



Central Peninsula Church

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The God of the Uncomfortable

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

One of the magazines that I read is called *Leadership Journal*. In one of their regular columns they ask a number of pastors the same question and their brief answers are recorded. In the last issue, the question was, "How do you respond when people don't 'feel comfortable' in your congregation?" That's an interesting question, isn't it? I guess the answer should really depend on WHY people feel that way. It could be that something needs to change in the church, or it could be that something about that person needs to change. It's not always bad to feel uncomfortable. One pastor even said, "We are comfortable with people being uncomfortable."

I've been in churches where I've been so comfortable I could take a nap. I've been in other churches where I've been so uncomfortable I had to leave. How about you? How important is it for you to be comfortable in your church? Is that a good thing or a bad thing?

I believe that there are things that God cares so much about that he's willing to make us uncomfortable to get them accomplished. As we've been studying the book of Acts we've seen that one of the things that God cares deeply about is spreading and sharing the good news about Jesus Christ. He cares about people and he cares about people coming into relationship with his Son.

This morning we come to a turning point in the book of Acts. So far, in the first five and a half chapters, the church is composed exclusively of Jewish people in Jerusalem. But now, through the events we'll look at today, God will thrust his people out into the wider world. The key figure up until now in Jerusalem has been Peter. The key figure in the future expansion of the church will be Paul. But the key figure in this turning point is a guy named Stephen.

I. Stephen's story sets the stage for the spread of the gospel.

A. Stephen's ministry was both gracious and powerful: We've already met Stephen in the first part of chapter 6. Stephen was one of the seven men chosen to oversee the distribution of food to needy widows. He was one of those men who the congregation recognized as having a good reputation and being "**full of the Spirit and of wisdom.**" Again in v.5 he is described as "**full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.**" And now starting in v.8 we see that his ministry expands beyond the serving of tables. He became a powerful spokesman for the faith.

"And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people" (v.8). What a wonderful thing to be full of both grace and power! I know some with grace but no power and I know others with power but no grace. But here is a combination of sweetness and strength that is rare.

B. The Jews level charges against Stephen: Yet this didn't keep Stephen out of trouble. The events described next move rather quickly. First, some members of a synagogue made up of freed slaves began to argue with Stephen (v.9). They found they were unable to deal with his inspired wisdom (v.10). Then they started a smear campaign against him (v.11). When arguments fail, mud is an excellent substitute. Finally they got the religious big wigs involved and had him arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin (v.12). Look what happens next. "**They put forward false witnesses who said, 'This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.' And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel"** (vv.13-15). Look carefully at the charges leveled against Stephen. Though they're trumped up, they're serious. Nothing was more sacred and precious to the Jews than their temple and their law. The temple was the holy place and the law was holy Scripture. If there was even a grain of truth in their accusations, Stephen was dead meat.

Notice that his teaching against these two holy things are said to be teaching he attributed to Jesus: "He said that Jesus said he would destroy and alter these things." We should ask the question, DID Jesus say that? We know that he was accused of it. At his trial they accused him of saying he would destroy the temple and in three days build another without hands (Mk.14:58). They thought he meant that literally but John tells us "**the temple he had spoken of was his body**" (Jn. 2:21). His body WAS destroyed and raised up in three days. Jesus could even say of himself that "**one greater than the temple is here**" (Matt. 12:6). In the past people came to the temple to meet God but now they will come to Jesus to meet God. And after he ascended into heaven and sent his Spirit Paul could even say to the churches, "**you are a temple of God, and the Spirit of God dwells in you. If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him...**" (1Cor.3:16-17). It seems that Stephen

didn't shy away from this topic and that made these Jews very uncomfortable.

They also accused him of trying to "alter the customs which Moses handed down to us." They're referring to the law. We know that Jesus was accused of disrespecting the law. He didn't keep the Sabbath as strictly as the Pharisees wanted. He didn't do all of the ceremonial washings. He associated with the wrong kind of people. All of that made the Jews uncomfortable. And yet, Jesus could say, "**I did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it**" (Matt. 5:17). Jesus was not against God's law, he simply knew that through his death and resurrection he would fulfill it. So these are the things they accuse Stephen of.

