

“Defending Our Hope”
a sermon on Acts 7:55-60 and I Peter 3:13-22
preached by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
at Concord Presbyterian Church, Statesville, NC
on April 28th, 2002

Almost exactly a month ago, on Good Friday, an eighteen-year-old Palestinian girl got up in the morning, wrapped a belt of explosives around her waist, finished dressing, approached some Israelis outside a crowded supermarket, and became a human bomb. She killed two people and wounded at least 30. There were suicide bombers before her, and there have been suicide bombers since, both men and women. But something about Ayat Akhras and her story lingers with me.

Perhaps it’s because I saw the photograph of her that her family distributed. I came across it again earlier this week. It could well have been her senior picture. If she lived in this part of Iredell County, she’d be on track to graduate from West next month. The thought of someone that young, someone with her whole life ahead of her, blowing herself up, in an effort to become a martyr, is tragic. So is the thought that a group of people could be driven to the point where they would even contemplate, let alone embrace, suicide bombing.

Then there’s the day when this particular bombing happened. It took place on Good Friday. Ayat Akhras died on the very day when Christians around the world were remembering how another resident of Palestine, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, also died for a cause. But *her* dying was very different than his—it communicated a very different message. It communicated a message of human hatred and revenge based in hopelessness, rather than a message of God’s love and forgiveness based in hope. How she got to the point of such hopelessness, and what our responsibility might be to relieve it, is a topic for another day and another setting.

But as I studied our scripture texts for today, my mind kept coming back to young Ayat Akhras. I thought of her as I read over our lesson from the book of Acts—the story of the stoning of Stephen. He, too, died for a cause. As Acts tells it, Stephen, who had been chosen to help care for and feed the widows, has gotten himself in hot water with the Jewish authorities of his day. They call him to account for his message and his behavior, and he boldly stands before them to proclaim his faith. He goes so far to say that the ones who have called him to account are misguided, just as their ancestors had been. Well, this enrages the authorities. They don’t want to hear it—and they rush at him to stone him.

Now what does Stephen do at this point? Does he pull out a sword, or detonate an explosive device to kill as many of them as possible, or call down fire from heaven to maybe even spare himself? No. Instead he says two things that echo the words of Jesus from the cross. First he says, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he says, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And then he dies. For that act of bold obedience, Stephen came to be known as the first Christian martyr.

For the longest time, I thought the word martyr really meant only: one who is killed for a cause. That certainly fits the profiles of Stephen and Jesus and Ayat Akhras. It wasn't until I was in college that someone explained to me that the word martyr comes from the Greek word *marturos*, which means witness. You don't necessarily have to be killed to be a witness—but you do have to be willing to take a stand for your faith, even when that's not easy.

Some years after the stoning of Stephen, the author of I Peter sat down to write to a group of Christians enduring heavy persecution. Some of the folks in that community were experiencing unjust suffering—they were being beaten and abused, not for doing the wrong thing, but for doing the right thing. After telling them not to retaliate, and to be willing to suffer for doing good, this is what the writer of that letter told them, “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence.” In other words, be like Stephen. Be a martyr—be a witness—stand up for your faith. Defend your hope.

I've been thinking a lot this week about how we do that. How do we stand up for our faith? How do we defend our hope? I can tell you this right off the bat. Defending our hope means acting a lot more like Stephen and those early Christians, than a suicide bomber. A suicide bomber is willing to *kill* himself or herself in hopes of killing others. A follower of Jesus is willing to *die to* himself or herself in hopes of bringing others life.

Some of you know that this week I went to Raleigh for a conference on Aging and Spirituality. The speaker, Jane Thibault, shared several stories at that conference about how older people she knew had done just that—how they'd defended their hope in the way they handled the circumstances of aging. Some of the folks she talked about stayed active into their eighties and even nineties, serving others in various capacities—cooking, visiting, working on various mission projects and so forth. That made me think about so many of you out there who are able and have chosen to be actively involved in serving others like that. But Jane reminded us that spirituality is not so much about what we *do*—it's about who we are, and whose we are, and how we are. One of the stories she told us was about a woman who had been active, but had been forced by circumstances to move into a nursing home because she had become virtually bedfast. She was no longer able to care for herself at home, and her children, who lived away, were not able or willing to tend to her there. This older woman clearly wanted to be home. However, rather than grumbling about that for the rest of her days, which is what I would have been tempted to do, the older woman asked to have a nice rocking chair brought into her room. She had the chair placed close to her bed. The rocking chair looked so inviting, and her demeanor was so pleasant, that it wasn't long before different people walking by her room started to stop and sit a while. At first it was just staff. Then other folks started to come in now and then, because her reputation was spreading. As they sat, they'd talk to the woman, telling her their problems. Mostly she just listened. After a while, Jane began to notice that this woman was developing quite a clientele of visitors—and she commented on that to her one afternoon. The woman said, “I've come to understand that at this point in my life I've got a new job to do. I'm called to be the ears of Jesus for people.”

