



BOOM DEE AH DAH

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It was sixty years ago this week that work started on the Crazy Horse Memorial. Since 1948, sculptors have been chipping away at a mountain in South Dakota, creating something along the lines of Mt. Rushmore to honor the famous Lakota chief. It will eventually be the largest rock sculpture in the world. They have finally completed the face and it looks good. Now there's actually something to see when you go to visit it.

But when you pull back a little further away from it and see the mountain next to the scale model statue of what it will one day be, you can see just how far there is still to go. And now they've come to some tricky parts (like the arm) that are even more complex to bring into reality than the face. They have to figure out how to make it hold together, working with the natural fault lines and fissures in the rock, because the mountain has its own characteristics that don't always lend themselves to being a carving. It's a lot of work, but the end result will be spectacular.

For several weeks now, we have been chipping away at the book of Acts (although it might FEEL like it's been 60 years). The face of the book is starting to take shape as we see some themes and directions start to emerge. We're beginning to see features. The ideas of the gospel being universal and the church being unleashed in the world are showing up again and again.

But we've still got a long way to go. There's a lot more left still to work through in this book. This morning we come to a chunk of text that is a little more complicated to work with. Luke didn't write with sermons in mind, and he presents this long section that doesn't lend itself to preaching. It's hard to divide up neatly and hard to cover in one piece.

But it has key material in it, and because Luke devotes such a large amount of space to it, it is worth the effort to dig in and see what emerges. Let's take a look at the beginning of this section:

Acts 6:8-7:1

Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called) -- Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the

provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen, but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.

Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God."

So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

This year, the Discovery Channel came out with a short promo commercial for all their shows that I'd like to show you.

[I Love The World promo spot]

Now if you're familiar with any of the shows and their hosts, you know that part of what makes this video work is the fact that all of them really do love those things they're talking about. They love the world they work in. Bear Grylls on Man Vs. Wild loves finding new spiders and sleeping inside rotting logs in the jungle. He eats it up. Mike on Dirty Jobs loves wallowing in muck and talking about gross things. Jamie and Adam on Mythbusters are crazy about blowing stuff up. Half of the reason people watch the shows is because the hosts themselves are so passionate about the subject matter that they just ooze enthusiasm for it. Every fiber of their being communicates the love they feel.

You may have had a boom de ah dah teacher like that – someone who was so excited about their subject matter that it made you want to know more about it too. Boom dee ah dah people have contagious enthusiasm about what they love.

Stephen could have sung that boom de ah dah song about how much he loved God. Every fiber of his being communicated how passionate he was about following Jesus. We read last week that he was full of the Spirit and wisdom, and this week we find he is also full of God's grace and power. He's able to perform miracles. He was so caught up in his relationship with God that his face shone with the glory of an angel who had been in God's presence – like Moses' face did after he met with God. When Stephen talked about God, people listened. The way Luke describes him makes him sound absolutely captivating. His passion for God was contagious.

People like that are wonderful. And dangerous. They rock the boat. They threaten the status quo with their energy. We don't know exactly what Stephen did to get himself in trouble with the religious leaders, but his passionate enthusiasm made him a target for all their animosity toward Christ.

And they didn't have anything specific to say bad about him so they fell back on the old standby way to slander someone in that day: "He's talking trash about the temple and the law." That was always good for getting the crowd upset. It had been the same tactic the leaders had used to accuse Jesus, and it worked so well there, they decided to try it again.

The temple and the law were the two most sacred components of Jewish culture. The temple was where God's presence was supposed to reside. The law was the defining standard from him that formed the backbone of their society. To be publicly teaching anything bad about either of those would be outrageous and inflammatory.

So Stephen's enemies drag him in front of the Sanhedrin, which was the ruling religious and legal council, headed by the high priest himself. All the accusations are made against him in a mini-trial.

At that point, the council gave Stephen an opportunity to defend himself. Luke writes,

Then the high priest asked him, "Are these charges true?"

Someone should have elbowed Stephen at this point: "Say no. Absolutely not, your honor. They're twisting my words." Wouldn't you agree? Clear the air as fast as possible and put this thing to rest. But that's not what Stephen does. Instead, he starts into this long speech – by far the longest speech in the book of Acts. He goes back and talks about Abraham and Moses, and recounts a bunch of Israel's history that seems completely unrelated. You're left wondering: Is he making a point or is he just stalling for time?

