

Easter 5, April 10, 2020**When a Hill Blocks the View**

Sermon Theme: Even when hills block our view of God’s kingdom on earth, the Holy Spirit keeps our focus on the glory that awaits us in heaven.

Text: Acts 6:1–9; 7:2a, 51–60

Other Lessons: Psalm 146; 1 Peter 2:2–10; John 14:1–14

Goal: That hearers see that even when earthly struggles block their view, an eternal glory in heaven with Christ has been opened to them.

In the Gospel, Jesus prepares his disciples for his Passion. However, He does not focus on the Passion, but directs the disciples’ attention to their relationship with him. In the midst of all the changes that will happen after his crucifixion, Jesus promises his disciples that his relationship with them will continue and that they will do “greater works” in his name. Indeed, after his resurrection and ascension, Jesus sends his Holy Spirit upon the Church, and the mission of God continues as the Word of God is brought by apostles and disciples to the ends of the earth.

In Acts 6, we have an example of how God does this “greater work” through Stephen. The assigned readings offer us selections of the account in Acts where, like the Passion of Jesus, the changes of this world are deadly. Stephen, “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (6:5), begins service in the church, and immediately persecution arises. Amid these deadly changes, Stephen’s heart is fixed on Jesus (7:55), the one in whom true joy is found.

The account of Stephen has been edited for the sake of time in the context of the worship service. This means that you will not know that Stephen’s public dispute with the synagogue of the Freedmen (6:9) has led to his trial before the council (6:12) and that Stephen’s address to the council consists of much more (7:2–50) than his mere denunciation of his hearers (7:51–53).

This abbreviated account of Stephen offers us a glimpse of the main event, God’s saving work in the midst of human suffering. The main point of the sermon—that God is working in the lives of people out in the world—is very similar to the main point that Stephen is proclaiming in the speech that has been left out of the reading: “The Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands” (7:48). Our Lord Jesus Christ rules over all creation, and God is at work in the mundane and marvelous experiences of life.

Sermon Outline

Introduction: Having grown up in the mountainous regions of Colorado, I was used to hills and even mountains obstructing the view of things I sometimes wanted to see. Imagine, then, my surprise when I received a picture of a road sign from a relatively flat, rural area of our country that said “Hill Blocks View” and a reduced speed of 35 miles per hour. The hill was barely discernible! Yet even though the hill was practically nonexistent, the view of oncoming traffic was obscured. It was a necessary sign to alert the traveler to unseen dangers on the road ahead. The beauty of hills and mountains can distract our attention from what is immediately in front of us as we travel along our nation’s highways.

The things of this world block our view of God’s kingdom. Yet even as the world blocks the glory of God’s kingdom, the Holy Spirit keeps our eyes on his glorious kingdom, which will be revealed one day. As we consider the account of the martyrdom of Stephen, let us keep in mind that

Even When Hills Block Our View of God’s Kingdom on Earth, The Holy Spirit Keeps Our Focus on the Glory That Awaits Us in Heaven.

- I. Hills block our view of God’s kingdom on earth.
 - A. The scribes and elders stoned Stephen because they could not see the kingdom of which Stephen preached.
 1. The daily, physical needs of the Christian congregation threatened to block the apostles’ view toward preaching of God’s kingdom of grace (6:1–2). The apostles were determined not to let this service of the Church in caring for temporary physical needs interfere with their primary concern of preaching the Word for the eternal salvation of souls. The seven are chosen by the people and set apart for service.

