When I was in seminary, my preaching professor told us: always put the fireworks at the end of the sermon. Apparently, Stephen and I had the same teacher. Because that's what he does.

He begins his sermon by saying the glory of the Lord first appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia. I think this is a good thing for us to remember when we start to think that God's plan begins and ends with me or my church. He then goes on to spend a bunch of time talking about Joseph in Egypt. Over and over, he talks about what God did in Egypt. Egypt, Egypt, Egypt. If I was a betting man, I would bet that the Jewish High Council didn't much care for Stephen talking about God's grace extending even to Egypt.

The longest part of the sermon is about Moses, but it's mostly about what a bunch of whiners the Hebrews were in the desert. Even as he talks about their wilderness wandering, he still manages to insert Egypt nine more times, as if to say, *Remember how you thought Egypt was the best you could do for yourselves? Remember how short-sighted you were?*

**We don't always believe in God's great plan for our lives, when good enough will suffice.**

Why aspire to a calling or a dream career, when paying the bills will suffice? Why work for a great relationship with my spouse when it's easy just to spend every night together in front of the TV? Why think about that big idea for ministry in the community, when being a diligent church-goer will do? Why hold on to the dream when Egypt is so convenient?

Then when he finally gets around to the Promised Land part of the sermon, he immediately skips forward to the Great King David, who gets *one verse*. And Solomon, he gets one verse, but only to say: *You know that temple you built for God? God didn't really need it.*

Stephen is standing before these leaders, whose job it is to oversee Temple life, and Stephen's up there saying, "You guys, it's not about the buildings." God was at work long before the temple; God was at work in Ur of the Chaldeans; God was at work in Egypt; God was at work in the wilderness. This God, your God, is not confined to what happens in the Temple.

Do you see what happens when the Gospel confronts narrow religion? And I say Gospel intentionally, because even though Jesus' name has not even been mentioned, his expansive grace and mercy come through in these Old Testament Covenants—pointing to an even greater hope.

The Temple leadership were stuck in a rut and it's easy to get stuck in our ruts. It reminds me of a sign on an Alaskan Highway that reads, 'Choose your rut carefully, you will be in it for the next 50 miles'.

Because you're so focused on attending to this one narrow story of the Temple, you are missing what God is doing in so many other places, and in so many other ways and means in your life.

This should be profoundly hopeful news to us, because it means that we can have visible encounters with the living God anywhere and everywhere, not just in church. Where is a good place to share hope in Jesus Christ? Answer: everywhere.

Verse 49 and following are a beautiful reminder of this. Here Stephen quotes the Prophet Isaiah from Isaiah 66:

**“Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?”**

Never again will God allow himself to be confined to one particular piece of geography. Now the whole world belongs to this God, who in Jesus Christ had come to love and redeem us.

You'll notice that when Stephen drops that stiff-necked, uncircumcised in heart comment, that's not what gets them going, that's not what sends the High Council off the handle. But when Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, says, **“Look, I see the heavens opened and the son of Man standing at the right hand of God!”** this is what caused them to cover their ears and rushed toward him to drag him away.

It was Stephen's vision that got him in trouble. And the vision was that God was not confined to this place. You can imagine how hard this was to hear. These men had built their entire life and theology around a people who had a holy land, because they had a holy city in the midst of it, and in that holy city was a holy Temple, and in that holy Temple there was a holy of holies, and that was where God would come and meet the people.

You remember just after Jesus breathed his last, the curtain in the Temple tore from top to bottom. Who knows, maybe by this time, they had sewed the curtain back up. The tearing of the curtain was not just so that we, who are sinners, could now come in and have access to the holiness. Maybe it was just the opposite, so that the holiness of God could run out from that place to all four corners of the world.

A vision can be a powerful and dangerous thing. Just ask people like William Wilberforce, Rosa Parks, and Nelson Mandela. Visions like Stephen's can land us in an uncomfortable place, where our necks, made stiff by staring down into our naval, are lifted up. And the way we elevate our gaze to see the Savior is by continuing to come and be with one another in worship, hearing the promises spoken time and again.

Did you notice how Jesus is described? Most other places we read of Jesus seated at the right hand of God. Here it says that he is standing. I think he's standing because he's about to witness something great. We always stand for something great: the Hallelujah chorus, the national anthem, when a bride walks down the aisle. I think Jesus is standing for the vision. He's heard the testimony, he sees what's about to happen, and he stands for one man who gave it all for the vision.

Do you have a vision? Truth is, we all have something greater than ourselves: a vision, a purpose, a calling worthy of our lives. What is yours?