Many scholars have had little patience for this section of Acts. One theologian, Martin Dibelius, came right out and said most of the speech was irrelevant. The playwright George Bernard Shaw was even more blunt about his feelings. He called Stephen a "tactless and conceited bore." He said he was wasting his time rehashing stories that everyone in the Sanhedrin knew by heart.

I think those comments tell us more about the beliefs of the people who made them than they do about Stephen, but still – they bring home the truth that it is a hard text to wrap your mind around. Read through it sometime and you may share their frustration. It's not an easy read. But that doesn't mean it doesn't have value. I keep coming back to the fact that Luke gave it so much ink that he must have thought it a crucial piece of the record. There's much more going on here than meets the eye.

Let's reenact that story a bit this morning. I'm not going to give you a line by line reading. I'm going to paraphrase his speech for you, and hopefully this will capture the essence of Stephen's message.

Your honor, members of the Sanhedrin, if I may, I'd like to tell you a story. It begins with God – the God of glory we all worship. He came to our ancestor Abraham in a far

off place – not here at the Temple. He came to him clear back when he lived in Mesopotamia. He told him, “I want you to leave here and go where I will show you.”

So Abraham did. He picked up and moved here. But even when he got here, he never owned a square inch of this place. He never had a temple. All he had to go on was God’s promise that someday his descendants would inherit this land. But first they were going to go through some very difficult days.

Abraham had Isaac, Isaac had Jacob and Jacob had the 12 sons who became the 12 tribes. All those brothers were jealous of their brother Joseph, so they sold him into slavery in Egypt. But God was with him there in Egypt. Again, a far off place, where there was no temple – just God. God took Joseph to this foreign country to rescue the world from the famine.

Eventually, when the famine got bad, all of Joseph’s brothers went to Egypt to get food, and they didn’t even recognize Joseph when they got there. Here he is -- God’s chosen man to save them, and the people he would save didn’t even know him. Eventually the brothers do learn the truth, and they all move to Egypt.

Everything is great for a while, but then a new king takes power in Egypt who doesn’t know his history, and he sees all these Hebrews and says, “Sweet. Here’s my labor pool.” So he makes the Israelites slaves, just like God said would happen.

God is continuing to bless Israel though, even in slavery, so much so that the king decides to kill off any newborn Jewish boys and slow the population growth. When Moses is born, he is miraculously saved and raised by the king’s own daughter. He grows up, and one day sees an Egyptian mistreating a Jewish slave, so he steps in and kills the Egyptian. He thinks his people will know he’s on their side, but the next day, when two Israelites are fighting and he steps in, they say, “Oh are you going to kill us, too?” Once again, the people fail to recognize the one God sent to rescue them.

Moses runs to the desert and lives there for 40 years, until one day, God comes to him in a burning bush. Far from the Temple, far from the Holy Land, God appears in all his glory. In fact, he tells Moses to take off his shoes, because his presence there has made that ground holy. And he tells Moses to go back to Egypt and lead out his people.

Moses did it. And God met him on Mt. Sinai and gave him the law. Those were words of life. That’s what I believe about the law. But you know as well as I what our ancestors did with that. Moses wasn’t even off the mountain before they made themselves idols and ran after them. Our people have a very checkered past when it comes to the way they treat God’s law.

This whole time, God continued to make his home with them. They had the traveling tabernacle that went wherever they did, and that served as the symbol of his resting place right up until David. David wanted to make something more permanent for God, and

asked if he could be the one to build a house for him. It was his son Solomon who actually built the Temple.

But the God of our whole history isn't a God who lives in man made structures. He didn't need that Temple. If you want to know what he thinks about it, just look at what He said through Isaiah. He said heaven is his chair and earth is his footstool, so how could anyone possibly build him a home big enough? Those are God's words about the temple, which go way further than anything I've said.

That's essentially what Stephen laid out for them that day. The stinger comes in his closing remarks, which we'll look at in a few minutes. But first I want to look at what he has done here so far.

As you listened to it, I doubt any of what I said surprised you. There is nothing in the speech that would surprise any Jewish person of Stephen's day. They knew all that. Sort of. They were just thinking of their past through one set of lenses while Stephen looked at it through another.

