

# Sermon Text for October 28, 2018

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Exodus 34:29-35, Acts 6:8-15

## *“Fulfilling the Law”*

I want to welcome you today as we celebrate the 501<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. For better or for worse there are not many Sundays that you come into worship and leave knowing something more about what it means specifically to be a child of the Reformation. It was a pivotal time in the history of the church. Both of our Scriptures also contain pivotal moments in the history of the people God from Moses to the 10 commandments to the first Christian martyr whom we see today in Stephen.

Some people say, now 501 years after the Reformation, that we are also in a pivotal time. I received a stack of what was called non-partisan Christian voter guides perfectly cut to fit into any bulletin. The issues they picked out were issues that Jesus never once mentioned and had nothing to do with advocating and being on the side of the poor and the powerless as Jesus demands us to be. The fact that the term Christian was on it was a joke, do not make your Christian decision on how to vote based upon the issues that Jesus never addresses.

But I think we are in a pivotal time in our society and culture. When you look at the Reformation you see that what the mission of the church was supposed to be was in direct conflict with what the leaders wanted. There was an internal struggle that was taking place. Today I see a direct conflict between what the mission of the church ought to be and what our government leaders in power are telling us to stand up for and about which we ought to be indignant.

Stephen and Moses both found themselves in a pivotal time in the history of God’s people where the clear fulfillment of God’s plans were going directly against what the culture, the people, even the religious authorities of the time necessarily wanted. I believe we also live in such a time where the fulfillment of the law of God by this church will inevitably cause us to be in direct conflict with our society, our elected leaders, and maybe even with the religious leaders of today. Let’s read.

### **READ SCRIPTURE**

Charlton Heston walking down Mount Sinai with the tablets of stone as lightning and thunder strikes around him is probably burned in the minds of those 50 and over in this congregation. For the rest of you younger folks, Charlton Heston was a really, really famous actor and he played Moses in, well, Moses.

But that is the scene that we read today. You would think that when your leader has a visible conversation with God it would provide an added boost of confidence for the Israelites as they are trekking across the desert to get to the promised land. Verse 30 tells us that when the people saw Moses they were afraid. Verse 31 we see that they approach Moses cautiously, and skeptically. First the leaders speak to him, once the way is clear and they are sure that he is safe, then we see that the people speak to him. But he was scary, his face was shining and that just doesn't normally happen to people. I mean, these people had seen some strange things, but this was added to the list of things that were out of the norm and scary.

When we have experiences with God sometimes we keep them to ourselves because we don't want people to think we are crazy, especially if our face is shining. Moses encountered God and it put him at a disadvantage in his relationship with his people because they just didn't get him or what was happening to him. So he covered his face so the people wouldn't always have in their face this leader who was on a first name basis with God. So Moses in the process of fulfilling God's desires by literally bringing the law to the Israelites was not received with open arms by his people, but rather they were afraid of him and what he was bringing and how it would change their life, as new things tend to do.

Stephen was also someone who had a very direct and visible relationship with God. We were introduced to him two weeks ago. Remember the problem we were having in the early church? The Greek widows were being overlooked in favor of the Hebrew widows and so the Greek widows were going home hungry. So in vs.5 Stephen is chosen to serve and wait on tables and care for these widows. Stephen is also a Greek name as opposed to a Hebrew name, so it makes sense that he was one of those chosen because he would also be serving his own.

But look at vs.5 again and you see Stephen is the only one described in detail with positive terms, as opposed to just descriptive terms. He was called a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. None of the others are described that way so we should have known this guy was a bit special. So today we are reintroduced to him again and he is described in vs.8 as someone full of grace and power. So far this Stephen according to Scripture in vs.5 full of faith and the Holy Spirit, vs.8 full of grace and power. So we know God has something special planned for him because Scripture is making him special.

