

Morning Devotions
Friday, September 11, 2020
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Acts 7:9-16

Acts 7:9 “The patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him, Acts 7:10 and rescued him from all his afflictions, and enabled him to win favor and to show wisdom when he stood before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who appointed him ruler over Egypt and over all his household.

Acts 7:11 Now there came a famine throughout Egypt and Canaan, and great suffering, and our ancestors could find no food.

Acts 7:12 But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our ancestors there on their first visit.

Acts 7:13 On the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family became known to Pharaoh.

Acts 7:14 Then Joseph sent and invited his father Jacob and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five in all;

Acts 7:15 so Jacob went down to Egypt. He himself died there as well as our ancestors,

Acts 7:16 and their bodies were brought back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

Only two chapters after the word ‘church’ is used in Acts for the first time, Stephen, her first martyr, makes an impassioned defense to the regional council in Jerusalem after Jewish authorities falsely accuse him of blasphemy against God and the Temple. His speech summarizes the longer account of the Joseph saga in Genesis 37-50, but begins with God’s promise to Abraham, including the exile and homelessness that Israel would endure. Stephen continues with the story of Joseph, also falsely accused while in Egypt, but who later scaled the heights of political power there.

Stephen’s appeal to the authorities was rightly understood as a critique of temple politics, and his message was timely: despite Christ’s final words before his ascension, sending the disciples to mission, most remained in Jerusalem. To defend himself against the charge of blasphemy against the Temple, Stephen advocates for worship not limited to a physical space, quoting Isaiah in verse 48: ‘the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands.’ Stephen argues for a ‘portable’ worship — in tents, not temples — in his discussion of the patriarchs, and speaks of the ways that Abraham, Joseph, and Moses keep covenant with God in journeys marked by exile, economic migration, and risk.

As our own houses of worship remain closed, Stephen’s testimony in Acts reminds us that Solomon’s temple could neither encompass Abraham’s covenant with God nor play a part in Christ’s great commission. The work of the church cannot be constrained by our attachment to man-made houses; it is better described by the encounters in our daily and life-long journeys. Stephen quotes from Isaiah near the end of his defense: ‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is my place of rest?’ (v. 49).

As we long for our sanctuaries and our return to them, we can take consolation in this reminder that God was with Joseph — and Abraham and Moses — and will be with us, whatever our place or situation, and that the first Christ followers were likewise called to leave the Temple, to journey well beyond the safe spaces they knew.

Let us pray,

Lord, you have led us out of our churches. Help us to bring your good news to those beyond our sanctuaries. Make us aware of your presence in the unexpected places and uncomfortable spaces we might not choose to inhabit, but where you lead and surprise us.



Giovanni Battista Lucini, *Stoning of St. Stephen*, c. 1680. [Wikimedia, public domain]

In Lucini's dramatic portrayal of Stephen's stoning, we see a focus on Stephen instead of the epic sweep of a historical event. Here, the martyr's face is unfinished, suggesting the speed and violence of the act. Stephen's hands, extended in prayer near the center of the canvas, draw our attention by their stillness.