There are always two histories going on: The way we remember it, and the way God sees it. While the synagogue leaders were focused on the Temple and the Law so much, they were conveniently forgetting how long Israel went without either and how often they as a people had missed seeing God's chosen agents at work. Had they identified themselves with their ancestors more closely, they might have been more cautious about dismissing Jesus, because they wouldn't have wanted to repeat the same mistakes. Instead, they saw themselves more as the heroes – defenders of the faith that Stephen seemed to threaten.

We look at them and shake our heads, but we're not so different. I think something similar happens with our personal histories. We always seem to remember events in such a way that we're the heroes in the story. We're rarely the bad guys in our own version of how we got to where we are today. If you don't believe that, just talk to some kids after they've been in an argument. Each one feels fully justified in their own version of what happened. We interpret the world as if we're always in the right.

We even do that when we read the Bible. We put ourselves in the place of the disciples when Jesus is making some pointed comments to the Pharisees. We see ourselves as part of the inner circle rather than the skeptics. We're Stephen giving the defense, not Saul, who was holding the Sanhedrin's coats and seething mad as he listened.

But if we stop for a minute and try to think from the other side, as if we were in the audience that day, the message suddenly becomes very convicting. We hear Stephen saying, "Rethink your own history. Maybe there are lessons to be learned that you've missed. Maybe you're not all that."

What we find is that we're not the hero we've always believed. We're not exactly the villain either, although he shows this strong pattern of disobedience and rebellion. Instead, what we learn is that we're not the center of the story at all. God is the main

character, and he is active in ways far beyond what we've imagined or what we recall later.

One of the first truths that come through Stephen's message is that **God is always bigger than my past.** The people accusing Stephen were centering all their anger on what they perceived to be the way he was talking about the Temple and their traditions of interpreting the law. But Stephen showed that God predated both by a long shot. God was there in far away Mesopotamia, before Abraham even knew who he was, while he was still worshipping pagan gods. God initiated the communication long before there was a Holy Land.

The priests and other religious leaders had developed a very narrow view of God that was locked into this religious system and the way they had always done things. They felt ownership and control over what God was like. They saw him as active and involved in certain things but not in others. They saw the Temple as his home base.

But that wasn't recognizing what God had done in their own past. His throne was established long before there even was a Temple. He didn't need it or even ask for it. But now, the religious leaders saw that Temple as being sacred. They weren't paying attention to their history. As a result, they couldn't see that they were repeating the same patterns their forefathers had. Once again, they were rejecting God's plan to rescue them.

We got a graduation announcement from somebody who lives out of state, and the inscription in the card said this:

*The past doesn't matter anymore,
Everything that matters is out there,
Everything that matters is everything we're about to do.*

What can one say in response to such heartfelt poetry? We'd all like to live as though our past has no bearing on our future, but the reality is that our history very much shapes our future. And how we see God's involvement in our past will carry through to where we see him down the road. Is he speaking to us in direct ways or do we only associate him with our traditions and habits? As we look back, are there places and times in our life where we feel we were too far away for God to be reaching? Places that were too dark, our own version of Mesopotamia where we weren't interested in him? God was there, too.

God did not suddenly enter our lives when we came to church or put our faith in him. He was calling us long before we recognized his voice. When we were still sinners is when Christ died for us.

God didn't love Israel because Solomon went to all that work to build a fancy temple. He had loved them long, long before that. And God doesn't love you for all the effort you put into being good enough. He loved you long, long before that. He's always bigger than your past.

And when Israel was enduring 400 years of slavery, the thought of freedom must have seemed impossible. How could God ever get them out of Egypt when they were so powerless? They didn't even have an army. But God showed them that when he fights for his people, he wins.

If God is bigger than my past, it means he is capable of releasing us from our Egypt. There may be something you've done or been through that seems too impossible to escape. But God will fight for you, and when he fights for his people, he wins. You've heard the verse "Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world." That's a great comfort. There's another verse that goes along with that that sometimes is even more comforting.

1 John 3:20

...God is greater than our worried hearts and knows more about us than we do ourselves.

All the things from our history that loom so large in our minds are lost like tiny specks of dust in the greatness of God's love for us. He's bigger than our past.

Stephen shows that God is also always **closer than my past**. I love the section of the speech where he talked about Joseph being sold into slavery in Egypt. What a horrific experience for a teenage boy to go through. And yet Stephen said this:

But God was with him and rescued him from all his troubles.

