

Second Sunday in Advent

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[0 : 0 0] In his larger catechism, Martin Luther famously wrote, Whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your God, your functional Savior.

I put this question to you this morning and to me. What does your heart cling to? What does your heart confide? Who does your heart confide in? In what do you find deep rest?

We come to our last Sunday in Acts until the new year. We're going to take a break for a few weeks. And if you've been following along, you'll remember that Acts is this remarkable turnaround.

It's a continuation of the Jesus story. And in it, we see these apostles who are bold and brave and who are bearing witness to the resurrection of Christ from the dead, who previously, a few months prior, they were overconfident, but they were cowards.

And they fled, all of them, when Christ experienced his passion. There's this incredible turnaround with these apostles.

[1 : 1 7] It really is a remarkable thing. You'd think they're two separate groups of people. But no, they're the same apostles that walked with Jesus that are now testifying to his resurrection.

In today's section of Scripture, Stephen, who, if you were here last week, he was one of the seven that were entrusted with the distribution of alms and charity to the poor.

But Stephen wasn't just somebody who was about mercy ministry, because here we see that Stephen is an incredible preacher.

He is proclaiming with grace and power, doing wonders and signs among the people, similar to what the apostles are doing. And Stephen faces the same type of opposition that the apostles faced and Jesus did as well.

So, there's five groups of different Jewish people described here, a part of two separate synagogues. And they are pushing back against what Stephen is saying.

[2 : 2 1] And it says that they couldn't match his arguments. So what do they do? The same thing that they did with the apostles and what they did with Jesus.

They drum up a bunch of false accusations. And in this case, in two different ways. They accuse him of advocating for the destruction of the temple, just like Jesus did.

And the second thing is that they are accusing Stephen of messing with the law, the words of Moses, that they are taking the law and teaching something different.

That Stephen is reinterpreting the law to suit his own agenda that is contrary to what the scriptures say.

On one hand, it seems like it's just a status quo accusation against Stephen. But to really understand these accusations and the gravity of them, we need to understand the significance of the temple and the significance of the law.

[3 : 2 8] And how both of them were unbelievably central to Jewish religion in the first century. The accusation goes like this.

I'll read it again. Acts chapter 6 verses 13 and 14. And they set up false witnesses who said, This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place, that is the temple, and the law.

For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place, that's the temple, and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.

So what will Stephen do? It's always a question that, I mean, we know we continue reading. We don't pause necessarily as we're reading the text. So we know that Stephen's just going to go at it.

But what is Stephen going to do? How is he going to respond? It appears that Stephen, if he wants to get out of this unscathed and alive, he has to denounce Christ.

[4 : 30] He has to, in some way, lessen the blow. Well, Jesus didn't really say that and start, you know, leaning into nuance. Or maybe just straight up denying him.

This group is angry and they're vengeful. Jerusalem is seeing thousands of people converted to this false Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, who is somebody that did not rise from the grave, but stayed dead because he hung on a Roman cross.

This is what Stephen and the apostles are doing. We need to squash it. It can't happen. And they are angry and they are vengeful. And they do not seem like they are ready to hear a reasoned argument.

So what does Stephen do? Well, Stephen doesn't attempt to defend himself. He doesn't cower. He doesn't get, in a sense, backed into a corner and lash out at them.

But instead, he sees this ever-growing mob in them, a captive audience. And so, beginning with Abraham, he lays out the case that those who are truly guilty of misunderstanding the temple and the law, it's not him, it's them.

[5 : 49] He is accused of acting in a way that contravenes the scripture. And what does he do? He uses the scripture to prove that actually his detractors are the ones in the wrong.

This text will shed light on why Stephen and the early church had such power and courage in the face of such real and deadly opposition. Again, keeping in mind the question I asked you earlier.

What does your heart cling to? Who does your heart confide in? This text, it will shed light on those two questions for Stephen and help us to answer those questions for ourselves.

It will also shed light on the difference between a real and a functional Savior. And I'll explain that in a bit. So, this text is a really hard one, in a sense, to preach on a Sunday.

Matthew read verses 8 to 15. This whole section goes from chapter 6, verse 8, all the way to the end of chapter 7, which is, I mean, it's 60 verses.

