

What if you're not Stephen? (Acts 7:55-60)

When we read biblical narratives, we tend to imagine ourselves as the protagonist.

by [Enuma Okoro](#)

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When we read biblical narratives, we tend to place ourselves as the protagonist--at least I do. Almost without thinking, I imagine that the only way to learn from the story is if I am at the center.

In the call of Abram story, I rarely imagine myself as one of those *not* called. Instead I ask, what if God called me to leave my home? What can I learn about obedience here? In the Jonah story, I never think I might be one of the sinners in Nineveh. It's always, what if I were the one stuck inside the whale?

With this week's reading from Acts, I wonder if most of us automatically see ourselves as Stephen. But if we approach the text with an open and receptive spirit, where else in this martyrdom scene might we find ourselves?

What would it mean if we were among those who stone him, those enraged by a threatening word of truth? We may not literally kill people, but in what ways do we cause grave harm when we react to perspectives that threaten us, or to visions of God with which we do not agree? The mob is made up of the council of religious authorities who are charged with ensuring that people do not blaspheme against God. And they believe Stephen is doing this. But they also seem to hear his witness as blasphemy because they have already decided how God works, how God reveals God's self and to whom. There isn't any room left in their imaginations.

Our world is only becoming more diverse. Like it or not, ready or not, we will increasingly be confronted with neighbors, colleagues, and even new friends who have different ideas from ours. What could happen if we approached difference in culture, faith, and people the same way we try to approach scripture, with an open and receptive spirit? I wonder what the people in the crowd surrounding Stephen are so afraid of hearing. What aspects of their world is threatened by listening to what Stephen has to say; what notions of God do they find so offensive?

And how might we answer such questions ourselves--if by chance we discover that in this story, we are not Stephen?