B. Stephen responds to the charges: But Stephen wasn't shaken by these accusations. As a matter of fact, his face was like that of an angel. He was radiant, composed. After the high priest asked him, "Are these things so?" he responded. Starting in 7:2 we have Stephen's defense, which by the way is the longest speech in the book of Acts. It extends all the way to 7:53. Some people have accused Stephen of rambling. George Bernard Shaw called him a "quite intolerable young speaker" and a "tactless and conceited bore." But I've come to see this speech as a masterpiece. He walks through a few of the most familiar events and names of the Old Testament story so as to show that his teaching on the temple and the law wasn't inconsistent with God's word but actually honored it. He's saying, "What we teach is right in line with how God has always worked." We don't have time for me to read the whole thing, so let me give you the high points.

1. *The temple:* First, what does he say about the temple? Remember that the Jews believed this was the Holy Place where God resided and where people went to meet with him. He goes through four major periods which were dominated by four individuals. In each, he proves that God's presence wasn't limited to any particular place.

a. *Abraham:* In 7:2-8 he talks about Abraham. He says, "**And he said, 'Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran,...'**" (7:2). This is a bit different from the impression we get from Genesis which seems to say that God appeared to Abraham in Haran, not before it. But Stephen says God appeared to him before Haran, in Mesopotamia, a place inhabited by idol worshippers. He's saying that God wasn't limited to a specific place. He goes on and talks about how in Abraham's time, before there was a holy place, there was a holy people, to whom God had made promises.

b. *Joseph:* Then in 7:9-16 he talks about Joseph. Look at vv.9-10. "**The patriarchs**

became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt. Yet God was with him, and rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he made him governor over Egypt and all his household." The important thing to see here is the emphasis on Egypt, which is mentioned six times in seven verses. It was in Egypt that God was with him. It was in Egypt that God preserved his family during the famine and it was in Egypt that the people of Israel multiplied. I guess God is in Egypt! How radical is that! That's like me saying, "God is over there working in that LDS church across the street!"

c. *Moses:* Then in 7:17-43 he talks about Moses. He spends a lot of time here on this one. He talks about how Moses was born in Egypt and raised in Pharaoh's palace and how he had to flee into the wilderness after trying to save his Hebrew brothers who were by then in slavery. He says God appeared to Moses after 40 years in a burning bush. Look what he says in 7:31-34. "**When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he approached to look more closely, there came the voice of the Lord: 'I AM THE GOD OF YOUR FATHERS, THE GOD OF ABRAHAM AND ISAAC AND JACOB.'** Moses shook with fear and would not venture to look. **BUT THE LORD SAID TO HIM, 'TAKE OFF THE SANDALS FROM YOUR FEET, FOR THE PLACE ON WHICH YOU ARE STANDING IS HOLY GROUND. I HAVE CERTAINLY SEEN THE OPPRESSION OF MY PEOPLE IN EGYPT AND HAVE HEARD THEIR GROANS, AND I HAVE COME DOWN TO RESCUE THEM; COME NOW, AND I WILL SEND YOU TO EGYPT.'**" Notice how God said to him that the place he was standing was holy ground. Stephen is pointing out how there was holy ground outside the holy place. Wherever God is, is holy. And the same God who met Moses in the wilderness was again present in Egypt because he had seen the oppression of his people. He goes on and says that even though the people rejected Moses he led them out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and back into the wilderness.

d. *David and Solomon:* It was in the wilderness that God gave Moses the law and directed him to construct the tabernacle. And they brought that tabernacle with them into the promised land. This brings us to 7:44-50 where he talks about David and Solomon. He says it was David's idea to build the temple but it was his son Solomon who actually constructed it. Then look what he says in 7:48-50. "**However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands; as the prophet says: 'HEAVEN IS MY THRONE, AND EARTH IS THE FOOTSTOOL OF MY FEET; WHAT KIND OF HOUSE WILL YOU BUILD FOR ME?' says the Lord, 'OR WHAT PLACE IS THERE FOR MY REPOSE? WAS IT NOT MY HAND WHICH MADE ALL THESE THINGS?'**"

Do you see how a single thread runs through what he says here about the temple? It's that the God of Israel is not restricted to any one place, he never has been! God's

presence cannot be localized or monopolized. If he has any home here on earth it's with his people that he lives. That's his home. That's where he lives.

