

BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI

THE WORSHIP OF GOD • JULY 5, 2020

“BRAVING THE WILDERNESS”

Song of Focus

God Has Already Conquered

Words and Music by Ed Varnum

1. You're surprised we're holding on when you think all hope is gone;
all you see is the darkness, always sunset, never dawn.
But, praise God, by faith we see just ahead God's victory!
First the cross, then resurrection; so, in joy we shall march on!

Refrain

We're afflicted but not crushed, we're perplexed but not despairing;
persecuted, not forsaken; we're struck down but not destroyed.
The empty tomb after Golgotha gives us hope and makes us stronger,
'cause God has already conquered, jubilant and overjoyed!

2. We'll march on through darkest night, ever moving toward the light,
for we know it is before us, walk by faith and not by sight.
'Til God brings forth that day, hope and love will guide our way.
We'll defeat hate with compassion, standing up to wrong with right.

Refrain

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persecuted, not forsaken; we're struck down but not destroyed.
The empty tomb after Golgotha gives us hope and makes us stronger,
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The Scripture

Acts 7:54 –8:1

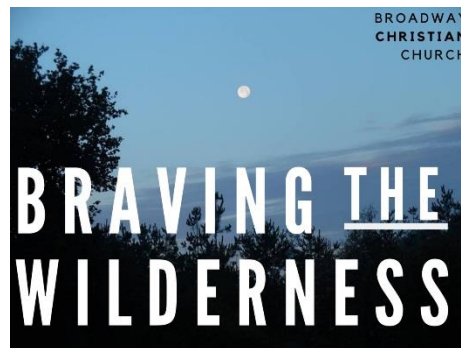
When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died.

And Saul approved of their killing him. That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria.

The Message
Braving the Wilderness: Set-Backs
Mark Briley

Synopsis: No one expects to brave the wilderness without experiencing some unexpected setbacks. Many a mother has said, *“There’d be days like this.”* Nothing worth braving appears without some resistance. The Jesus movement ran into such resistance regularly. Stephen, a rising leader within the movement, is among the many victims of this new wilderness in the life of the Church. Such moments can either kill a movement or be met with perseverance. Some hearts, in the process, while longer to crack, may very well find their way to being part of the persevering movement forward. Case in point? One Saul of Tarsus.

“And Saul approved of their killing him.” (Acts 8:1)



“The way we treat people we disagree with the most is a report card on what we’ve learned about love.” Bob Goff offered those words this week. That’s maybe sermon enough for today.

It certainly gave me cause for pause as we live through another week on this planet. Every week gets a little more bizarre than the last it seems. Bizarre may apply, but is not always the right word. Sadness comes to mind. Frustration. Anxiousness. Hurt. Grief. Even fear. Maybe you’d choose one of those words to describe the week.

As playing on the serenity prayer seems to be a thing these days, I saw one social media post that said, *“Grant me the serenity to not read the comments, the courage to not read the comments, and the wisdom to not read the comments.”* In fact, numerous friends posted statements with explicit instructions that no comments would be tolerated, and I get it.

We're tired. Exhausted. We feel the need to express ourselves, but we have not the energy to engage the debate. This is a good time to be honest with ourselves (*and maybe someone we trust*) and have a mental health check-in. Or... maybe it's a good time to check in on someone you haven't connected with in a while. We need each other... especially as the wilderness realities of our world get thicker by the day. It feels as if we're living in a constant state of setbacks. Instead of "*Ready, Set, Go!*" life feels like, "*Ready, Set... back. Ready, Set... back.*" *Ready, setback.*"

We're braving that very wilderness today in our ongoing sermon series imagining the movement of the early church. The everyday disciples of Christ were thrust into the role of leading the movement Jesus started into the future. We often take church, faith, spirituality for granted as if it is a given of some kind. While spirituality certainly has an innate quality to it, we may take for granted that everyone knows how to "*do religion.*"

Traditions and customs that form the rhythm of our lives together may have always been for some of *us*, but they certainly have not always *been*. The early Christian movement was on the frontier of faith without much instruction other than the tough teaching and parables they had gleaned from Jesus, his word to "*love each other as he had loved them,*" and the gift of the Holy Spirit to propel them forward. That's plenty of power, yes, but me selling out to the truth that, in Jesus, God so loves the world, and building a church are not exactly one in the same.

