

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
January 30, 2022

Turning Disruption into Mission

Acts 7:54-8:8

Last week, Open Doors, an international organization that supports persecuted Christians worldwide, released its 2022 World Watch List. The list is an annual ranking of the top 50 countries where it's most dangerous to be a Christian. For the past 20 years, North Korea ranked number one. But this year, Afghanistan has moved into that position. North Korea still came in second, followed by Somalia, Libya, and Yemen. As you work your way through the list, the primary source of persecution varies. Sometimes it's religious extremism. Sometimes political oppression. Sometimes religious nationalism. Sometimes totalitarianism. Sometimes corruption and organized crime. Hostility to the gospel and opposition to Jesus' disciples come in many forms.

Had Open Doors existed when Luke was writing the book of Acts, I'm sure it would have reported on the persecution that broke out against Jesus' followers in Jerusalem. In today's text, hostility toward Stephen's ministry reaches a boiling point, and he's martyred for his proclamation of salvation through Christ. But this attempt to silence the gospel actually ends up serving to spread the good news to other regions. According to Luke, "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went" (8:4). That ironic statement signals that we're entering a new chapter in the advancement of the gospel beyond the familiar confines of the holy city.

As one commentator has put it, "Persecution does not stop proclamation."¹ God's living word can't be halted, and his commitment to the salvation of humankind can't be subverted. Opposition in one location creates opportunity in another location. Instead of shrinking, the geography of the gospel expands. The map of redemption grows. What begins as disruption gets turned into mission.

During the last two years, we've learned plenty about disruption, including within the life of our church. Our congregation has experienced lots of scatteredness. I'm not trying to put our hardships on a par with the suffering that millions of persecuted disciples are facing in other parts of the world. We certainly haven't faced the kind of rejection and deprivation that so many of our brothers and sisters in Christ have endured for the sake of the gospel. But we have been through, and continue to deal with, a season of distress in which so much of church life has been uprooted and unsettled. COVID-19 has created all sorts of barriers that have distanced us from one another. Our gathering to hear the word and our going to spread the word have come up against obstacles that we never anticipated. It feels like the pandemic has constantly pushed against our witness, threatening who we are and what we do as God's people.

But the good news is that through it all, God hasn't stopped doing things. As we heard in today's reading from Isaiah, God's word is still going forth, accomplishing what he desires and achieving the purpose for which he sends it (55:11). COVID-19 hasn't silenced the voice of Christ in our midst. We're still listening to Jesus and preaching Jesus. True, the congregational environment has changed as we've adjusted our programming, altered parts of our worship service, and made greater use of technology. There have been stretches of time when we've closed and then reopened. But during it all, God has never ceased

operations. His kingdom has been up and running 24/7/365. His mission of redemption hasn't changed. Jesus is just as much at the right hand of God now as he was prior to March 2020.

About a year ago, a reporter for the British newspaper *The Telegraph* wrote about a minister who took the good news of God to the streets:

... in the first week of the first lockdown, as the Church of England shut its doors, the Reverend Pat Allerton, vicar of London's St. Peter's, had a brainwave. Nicknamed the Walking Priest, he says, "I had an idea to take a hymn and a prayer to the streets of my parish, to lift spirits and bring a bit of joy. So, on March the 26th, I went out to Portobello Road."

He was cautious about the effects of hitting the streets with a loudspeaker, blaring out Judy Collins' *Amazing Grace* on Spotify. He says jauntily, "I thought I might be told to 'do one' (English slang for 'disappear'). But I was amazed by the response. People were really moved. They clapped and invited me back! They probably regret that now. I believe God was coming alongside people, letting them know He's there."

Over the following weeks, Allerton did 64 walking services around London, helped by the amazing weather. Each service—with a hymn, a prayer, and a 60-second sermon—took seven minutes. He invited people—up to 50 at a time—to join in from a window or doorway. "So many people commented on social media, saying things like, 'I'm not religious but I've got goosebumps. There are tears coming down my face.' God's presence was touching people."²

How encouraging that during a time when we've had to be very cautious and careful about our physical proximity to other people, God has been busy touching human beings, making contact with us in fresh ways. While we've been focused on social distancing, God has actually drawn near, often by methods and means that we wouldn't have previously considered. Some of these innovations have happened in the area of congregational worship. In the early stages of the pandemic, some churches pivoted to outdoor services or drive-through worship. Some ministry leaders, like Reverend Allerton in London, took their ministry to the streets. Many congregations adopted virtual worship gatherings, including livestreaming their worship services. These are just a few examples of how the scatteredness created by COVID-19 has created an atmosphere that invites change. Change that has actually expanded the range and reach of Christian ministry. In many ways, disruption has been turned into mission.

