

10 January, 2010
Grove Presbyterian Church

If he had kept his mouth shut, he would have been alright. But he didn't, so he ended up getting killed.

When the big boys have it in for you, it's better for you if you play nice-nice. The last thing you should do is give them further reason to be irritated.

But then when the big boys have it in for you - when they're already bouncing the rocks in their hands -- you know you're done for anyway, so you might as well go out in style.

This was Stephen's moment. He's a preachin' and real preachin' tends to get you deeper in trouble.

They drag him from the synagogue to stand before the high council of the land. Intimidation. The big boys. The same spot where his Jesus stood months earlier.

They accused him of blasphemy, of saying bad things about the temple. Well, they were partly right. He did. The best lies are those with a germ of truth in them.

Stephen didn't say what the false witnesses accused him of saying - that this peculiar Jewish movement of followers of this Jesus were going to destroy the temple and change the customs of Moses -- but what he really said was probably worse - in their ears.

They drag him outside the city - to the same spot, likely, where Jesus was crucified - and stone him to death. They're good flinging stones over there in Palestine and Israel because they have been practicing for years. Their version of Little League.

He, in challenging the charges against him of being blasphemous, declares them to be blasphemous. They have tried to lock God up in the temple.

And they did. Try that is. Try to turn the temporary into the absolute. Try to defend their views as correct and all others wrong.

But rather difficult to lock up God in a box. Especially when heaven is God's throne and earth his footstool.

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For years, as Liz Hallen quoted to me the other day, we have had religion without spirituality, why complain now about spirituality without religion?

God. It's the name we use. Maybe even overuse. But there are many others. A little variety could prove helpful in keeping us a tad off balanced. If you cannot even name God - God without the definite article -- it helps keep us from turning God into a pet. Here, Fido,...

Indwelling Presence  
Ground of Being  
Ancient of Days  
Everlasting  
First and Last  
Deliverer  
Fortress  
Mother Bear  
Shepherd  
Cloud Rider  
God of Seeing  
Exalted One  
Lord of Hosts  
Elohim  
El Shaddai  
Adonai  
Yahweh

A little mystery is good for the soul.

It was Augustine himself who wrote:

*si comprehendis non est deus...*  
*If you understand him he is not God...*

Which is why, religiously, we rely on revelation rather than reason. We rely upon insights of the spirit. Glimmers of connection. It visits us. What at Seminary we called the 'Aha!' moment, when suddenly it makes sense, however fleeting.

Makes sense to me. Since when do we have to understand the other person to love them?

Been married since 1975. I understand her less now than I thought I did then.

Since when do I understand my children? Or friends? Or all of you? Does it require understanding to appreciate, to love, to care for, to yearn for?

Does anyone of us ever fully and truly know another person? Not likely.

But loving, we want to understand more.

*God draws us to himself through what we lack  
--Diogenes Allen, Spiritual Theology*

But loving, we want to be with them, even without understanding. To share presence. To share these days. To share our time together. To walk the journey in the wilderness together.

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To Stephen, attuned to Jesus by the Holy Spirit, the temple was not their blessing as Jews, but their curse.

Here is the true faith, they defended:

Here is the right way to worship.
Here is the only way to worship.
Here is true religion.
Bricks and mortar.
Altars and basins.
Priest and Choir.
Trumpets and Lamp stands.
Cash boxes and Authorities.

In trying to honor God they ended up turning God into their idol. The shift occurred as it does in so many religions. They stopped trying to discern what God wanted and God became a means for them to manipulate what they wanted from the world. Knowledge of God became for them a means to power, a means to control others.

What's the best cure for idols? Destruction.

It is our expectations that shove God from his throne inside our hearts, whenever we think things of this world can give us complete and lasting satisfaction.

Better, Stephen preached, were those days in the wilderness, when we were a rag tag dependent people.

Better, Stephen preached, was when instead of temple we had a tabernacle. A tent where God's presence was communicated to us. The divine cloud descending and enveloping. The divine glow shining. When present, that is where we should be. Until the cloud and the glow move on toward someplace else.

We were meant to be a pilgrim people, Stephen preached, following the radiance of God, following God's direction. A people whose feet keep grounded to the ground of being, moving on. Dependent. Uncertain. Exciting.

Better is when not a whole lot of stuff was needed. Just a tent and the covenant.

Better was when the tabernacle kept us uncertain and mobile, refusing to believe in the absolute holiness of any one place.

Better was when we always were led to a fresh place.

Those days have returned Stephen preached. Except now our tabernacle, our tent of meeting, the presence of God who guides and leads us as a wilderness people, is our Jesus, who now by Holy Spirit, we follow wherever he beckons.

*"How do you measure the worth of a flashlight?
By looking at its bulb or by how it illuminates our world?"
-- Simon Weil*

Let this Holy sacredness, this reality of God, guide our worship, our intellect, our morals, our commitment to justice, our growth in virtue as we move toward a new beginning, a fresh place.