

“Crossing Over
Acts 7:1-36

It’s like a Bible College student preaching his or her very first sermon (covering everything from Genesis to Revelation, we would say) but in truth it’s a seasoned leader preaching his very last sermon. His name was Stephen, and he was the “first” Christian martyr. Although an important figure in the Christian Community and even more important those who “attended” the stoning, was the message that Stephen delivered that day. Although brief, the length and breadth of what Stephen spoke is about is 44 pages in your pew Bible and stretches from Genesis 12 to Exodus 14 or around 430 years in calendar time. Now that’s a long sermon, even longer than the message Paul delivered that caused Eutychus to fall asleep and then fall out the window to his death. It was a history lesson for those who were prepared to bend over to pick up a stone and throw at Stephen’s head, a narrative all knew by heart but really only made sense centuries later. And it’s a lesson like stories we read when nothing is on tv or a family history passed down from generation to generation. Today it would be similar to a familial scrapbook or a family album with small tags underneath saying, “This is Grampie Abe and there is Cousin Joe and over there is Uncle Moe.” And then there is that one critical point that forever changed a family. Some of you know exactly of what I speak. Maybe it’s a divorce that shook your family and left a deep and indelible scar on you and your sister. Or maybe it was generational abuse that made you distrust everyone. Or it could have been a move that took you away from all that was familiar and you wished you could go back but you knew you couldn’t. Or a decision (one decision) that set your life on a certain path and you wonder how things might have been different if you had gone this way rather than that way. But that’s assuming a negative ending, right? What if the glass is half full and not half empty? Like you can’t imagine your life without the person you share your bed with and how you ended up together can only be described as a “God-thing”. Or “lucking” into that job because of a friend of a friend of a friend. Or if you had not made that decision so long ago your life would have been very different if you had gone that way rather than this way. In truth that’s really the point of Stephen’s sermon. He picks up the story of three families that share one critical point in the family history that changes everyone’s family history, including ours.

First there is Abraham. He was the “star” of last Sunday’s message. And here is where Stephen begins, even though it’s not really the “beginning.” You would think Stephen would have started a little further back, like with our “original” parents but he doesn’t. So if not Adam then should it not have been Noah because it was around Noah’s time that everything fell apart and maybe that’s the critical point, but it’s not. Instead Stephen begins with Abraham, just as all three major religions (Judaism, Islam and Christianity) begin with Abraham or as we like to call him, “Father Abraham.” Abraham’s life, if you remember, was going rather swimmingly until God showed up. And God’s

arrival was rather surprising because Abraham could be considered an “unbeliever,” at least at that time because Abraham wasn’t exactly sure who God was, at first. But still Abraham listened to God and did what people of that time did not do – leave all that was safe and familiar to go to what was unsafe and unfamiliar. And because of Abraham’s “faith” God promised him two things, two things that were absolutely foolish. First God promised Abraham land, a lot of land, which is odd for someone who doesn’t have money to buy land or relatives that could bequest him land and second the promise of numerous descendants, which is even harder to believe, especially when you have no children and you have been retired for about 35 years. It’s hard to believe either of these things, and harder still when Abraham and his descendants were “resident aliens” and all those kids Abraham would supposedly have would one day be “enslaved”. But God did not give up on these promises, even though his people had given up on God numerous times. God would “covenant” with his people, that is, make an arrangement that would be too good to be true. It would be like a bank telling you the amount of your mortgage payment every month, but if you can’t pay one month or two or three or whatever not to worry, because the bank will look after it. Seriously?

And then there’s Joseph another person who was minding his own business, enjoying his preferential life (at least with his Dad) when God turned his life upside down. A jealous brother, or two or three, or more and all of a sudden he’s a well dweller and then soon after a cellar dweller. Oh how his life had changed from his early days of showing off the fancy shmancy coat to his brothers that his father had made just for him and not his brothers. At one moment he’s sitting at the “right hand of his father” asking if he wanted the last piece of pie and the next he’s living with a bunch of convicts forgetting what pie even tasted like. But then, as some would say, “because of a lucky break” (but you and I know there is no such thing as “luck”) Joseph gets out of prison and is raised to prominence - even higher than what he enjoyed at home - as second in command in all of Egypt. And in the end Joseph even has the opportunity to get everyone back (including his brothers) of anyone who wronged him but instead Joseph shows grace and restoration follows. Again, you would think that maybe this “restoration” would be the critical point in this family narrative, but it’s not.