The defining truth of Joseph's existence wasn't his circumstances. It was the fact that God was with him. All these terrible external things happened to him, but God was closer. When he was rejected and sold out by his very own family, God was with him. When he was made a slave and treated unfairly, God was with him. When he was thrown into jail and punished for crimes he didn't commit, God was right there with him in the cell.

At Illahee this week, in one of Isaac's classes, they brought in a Holocaust survivor. She had been old enough and healthy enough to be sent to a work camp during the war, but she had lost her family and watched as countless other people were put in different lines that would lead to the gas chamber.

After she shared about her experiences, one of the students asked her, "Why do you think you survived?" Without hesitating at all she said, "It was the Lord." One of her friends during the war had been Catholic. Jews and Catholics weren't supposed to associate with each other, but her friend would invite her over to her house, and her father would read to her from his Bible. She said, "From that moment on, I believed in the Lord." He went with her into the concentration camp and he was still with her as she told her story to a class of junior high students a lifetime later. She could have been bitter and angry, but instead she was praising God in a public school and thanking him for being with her through that horrible time.

What is going to define you? Circumstances, or God's presence in the middle of them? He's closer than the people who attack you. He's closer than the stress that overwhelms you. He's closer than your own sin that entangles you. God is the main character. He's the hero. And we ALL need to be saved.

We talk a lot about Christ giving us a future with God, but in a sense he also gives us a history. He replaces our individual story with one that has him in the middle of it. He gives us the cross, and says we died there with him. He shares in our pain just as we share in his. He can't get any closer to you than he is in the middle of your suffering. He has felt the stings of criticism and unfairness and betrayal that you are going through. We can wonder why God allows pain, but we can never wonder if he really understands what we're experiencing. He already proved that on the cross. He is closer to us, nearer to us than anything our past or present or future brings along.

God is bigger than my past, he's closer than my past, and Stephen says he is **always further than my past**. What do I mean by that?

If we look at Abraham, sitting there in Mesopotamia, God calls him. Now when you call someone, it generally means there's some distance between you. Otherwise you're just talking, not calling. When I was a kid, my mom had this signature call she would use when she wanted us to come inside for dinner or to clean our rooms. There were no words – just these two kind of sing song notes that meant drop what you're doing and get inside. I'm not sure where she got it. It sounded kind of like a loud, human doorbell. But it worked. We all knew we had to get moving when we heard it.

Abraham was called to move out of where he was and go to someplace new. God met him where he was, but then took him further. Joseph was taken out of where he was to someplace new. Moses was asked to go someplace new. The Israelites were taken out of Egypt to someplace new. There is this constant theme of movement, going further with God.

The religious leaders in Stephen's day were considering David and Solomon's era as the glory days. The Temple represented a permanent location and stability. It gave a sense of security and grounding. But it also came to represent a certain immovable quality that hadn't characterized most of Israel's history. Things had become entrenched.

Change is always hard. It's unsettling. But God's call is a call to movement. He doesn't want us to be static. He doesn't want us to be stuck. He invites us to go further than our past. It may not be physical movement from place to place like Israel, but it always involves spiritual movement. There are always ways to grow that will take us out of where we've been.

Are you seeing growth in your life? Are you moving closer to what God wants for you? Is your character becoming more Christlike? I've known people who reached a point in their faith where they didn't really want to learn anymore. Preachers are notorious for

this, getting to a certain point in their faith where they can plop down and just tell other people where to do the moving. That's not the Christian experience. Until Jesus comes back or calls us home, we're called to keep moving further, because there is always more of God to know.

Our New Day letterhead has a tag line on it that says, "Need a fresh start?" And everybody who comes here does. We've all got histories. We carry our past around with us all the time. Some people have a whole Samsonite set of luggage full of shame and guilt. Other people are in complete denial of the trail of victims they've left behind. And some of us are running away from situations, looking back over our shoulders and hoping they won't catch up.

Nobody's come through these doors a blank slate. We have a past, and the past matters. But we can all have a fresh start as we begin to get our histories in proper perspective. And that's what Stephen challenges us to do – to rethink them with God in the center and see what it is he has done to bring us where we are. And out of that, we can begin to see where he wants us to keep moving so that we don't let that past define us.