2. *The law:* But there was also the accusation that he was trying to alter the laws and customs which had been handed down from Moses. In each of the four periods that he's gone through he's shown how the problem wasn't the law but the Jewish people's lack of obedience to the law. And then he concludes in 7:51-53 by saying, **"You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it."** So he says, "It's not me or Jesus who disregards the law, but you and your fathers before you!" That made them very uncomfortable.

C. Stephen dies in a glorious way: You probably know what happens next. Stephen becomes the first martyr of the church. They drive him out of the city and they stone him. But this wasn't just any old death. This was a glorious death. It was glorious because of what Stephen saw. He saw the glory of God and Jesus, standing at God's right hand (7:55-56). Usually, the Scripture portrays Jesus as seated at the right hand of God as a picture that his work is finished. But here he's standing to show Stephen that he's ready to welcome him into heaven. It was also glorious because he died praying (7:59-60). He prayed, **"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."** He knew Jesus would be there to receive him. And then like Jesus he prayed, **"Lord, do not hold this sin against them."** It was also glorious because Luke says he "fell asleep." Isn't that great! He didn't die, he fell asleep. I don't know about you, but falling asleep sounds a lot more inviting than dying. Luke wants us to know that for the Christian death is not final. It's a falling asleep and when we fall asleep we wake up, as Stephen did in the arms of Jesus! I know people who say, "I'm not afraid of death; I'm just afraid of dying." But for those who stand for Christ, we don't have to be afraid of either. We may not experience all that Stephen did at that moment, but God will give us all the encouragement that we need.

D. Stephen's martyrdom results in the scattering of the church: There is one more thing I want you to see in this story. Stephen's martyrdom was the catalyst for the spread of the gospel beyond Jerusalem. This happened in two ways. First, because of who was there. 7:58 says that those who stoned Stephen **"laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul."** And 8:1a says again that **"Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death."** This is Saul of Tarsus who would later become the Apostle Paul. Why do you think Luke tells us about Saul's involvement in all of this? Because this event had a huge

impact on him. The image of Stephen's glorious death made him very uncomfortable. He fought it and fought it until on the Damascus road Jesus appeared to him and said, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads." From the time of Stephen's death Paul had been fighting something, and it all started right here as he watched Stephen die. But Stephen's death didn't just impact Saul, it also impacted the entire church in Jerusalem. You would think that what happened to Stephen would cause them to hide in fear. Instead, 8:1b-4 tell us that God used this event to thrust them out of Jerusalem and make them more courageous witnesses for Christ. The church wasn't weakened by his death, but strengthened.

II. God wants the gospel to spread enough to make them uncomfortable.

So that's Stephen's story. Most messages on Stephen are all about him as the first Christian martyr and how we need to be willing to die for Christ as well. But Stephen's martyrdom is meant as a key turning point because it sets the stage for the spread of the gospel beyond Jerusalem. Remember what Jesus said to his disciples before he ascended? He said, "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Well, we've seen their witness in Jerusalem, now they're being thrust out into Judea and Samaria, and Stephen is the key.

Stephen is the one who has demonstrated in his message that God is not bound to a place (the Temple) or to traditions (the law). God is bound to his people, wherever they are, not to buildings. So now, as the church is thrust out, he's ready to accompany his people wherever they go. When Paul and Barnabas soon set out into the unknown on the first missionary journey, God will be there. But for Jews who were so used to coming to Jerusalem to meet with God, and following all the traditions and customs surrounding worship in the temple, this had to be very uncomfortable. They must have thought, "This is not what we've been taught. This is not how we thought he worked."