So, the disciples are sharing the message and as we've encountered in this series, we have seen them growing in their influence – to the point where we are seeing thousands added to the number of those who claimed Christ as Messiah day by day. Truly incredible. But like anything that grows, thrives even, setbacks are bound to occur. You know this on a personal level I'm sure. You finally commit to a regular exercise routine to get your body in gear and day three or four, you blow out a knee. Setback. Or your business is getting off the ground and things are building with great momentum but an unforeseen glitch knocks you way off course, leaving you with the wonder if it's worth the blood, sweat and tears. Setback. Your relationship is improving, counseling is helping, but stress hits, relapse in judgment. Setback.

Because the movement was growing with such strength, the disciples decided that they needed additional help. They called a congregational meeting and said, "*We've got our hands full preaching and teaching. We need some people who can lead the effort in serving the poor.*" We may call them deacons. A motion was quickly made, seconded, all approving said, "*Aye!*" Nominations were made – Stephen, a man who Luke, the author of Acts says, was a "*man full of faith and the Holy Spirit*" was chief among the deacons nominated. The apostles laid hands on him and the other six nominees commissioning them for their task.

Stephen was immediately an asset to the movement – “*brimming with God’s grace and energy,*” the text says. He was doing wonderful things among the people. But, as is often the case, some weren’t on board with the message and were out to end Stephen just as they did to Jesus. Adversaries were secured to send out some fake tweets about Stephen – saying he was blasphemous in his word against the Temple and the Torah. The High Council, while mesmerized by the glow that radiated from Stephen’s very being, tried him against these accusations. They give Stephen the floor to explain himself. He starts right in with their faith history – from Abraham to Isaac, to Joseph and Jacob and Moses and on and on, saying how this was building to the coming of the Just One – the Messiah, who was Jesus of Nazareth. Then he slips in a strong word or two about their bullheadedness. Eugene Petersen translates it this way in *The Message*, “*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!*”

Now, they don’t exactly cover all of this in homiletics class in seminary – but most anyone could tell you that making such a tirade on people isn’t likely to be overly endearing – such is the life of a prophet. Truth is, we have all likely been a part of such a crowd – as the text says, “*They covered their ears.*” They had no desire to hear the truth of the Spirit of God. We like to be able to say, “*We weren’t briefed on that.*” We like to watch one particular news network because they “*give it to us from our preferred angle.*” They wanted to hear what they wanted to hear and anything else wasn’t going to fly. Are you ever stubborn like that? I am sometimes. And what happens? The people grind their teeth, close their eyes, plug their ears, and bum rush Stephen to stone him to death. Did I say Happy Fourth already?

I know this isn’t all that flowery of a Scripture for today, but this story of Stephen might only be the third or fourth lead on the news if it were happening right now. We’re living in a season of hard things, challenging realities, setbacks of many varieties. Our fortitude is being tested. Our energies fully expended. I spoke with a couple of young ministers this week, who are flat out exhausted – emotionally, physically, spiritually. People are battling their own internal states while trying to hold and balance the varied internal states of others. The nation is grinding its teeth, closing its eyes, plugging its ears and attacking any who may be in their way. Take a step back. Take a breath. Ask God for some clarity before chaos becomes our only response.

