

Acts 6: 1-6, 7: 55-60 "Seeing God's Glory" Rev. Janet Chapman 5/10/20

Today's story is one I have tried to avoid over the years – it is nothing less than savage and bestial, a story I would just as soon flip the channel on rather than be reminded how it has contributed to anti-Semitism and violence. Before you change the channel this morning, something very easy to do now that we are online, I want to assure you there is hope and redemption here if we will dare to open our eyes and hearts to God's glory. Stephen's story is not well-known in Christian circles but maybe it should be. As I revisited his story, I could not separate the reality that this was one of the chosen texts that just happens to fall on Mother's Day this year, that Hallmark tradition that has become as sacred to some as Christmas and Easter. You should know that the Christian year and the calendar year often have nothing to do with each other, and biblical scholars took no heed of Mother's or Father's Day when they laid out scriptures to be heard during the Easter season. That does not mean they are inseparable, however. As a parent, I admit I read every story with a certain slant toward the parent's view. What was it like to be Mary, the mother of Jesus, as she watched her son die on a cross? And what about Mary's mother – how did she feel about her teenage daughter getting pregnant? It is hard to keep an arm's distance from the ups and downs of your children. This week we met the Georgia mother of Ahmad Aubrey, yet another black mom living through the savage killing of her unarmed son who was just out for a jog. We met Denver's NICU doctor, Anna Zimmerman, who did everything right to protect her kids and still her 4 year old got COVID and she could only watch as he struggled for every breath. On Facebook, a Selma friend shared the agony of a desperate phone call from her daughter in excruciating labor at the hospital and crying to have her there, but only the baby's father is allowed. Every parent cringes at such stories.

Parenting is not an easy task by anyone's standards. Tony Campolo tells a story of being at a very sophisticated academic gathering at the University of Pennsylvania. Almost everyone in the room held doctorates and had achieved numerous academic awards. One colleague who taught sociology struck up a conversation with Tony and his wife and, at one point, turned to his wife and asked, in a condescending fashion, "And what is it that *you* do, my dear?" A very articulate woman, she responded, "I am socializing 2 homo sapiens into the dominant values of

the Judeo-Christian tradition in order that they might be instruments for the transformation of the social order into the kind of eschatological utopia that God willed from the beginning of creation." Then Tony's wife asked sweetly, "And what is it that *you* do?" The woman answered humbly, "I... I... teach sociology."

It is a hard and holy task to raise children to become instruments of faith and transformation, and therefore, I am grateful for even the lesser known examples we have within scripture, often overlooked by the more weightier biblical characters. There is the mother of Rufus in Romans who loved the apostle Paul like her own son; and Samson's mother who followed radical instructions to restrain from all wine and unclean things in order to have a healthy child; and the mother from Zarephath, a widow, whose son dies and Elijah raises him from the dead; and there was the pregnant daughter-in-law of Eli who, after the ark of the covenant was captured by the Philistines, named her son Ichabod meaning the glory of God has departed. But what about our lead character today, Stephen? Playing off the infamous words of Glinda in one of my favorite musicals, *Wicked*, "After all, he had a father, he had a mother, as so many do". The scriptures give us no clue about Stephen's family as is the case with others. His claim to fame is being the first ordinary Christian to follow his shepherd to slaughter. He was the first martyr and deacon but he was not one of the 12, not even a candidate to replace Judas when the slot came open. As far as we can tell, he was not anyone's idea of headline material, except maybe to his dear old mom, whoever she was. Whoever she was, she had taught him to be a good, faithful man who could be trusted to distribute food to those who were hungry without putting more on one person's plate than another's.

As the story goes, seven men filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom were appointed to tend to issues of equity and waiting on tables. If Stephen had stuck to his job description, he probably wouldn't have gotten into so much trouble. But somewhere in his upbringing, he had learned the art of persuasion, public speaking, and thinking outside the box. He began to do signs and wonders among the people and spoke in ways his detractors found impossible to dispute. Luke, the author of Acts, sets out a striking parallel between what happened to Jesus and what happens to Stephen. We can only imagine that like Jesus' mom, Stephen's mom, if she were still alive, would have stayed close by to the action. She would have witnessed that

for her son, just like for Jesus, conflicts arose in the synagogue, a secret plot was concocted to make an arrest, he was violently seized, brought to the council authorities, the people were stirred up against him, and he was accused of blasphemy and a destroyer of traditions. All of these were just like Jesus. But unlike Jesus with his twitter like responses during trial, Stephen talks and keeps talking, speaking twice as long as any single proclamation of Peter's or Paul's. This must have brought back memories to Stephen's mom of how he just couldn't keep quiet even as a young child. In his trial, Stephen rehearses the entire history of the relationship between God and Israel. Although his sermon is meant to ultimately defend Jesus, the Savior doesn't get mentioned until the very end. Stephen seems far more interested in challenging his accusers, those stiff-necked people, of continuing their infidelities to God, calling them enemies of God. It is a mother's worst nightmare as it doesn't take long for them to figure out how to absolve themselves of that guilt. I can imagine Stephen's mom begging him to stop, to lay low, don't make a fuss for the sake of his family, for her sake if not his own. I wonder if he responded like Jesus, "My family are those who do the will of God"? Did Stephen even see the danger or worry about it? I am not sure those who offer their lives in service to God focus on the danger that much. I don't think you seek out danger anymore than you try to avoid it. Barbara Brown Taylor notes it just happens when people get so wrapped up in living God's life that you forget about your own safety. You forget about the danger, and then the next thing you know, it is raining rocks. Stephen wanted to see the glory of God and all his words and actions pointed him in that direction. It rarely comes natural to us, therefore, I believe somewhere in his history, Stephen must have had a parental figure which taught such a way of living, which modelled the kind of world God envisioned since the beginning of creation.

Our past and present are filled with such folks, some reflect a small glimmer of what it means to offer yourself in service to God and some shine such bright lights on that life, you almost go blind if you stare too long. You can tell someone who lives to see the glory of God because they rarely take credit for their own actions; when a blessing is realized they don't say, "I did that; you can thank me," but rather they disburse credit to those around them, they recognize the value of teams and task forces and are never surprised at their essential nature. We see such traits in nurses and educators who were honored this past week; we've seen them

in the great faith leaders such as Bonhoeffer, Romero, and King who lost their lives because of faith; and we see them in parents who give of themselves every single day to the betterment of not just their own children but all children. Not everyone is called to the extremes we see played out in the likes of Stephen and some of us try pretty hard to make sure we are not, but in this time between Easter and Pentecost when we are working on what it means to be Easter people, it is important to remember some believed that living as an Easter person meant giving of yourself so that all people would have an equal and just opportunity to live and see the glory of God for themselves. Those who murdered such folks found out, over and over again, that trying to get rid of them worked about as well as trying to get rid of dandelions by blowing on their puffs. The harder the wind blows, the further the seeds spread. It is a hard and holy task to teach others to be instruments of transformation and faith, but for Easter people it is the path towards seeing the glory of God for themselves.