

Straight from the "Hart"

May 8, 2022 Mother's Day



Special Preservice Music

Opening Prayer

Lord, we have gathered to thank you for delivering us to life and eternal life. We are humbled by



your love and grace through which we experience the joy of your presence. Draw us close, listen to our gratitude, and build us up for the days to come. We give because you gave so much, we give, not asking for anything, but offering our appreciation for all your mercies in Jesus Christ, and it is in his name that we pray. Amen.

Call to Worship Come, find in Jesus his heavenly grace. Be filled with his presence. Pursue his will. Seek his love. Resolve to reject the world's temptations and live for Christ alone. Desire nothing but his pure love within your heart, and to happily know that he takes us for his own. (Inspired by *Come Savior, Jesus, from Above* by Antoinette Bourignon, tr. by John Wesley)



Music Leader: Let's sing of the beliefs that hold us firm no matter what the day brings.

Music

We Believe (Key Lyrics)

In this time of desperation when all we know is doubt and fear,
There is only one foundation. We believe, we believe.

In this broken generation, when all is dark, you help us see.
There is only one salvation. We believe, we believe.

We believe in God, the Father. We believe in Jesus Christ.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, and He's given us new life.

We believe in the Crucifixion. We believe that He conquered death.

We believe in the Resurrection, and He's comin' back again. We believe.

So, let our faith be more than anthems, greater than the songs we sing.

And in our weakness and temptations, we believe, we believe.

Let the lost be found, let the dead be raised. In the here and now let love invade.

Let the church live loud. Our God will say we believe, we believe.

And the gates of hell will not prevail, for the power of God has torn the veil.

Now, we know Your love will never fail. We believe, we believe.

CCLI # 2561297

Music Leader: Today's story begins with Stephen, who found in Jesus God's strong faithfulness to him, and by his grace we will carry on in faithfulness to him. Let's sing "Forever"

Music **Forever** (Key Lyrics)

Give thanks to the Lord, Our God and King. His love endures forever.

For he is good, he is above all things. His love endures forever.

With a mighty hand and outstretched arm, His love endures forever.

For the life that's been reborn; His love endures forever.

Sing praise, sing praise, sing praise, sing praise.

Forever God is faithful, forever God is strong, forever God is with us,
Forever, forever.

From the rising to the setting sun. His love endures forever.

And by the grace of God we will carry on; His love endures forever.

Sing praise, sing praise, sing praise, sing praise.

CCLI # 2561297

Reading Hear Stephen's story:

Stephen was anointed as one of seven to administer ministry to the needy. He a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. Full of grace and power, he was doing great wonders and signs among the people. People from several synagogues rose up to dispute with Stephen, but they could not compete with the wisdom and the Spirit with which Stephen spoke. Therefore, they secretly induced men to become false witnesses, saying they heard Stephen speak blasphemy against Moses and God -- and that Jesus of Nazareth would destroy the Temple and change the sacred customs that Moses delivered to them. After stirring up the people and religious leaders they brought him before the council. All who sat in the council saw that Stephen's face was like the face of an angel. The high priest asked, "Are these things so?"

Stephen recited the history of their people. He spoke of their consistent stiff-necked breaking of their faithful God's Law -- including how they killed those who

predicted the Messiah's coming, and how they have now murdered him too]... Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, said, "I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man at the right hand of God."

(Summarized paraphrase of Acts 6:5-6,8-15, 7:1-2ff,55-56 (ISV)).

Music Leader: Stephen had full confidence in his desire to worship Jesus to the end. Highly exalted as the son of God yet gracefully humbled himself to pay the price for our sin, and therefore exalted again to the right hand of the throne of God. Let's sing...

Music: Here I Am to Worship (Key Lyrics)

Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness, open my eyes, let me see.
 Beauty that made this heart adore You, hope of a life spent with you.
 You're altogether lovely, altogether worthy, altogether wonderful to me.

King of all days, oh, so highly exalted, glorious in heaven above.
 Humbly You came to the earth You created, all for love's sake became poor.
 I'll never know how much it cost to see my sin upon that cross.

And here I am to worship, here I am to bow down,
 here I am to say that you're my God.

CCLI # 2561297

Mother's Day Tribute And that kind of faithfulness is seen in many mothers, grandmothers, and women who take on those kinds of roles sacrificing for their children's benefit...Mary Jo is going to sing for us as a tribute to the ladies today, and while she sings, watch the TVs to see the pictures you have submitted and thank you, you who have submitted the pictures to help make this tribute personal and special...



