

Acts 7:55-60, Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16, 1 Peter 2:2-10, John 14:1-14

***Please note that next week there will be no printed message distributed as Pastor Jonathan will be participating in a continuing education course. Instead, there will be a link posted on our website to an alternative message that Sunday (May 17th). Printing of Pastor Jonathan's messages will resume the following Sunday (May 24th). Thank you for your understanding!

INTRO

Well good morning, and thank you for taking the time today to listen to this recorded message for Sunday, May 10th, the 5th Sunday of Easter. And a happy Mother's Day as well to all of you mothers who are listening today — I hope that you have a good Mothers' Day and are able to treat yourselves to something special today.

When we first started these recordings, I didn't expect that two months later we would still be doing this, and it looks like we will be continuing in this way for a little longer yet, so thank you for your patience — I know that we all would like to be able to gather together on Sundays as we normally have done. But in the meantime, we make do the best we can, and we continue to lean on the grace of God to carry us through unusual and difficult times.

As always, I'll invite you to pause this recording and take time to read the lessons for today. The first lesson is Acts 7:55-60 — this is the story of Stephen's stoning (Stephen was one of the early Christians). We've been reading throughout the season of Easter from the early chapters of the book of Acts, and we've been hearing about all of the wonderful experiences of the early church — preaching boldly, gathering together for worship, fellowship, prayer, and service. But now by this part of Acts, the initial shine has started to rub off the church. Things aren't going as smoothly for the church anymore — there's quarrelling between Greek & Jewish believers, fighting in the soup kitchen lineup, a couple named Ananias & Sapphira have withheld money from the church & lied about it. And now Stephen, one of the early church leaders is in the process of being killed — stoned — for his bold confession that Jesus is the Son of God.

So suffering and persecution are entering the story of the early church, and we're introduced in this reading to a character named Saul — a young man at whose feet Stephen's persecutors lay their coats as they kill Stephen. Saul is a religiously zealous young man, who will soon be a leader of the persecution movement against the church, yet who himself will dramatically & unexpectedly come to faith in Jesus, moving from persecutor to defender of the Christian movement, and taking the new name of Paul. This is a story that reminds us that no matter how bad things get, no matter how hopeless and abandoned we may feel, when we or the church are

being snuffed out God is at work behind the scenes — he's orchestrating things so that his name & his renown will be taken to the ends of the earth — God is still very much in control.

Then our Psalm today is Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16 — it's a cry for help in the midst of persecution, and a bold statement of putting one's faith in God for deliverance in the midst of hardship. So we can think of Stephen's own cry to God while he was being killed as we read this Psalm. And we can make it our prayer too as we face troubles in life.

The next lesson is 1 Peter 2:2-10 — here Peter encourages his readers that they are like living stones being built up as God's temple. This is right around the time when the Jewish Temple was destroyed, and the place of worship for the Jewish people had been taken away from them. And so Peter reminds these young Christians that their faith isn't wrapped up in physical buildings (does this sound timely, anyone?), but that they as people of faith were being built up as God's temples, houses of God's Holy Spirit & the means by which God puts himself on display throughout the world, with Jesus himself standing as the chief cornerstone of this new temple, the church.

And then our Gospel lesson today — John 14:1-14. This is a great text which takes place during the Last Supper before Jesus was betrayed, arrested, and taken to be crucified. That very night, as Jesus ate the Passover meal with his disciples he spoke these words to comfort them, that even though trouble was on its way, even though everything was about to change, even though Jesus was about to be taken away from them he promises that he is going to prepare a place for them in his Father's house and that he is going to come back to take them there. He promises that he is the only way to the Father — the way, the truth, and the life. And so he says to them, "Let not your hearts be troubled."

So, even though I've summarized these readings already, take the time to read them yourself — this is God's Word, and God promises to speak to us through his Word — and once you are finished reading them, feel free to resume this message.

FINGERS IN OUR EARS

Well, our kids are getting older, but there was a time when they were pretty small — toddlers who required a lot of round-the-clock attention & care. If you are a parent, do you remember having toddlers in the house? Maybe you've got toddlers now. Or perhaps you are an aunt or uncle or grandparent, or a friend of parents, and you've seen the way little kids can behave

Toddlers seem to swing between two poles — two extremes in a lot of things. They can be extremely cute, adorable, and a lot of fun to interact with or talk with. And they can swing to the other end of the spectrum, they can be little terrors, throwing tantrums, yelling, & crying! My favourite is the foot stomping — when rage hits a level where the only appropriate way of letting

it out is to stomp your foot on the ground in anger. Maybe we can be a little more like toddlers than we'd like to admit...