It turns out that what Stephen had to say that day wasn't really much of a defense. In fact, he was on the offense. He flipped the tables and put his accusers on trial. They were the ones who had some answering to do. And throwing all caution to the wind, he went for the knockout with these final words:

Acts 7:51-8:2

"And you continue, so bullheaded! Calluses on your hearts, flaps on your ears! Deliberately ignoring the Holy Spirit, you're just like your ancestors. Was there ever a prophet who didn't get the same treatment? Your ancestors killed anyone who dared talk about the coming of the Just One. And you've kept up the family tradition — traitors and murderers, all of you. You had God's Law handed to you by angels — gift-wrapped! — and you squandered it!"

At that point they went wild, a rioting mob of catcalls and whistles and invective. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, hardly noticed — he only had eyes for God, whom he saw in all his glory with Jesus standing at his side. He said, "Oh! I see heaven wide open and the Son of Man standing at God's side!"

Yelling and hissing, the mob drowned him out. Now in full stampede, they dragged him out of town and pelted him with rocks. The ringleaders took off their coats and asked a young man named Saul to watch them.

As the rocks rained down, Stephen prayed, "Master Jesus, take my life." Then he knelt down, praying loud enough for everyone to hear, "Master, don't blame them for this sin" — his last words. Then he died. Saul was right there, congratulating the killers.

That set off a terrific persecution of the church in Jerusalem. The believers were all scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. All, that is, but the apostles. Good and brave men buried Stephen, giving him a solemn funeral — not many dry eyes that day! Why would he say something so sure to get him in trouble? It was because he was so full of the Spirit and he had absolutely no fear. He was speaking God truth to these people who had ignored and rejected more subtle appeals.

John Stott once commented that the death of Stephen was full of Christ. His words and actions so much echoed Jesus' own words and actions before his death. Stephen knew that this trial wasn't about him – it was about the Almighty God. And like Joseph in Egypt, Stephen knew God was close to him all the way through it. He even got to SEE a peek into heaven, with Jesus standing there to welcome him. There's no self pity possible in that.

The religious leaders had tried to make this all about traditions and rules. They were concerned about the temple and their view of the law. Things they had invested in. Things they could control. Stephen brought it home and said, "The issue is not what you're doing with those things. It's what you did with Jesus. He was the one God sent, and you missed it. Without him, the rest doesn't matter."

Christ is the center. Not church. Not rule following. What are you doing with Jesus? That's what God wants to know. That's what will make sense of your history and that's what will shape your future.

It was the mention of Jesus that got the crowd angry with Stephen. That same day, they started persecuting the whole church. Those early Christians became part of the very story Stephen had been telling, going into a period of deep trouble and hardship. Yet God was with them, and as they scattered, he was in that movement. Jesus had said that they would be his witnesses to the end of the world, and now it was coming true. The church spread out and took the gospel to new places. God took them further than they expected, in ways they had not expected.

God can use anything and everything, because our story is his story. As you think about your own past, I'd like to invite you to do some honest self evaluation:

God is bigger

What do I need to know God outsizes? What's my Egypt?

Maybe it's a sin. Maybe it's a fear. Maybe it's a deep wound. God is bigger than anything in our history. What do you need forgiven? What do you need help forgiving? Does the idea of God rescuing and healing sound too good to be true? That's because it's God-sized good news. Will you believe it?

God is closer

What defines me: God's presence or my circumstances? When I look at the experiences I've been through, how do I interpret them? How has God being close made

a difference? You can come at it in reverse: What feels closer than God to me right now? Something wants to wedge its way in. Ask him to show you how near he is.

God is further

Here's a hard question: Where have I missed my own rebellion? The Israelites couldn't even see their own pattern of missing God's activity. Have I viewed myself as the hero, already having learned everything I need to? God keep us from blindness to our own weak spots. Where is he wanting to see movement in your life? If you take an honest look at your faith, where are you stuck?

Finally, what am I doing with Jesus? Forget church and everything else for a minute. Think about the person. Do you love him with all your heart and mind and strength? Are you a "boom de ah dah" person with a contagious passion for Christ? I want to be able to sing along with Stephen:

*I love the Savior
I love his love for me
I love forgiveness
I love his majesty
I love this great big God
He changes history*

Boom de ah dah, boom de ah dah, boom de ah dah, boom de ah dah...