[6 : 59] So, it's a huge, huge chunk. And it is one unbroken speech of Stephen. That is the biggest unbroken speech in all of Acts, and quite possibly the entire Bible.

I don't know if that's 100% true, but I'm almost certain. I'm like 90% sure that that's the case. So, what we're going to do is not read through every verse.

I'm going to sum up a lot of it. But we're going to seek to address how Stephen responds to those two accusations. One, against the temple. Two, against the law.

And how our only hope, Stephen teaches us, in life and death is in Christ Jesus. So, let's just jump into it. That's quite the bit of an intro, but this is quite the bit of a text.

So, let's take a look at the temple. To fully understand the significance of this first accusation against the temple, we have to understand that by the first century, the temple was the epicenter of Jewish religious and social life.

[8 : 02] It wasn't just a Friday evening, Saturday morning place where people went to worship. All of life surrounded and was tied to the temple.

And the temple in the first century wasn't the temple that Solomon built. If you remember King Solomon, not King David, was the one who would build the temple.

That temple was destroyed in 587 by the Babylonians. This is Herod's temple. And it is about double the size of Solomon's temple. And it was unbelievably ornate and beautiful and gorgeous and absolutely huge.

It was a symbol, in a sense, of Jewish longevity and the staying power of a persecuted people.

Especially amid Roman occupation. Remember, Israel right now is occupied by Rome. Rome does not like sharing their throne with anybody. And so, this temple, this grand, huge, magnificent temple, is in a sense a big thumbing of the nose to Rome.

[9 : 14] Not only that, but the temple was understood as the place where God resided. It was the place where God's presence was amongst His people.

And it was the place where heaven and earth met. So that in the temple, it was the symbol of God coming down and dwelling amongst His people.

So the temple is a big deal. It's a huge deal. However, by the time the first century rolls around, this temple became something that God never intended. And this is where the rub is.

The temple was to be a symbol of God's presence. And the temple, built by Solomon, it replaced the tabernacle that was supposed to be the place, again, where God's presence resided among His people when they were going through the desert.

And we see that there's always a place or always a symbol of God's presence amongst His people. But the temple in Jerusalem began to function not like the temple according to the Scriptures, but like a temple of Artemis.

[10 : 19] Or Athena. The place where God could be contained. The place where God was safe and controlled. Neat and tidy God. It's never God's intention.

For the entire earth is the Lord's, for He made it. How can God, who created the entire world, be confined by His own creation in a box? Gorgeous box.

Beautiful box. Gold everywhere box. But a box. How can He be confined to that one locale? Wow. So, this is where Stephen, he's flexing his Bible muscles here, because he begins with Abraham and says, hey, listen.

If God is confined to a temple, why did God meet Abraham in Mesopotamia? When he was a pagan, worshipping many different idols. If God is confined to a box, why does God minister and why is He with Joseph in Egypt?

If God is confined to just the temple, why did God meet Moses in Midian and at Mount Sinai? And even when Solomon finally built a temple, God made it clear that he does not dwell in temples made by human hands.

[11 : 39] And then Stephen quotes Isaiah 66 and he says this. This is in verse 49 and 50. This is God speaking. Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool.

What kind of house will you build me, says the Lord? Or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things? The temple had become a place that no longer represented the presence of God.

Represented the presence of God amongst His people, but became the economic and political center for those in power. The temple gets perverted.

It became the commodification of religion. We keep God here. He is safe. He is neat and tidy. And what does Jesus do? He blows that out of the water.

Which, in a sense, makes the accusations against Stephen half-correct. Jesus, going back, if the temple was a symbolic representation of God's presence amongst His people, and the place where the gap between heaven and earth was bridged, then Jesus makes the temple obsolete.

[12 : 57] Or better put, Jesus is the temple Himself. Both temples and the tabernacle and the desert all pointed to Christ. Christ. It should have acted as a preparation for Christ.

So when the true and the greater temple came, everybody would say, Aha! That's what it was all about. For in Christ, God meets man. In flesh.

This is what we are celebrating, or preparing for in Advent, and what we'll celebrate at Christmas. That God doesn't say, Come to me. He says, I'll come to you. And God, the Son of God, takes on flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, fully man and fully God.

