When the World Covers Its Ears
What Does It Mean to Trust the Way?
Easter 5: May 3 2026

Holy One, Creator, Word and Spirit
Teach us to take the long view
to plant seeds we may never see grow,
to trust that your justice is forever unfolding,
even now. Amen.

There are moments in Scripture, and in our own lives, when truthful revelation affects us as a whack on the side of the head, clear, obvious, and yet stubbornly ignored. Consider today's reading from Acts.

Stephen stands up with fire in his bones and speaks hard truth to the early followers of Jesus: you've grown stubborn, closed off, petty, resisting the Spirit, you are just like those before you who rejected the prophets.

It lands like a spark in dry grass. The crowd turns furious, teeth clenched, hearts shut. Stephen isn't looking at them anymore he's caught up in a vision, seeing heaven flung wide open and Jesus standing right there with God, as if ready to receive him.

That's more than the crowd can bear. They rush him, drag him outside, and stone him to death.

While being stoned to death, Stephen prays for mercy: "Don't hold this against them."

Stephen is filled with the Holy Spirit. Heaven is clearly revealed to him. Christ standing, God present. And the response?

They cover their ears. They shout him down. They refuse to listen. Not confusion. Not misunderstanding. Refusal.

Off to the side stands a privileged young man named Saul, holding coats, watching the drama closely enough to feel the crush of the stones, non-responsive, but not untouched.

The Church has recognized Stephen not as just the first deacon, but as the prototype deacon who shows what this calling looks like when lived fully.

And there's something deeply fitting for me in that: the first named deacon is not remembered for organizing charity, but for standing at the intersections speaking

prophetic truth and willingly taking risks leading to the loss of his life.

It is one of the most revealing images in all of Scripture: the early Christian community that cannot bear to recognize the dynamic changes that were happening. A community that once again chooses orderliness over transformation.

And if we are honest, this is not a scriptural historical drama. Each of us have personal experiences where we have responded in the same way.

From the Crowd's Point of View

Stephen feels dangerous not simply because he is wrong, but because he threatens everything that holds our world together.

He speaks as if the Temple is no longer the center, as if the Law is no longer the boundary, as if God is moving outside and beyond what we have faithfully preserved.

Under the oppressive weight of empire, we cling to what remains of our identity, our story, our practices. And Stephen is unraveling them.

When he retells our history, he does not comfort us he confronts us.

He places us among those who resisted God, those who rejected the prophets. That accusation cuts too deeply to bear.

And when he claims to see heaven opened when he names Jesus beside God it feels like blasphemy and loss all at once. If God is no longer where we have known God to be, then what is left of us?

So, we cover our ears out of fear
Fear of losing our identity.
Fear of losing certainty.
Fear that if we listen, we might have to change.

In that moment, silencing Stephen feels like preserving faith. Preserving order.
Preserving God.
We Stone Him.

And Saul, a newcomer, stands there, above it all, steady, learned, devout making it all feel justified.
the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul

He is not throwing stones himself.
But he is present, consenting, and complicit.

To the crowd, Saul represents orthodoxy.
He is trained, educated, serious about the law.

Saul embodies the religious, cultural, political structures that normalize harm while believing themselves faithful to God.

The witnesses lay their coats at his feet signaling approval, authority, and bystander participation.
He has the authority of empire.
His presence lends credibility to the act.

What might otherwise be seen as mob violence is reframed as righteous enforcement.

And that is what makes Saul so important to this story.

He represents the part of the human condition and the Church that:

confuses certainty with faithfulness,
defends rather than embraces a dynamic God,
justifies colonialism, genocide, violence, warfare clothed in righteousness.

And yet this is not the end of Saul's story.

Because the same Saul who stands there, holding coats,
will one day become Paul
the one who carries the Gospel across boundaries,
the one who insists that God cannot be contained,
the one who proclaims that nothing can separate us from the love of God.
That transformation does not happen all at once.

It is slow.
It is disruptive.
It is painful.

We often tell the story of Paul's conversion as if it were instantaneous a flash of light, a voice from heaven, and everything changes.

Scripture suggests something more complex.

After that moment on the road, there is blindness.
There is waiting.

There is dependence on others.
There is time in obscurity.

The scales fall but only after a period of disorientation.

The transformation begins long before Damascus.
It begins at the stoning of Stephen.