A few months into the pandemic, one pastor wrote an article titled, "Church Will Never Be the Same. And That's Good." He captured the opportunities of the moment well when he said, "It is common to be a bit nervous about the host of challenges that will face the gathered church for the foreseeable future. But not all change is bad. Leveraged correctly, the disorientation brought about by the pandemic could foster reprioritization and focus that brings out the best in God's people."³

It's interesting to look back over the past couple of years and see how lots of the developments he was observing or forecasting have taken shape in congregations. For instance, he stressed how churches shouldn't necessarily aim at getting back to old patterns or returning the congregation to what it used to be. In other words, we shouldn't concentrate most of our energy and attention primarily on getting back to normal, or recovering the church that we knew before the pandemic hit. Instead, this has become a season to evaluate and refocus. It's a time to reflect on how we can pursue the same mission but in fresh ways. It's a time to consider new methods for reaching more people. It's a time for you to explore ways to love your neighbor and be a witness for Christ outside of established church programs that may not be operating. It's a time to cultivate a deeper appreciation for the spiritual disciplines and holy habits that sustain us in seasons of scatteredness. It's a time for leaders in the congregation to grow in stepping up, and to

mature in shepherding the flock during disruption. It's a time to look beyond what we as one congregation want to do, and to think about partnership and collaboration with other churches as one of the best ways to participate in God's mission in the world.

One of the ways we've been able to do this is through our gifts to international missions through the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering. Your contribution gets joined with the contributions of others in our congregation, and our church's contribution gets joined with the offerings from other congregations to provide resources and support for our missionaries. This is an example of how we advance God's kingdom together.

David and Julie Yngsdal are two of the individuals supported by your gifts. They serve among refugee communities in Durban, South Africa. One of those refugees, whose name has been changed for security purposes, is called Kara. Her family in Burundi has disowned her because of her choice to follow Jesus. Some members of her family have even made threatening phone calls, declaring her "dead to them." But in the midst of persecution and fear, Kara has grown in reliance on God's sovereign love and purposes. She and her husband and children are now part of a resettlement program which will relocate them to Canada. Our missionary Julie wrote: "They have been such a vital part of God's work with us. We can't be sad though because their hearts are glad and once again, as it often happens with transient refugees, we raise up and help to 'water and grow' God's children and then find that He relocated them (in His plan) to go and be missionaries and lights in other places."⁴

Luke says, "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went." Praise be to God for how he takes experiences of hardship, disruption, dislocation, and scatteredness, and uses them to advance his kingdom and spread the gospel. Following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, one newspaper reporter wrote a story about several churches that had been scattered by the storm. One of those churches was White Dove Fellowship International Outreach Center, pastored by Reverend Michael Mille. The church normally had over 3,000 in attendance. But on the first Sunday after the hurricane, Reverend Mille preached to 300. During his emotional sermon, Reverend Mille offered a unique Christian perspective on the tragedy and how it affected his congregation. He said, "We have successfully planted people all over the U.S." Then he also noted, "We used to sing Jesus is all we need...now he's all we've got."⁵

During this ongoing season of dislocation and scatteredness, let's continue to rely upon the fact that the presence of Jesus is what makes the church the church, and that Jesus is with us as we take further steps forward. And like those whom persecution scattered from Jerusalem and into new territory, let's continue to carry the good news of God's reconciling love with us, wherever we as a church eventually land. Remember that God can take our disruption and turn it into greater mission. This is the conviction on which our Church Council will gather following today's service. We'll seek the wisdom of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our congregation's ministry, especially as we look out over the year ahead. Join us in the process of discerning God's direction, through your prayers, and by being available to do your part in the advancement of God's kingdom.

¹ Robert W. Wall, "The Acts of the Apostles." *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002) n.p.

² Harry Mount, "Can the Church of England Survive Covid?" *The Telegraph* (January 9, 2021).

³ Matt Rogers, "Church Will Never Be the Same. And That's Good." *Christianity Today*. May 26, 2020.

⁴ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/partners/gloo/coronavirus-shaping-future-of-church.html> (January 27, 2022).

⁵ Caroline Anderson, "God at work through trials of persecuted refugees; hope for resettlement." *IMB*. January 17, 2022. https://www.imb.org/2022/01/17/god-work-trials-persecuted-refugees-brings-hope-resettlement/#msdynttrid=FxS5-Rkr_WUKJNMLucFZ__0e_05344FleZkH0Aw0k3I (January 27, 2022).

⁶ Lolly Bowean, "Ministers Look to Rebuild Lost Flocks." *Chicago Tribune* (September 19, 2005).