And finally Stephen speaks about Moses. Born at the wrong time, (a death sentence to all babies in Egypt had been made law) to the wrong parents, (a family with no power) with the wrong nationality (he was Jewish) Moses cruised down the river but this was no “Viking River Cruise” but a baby in a basket. This voyage that was supposed to lead to a “better” death ended up with a better life because of a sympathetic princess who didn’t care that he was a Jewish baby from a lowly family. So Moses was adopted into prominence while his entire nation remained enslaved. The great, great, great, great grandchildren of Abraham who were promised land owned nothing and their kids and grandkids would be owned by another. It’s an odd and terrible story. Could this really be the story of

“God’s chosen people?” So is the critical point in Israel’s history and ours? For over two hundred years Israel (the descendents of Abraham) lived in bondage and slavery, for over two centuries they waited and waited and waited for things to be different. In fact they waited so long they had given up on waiting because they didn’t think things would ever change. And then we’re back to Moses. Even when his life falls apart when the Prince of Egypt becomes a wanted man, even when He flees to become a lowly shepherd it was there where God meets Moses and says to him he has to go back to Egypt and help release his own people from bondage. At first Moses refuses. But then Moses obeys because who can possibly say “no” to God when you meet God in person. So Moses returns to Egypt, goes back to his people and wears down Pharaoh till in utter desperation Pharaoh lets his entire slave force go home. And go home they do, heading toward the Promised Land.

In a moment this lost, hopeless, imprisoned people are found, hopeful, free people. That picture is the Biblical image of redemption: lost, hopeless imprisoned people being found hopeful, free people. But how could such a thing happen? And here we finally see the critical point in the Biblical narrative and our lives today. There are countless images in both the Old and New Testament that speak of this event. In the Old Testament it’s called the “Exodus,” in the New Testament salvation and in both Old and New, it’s about “crossing over.” On the one side of the Red Sea there is slavery and on the other side freedom - crossing over from death to life. Tim Keller tells us that no other religion is like our Christian faith. To every other religion faith (or getting to God) is about building a bridge. To build a bridge you put a pylon in the water and then you build a platform on top of that pylon and then you put in another pylon and you continue this process again and again and again. It’s up to you to keep building but you never seem to arrive or get to where you are going. But not with Christianity, says Keller. Grace operates by “crossing over” but not because of anything you do. One well known commentator tells the story of how he would ask people he met if they were a Christian. Many, he would typically say, (especially those from a British background who try to be modest at all times) “I’m trying.” Such words he said would say told him that that person had no understanding of Christianity in the least because “Christianity is not about the quality of our faith but the object of our faith.” (Keller)

When Pharaoh released the Hebrews from Egypt they ran and came to the Red Sea. On one side was bondage and on the other, freedom. They could not make it across on their own. The water was too deep. They had no time to build a bridge. So instead God parted the sea and provided a way out – all they needed to do was “cross over.” Tim Keller gives a powerful illustration of that one critical event that changed everything for the Hebrews and changes everything for me. And if you can grasp it, it will change everything for you, even today. Keller speaks about when the waters parted and the people of God began their journey to the other side there were at least two types of travelers. Imagine

just for a moment that scene, if you can picture it. All of a sudden the river is wide and deep and then suddenly the water parts and now on either side there is a wall of water as high as a skyscraper. But even more the water bed, where the water is parted is dry, dry enough for the Hebrews to walk upon and not sink. Can you imagine those at the front of the line after Moses yelled, "Let's go!" Keller imagines two types of people that day who crossed over. Keller says, "There were those crossing the Red Sea during the Exodus who said something like, 'God is on our side. The Lord is fighting for us! Eat your hearts out Egyptians!!' While others crossed over saying, 'I'm gonna die. I'm gonna die! I'm gonna die!!' Two very different qualities of faith but both shared something equally." Both crossed over! Both were saved!

This may be no better image of where we are. Redemption is about getting out of bondage, it's about freedom. The hymn writer pens, "Long my imprisoned spirit lay Fast bound in sin and nature's night; Thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray, I woke, the dungeon flamed with light; My chains fell off, my heart was free; I rose, went forth and followed Thee." (Source: "And Can it Be") Salvation is about getting out. It's about crossing over. It's about crossing over by grace and nothing we do. You are either in the Kingdom of Darkness or the Kingdom of Light. You are either adopted or not. There is no process to being adopted. You are or you aren't adopted.

So if you are a Christian you have already crossed over. The Egyptians didn't make it, if you read the rest of the story. Only the Hebrew's were able to cross over. Why is that? Were the Hebrews better than the Egyptians. No! The Hebrews got safely to the other side because they had a Redeemer and the Egyptians did not. The Hebrews had Someone who crossed over first and invited them to do likewise. That same Redeemer is available for you. Jesus Christ on the cross mediates for you. He redeems you so that you too can cross over. Thanks be to God.