



### Acts 7:51-60 (New Revised Standard)

51 "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. 52 Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. 53 You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it." 54 When they heard these things, they became enraged and

ground their teeth at Stephen. 55 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. 56 "Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" 57 But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. 58 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. 59 While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 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.



**My wife got a bit of a new look this week** and you may think the image on the screen is part of my own consideration for change. A little longer hair, plus a couple of other modifications ... Ah, the capacity for self-delusion, wonderful isn't it? Who we are & who we see ourselves to be.

While my wife was busy working long and hard this week I, as a

supportive husband, went to see a movie - Thor. Naturally, I was only thinking of you – totally sermon research, well, not at first but it does have a way of turning out that way! As I watched

the previews and enjoyed the free popcorn, the message that came through was that we are a society, a world, in need of salvation. Thor himself saves the world – a couple of them, the **Green Lantern** is coming (June 17<sup>th</sup>) and he seems cast to battle not only bad people but larger forces of evil (and, as Ryan Reynolds, naturally we know he is a Canadian from BC); and

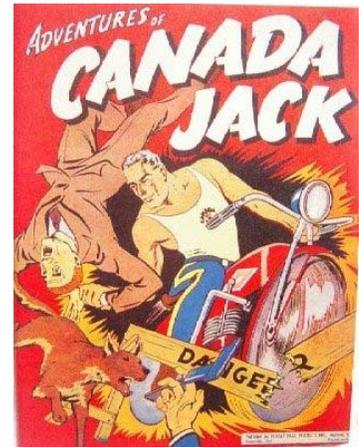


**Captain America** is due (July 22<sup>nd</sup>). Clearly we are in danger – or at least feeling that way. The future is not only uncertain but ominous with overtones of catastrophic.

We are in need of heroes, those who will display courage and self-sacrifice for the greater good, heroes who will stand up and stand against that which threatens to diminish and destroy life, heroes who will take a stand and help us stand.



Perhaps it has always been. The first *Captain America Comic* appeared in March 1941. **Steve Rogers**, a sickly young man was enhanced to the peak of human perfection by an experimental serum , and renamed Captain America, patriotic to the core and a great fighter of the evil personified by the Axis powers. "The first



Canadian national superheroes – Nelvana, Johnny Canuck, and Canada Jack– also emerged during the Second World War ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canadian\\_comics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canadian_comics)), although their costumes do not seem as cool. After the war ended, and the threat had passed superheroes were retired (unfortunately for The Incredibles).

Now they're back, partly driven, it is true, by the commercial success of Batman and Ironman but among us once more.

**When the future is uncertain and the old ways no longer secure we seek heroes and salvation.**

When the apostle Luke wrote the two volume set of Luke-Acts the times were also tumultuous.

The Jewish Temple (up dates of rebellions) had been destroyed – and so the priestly cult

weakened. Israel, as a nation, was being punished for daring to consider the possibility of rebellion against Rome and Christians were persecuted. Followers of the Christian Way were widely regarded as subversive, probably

**66 – 70 CE The first Jewish–Roman War  
(The Great Revolt)**  
**70 CE – destruction of the Jerusalem Temple**  
**73 CE – fall of Masada**  
**115–117 CE [Kitos War](#)**  
**132–135 CE [Bar Kokhba's revolt](#)**

in league with terrorists, and prone, according to some propaganda, to sub-human activity like cannibalism. Like the victims of flood and fire, the early Christians of the time of Luke would have to be ready to quickly grab what they could and flee. All that seemed once promised in Jesus was visible neither in the rear view mirror nor on the horizon. There was no Johnny Canuck, no Canada Jack and no Messiah. In the speech of Stephen we hear the voice of a church hunted and scattered. We hear the story of a church and a people struggling, wondering what the risk of being Christian might bring next.

At the center of this tale stands the story of Stephen, “a watershed in Acts.” (Willimon, *Interpretation*)

Peculiar because who is this Stephen? Not one of the A-team, at least originally – not one of the original disciples, not an apostle, not the Christ. How can the story of the church turn around this guy? His speeches smack more of political polemic than reasonable testimony; yet, at some point, he is gripped by a gospel that changes him and he becomes the defender, the Witness of another Way. It is he who proclaims the new Way worth dying for.