At the edge of violence.
At the whisper of truth Saul cannot yet hear.
At the witness of mercy he does not yet understand.

Something in Saul is already being unsettled.
This is the mystery of God's work:
even in resistance, even in complicity,
the Spirit is already at work.

The one who covers their ears today
may become the one who listens tomorrow.

The one who resists today
may become the one who proclaims tomorrow.

We must allow transformation to happen within us.

And it is to our human instinct to control, to secure, to make our own way, that Jesus speaks:

"Do not let your hearts be troubled… I am the way, and the truth, and the life."

Jesus is not giving directions. He is unbinding our need to be the ones who chart the course.

Because most of us do not want a way we want a plan.
We want to know where this is going.
We want clarity.
We want outcomes.

We want to make our own way. And Jesus says: No. I am the way.
The Psalmist gives us language:
"Into your hands I commend my spirit."

This is not resignation. It is resistance. It is trust.
In a world that tells us to secure everything to say “Into your hands” is a refusal to let fear be our guide.

It is letting go of the illusion that we are the ones who make the Way.

We are living in a time when the world is uncovering its ears. Where the Gospel meets us in the urgency of now.

We see it when communities cry out for dignity and are met with silence or force.
When migrants seek safety and encounter systems of exclusion.
When truth is spoken and dismissed because it demands too much change.

We are invited and join people refusing to cover their ears.
neighbors showing up.

taking risks.
speaking truth to power
stepping into the breach.

we question: Will this make a difference?

We want results.
We want measurable change.
We want to know that our efforts matter.

The Gospel however invites us into something deeper

Not control over outcomes, but faithfulness within the process. This is where the long view matters.

As we often pray:
“We are prophets of a future not our own.
We plant seeds that one day will grow.
We lay foundations that will need further development.”
This is the long view of the reign of heaven

To trust that God is the Way means we are not responsible for finishing the work, but we are responsible for being faithful within it.

We stand today in the shadow of two figures: Stephen and Saul. Stephen speaks a truth that disrupts, and the crowd covers their ears. Not because they do not believe in God but because they are certain they already understand God.

There is always a theology behind the violence. The crowd believes they are protecting truth, preserving the community. And yet, in that belief, they commit harm in the name of God.

When certainty replaces compassion, theology becomes dangerous.
Standing nearby is Saul, holding the coats. He is not impulsive he is convinced. He believes he is faithful, righteous, aligned with God's will.

The most dangerous violence is the violence we believe is righteous.

This is not only a story about the post resurrection community it is a story about us. Across history, religion has been used to justify power, exclusion, and harm. We are complicit.

Some theological systems imagine that suffering and destruction are part of God's plan.

Within certain forms of Christian Nationalist - Zionist eschatology, the gathering of Jewish people in Israel is seen as a precursor to the end times culminating in conversion for some and destruction for others.

Here I must pause and ask: what kind of God requires the suffering of others to fulfill divine purposes? Might I suggest a God defined by human empires, such as Christian Nationalism.

Jesus does not require destruction to bring about redemption. The Gospel does not treat people as means to an end. It reveals a Creator who knows each person by name and calls them beloved.

Saul must have carried the memory of Stephen’s stoning. What if his transformation began not with certainty, but with Holy disturbance?

On the road to Damascus, Saul is struck blind. Not as punishment, but as interruption. Blindness becomes mercy the mercy of being stopped.

Saul is in a state of disorientation where certainty has collapsed, memory has become unbearable, and the first fragile movements toward surrender are beginning.
This is the space where the old world has died, but the new one has not yet been born.
And then the scales fall.

The scales are not just physical. They are theological, ideological, relational. They are everything that once informed Saul about who belonged and who did not. He is at an intersection of being faithful and harming the work of God.

Conversion is not seeing better it is seeing differently.
What emerges is a new vision: a mothering creator not confined to nation, land, or system, but revealed in love, justice, and reconciliation.

This is the Beloved Community, a community without borders, where dignity is not earned but recognized.

We should ask ourselves: Where are we covering our ears?

Where are we holding the coats? Where are we resisting the scales covering our own eyes.

We are not asked to finish the work. We are asked to be faithful within it to remain open, to listen, to be transformed.

May we have the courage to release the God we have created, and as the Psalmist who gives us language suggests “Into your hands I commend my spirit.”