And in Christ, man meets God. He's the temple. It is also the place, the temple is, where man atones for their sins, so that we would be, in a sense, made clean, to be in God's presence, through sacrifice.

But Jesus, a once and for all sacrifice, dies on the cross, so that no other sacrifice is needed, and that we clothe ourselves with Christ's righteousness, and we enter into the presence of God.

[14 : 11] So in a really huge, wonderful, beautiful, cosmic way, Jesus is the temple. And all the other temples that Israel had, I mean, the two temples and the tabernacle, it all pointed to that.

It was a symbol. It was a road sign. It was a miniature that you could look at and see, oh, this is what the big one will look like.

And that is what the temple represented. But they didn't notice that, because their heart did not cling to God, but instead to power and prestige.

So God, He will not share His throne with another. He wants our entire being, He wants to lay claim on all the real estate that is Daniel, all the real estate that is you.

No inch He wants to cede to any other kingdom, not even to your own. Either God is calling the shots, or we are. We cannot try to manipulate God.

[15 : 19] And this is what Stephen is getting at. That God can't be confined at all, because He is all-powerful, and He is Himself, in Christ Jesus, the temple.

There's this interesting bit in the opening chapters of The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, where Lucy asks Mr. Beaver if Aslan is a safe lion.

And I'll read just a bit here, because I'll botch a beautiful little bit. This is Lucy speaking. Aslan is a lion. Oh, sorry, it's Susan.

Aslan is a lion, the lion, the great lion. Oh, said Susan, I thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion. Safe, said Mr. Beaver.

Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe, but he's good. He's the king, I tell you. Aslan is the lion in the story that represents Christ.

[16 : 20] When we try to confine God to a Sunday meeting, or confine Him to an evening Bible study, or simply just maybe a devotion, because you're an advanced Christian, I don't mean that in a put-down way, but you're hitting your devotions every day, and you think, that's it, I've done my peace, God has gotten my mornings, or God has gotten my Sundays, or God has gotten this, or God has gotten that.

We are confining God. We are treating Him in a neat and tidy way. We are confining Him, but He can't be confined. He is not a safe God, but He's a good God, and He's a good king.

Like the religious Jews, we have a propensity to keep God in a box, affirming His existence, but denying His power. It is a huge warning to us as well.

So, we conform to Him. We trust that His desires for us are good, and His commands are just, but we cannot make the mistake in trying to tame God.

We can't do it. He will not be tamed. He has shown us His ways, and we must, by His strength, teach our hearts to love the things that He loves, and do the things that He calls us to do.

[17 : 41] That we would cling to Him, and confide in Him, and find our hope in Him. And how do we do that? Well, that's through God's Word, and fellowshiping with one another, and this leads us to the second accusation that Stephen is doing away with the law.

So, what does he have to say about that? So, Stephen continues by refuting this second accusation that Jesus and His teaching, because He is teaching what Jesus is teaching, are changing the customs that Moses apparently gave to the people of Israel.

This is, I mean, this is a big accusation. I would hate anybody to accuse me of that, or to accuse you of that, but we need to pause for a second.

Because they are claiming that their interpretation of the Bible is the interpretation of the Bible. And by the time we get to the first century, we have this whole apparatus, so to speak, of interpreting the Scriptures in a way that subverts the very nature of God's commands.

So, the tradition goes, and this is not in the Bible, but the tradition goes, that when God gave Moses the Torah, or the books of the law, He whispered the interpretation in his ear.

[19 : 07] It's called the oral Torah. So, He gives the law, and then whispers the interpretation in His ear. So, on one hand, I mean, we have to interpret the Bible.

The Bible takes interpretation. I mean, it doesn't take interpretation when we say don't steal. It seems very obvious, but there's a lot of things that aren't necessarily obvious at first glance.

An example, what does it mean to refrain from work on the Sabbath? What constitutes work? How about rest? How, what if rest for one person is work for another?

Somebody hates gardening, they have to do it, it's, it's, it's a headache. Another person can't wait to get their hands dirty, and to get on their knees, and plant, and harvest.