Chaos and fear-response is what we see in the crowd surrounding Stephen that day. Like a defiant child, they plug their ears and throw a temper tantrum, because they are not hearing what they want to hear. They can’t hear the hard truth. So, getting Stephen stoned it is – and we’re not talking a Rocky Mountain high. *And...* this was not a

judicial trial, okay? It was murder. The Sanhedrin had no right to put anyone to death. Stoning as a conviction to a trial occurred by witnesses of the crime throwing the criminal down from a cliff, or at least a significant height of some kind. If the fall killed the man, “*Fair enough*,” they’d say. If not, boulders were hurled down on him from above until he died.¹ The people were familiar with the practice and went into beast mode to stone Stephen, if even unjustly. The primal instinct to kill another who seems a threat – if even a threat in ideology alone – is remarkable. God help us. We’re living this tension in our culture right now. It’s palpable – people are on edge. How is our report card fairing these days based on what we’ve learned about love?

The crowd reaction is one of significance here – and enough for me to note to myself – don’t live with plugged ears, constantly seething and grinding my teeth – that’s no spirit-of-Christ way to live. But we move to Stephen’s countenance in this passage that is likened to the ability of Jesus to forgive those who persecuted him on the cross: “*God, forgive them for they don’t have a clue.*” Stephen, amidst his certain knowledge that his moment of death has come, has a peace that I have only seen in those who have found their way past perfection, past pretenses, past surface appearances to the depths of the peace and grace of God. In the midst of the chaos, Stephen says, “*Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!*”

I suppose one could argue that he was attempting to distract the riot – “*Look, guys, over there – what is that?*” hoping they’d all look the other direction while he got the heck out of Dodge. But I don’t think so. It was the gaze of peace. It was the full view of his Lord and the ultimate calm of his heart’s knowing. What does your heart know... truly know? It is a look every parent longs to see one day on their child’s face – ultimate contentment with self, with God, with life. Loved. Whole. At peace in their own skin and spirit.

Amidst the stress of this time, I caught a glimpse of my son’s face one moment this week that took me to that very place as a parent. It was a déjà vu moment – taking me back to that same look on his face at a soccer game a couple of years ago. It was one of those weeks for our family – six soccer games, two baseball games, band concerts, dress rehearsals, recitals, choir competition at Frontier City a couple of hours from home, field days, 6th grade dance, multiple practices, and on and on the list goes. It was ludicrous.

But there was *that* moment. I saw it on my child’s face. He was loving soccer – the first season he’d played on a team. This wasn’t the team I was coaching... – I just kept the game-time for substitutions for Dane’s coach, so I mostly just got the thrill of watching him discover his body in this new sport that he had never played. He’s quick footed and determined and even at his size, he had no hesitation to get in the thick of things like a Rugby scrummer. Though he’d been close many times, he hadn’t scored a goal

¹ As shared by William Barclay in his commentary on “The Acts of the Apostles”. Westminster Press. 1975.

yet. He told me as we walked to the field that day that he felt it was the game, and I wanted it for him so much. And so a few minutes in, he breaks at mid-field with full ball control weaving in and out and around the opponent. I'm leaning with him each time he weaves and cheering him on. I knew this was a good chance for him to score and it finally came down to him and the goalie. He juked right, he juked left and stroked the ball just so past the diving, vested, gloved 10-year old and into the back of the net.

I wondered how he would feel, how he would look, what he would do. His back was to me at first as the play ended, but he swept left with his arms slightly lifted to his sides – not with any arrogance but as if they were going to allow him to fly. And then – his face. Oh, his face as he turned back my way. Satisfaction. Peace. Contentment. Joy that made any other matter that his soul was wrestling with disappear. In that moment – it was serene. And the only look that can surpass that moment was surely my own – a parent seeing his child in such a state. For a few seconds – nothing else mattered. We need some of these moments these days.