But it isn't finished. Verse 8 says he did wonders and signs among the people. We've heard about these great wonders and signs before. Open your Bibles to Acts, a book that by now I hope you are becoming very familiar with. God to Acts 2:43, 4:30, 5:12, so if we were to describe the early church it was a church that did great wonders and signs. If you are called on

as a disciple of Jesus Christ you know you are fulfilling your role because you see great wonders and signs being performed. Next week we begin our stewardship month and we will see that it is often in our finances where God is able to get our attention with great wonders and signs. So, Stephen is a part of this long line of apostles, and disciples and leaders of the church looking to fulfill what Jesus commanded them to do on this earth.

We have some very specific details here about the debate that arises between Stephen and this group of Jews from the Freedmen Synagogue. So freedmen were those who either had been released from slavery or generationally they were slaves by background but it would be a Greek speaking church. We know by inscriptions that have been found in Jerusalem that such a place existed. Now, we know that Stephen was Greek, and we know from how Jesus was treated in his home synagogue, I have my own personal belief that this may have been Stephen's home synagogue and the people that he was arguing with he knew very well.

You tend to get a lot more fired up around people you know and people tend to get a lot more angry with you if you've had a history with them. It all inevitably comes back out. So, here we have Stephen speaking about Jesus and how he was the Messiah and how faith in him provided eternal life. But this all sounds natural and maybe even exhilarating to us, but not so much for those who had so much to lose in their own eyes if Jesus was, as he stated in Matthew 5:17-20. Read it...I have come to fulfill the law. That sounds normal to us, but back then if this is true, then it is scarier than Moses coming down from Sinai with tablets etched by God.

This first century church which Stephen represented was at a critical time in their history, and in the history of the world. Stephen's threat was one of the changing of the status quo which meant the changing of the guard. Stephen in this debate is accused of attacking the very foundation of Jewish life. Moses and God, the law and the temple. You can't have organized religion and institutional religion without all of that. And Jesus says in John 2:19 that if the temple were destroyed that he personally would rebuild it in three days, so it really wasn't needed after all. He told the Samaritan woman at the well that the day would come when we no longer worship at the temple. But how can you love God if God doesn't have a home, or the law, or a superhero like Moses?

This is where the ministry of the early church comes in direct conflict with the culture and the status quo of the day as it did in Luther's time. New ways of doing things and of believing were considered dangerous and threatening. But we read today about people who were equipped to lead His people in the face of such challenges that will inevitably affect how God's desires are fulfilled.

But as we look to carry out God's promises and God's purposes as Stephen and Moses did, we are equipped. Look at Luke 21:15 and we read that Jesus sends his Holy Spirit to fulfill his purposes. It is that Holy Spirit which made Moses' face to shine and Stephen more able as we read in vs. 10 to speak so that they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke, and eventually made his face shine and look like an angel.

We are living in a pivotal time today. Some think things have never been so bad, and scary, and scattered in our country. We are going through tragic, tragic times. Yesterday's shooting and the bombs scattered across our country is another example of the same type of person harming people because they feel called by some in leadership to fulfill this heinous purpose. It is a terrible time in the history of our nation. But let me remind you of 1968 some of the things that happened in our world and our country: MLK is assassinated, Robert Kennedy assassinated, race riots in our city streets, student protests all over the country and our world, Tet offensive in Vietnam, we are at war in Vietnam, our boys and girls are dying over there, North Korea is threatening, the Chicago Democratic Convention takes place and the bloodbath there. All in the same year, oh year, and I was born that year as well. It was a real mess of a year.

I am convinced as our 90 Day Challenge author of today tells us, Ecclesiastes, that there is nothing new under the sun. But what is unique is that we are called to live together as a church in this time and this place to fulfill God's desires in this pivotal time in history. But what we need to be aware of is that whenever we do, we will be accused falsely because our mission flies in the face of the people who are in power. Because fulfilling the law has less to do about looking after our own interests and making sure that people who look, talk, think like us remain in power, but rather more about those who have no place to go find a home here. This is fulfilling God's law.

Visionaries, people who see God's plans clearly and pursue them have always been considered dangerous, so maybe our task is to be dangerous as Luther was, as Stephen was, as our Savior Jesus was, so dangerous that they killed him. So there is absolutely today a conflict between our mission and those in power. May God bless us and keep us as we look to fulfill his law without counting the cost. Amen.