Are we to leave these things for people to personally apply the text of, of Scripture to their lives, or are we to have a blanket, one-size-fit-all approach? Both approaches have wisdom, and both have shortfalls.

[20 : 09] Interpretation is, it's, it's very important, and not necessarily an easy thing. So, I gave the example of the Sabbath. This is just one command of some 613 commands recorded in the books of Moses.

So, what happens by rabbis and scribes is that they come up with a whole system of how to interpret the laws. What does it mean to keep the Sabbath, or what does it mean to not mix fabrics, or what does it mean to keep the death outside of the city?

It's an elaborate apparatus, like I mentioned, of interpreting God's words. But the problem is, the heart of the law expresses two things according to Scripture itself.

That one, God is a holy God, God, and that He is set apart, He is without equal, He is perfect and good in every way, and that His laws reflect that reality of who He is.

And the second thing that the law points us to is that we are not God, and that we are sinful, and we are broken, and we have an inability to keep the law in its entirety, and therefore, we are lawbreakers.

[21 : 34] So the law, although good, was not given so that we could keep it, and therefore achieve some kind of righteousness on par with God's, but it's to let us know that we are broken people that have an inability to live a perfect life, and therefore, how on earth are we to get to God's level?

The Apostle Paul says it here in Romans 3, verse 20, For by works of the law, no human being will be justified in God's sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

That's it. The law is good. It's a fantastic thing. Fantastic principles to live by, to obey God, but it is not the source of your justification. It is not the source of your salvation.

Already now, we begin to see the difference between a real Savior and a functional Savior. A Savior that promises salvation eight days a week, and a Savior that is weak and false, that at best gives you the idea that you're saved, but is completely devoid of power to justify.

Real Savior, functional Savior. But what happens when you adapt the law and interpret the law in a way that changes that purpose so that we do not think we need God's grace, but in a sense, seek a way to justify ourselves through our keeping of the law.

[23 : 06] What does that do? It means we start to fiddle with God's words. We start to say, well, it can't mean this. And we do that as Christians. This isn't just a rabbinical problem.

There's hard parts of the scriptures that we are fine to either ignore or say, you know, those rough edges aren't that rough.

Why don't we sand those down a little bit? Listen, we are in this boat together. I am, like I say this often, I am elevated here, but I am not over you. I am amongst you.

I do this every day. We have this propensity to self-justify. Does this not expose us as lawbreakers? You know, the great irony here is that we try to keep the law because we are not lawbreakers, because we will achieve righteousness in God's sight, and by doing so, we prove the very purpose that the law was given to expose us as lawbreakers.

We have a propensity to self-justify and therefore turn God's law into something it was never meant for. And what do we do? We miss the one whom the law points towards.

[24 : 19] And this is what Stephen is getting at here. Verses 51 to 53. And this is where you think Stephen's going real spicy, but we're going to read the rest of chapter 7.

But this is what he says in verse 51 and 53. You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit as your fathers did.

So do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the righteous one, whom you have now betrayed and murdered.

You who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it. Jesus here is called the righteous one. The one who is blameless before the law.

The perfect law keeper. The one who gave the law himself. Jesus who is in perfect communion with God the Father.

[25 : 25] The one who does what no one else could do. The righteous one who is compassionate and merciful. Who is slow to anger. Who is abounding in steadfast love.

Who is without blemish. When the righteous one exposes the self-righteous, there are two options. Either you remain stiff-necked or you look upon him and you humble yourself and put your faith in him.

But there's no in-between. And this is what Stephen's getting at here. Stephen isn't acting out of a blind and uncontrolled anger. He has this big speech and it's just bubbling up and bubbling up and bubbling up and then he just bursts out.

You stiff-necked people. Not at all. It is controlled. He is speaking the truth to them. And what does the truth lead us to?

Freedom. So in a sense, Stephen is inviting these people who are seeking to crush him and crush the Jesus movement.

[26 : 29] He is inviting them to repent. To not have stiff necks. To not have unbelieving hearts and ears. But instead to say, you're right. God can't be confined to the temple.

We've been screwing around with God's law for far too long. We repent. We are done with it. We are tired of the self-righteousness that we have tried to live and we have exported out of the temple.