Some folks might have said—I'm better off dead than to be in a nursing home. Like suicide bombers, they might have sought to destroy themselves or to unleash anger and inflict pain on as many people as they could. This woman did the opposite. She defended her hope—our hope. She transformed a potentially crummy situation into a ministry. She became the ears of Jesus—and she wasn't afraid to say so.

That's certainly part of what it means to defend our hope as Christians. It is to be aware of and unashamed to point to what God is doing in our lives and our world. But it is also to die to ourselves enough to let God work in and through us—and that means we don't always get everything we want.

Olive Ann Burns, one of the funniest Southern writers I've ever read, wrote a wonderful book called *Cold Sassy Tree* that is chock-full of good lines for sermons. The novel is written from the perspective of Will Blakeslee, a young boy in Georgia during the early 1900's. At one point Will asks a question of his Grandpa Blakeslee. His question has to do with why Jesus said that we could ask God for anything we want and get it. His Grandpa Blakeslee responds with some homespun wisdom that I think defends our hope quite well. This is what he says: "Maybe Jesus was talking in his sleep, son, or folks heard him wrong. All I know is that folks pray for food and still go hungry, and Adam and Eve ain't in that garden a-theirs no more, and yore granny ain't in hers, and I ain't got no son a-my own to carry on the name and hep me run the store when I'm old. Like you say, you don't get thangs jest by astin'. Well, I'm a go'n study on this some more. Jesus must a meant something else, not what it sounds like.

"When Jesus said, Ask and you shall receive, it doesn't mean for us to pray for rain. Faith ain't no magic wand or money-back gar'ntee, either one. Hit's jest a way a-livin'... Hit means you do'n be holdin' on to God in good or bad times, and you accept whatever happens. Hit means you respect life like it is—like God made it—even when it ain't what you'd order from the wholesale house.... When Jesus said ast and you'll get it, He was givin' a gar'ntee a-spiritual healin', not body healin'. He was sayin' thet if'n you git beat down—scairt to death you cain't do what you got to, or scairt you go'n die, or scairt folks won't like you—why, all you got to do is put yore hand in God's and He'll lift you up... I found out long time ago, when I look on what I got to stand as a dang hardship or a burden, it seems too heavy to carry. But when I look on the same dang thang as a challenge, why, standin' it or acceptin' is like you done entered a contest. Hit even gits excitin', waitin' to see how everythang's go'n turn out.

Grandpa Blakeslee sums up his views this way:

"Jesus meant us to ast God to help us stand the pain, not beg Him to take the pain away. We can ast for comfort and hope and patience and courage, and to be gracious when thangs ain't goin' our way, and we'll git what we ast for. They ain't no gar'ntee that we ain't go'n have no troubles and ain't go'n die. But shore as frogs croak and cows bellow, God'll forgive us if'n we ast Him to."

Now, I need to say that unlike Grandpa Blakeslee, I think it's okay to pray for rain. It's okay to ask God to take the pain away, it's okay to pray fervently for physical healing, it's okay to pray that God will do what you want when you want it done. I've prayed prayers like that, and will continue to pray prayers like that every day of my life, for all I know. After all, I want God to know what I want—and I want more than anything for those of you who are afflicted physically to be healed. Oh, I have faith that God can do wonderful things beyond our wildest imaginings. I've seen it happen. And I'll pray for it to happen again and again.

But that's not where my *hope* finally resides. My hope doesn't reside in God doing what *I* want when *I* want it done. My *hope* doesn't reside in God protecting me from all pain, or shielding me from physical death. My hope resides in the knowledge that whatever I face, the God of Jesus Christ will face it with me. My hope resides in the assurance that if I trust him, he will transform even the worst things I can imagine into vehicles for his glory. I saw it happen this week.

Hope like that is worth defending, friends. Hope like that is what enabled Stephen to speak up boldly, and then to emulate Jesus by asking God to forgive those who were stoning him to death. Hope like that is what enables people to practice forgiveness, and to work for justice, and to overcome any inclination to hurt or destroy others or themselves. Hope like that makes ordinary folks like you and me into witnesses of God's powerful love. I wish the young suicide bomber Ayat Akhras had known that kind of hope—and I wish that those on both sides of the conflict in the Middle East may *yet come* to know it.

Let me close with two of my favorite quotes about hope. The first comes from Peter Gomes, the chaplain at Harvard, in his work *The Good Book*. "Hope does not deny the circumstances of the present, and hope doesn't help us get out of our difficulties. Hope doesn't get us out, but it does get us through." I think Grandpa Blakeslee, and the woman who became the ears of Jesus from her bed in a nursing home, and Stephen and Peter would agree with that statement.

The second quote comes from one of Father Henri Nouwen's books on prayer, *With Open Hands*. "Hope means to keep living amid desperation and to keep humming in the darkness. Hoping is knowing that there is love; it is to trust in tomorrow; it is falling asleep and waking again when the sun rises. In the midst of a gale at sea, it is to discover land. In the eyes of another, it is to see that he understands you. As long as there is still hope, there will also be prayer. And God will be holding you in His hands."

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.