A carnation was given to each woman present.

Special Music Wind Beneath our Wings

Prayers Loving Lord, we come to you trusting in your direction and comfort to lift us up in your due time -- just as in the healthy home, we have leaned and trusted on our mothers to direct and comfort us. And so, on this special day we ask your blessing on all mothers, and women who fulfill that role. As they do, may they be inspired by your mercy, wisdom, strength, and selfless love. For new mothers with new responsibilities, for expectant mothers wondering and waiting, for those who are tired, stressed, or depressed, for those who balance the tasks of work and family, for those whose children have limitations, for those who must take on this vital task on their own, we pray for all

in whatever situations they may find themselves and thank you for the blessing of being in this world and their role in making us who we are.

For those with worries today, we see the beauty of the birds and flowers, we feel the warmth of the sun, the freshness of the rain, even the brightness of the snow in its season -- we observe the way you watch over your creation, yet even so, we sometimes fail to remember your gracious care and protection over **us**. We forget to turn our eyes upon you. We are prone to wander and fail to realize that you are leading us to green pastures and still waters and watching over us with compassionate care as we meander along on the dangerous paths of life, forgetting that your mercy and goodness follow us all the way to your home where we will feast in joy.

For those struggling due to any variety of circumstances, we ask that you bless them all. **Praises and Petitions** We continue to remember the Ukraine, for the family and friends of Mickie Voight's sister Cindy who lost her husband to a heart attack, we lift up 48 year old George Gauchey with serious stage cancer, for Ray Martin and all who are seeking employment, for people who are seeking specialists and having tests and procedures done to alleviate various ailments, we pray for the friends of Jan Martin's brother - Diane Watkins, who has a bad infection, for DJ Turner, a young man with covid complicated by bad diabetes, Darlene Tidmore who has covid and a leg sore that will not heal, we also pray for an online viewer whose friend is bringing medical supplies to the Ukraine next Monday, and hopes that he will not have to go, and for others that are on our hearts and minds. (Pause) And then we pray for all who take on the mothering role, that their love may be deep and tender and that they may lead their children, grandchildren, or other children in their life -- to know and do what is good, living out the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray **LORD'S PRAYER**.

Music Leader: Stephen discovered that real life is found in the risen life of Jesus, and because of that, fear fades in light of the fact that our future is in hands -- for this life and the next when we join in the heavenly songs that never end. Let's sing.

Music **Because He Lives (Amen)** (Key Lyrics)

I believe in the Son. I believe in the risen One.

I believe I overcome by the power of His blood.

Amen, amen. I'm alive, I'm alive because He lives. Amen, amen.

Let my song join the one that never ends, because He lives!

I was dead in the grave. I was covered in sin and shame.

I heard mercy call my name. He rolled the stone away.
 Because He lives, I can face tomorrow.
 Because He lives, every fear is gone.
 I know he holds my life, my future in his hands.
 Amen, amen. Let my song join the one that never ends.
 Because He lives, because He lives!

Introduction to and Bible Reading

It was Stephen's belief in what we just sang that allowed him to confidently face the Council where we left him in the first reading. They were already so enraged at his defense against the false testimony and the truth of what they did to Jesus that they were cut to the heart and gnashed their teeth at him. Yet Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, only had eyes for God, whom he saw in all his glory with Jesus standing by his side. And when he said so, his listeners cried out and covered their ears. Then



(Summarized from Acts 7:54-57a (WEB, MSG))

Yelling and hissing, the mob drowned him out. Now in full stampede, they dragged him out of town and pelted him with rocks. The [false] witnesses took off their coats and placed them at the feet of a young man named Saul. As the rocks rained down, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my life." Then he knelt down, praying loud enough for everyone to hear, "Lord, don't hold this sin against them!" When he had said this, he died.

Saul wholeheartedly approved of Stephen's death, congratulating the killers. And on that day a great and relentless persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and the believers were scattered abroad through the regions of Judea and Samaria, except for the apostles.

All this time, Saul was still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, and relentless in his search for believers, went to the high priest and he asked for letters of authority (arrest warrants) to take to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any men or women there belonging to the Way (believers, followers of Jesus the Messiah) he could arrest them and bring them bound with chains to Jerusalem.