We are tired of it. Let us cry out to Christ. That's what he is inviting them to do. But instead, they do not.

I mean, they should, in a sense, have the same response as the Jewish people at Pentecost when Peter preaches his fantastic sermon after the Holy Spirit descends.

And this is how they respond in Acts chapter 2, verse 37 to 38. Now when they, that is the crowd of Jewish people, heard this, Peter's speech, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, Brothers, what should we do?

[27 : 38] And Peter said to them, Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Their response, chapter 7, verse 54. Now when they heard these things, they were enraged and they ground their teeth at him. Later on it says they stopped their ears and they were yelling.

They were going, they were going berserk. They were going crazy. There was, there was, there was a disconnect. They weren't thinking like human beings. They were angry. And this is the reality of being stiff-necked.

And it's far too easy to say, ah, those unbelievers. Friends, the law points a mirror right back at us. God's laws and God's ways and God's mercy that is extended to us for our benefit, for our enjoyment, for our life and life eternal when we look at it and it doesn't fit with us, with the things that we are trying to do or our ambitions.

Do we not put our fingers in our ears and go la la la la la la pretending as if God is not speaking and speaking over him, gnashing our teeth at him.

[28 : 56] But instead, he wants us to repent with a trust in him. Friends, we are the religious leaders in this story. Whether through secular means or religious means, we try to self-justify treating our sins as no big deal or denying God's power and claim upon our lives, our stiff necks are revealed.

We have a self-righteousness that's not based on God's truth but a curated vision of truth. However, this exposes what our hearts truly cling to, what our hearts truly confide in.

It exposes our functional saviors and not the true savior. And friends, this is mercy. This is kindness. It is goodness. It is the goodness of God that leads us to repentance.

Our section ends with Stephen being martyred. He's the first martyr in the history of the church and this is how it reads, verses 55 to 60. We'll start in verse 54.

Now when they heard these things, they were enraged and they ground their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

[30 : 19] And he said, Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him.

Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

And falling to his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not hold the sin against them. And when he said this, he fell asleep. Why is it that Stephen went to his death saying the same thing that Christ said when he hung upon the cross?

Receive my spirit, forgive them, they know not what they are doing. Friends, because his heart clung to and confided in the true and unchangeable Savior.

See, when our hearts are turned to Christ, there is nothing that can be taken from us. Our money can disappear, our homes can disappear, our very lives can be in peril, and we still have Christ.

[31 : 36] Nothing, nothing can rob us of him. So let us not trust in the charity that we do or the building that we meet in or our excellent track record of not sinning or doing our devotions, all really important.

So let's keep that up. But let us not find our ultimate hope and worth in that, but find our ultimate hope and worth in Christ. We are not justified, we cannot be justified by anyone or anything but Christ.

So let us say like the Apostle Paul who could have been drawing on this very experience when he wrote Philippians 3, it could have been in his very mind, we don't know, he doesn't say, but he was there witnessing it, but he wrote this in Philippians chapter 3, and let us make this our prayer and our life as well.

This is what he says, verse 9, verse 9, verse 9, verse 9, verse 9, It doesn't sound and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible, I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

It doesn't sound like a man who is sad or broken or lacking in anything. And this is easy to say on a Sunday and hard to live out on Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday and Thursday, but by God's grace and by God's kindness through prayer, he has promised to lead us and to transform our hearts so that we will cling to him, that we will confide in him, that he will become our true and only Savior.

[34 : 00] So friends, let us trust in the righteous one. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you that we don't have to make yearly pilgrimages pilgrimages to Jerusalem to worship in a temple because you are here in our midst.

You created the entire world. You're not confined to anywhere and in your goodness and kindness, you didn't beckon us up in a giant staircase or a ladder that we could never ever use to climb into your presence, but instead you descend and take on flesh and live a very, very, very human life, a fully human life and then die in our place a human death and get buried in a human way and rise again in a divine way so that we now as humans share in that reality, in that resurrection life.

Lord, expose our hearts to the idols that we have, to our functional saviors, to the things we go to to calm our restlessness and instead, Lord, let us learn by your help to rest in you.

We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.