2. The Holy Spirit provided seven men, of whom Stephen was one, to attend to the physical needs of the congregation so that the apostles could devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word (6:3–6).
 3. “Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people” (6:8).
The Church now refocused, “the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied.” Even “a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith” (v 7). Now the narrative turns to Stephen, one of the seven. “[He] was doing great wonders and signs.” At this, resistance begins from a synagogue, ultimately leading to his appearance before the council. The text skips vv 6:10–7:50 (with the exception of 7:2a). These words must be read in order to understand properly the context of Stephen’s martyrdom at the end of ch 7.
 - a. Stephen was given the Holy Spirit to proclaim God’s Word and perform miracles.
 - b. When Stephen’s preaching reached the ears of the elders and scribes, they could not see the kingdom of which he preached because of the hills they erected before their own eyes—they lacked faith in the Son of Man (6:9; 7:2a, 51–57).
- B. The things of this world threaten to block our view of God’s kingdom of grace.
1. For example, caring for our children’s physical needs can block our view of their spiritual needs.
 - a. We put off family prayer and devotion time with our children.
 - b. We feel that since they learn the Bible in Sunday School, we don’t have to teach them God’s Word at home. That is so not true, I recall our kids telling us that we were the only ones telling them these things. Sometimes the world speaks louder.
 2. False teachings about Jesus block our view of who he really is.
 - a. Most Hollywood movies and television documentaries do not agree with the Scriptures’ teaching of Jesus. I’ve been reading lately that Disney has been persuaded to include gay characters in it’s children’s shows. Duck Tails, Onward, and Beauty and the Beast.
 - b. Some of the latest Christian fads focus on our emotions or duties, turning our view away from the means by which Christ delivers his grace while we are here on earth.
- II. The Holy Spirit keeps us focused on the glory of heaven.
- A. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen sees glory.
1. The violence done to Stephen could have blocked his view of God’s loving care for him. Luke reveals that there is nothing beyond the reach of God. Stephen is bloody, stoned, suffering, and dying, and yet God is at work in a marvelous way. God is able to enter into conflict, into suffering, even into death itself, and nothing can stop his work of love.
 2. The Holy Spirit gives Stephen a view of heaven, and he sees the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God (7:55–56).
 3. Even with stones flying at him, Stephen is able to commend his spirit to the Lord (7:59) and to pray, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (7:60).
- B. The Holy Spirit grants us a view of the glory of heaven, though hidden under earthly things.
1. Even when worldly activities block our view of God’s kingdom, the Holy Spirit is at work among us to reveal his kingdom. God is at work in the world. Not in the way skeptics say—hovering above the world, never reaching down in the lives of real people, merely a figment of our imagination. And not in the way some people think—entering into situations of suffering and making it all better. No, God is here, in the midst of suffering, transforming that suffering into the glory of his kingdom. As

Stephen is joined to the suffering of Christ, he is also joined to the glory of Christ. Nothing can separate us from the love of God, who is active and at work in our lives and in his world.

This, in fact, was the whole point of Stephen's speech. Although it has been cut out of our reading, Stephen's speech focuses on this wonderful work of God. Stephen proclaims that God "does not live in houses made by men." Rather, God is known by his powerful word that is at work in all places of the world. Even now, God is making himself known. When persecution arises, as it will, the disciples will be scattered from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and to the ends of the earth. But God will be there. Doing his work. Bringing to all people the saving work of Jesus, who has died and risen and ascended into heaven and now rules over all things.

- a. The Holy Spirit preaches Christ both to parents who neglect to teach their children and to the children themselves through many different faithful Christians (grandparents, godparents, friends, neighbors).
- b. The Holy Spirit moves faithful Christians from time to time to produce accurate portrayals of Jesus in major media (for example, *The Passion of the Christ*).
2. The Holy Spirit reveals the glory of heaven to us most clearly in the Divine Service.
 - a. Unlike Stephen, who saw the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God, we see the glory of heaven hidden in the Lord's Supper.
 - b. Even though the kingdom is hidden under earthly means of bread and wine, we receive a foretaste (and a preview) of the feast to come. God rules over all things and works in our world. He created us, claimed us as his own in our Baptism, calls us to serve him in our various vocations, and promises to raise us up to live with him in the new creation. The beauty of this preview of Stephen, as short as it is, is that it assures us of God at work in the world. **God is not distant from the world, and he is not always bringing about the happy ending that we desire. But God is at work. Nothing—not even death—can separate his people from him. And everything—even death—can be used by him to share his message with the world.**

Conclusion: Our world cries out for a theology of glory, but for now we live under a theology of the cross, in which God often accomplishes his greatest good in the midst of suffering and when all goes against human reason. The hill of Calvary, on which Jesus gave up his spirit unto death and sought the forgiveness of his persecutors, is always in view as we look forward to that day when we will live eternally in the glorious presence of God.