(Acts 7:55-8:1, 9:1-2 (WEB, MSG, AMP))

Sermon Accepted - Saul Acts 9:1-28

Last week we heard how God doesn't give up on those who failed while striving to follow the path he has forged for us. People like Peter. Jesus keeps on teaching, restoring, equipping and strengthening so that, hopefully, we will pick ourselves up, move on, and do better next time.

When I was young, I rarely fell even though I liked to bike on the ungroomed trails filled with natural jumps and potholes in the fields and woods behind our quiet, still developing suburban subdivision, and I rode a bike that had no specialized tires - - and speed and hills were handled by adjusting muscles rather than gears. I usually rode for fun with no destination in mind except to be back home before I was too worn out.

Occasionally I did ride to a friend's house, or a large store that was about 5 miles away. Those destinations put me on faster, smoothly paved paths but had increased dangers. One was overheating. One day, I flew to the store in 90+ degree heat, and then walked like we all walk after a long session of roller or ice skating. I wobbled with rubbery legs, overheated, underfed, and sopped through in sweat -- into that frostily air-conditioned store. My body didn't react well -- lightheaded, dizzy, and tingling, and if I had had a heavy lunch, I probably wouldn't have kept it long... They didn't have benches for the tired and weary in stores like they do now, but in my meandering, I found a low display shelf that happened to be empty, and I managed to sit on that until my body began to calm down as it adjust to its new environment.

The other increased danger was heavy traffic. Not usually a problem, but I do remember once when on my way home from that store that an old high schooler wanting to show off for his girlfriend -- instead of giving me clearance and going around, moved behind me and ran their car bumper within inches of my bike's back tire. Finally pinning me behind a parked car when I had to stop. They observed my our-of-breath, sweaty, perplexed expression look back at them. They laughed at me and then went on.

Now. Imagine life is a bike ride, each cycle of the pedals a passing of time. You've hit a stretch where you've been chased by a car, or errantly hit a pothole, or are so drained from overexertion that you have either fallen or had to stop short of your intended destination. On our journey toward abundant life and a heavenly destiny, at times our environment makes us uncomfortable, circumstances create bumps and holes that threaten to

**Do we start all over or
adjust and move on?**

wipe us out, pressures and conflicts want to run us off the road, if not run us down. We try to accomplish it all in our own strength but realize we are not built to do it on our own. We are unsteady on our feet, cut off and tossed about, and we fail on our Christian journey.

How do we normally respond? Do hang our head, pick up our bike and drag it back home and get on the bike and start all over again -- and say, this time I'm going to make the trip and do it right? Or, like Peter, and with the help of Jesus, do we pick ourselves up, learn our lesson, make what is damaged as right as we can, and keep moving forward from where we stopped or fell?

Jesus went to great lengths of grace to forgive Peter's failures. He forgave, healed, and offered a fresh start -- but he didn't make him start over as if Peter had never met him before. He picked him up and moved him forward in the right direction after every set back. This is good news for those who find themselves following Jesus but are speeding, overextending, overheating, or stumbling and stumbling down the path of faith.

But our biker story leads to today's question. Will God's grace extend to those in the car? Will it reach those who are not on the path, or even worse, trying to run the faithful off of the road -- and how does our answer impact our reaction to those who are biking down the path of faith? (Pause)

In Bible history, suddenly, a young Saul appears out of nowhere, approving the murder of Stephen,

What about the opposers?

and breathing murderous threats against other Christians -- though that was more his mode of intimidation and wishful thinking. Only Rome could legally execute. Nevertheless, most believers fled the persecution in Jerusalem, many of them to Damascus 150 miles away -- that's a long bike ride -- and they didn't have bikes.

The high priest in Jerusalem did have authority with internal affairs and public interest, and probably did have authority to grant Saul the right to kidnap, imprison, and injure these Christian refugees and drag them back to Jerusalem.

Saul was not like Peter who was on the right path, but sometimes faltering and failing. Saul was "in the car" trying to impress God by zealously, religiously pursuing "bicyclists" with a hyperactive road rage. Yet he was about to discover running down bicyclists -- retrieving believers for imprisonment was not what God wanted.