Only a few of us resemble Thor, Captain America or Wonder Woman – and then mostly in our imaginations. Most of us tend toward another model. So if called upon by the authorities – or

our grandchildren or children or Twitter followers – to give account of this noble Way soaked with the blood of martyrs I wonder what we might say. Why do we do it? Why have we chosen or been chosen by this Way?

This is not an academic question for it may be in the years ahead there will be a price to be paid for those who differ from the current soft, pan-spirituality that grows in favour in our society. Specific commitments may be costly for our children, grandchildren and friends.

When I work with leaders across the country, I usually ask them this question: **What is the cutting edge of the Gospel for you?** What is it about this Christianity stuff, being a follower of Jesus, which just reaches out and grabs you? Often, when I put the question, silence often descends for we, in the United Church, have not been trained or encouraged to answer this, much less answer it with gusto! We fear being fanatical or, as they used to say, Enthusiasts. Although it is interesting that most of the self-help/”change your life” books and programs do not share our modesty. They start with a similar question, although framed more in terms of passion. What is it that you feel passionate about? But our question is larger. What might we answer if asked by our children, grandchildren and friends, why?..... why this?

As an organization, for the sake of mission focus, it is preferable to have one clear, crisp statement about who we are and why we’re here. And we may have revisit this so we may all rally around one inspiring vision but, on a personal level, we answer the challenge differently.

I suggest to you **four powerful testimonies** that I have overheard in this congregation. This is not about being correct so don’t worry about getting a low grade on your official church

witness exam but it is important to name them because often we are not aware of that which we feel most deeply – other perhaps than our children and loved ones.

For some of us, our experience of God is of the floor that will not let us drop even when life batters us down. We may not be able to talk much about it or explain it to anyone without, we fear, sounding simplistic but, in the end, we just feel God is with us and will always be with us. Usually that brings comfort; occasionally challenge. Our faith, at its deepest level, resounds: We are not alone. We live in God's world! In life, in death, in life beyond death ... In more classic language, we believe that God will not break covenant. Houses may crumble or burn or be swamped, doctors may come with bad news, children may not go the way we once hoped but ... we are loved, we are cherished, we are not alone. Our salvation lies in coming to trust this deeply, unreservedly. And if they come and shake us and awake us in the night, it is that to which we witness.

Others of us, if pushed, would say that the Way of Jesus is **just the right way to live**. One of the gifts we in the United Church bring to the Christian family is our deep commitment to and legacy of **learning, study and conversation** about matters of the faith. It is not our tradition to say to people – “here, simply take this.” Our way is more, “Hey look at this, it just makes sense of so much. What do you think? / REALLY? / Say more, I never really thought of that side of it!” So we delight in the conversation and the exploration; even though we may at times wander and stumble we are at least stumbling in the right direction. This should be distinguished from an easy moralism (“All you need to do is...”) – sometimes it was reduced to that for a period in our ministry with children – but it is respect for a deeper conversation rooted in what we

believe is the fundamental nature of the universe which, as Christians, we believe we see in and through Jesus. We have more to say than simply *The Force is With Us* even though, at times, we ally with others against the Dark Side. But, deep down, we remain convinced that the Way of Jesus is actually the right way to orient oneself in the world, to treat other people, to set the priorities for our life together, as a congregation and as a society. We delight in the exploration and the advocacy. To this we bear witness feeling that salvation lies, basically, in treating people as Jesus did and ensuring that conditions and structures that deny this are opposed. “We are called to be the church – to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil, to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope, to seek justice and to resist evil.”

Others of us confess to some puzzlement about all the fuss about whether or not God is present and real. For can you just not FEEL, do you not **experience the presence of God**. Come to my church because there you will experience grace, you will feel the embrace of a loving and terribly challenging God. Come walk with us because we carry with us and are carried by practices that will take you to places within yourself and spirit that you never dreamed of, which will put you face to face with a power that terrifies and purifies, that sustains, no matter what. If you want to know who you really are and I mean REALLY know – beyond the trappings and all the theatrical props we may have around us – come walk this Way, if you dare. You know that slogan the American Army used to use – Be all that you can be – that should be ours. You’ve seen Lord of the Rings then you have a clue about the Power that created and how important that you carry the witness with whom you have been entrusted.