Scoring your first goal can't compare to being stoned to death – I am aware that the gravity of those moments do not equate each other. But the look – I can only imagine the look on Stephen's face, seeing his Maker and his Savior – his goal complete. I'm not sure how we get that look. I don't think there's a formula. But you know it when you see it... and I have seen it most in the faces of the saints before they died – a number of whom have literally said aloud, if even in their own words, "*Look, I see Jesus.*"

Stephen says those words before his earthly end – in his estimation, not a setback at all. But to the movement – certainly a cause for concern. The latter part of the verse one of chapter eight says, "*That day, a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria.*"

Setback. Perhaps. But in the grand scheme of the movement – maybe not. Author Donald Miller wrote about a terrible experience he had in a relationship in his personal life – hurt him deeply. He wrote as if shaking his fist at God, "*I will never thank you for this God! I'll never be okay with this!*" He noted a year later, "*All I could do was thank God for that.*"

May we be reminded: we can do hard things. And by this I am not saying, "*Everything happens for a reason.*" What I'm saying is that "*Everything may give us a new reason to grow, learn, and find a way to love better afterward.*"

We meet a young Saul of Tarsus in this passage. We know him best as the Apostle Paul – but that's a later story. Saul is a young, budding, and growing leader. His eyes are wide open as the elders of his faith give him the task of holding their coats while they kill Stephen. May that, by itself, be a word of caution for us today. For what hate,

what judgment, are we asking the next generation to hold our coats while we thrash someone, or a group of someone(s), because they are not like us. We must be careful with the responsibility we have to witness the faith to the very children we have walked up and down the aisle of this sanctuary dedicating them to the Lord and promising to demonstrate to them what it means to be the Church – the loving presence of Christ in the world.

Saul holds the coats and nods approvingly to his elders as they stone this servant of Christ right before his eyes. You don't forget something like that. And while his elders covered their ears and gritted their teeth, Saul was blinded to the truth of the grace of God he would come to know himself in the very presence of Christ. This may very well be why his conversion involves temporary blindness as he is struck down on the road to Damascus. It may have been the only way for him to re-learn how to see the world.

Stephen's witness – one that helped shift the movement from the church being a purely Jewish institution to one that was open to all people, Gentiles included, was one that Saul later appreciated as he began his own mission to share the Gospel with the Gentiles. It was the early theologian, Augustine, who said, "*The Church owes Paul to the prayer of Stephen.*" That prayer? "*Lord, forgive them. Lord, receive my spirit.*"

The movement could have folded in fear. It could have died out – a fad that was interesting for a bit but not worth persevering given the danger. There are always moments when we're braving the wilderness that our preference is to retreat to safety – to lose our focus of purpose amid adversity and retreat but the movement persisted. How will we persist now? How will our vision as a church rise to this time and be a leading voice into the future? We can't give up now.

Novelist Joseph Conrad says when he was a young sailor learning to steer a ship, a strong gale force wind blew up on him. The older, experienced sailor who was teaching Conrad gave him just one piece of advice: "*Keep her facing it. Always keep her facing it.*"² The apostles were determined to face whatever dangers threatened them. Their persistence won over even their greatest persecutor – the young Saul of Tarsus: coat-holder turned Apostle Paul – arguably the greatest advocate for the case of Christ.

Have you given up on someone in your life? Someone who you feel is a lost cause? Don't forget Saul. People can change – they don't always and there's maybe nothing harder – but why are we here if we don't believe change is possible? I saw it this week in a few of your faces that I was privileged to encounter – that gleam in your eye. We're not done. We've got love to fight for yet. And your focus and encouragement was enough to re-focus any of my own discouraged drift. We need that focus right now.

² As shared by Barclay in commentary listed previously.

No matter the event I was involved in growing up, sport being played or otherwise, my mother's voice (*at least to my ears*) rose above any other in the crowd. Her one word encouragement and instruction? "*Focus.*" I can hear her voice still plain as day. We laughed about it this week when we talked on the phone – even still, before a big day or big event that I may be speaking at or have some role in, it may be that text that comes to me right before I begin. It's from my mom. One word: "*Focus.*"

And that's enough. It's enough to battle the gale force winds, the criticisms of others, the failures and heartaches and setbacks. Focus. With such a focus of faith, what are we bound to see? What did Stephen say? "*Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!*" Not a bad view. Not a bad view at all.