Another thing that little kids might do when they're being told something that they don't like is to cover their ears, or stick their fingers in their ears and say, "I can't hear you! I can't hear you!" It really is a bizarre response — you're not convincing anyone that you can't hear them when you cover your ears. Do you ever plug your ears so that you won't have to listen to something you don't want to hear? Have you ever fought in the car about which radio station to listen to? That's when I want to plug my ears...

BAD NEWS

In the story of Stephen being stoned & killed, we read that those who were listening to his bold proclamation of Jesus as the Son of God stopped their ears, and rushed at him to do away with him. Like little kids jamming their fingers in their ears and saying, "I can't hear you!", they couldn't stand to hear one more word of what Stephen was saying — it was offensive to them.

Maybe you've noticed this too, that for some people the story of Jesus isn't good news, but bad news — they want nothing to do with it, they get upset, and they plug their ears. Why is this? Why is the gospel received as bad news?

Well, partly it's because we want to climb the ladder of spirituality ourselves. We often claim to be spiritual people, and so fill our lives with meditation exercises, work towards becoming our best selves, we might reorganize our living space — whatever we can do to *do something* to justify to ourselves that we are spiritual people, good people, deserving of some vision of heaven.

Maybe you've heard of or seen that sitcom *The Good Place*, in which the main character dies & wakes up in the Good Place — heaven. However her going to the Good Place was actually a mistake and she knows it, and all through the show she tries either to prove to others that she's good enough for the Good Place, or else tries to improve herself to justify her staying in the Good Place.

It's a ridiculous show, but profound in its acknowledgment that deep down we're all frauds. Nothing we do can improve us to the point of earning heaven — every attempt at self-improvement is selfishly motivated and counts against us instead of for us. The show demonstrates what theologians call a low anthropology — the reality that in our sinful human nature we can't save ourselves or improve ourselves — our selfishness infects us & always gets in the way.

This is why we have such an aversion to the gospel — why we receive it as bad news — because it's so hard to accept something free when we want to earn it or pay for it ourselves, when we want to stand on our own two feet before God and before others.

IDOLATRY & IMAGES OF GOD

Ever since the Garden of Eden, when Adam & Eve reached for that fruit, we've been grasping for divinity ourselves. And since the fall, when they were thrown out of the garden, we've lost knowledge of God & of God's character. Throughout the Bible God remains unseen by creation — we can't recognize him or know him or understand him as we should. And so we've forever resorted to making idols to worship instead — something, anything that is tangible, visible, that we can latch on to serve. What are your idolatries?

Jesus, in his conversation with his disciples before being taken away from them is asked by Philip,

“Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.” —John 14:8

They want to see God — if they could only see God, they could get through all of the change & uncertainty ahead of them — they could be given some assurances. And Jesus replies,

“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” —vs. 9

For the first time ever God has been revealed & made known to humanity, and he is made known through Jesus. When Jesus walked the earth God was made visible, so that we could know him unlike ever before.

GOOD NEWS

And when God is revealed to humanity in Jesus, he walks the long road to the cross to die for us so that we might be forgiven & washed clean of all our sin — all our idolatry, all of our attempts at self-justification. When Jesus embarks on that road, he comforts his disciples saying, “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.” (vs. 1) “I'm going to prepare a place for you in my Father's house, and I'm coming back to get you & will take you there.” See, Jesus doesn't prepare a place for us in heaven & then leave it up to us to find it ourselves. He promises to do all of the heavy lifting for us — to come back & to take us there. And he says that this is the only way — through him because he is the Way, the Truth, and the Life — no one come to the Father except through him because he alone is the one who reveals to us the face of the Father.

Jesus says, “If you want to see God, look at me!”

IN CLOSING

Let me leave you with a few closing thoughts. First, an invitation to those who might be listening who don't count yourselves as followers of Jesus or believers in his message: Consider how you rationalize your goodness — to yourself, and to others around you. It isn't enough. We are all frauds, and deep down we all know it. But enough is offered to you through Jesus. So take your hands off of your ears — this story is good news! Jesus says, “Believe in God. Believe also in me.”

Let me give also a word of comfort to people who are seeking God: Be honest about where you're at, pretending doesn't help. Again, your enough isn't enough — the solution to the rat race isn't found in you, it's found in Jesus, & he's offering himself for you.

And finally, a word of comfort to believers: No matter how bleak it gets, or how far the fingers are in the ears of those who are hearing this message, you can trust that God is still at work because Jesus is at the right hand of the Father, & things are being put in motion for people to come to faith (think of Saul watching Stephen's stoning). So hold fast. Jesus is preparing a place for those who believe, and he promises to take us there — rest & relax in that truth, & let the Spirit of the risen Christ empower & embolden you to bear witness of this truth to the world around you. After all, not everyone has fingers in their ears...

Let not your hearts be troubled. Amen.