I won't quote the Acts 9 story that is familiar to most of us, but I will summarize it and add in some additional details we learn from Paul's retelling of it. Saul and his entourage neared Damascus. It was about noon, which means the heavenly light

suddenly flashing around Saul must have been terribly bright, blinding Saul who fell to the ground. It could have been from the sheer brightness of the light, or it may have been because such light was a common expression of God's glory -- and since humanity (in common thinking of the day) cannot safely behold God's glory, blindness is not a surprising result. Saul heard a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard to kick against the goads." Goads are sharp pointed sticks used to spur oxen to do their work. In this case, it probably refers to sharp spiritual pangs of conscience. Luke doesn't say it, but many scholars believe Luke introduced Saul at Stephen's stoning because that event planted a spiritual seed of truth deep in the heart of Saul, perhaps felt during his daily meditations and prayers, and/or as one scholar suggested: He was [also] kicking against the advice of his widely respected mentor Gamaliel, who said of the Christians, "Let these men alone!... For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourself fighting against God." (See Acts 22:3 and 5:38-39) And it was this goading seed, grinding like a popcorn seed stuck between the teeth and into the gum -- sharp pangs and can't get it out... that primed him for this experience on the road.



"Who are you?" Saul asks from the ground. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Go into the city and you'll be told what to do." The men with Saul heard the sound but saw no one. They led Saul into Damascus.

Saul, intent on binding the followers of the Way and lead them to Jerusalem, instead finds himself bound by blindness and led to Damascus. More importantly; through his Jewish mentor, through Stephen's forgiving ways, perhaps through pangs of meditative conscience-- he is spurred - goaded - by these acts of forgiveness, acceptance and love. Instead of imprisoning the people of the Way, he encounters the Way, the Truth, and the Life - he encounters Jesus himself.

What do we do if we discover our path isn't the one God wants us on? We can't undo what's been done, Bringing our bike back to the starting point doesn't mean the first trip didn't happen, it just makes the trip longer because we've gone back before going forward... George Eliot wrote: "It's but little good you do, watering last year's crop." A lost crop is a lost crop. The farmer doesn't try to resurrect a bad season. He lets go of what is behind and turns over the soil in preparation for the

new season that lies ahead. In the same way we turn it over to the Lord and with his help, just like Peter, we get up, dust ourselves off, fix what we can, and keep moving forward.

That is easier said than done. In the city, Saul fasted and weakened for 3 days over the shock of being physically blinded and spiritually awakened. Dawning on him was the enormity of realizing that his life was not for God but at odds with God's will. It had to be overwhelming -- and that is why Jesus calls his people to be with Saul.

He sends us to others

Ananias is a Christian and a native of Damascus. He has a vision from the Lord to go to Judas' house on Straight Street, one of the city's main thoroughfares. The Lord tells Ananias in this vision that he told Saul that Ananias would come and lay hands on him to restore his sight. Ananias protests, not out of disobedience, but out of confusion. He knew the Christian refugees and their plight and Saul's reputation as persecutor has certainly preceded him. The Lord explains that Saul is his chosen instrument to proclaim Christ's name to Gentiles, their kings, and the people of Israel. The order of the list is unusual. Normally you would put God's people first, then kings of the nations, and then the Gentile people (if you mention them at all. Luke ordered them this way to indicate that Paul's primary thrust of ministry would be to the Gentiles, and their kings (which he goes on to describe later in Acts). Clearly, Jesus has a bigger vision for the potential of people than we would normally imagine -- and his insight wasn't after the moment, or even during the moment, but it was before Paul even got on the field -- the mission field.

See Acts 9:10-16

Put yourselves in the sandals of Ananias. See it as it is happening, without the benefit of the end of the story. You know Saul was breathing murderous threats to Christians and has arrived in your city -- and you are ordered in prayer to greet, welcome and commission him into Christ's mission. In theoretical, theological principle, no person is beyond God's grace, but in practical, logical application, it is difficult to believe that a person passionately opposed to Christians could or would ever change -- especially overnight. Would you be eagerly obedient, or would you conclude your vision was -- to use Charles Dickens' words: "a bit too much spice in last night's chili." I wonder what would have happened to Saul, or Ananias, or both, if Ananias chose to believe the vision was a fantasy and ignored, rejected, or even plotted against Saul. What if Ananias had not come and offered his healing words and hands to

See Acts 9:17-19

Saul? What if he had refused to believe that this hater of the Way could become one of its biggest instruments?

