

# *Sermon Text for January 13, 2019*

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Genesis 17:9-14, Acts 7:1-8

## *“Baptized in Water”*

The last time that we heard from the Acts of the Apostles was back in October, the last Sunday in October actually, it was Reformation Sunday and we looked at the end of chapter 6. And now all these weeks later after a month of stewardship then a month of Advent, we pick up again at the beginning of chapter 7 of Acts. When I prepared my newest sermon list I put 3 asterisks by this Scripture because I was going to skip it because I couldn't really find anything significant in it. There was just some language about a covenant that God made with Abraham.

We made a covenant last week to a packed house at both services. This covenant that we read about in Genesis was a covenant of the flesh, a physical covenant that required the cutting of the foreskin of an 8 day old baby boy. It was a mark which distinguished this child, this boy, as a child of God.

In Jeremiah 31:33, open it and read it. The prophet tells us: “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” In Abraham's day no circumcision meant there was no covenant, and that meant you were not, you simply could not be a child of God. Jeremiah tells us this was a covenant of the flesh but the days are coming when the covenant will be written on the heart.

I am here to tell you, that day has come. Jesus has brought that covenant of the heart that Jeremiah prophesied to us. This covenant which is written on the heart is manifested no longer in circumcision, but it is found in baptism. In baptism God claims us and calls us and seals us as his children. He draws us into a relationship with him that circumcision never could. Let's read Stephen speak about this covenant that God has with us.

### **READ SCRIPTURE**

We pick up in vs.1 with the high priest asking Stephen the question: are these things so? So, how did we get to this point where the most important religious figure of the day, the Pope of the first century, is addressing, or really accusing a disciple, a follower of Jesus Christ, of heresy.

Remember Stephen back in chapter 6:5 was chosen to be a deacon and to serve on tables and to help with the widows who were being overlooked. But then we find him doing great signs and wonders among the people, vs. 8, and arguing in the squares trying to tell people about Jesus Christ. As a result he was arrested and brought to Jerusalem before the council where they

accused him of preaching Jesus as an element of change, Jesus as a catalyst for revolution, Jesus as someone who would be on the side of the most vulnerable and powerless in society.

He was before a group of people who believed strongly that the best reform was no reform. Keep things the way they are, or else. Are these charges true? If you have joined the church in my tenure here or become a church officer or been married by me or had your child baptized I always tell you that whenever you are in front of the church and I ask you a question that you have to answer, the answer will always be yes. Is Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior, Yes. Do you promise to be a faithful husband, I do. Do you want your child baptized, I do. Will you renounce evil, I Will. Always answer in the positive because if you answer in the negative, if you say no, we will either have to do it all over again or maybe it just isn't for you.

Stephen, are these things so? Yes or no, that is really the only way this man of faith whose face was glowing like an angel according to 6:15, just the verse before this, are these things true, do you believe that Jesus has come to establish a new covenant so we no longer need this place, this temple. Are these things so?

Instead of saying yes like I would have coached him to say, he tells a story. Jesus used to tell stories a lot more than he would give straight answers so we should be used to it. The story that Stephen tells is the longest monologue in all of Acts. But notice that what Stephen says is not intended to soothe the waters, nor was it an attempt to escape punishment or appease the listeners. His story was one that was meant to reveal a covenant that was written on our hearts by Jesus Christ, a covenant of grace.

He begins by telling them about Abraham and a literal and physical journey that he was called upon by God to make. No, you must know that the people in the room from the high priest on down knew the story of Abraham just as well, if not better, than Stephen. Abraham was the father of their faith. In another Scripture these leaders scoff at Jesus and tell him that they are children of Abraham, what more could any good child of God want than that, that was the epitome of being a child of God.

The covenant that God made with Abraham was one that he had made directly with them as children of Abraham. But the journey that Stephen describes is one where in vs 6 Abraham and his family are foreign aliens living in a strange land where the people did not speak his language and they had noticeably darker skin than he and his wife did. He left his home country to settle in a land that was right on the border of Africa.

In fact, on this journey of faith over the generations they were mistreated, kept as slaves, the residents of that land mistreated them and distrusted them and made assumptions about their

character and their honesty. This is Abraham and his family and his progeny that we are talking about here who were not welcomed in a foreign land. That was part of his journey. The people listening to the story were totally tracking with Stephen because it was a part of their story. Few other groups of people have been more mistreated in history than the Jewish people, specifically by people like us, so when Stephen tells the story, there were some amens coming out of the audience.

But God says that Abraham and his people were only the beginning of the faith journey and the end game we find in vs.7 where the goal is for the people to come out of bondage and slavery and internment camps along the border to worship. Stephen says to worship here, in the temple. More heads were nodding because yes, we are here in the temple and the promises of the covenant have come true.

But Abraham was just the beginning. God's covenant was given a physical representation which was circumcision. All of this to show that the journey continues to where we are today, Stephen says, where Abraham became the father of Isaac and Isaac the father of Jacob and he the father of the 12 tribes and so here we are today. This journey of faith is not static, it is dynamic, Stephen tells the religious leaders. This journey of faith leads us to a covenant no longer of flesh, but one of the heart which can only be found in a relationship with Jesus Christ...but I am getting ahead of myself. These aren't the verse that we find here. Stephen will get there, so this is kind of a spoiler alert.

This covenant of the heart has been given to us today in Jesus Christ. Today is the Sunday that according to our Christian calendar we are supposed to celebrate the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. It was another epiphany to those around that this was the Son of God. This Jesus who was taken to the temple on the 8<sup>th</sup> day of his life just as Genesis commanded to be circumcised. He fulfilled the law in every way possible.

For us today the culmination and the beginning of our journey is baptism. Peter tells the crowds who ask the question early in Acts 2:37 when they were cut to the heart: what shall we do? Peter responds: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven."

As a result we see in Acts 16:15 that Lydia believed and because of her faith her entire household was baptized as well. When we baptize we believe the covenant of God is written upon the hearts of those that are baptized whether they are infant or adults and that no matter who does the baptizing it counts. Baptism for reformed Christians is the embrace into this

covenant community. It is a recognition that the end game for all of us, as it was for Stephen, would be that we gather to worship God.

In many ways baptism is the anti-circumcision. It is not of the flesh but of the Spirit and it is not limited to half of the population, but all of it. The purpose of Stephen's storytelling is really to get listeners to introspectively see if the charges they brought against him should really be leveled against themselves. For Stephen, judgement begins in God's own home, judgement delivered through the courageous determination to tell our own history honestly.

As baptized believers, especially this Sunday when we remember Jesus being baptized so that he could be prepared for his ministry, this early Sunday in the New Year we are called, like Stephen's accusers, to look at our own history honestly and to confess those times that we have brought charges against others which would have been better leveled at us. We are called to introspectively look at our own sin and come before the Lord in our end game, in worship, knowing that this is exactly where He wants us to be. We are in the place where as people of the covenant, where as people who are embraced by the God of grace, we are called to look inside of ourselves see our own sin, and then move forward as children of the covenant. Let's do that.