We are blessed in this congregation to have some who have, what might be called, mystical gifts. There have been some who have said to me after worship some Sundays, “could you not just feel the presence of God fill this place. I was afraid to turn around because the Christ was so close.” Or, at other times, “When you called upon God to fill this place could you not sense it was like the dome of this building opened to the light and the singing was not just ours.” Or, at other times, when the call of the Gospel was proclaimed could you just not feel the presence of all those saints who have gone before in this place seem to just seep out from these walls until, literally, we stand in the presence of a cloud of witnesses (as the bible says) and the amens resounded through the ages. Explain it? How do you explain three dimensional sight to one who has only one eye? How do you explain the rainbow to one colour blind? But real! Not all in this vein have these gifts but they do share a sense that salvation lies in the deep sense of connection with God.

We believe in God: who has created and is creating, who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh, who does work in us and others by the Spirit.

We are called to be the Church:  
to celebrate God's presence...

As I have pondered for myself the question What is the cutting edge of the Gospel for many in our time, I think at least one other voice needs to be added. And that is the witness of transformation.

Part of the testimony we carry as Christians is that **lives can be changed**, people can be changed. In our past we have not been so shy about this as some have been lately. Again it is interesting, that now many programs exist “out there” that promise transformation by lifting up the physical, the emotional, the historical **and the spiritual**. In this broken world we bear

witness to the Christ to whom the crowds came for healing, for bread, for a word spoken in the night, for the love that can change one! We do carry this witness and for some of us this is the gospel we claim and that claims us. For many in our time this is the message, the witness, they long to hear, to see for themselves (like Thomas) and to practice. Tell me, said Nicodemus, how can I be born again? It may be the question of the Digital Age.

The amazing and wonderful thing about here is that we not only tolerate but celebrate all these testimonies, at our best. Oh, we can be petty and whiny, but at our best we know that those with whom we walk may have a different testimony than ours that is not only authentic but one that we need to hear. What is it we say? “We all need each other, adults, children and youth as we discover the way of Jesus!” We don’t just say that as a cue so the children can get ready. It’s true. For sometimes we need to hear the testimony of those other experiences of the Gospel. It may not lie at our core but that does not stop us from saying “Amen.” Yes, these are my people. I walk with them, I stumble with them, I grumble with them, I struggle with them.

For, at least in my experience of you, we want to be a congregation whose experience of the Gospel is wide. Come, all you who are weary and heavy laden. Come all you bureaucrats like Zacchaeus and Matthew. Come all those in the grip of demons. Come all those who have been body slammed by life and find rest and grace. Come all you young mothers and fathers who wonder some days how you will make it through. Come all those who want to change the world. Come all those so aware of God that it is frightening. Come all those who say how does any of this make sense. **Wide** are the arms.

**And** we are also a congregation that values the **deep**. Whatever our sense of faith, whatever our primary experience of God, whatever our conviction about what will save us, whatever the prime manner in which we are called to live out our faith and to give testimony we, at least in this place, are not a company of faithful who rest easy with platitudes, who are afraid to think, who are afraid to challenge and explore, who diminish the role of practice and the cultivation of good habit. We resist the shallow and the restricted.

**We are wide in our experience of God and we desire to be deep in our discipleship.**

And in so doing, we pray that God might use this platform, deep and wide to change, even save, the world.

The story of the early church did not turn around celebrity heroes but around those like Stephen, those who were gripped by and thought the Gospel was worth living and dying for. There are those who now claim that we live during a hinge point in the life of the Christian church. We may prefer to pretend that once Thor or Wonder Woman appears then .... The story of the church emerging will not rest with such heroes but with those like us who may experience God and witness to salvation in different ways but who, nonetheless, feel this way is worth the living.

I don't know why you have been chosen but you have. So the witness and the practice and the figuring out of the road ahead remains our calling.

Thanks be to God.

If you dare and are able let us stand to affirm our faith through the saying of The Creed

We are not alone,  
we live in God's world.

We believe in God:  
who has created and is creating,  
who has come in Jesus,  
the Word made flesh,  
to reconcile and make new,  
who works in us and others  
by the Spirit.

We trust in God.

We are called to be the Church:  
to celebrate God's presence,  
to live with respect in Creation,  
to love and serve others,  
to seek justice and resist evil,  
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,  
our judge and our hope.

In life, in death, in life beyond death,  
God is with us.  
We are not alone.

Thanks be to God.