But as it is, Ananias is obedient and so confident in his vision that when he sees the dangerous Saul, he addresses him warmly as if they were fast friends, lays hands on him so that he could see and be filled with the Holy Spirit -- in essence anointing and commissioning him into Christ's mission. Paul's sight is restored, is baptized into the faith, ate and regained his strength, and began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. He is transformed from persecuting Christians to proclaiming Christ, from enemy of the faith to ambassador for the kingdom. Ananias does this one thing, then disappears again from the pages of biblical history.

Not everyone readily embraced Saul. When he returns to Jerusalem, the Christians remaining there feared and rejected him, not believing he was a true disciple, but that he had gone undercover to catch them. It was Barnabas who stood up for and with Saul in Jerusalem, introducing him to the apostles, telling Saul's story and how he had preached fearlessly in Damascus.

Acts 9:26-28

What would have happened to Saul if it weren't for Stephen, for Gamaliel, for Ananias, for Barnabas? Where would we be if it weren't for those kinds of people in *our* life (whether we were on a wrong path or not)? For some of us it was our mothers who demonstrated a self-sacrificing love, who encouraged us in our faith and never lost hope in us, and who encouraged us to press forward to our God-given dreams. Whoever were those extraordinary examples, those mentors, those inspirers, those encouragers and advocates -- those Ananiases and Barnabas -- "by"; we should be thankful for them.

This story is as much about how we too easily view people as beyond even God's reach, versus what potential Jesus sees in what he can do through *anyone*, even us. Perhaps it is call for us to do more than simply look at people differently, but to become the Gamaliel, the Stephen, the Ananias, the Barnabas, the examples, the teachers, the healers and the encouragers, the advocates that make a positive difference in the life of another.

To go back to biking: As we see people struggle along on their life's path -- do we like to "run them down" from our "more powerful, superior" position? Do we intimidate them, try to scare them, have a good laugh at their challenges? Do we hide all the benches so they lose their lunch and we can nod in judgment at what

we assume is their self-inflicted pain? Do we seek to be stumbling blocks in their struggle even if, like Saul, they don't see it as a struggle? OR, do we demonstrate self-sacrificing love, offering rest for the weary, obediently offering the words hope and the hands of healing -- because we confidently know that God's grace can overcome and overflows the boundaries caused by failure, and the barriers caused by opposition. **Let's pray...**

Prayer God, you grace the people of this world, most often through your people in this world. One of the most amazing things about your grace is that you work it through people such as ourselves. You don't wait for us to become "perfect" before you begin to achieve your purposes in and through us. Every Saul needs an Ananias. Every Timothy and Titus needs a Paul. We all need someone to lift us from the depths so that we are not destroyed, or gloated over, so that instead of being hurt, we may be healed, so that wailing is removed, and the joy of salvation and growth and blessing is experienced.

Salvation often comes to people like Saul because of the trusting obedience of people like Ananias, who offered grace and encouragement even though every human evidence pointed to logical skepticism and rejection. Forgive us when fail to see your potential in people, and in our skepticism make their journey to you and with you harder instead of lighter. We are grateful for the people who, when we saw no potential in ourselves, saw potential in us and encouraged us along our way. We need each other to see and give the potential of grace that lays deep within each of our hearts. Gift us to be a positive force in the lives of others. Amen.

Music Leader: Our final song rejoices that God's grace is strong enough to wrestle with and overcome our resistance and rebellion, and into the waters of his gracious love and the joy of his salvation. He never forgets us e hope you bring to us in our brokenness and pain, and hope that sets aside our past and reaches out in healing and new life for us and for all generations to come. Let's sing...

Music **Your Grace is Enough** (Key Lyrics)

Great is Your faithfulness, oh God. You wrestle with the sinner's heart.
 You lead us by still waters into to mercy, and nothing can keep us apart.
 So, remember your people, remember your children,
 remember your promise, oh, God.

Your grace is enough, your grace is enough, your grace is enough for me.
 Great is Your love and justice, God. You use the weak to lead the strong.
 You lead us in the song of Your salvation, and all Your people sing along.

Your grace is enough, Heaven reaching down to us.
Your grace is enough; I'm covered in your love,
Your grace is enough for me.

Blessing Now may God, whose love -- like rolling waves -- is never ceasing -- and always refreshing -- May he bathe you in clear, calm, living streams of water. May his gracious forgiveness fall over you -- so that the borders of failure and of opposition -- may be washed away and you are renewed in the tides of his mercy. Amen.