Stephen is also the one whose glorious death resulted in the scattering of the church. How uncomfortable it must have been for the early believers to have to flee from Jerusalem because of persecution. Imagine how that would have felt. Where would they live? How would they make a living? Who would their new neighbors be? Gentiles? And then there was Saul. No one was made more uncomfortable by Stephen's death than him. And that discomfort would finally lead him to faith, and that faith would lead him all the way to Rome with the gospel.

You see, God wanted the gospel to spread enough to make them uncomfortable.

III. God wants the gospel to spread enough to make us uncomfortable.

Times have changed; people haven't changed; God hasn't changed. There are things that through the history of the church have needed to change for the gospel to spread. But change makes us uncomfortable.

It's true on a personal level. Think about the circumstances of your own life. Think about the things that make you uncomfortable. Maybe you lose a job. You have to find a new place to work. Maybe you even have to move your family. Why would God allow that to happen? Maybe your landlord decides to sell the place you live. You have to find a new place. Why would God allow that to happen? Maybe you're a high school student and your parents go through a divorce and all of a sudden you find yourself uprooted, having to go to a school you hate. Why? Because in any one of these uncomfortable scenarios God might want to use you in a new place, surrounded by new people, to spread the gospel.

It's also true for the church. When the church started out, they worshipped by chanting the Psalms and fragments of the New Testament letters they thought were hymns. Then someone came along and said, "I have a new song. It's set to the Greek meter." Someone said, "You can't do that. God doesn't sing in Greek meter." That made them uncomfortable, and there was a struggle. But God was doing something new. And when God does something new, there are new forms. Nothing is wrong with the old forms, until they hinder the spread of the gospel and then we need to get rid of them. In fact, a few hundred years later, someone came along and said, "Greek meter doesn't work any more. Let's do music to Roman marching songs. That's what everyone is listening to." Someone said, "You can't do that. God isn't into Roman marching songs, he's into Greek meter!" Sometimes what was once a good thing can become a bad thing if it takes precedence over what God is doing to reach people.

Flip the calendar into the 18th century. God was doing something in and through a guy named John Wesley. There was a great revival. People were coming to Christ. Wesley was a powerful preacher and he began to go out into open fields where people were working. He preached to dirty, sweaty workers in a language they could understand. People in the churches didn't like that. It made them uncomfortable. "You can't have church out there in the fields. You can't do that!" But God was doing something new; he wanted to reach those people and he was willing to make them uncomfortable to do it.

Years later a man named Robert Raikes had a vision to reach the street kids (urchins) in the big city of London. These were kids that didn't have any education and they certainly didn't know how to act in church. He said, "We're going to hold classes to educate them, to bring them to Jesus. We'll call it Sunday School." There were churches in London that didn't like that idea. They didn't want their kids around those kids. They were a bad influence. But God cared about those kids enough to make those people uncomfortable.

Fast forward to today. There are churches that meet today in night clubs. If you were there you would see 18-20 year olds covered with body art and decorated with piercings. You would hear music that was so loud it made your seat vibrate. You and I wouldn't be all that comfortable there. But God is there. He's reaching out to them. And they're worshiping him with a passion and authenticity that would put many of us to shame.

Some things don't change. God's commitment to his people, the church, doesn't change. God's word doesn't change. But the church is not about buildings, it's about people. And God's word is not about traditions, it's about Scripture. God's heart has always been willing to abandon buildings and traditions in order to reach the lost.

CONCLUSION

The question we all have to ask ourselves is, are we? Are we willing to let go of our cherished assumptions about what church should look like? I think about this great building we're meeting in this morning. There are few of us left here who remember when we didn't have a building and we met over at the Middle School, and several other places as well. We dreamed about this building and we sacrificed to build it and it's serving us well. But it's possible that something good can become something bad if it gets in the way of God's purpose to reach the lost. And it wouldn't surprise me at all if one day God said, "Nice building here. But I would sort of like to spread you folks out a bit." That might make some of us uncomfortable, and that might be a good thing.

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