

“The World Turned Upside Down”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Edina Morningside Community Church; May 3, 2020

Acts 17:1-9

After Paul and Silas had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This is the Messiah, Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you.” Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. But the Jews became jealous, and with the help of some ruffians in the marketplaces they formed a mob and set the city in an uproar. While they were searching for Paul and Silas to bring them out to the assembly, they attacked Jason’s house. When they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some believers before the city authorities, shouting, “These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has entertained them as guests. They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus.” The people and the city officials were disturbed when they heard this, and after they had taken bail from Jason and the others, they let them go.

Several weeks ago, the other church staff members gathered online for a check-in. We took turns naming our sorrows, joys and sightings of God in the midst of these times. The conversation shifted to a question of what we are learning in this time, what in our ministries might be forever changed because of our experiences right now. We are starting to see life-altering, church-transforming impacts of the pandemic, and that the future will look drastically different from what we have known to this point. Laurie Eckberg reminded us of what church historian Phyllis Tickle has suggested, that every 500 years or so the Christian church goes through a great rummage sale of sorts, deciding what to keep and what to let go of, how to be church in a new era. Could our current global transformation be on the same scale as the fall of the Roman Empire, or the upheaval of the Reformation in Europe? Truly, we do not know what will come of this time, only that it will be remarked upon in the histories of the world that are told generations from now. The pandemic has turned the world upside down.

But this isn’t the first time. Indeed, when the Gospel first started to spread in the decades after the resurrection, it had a similar upside-downing, table-turning effect. When apostles like Paul and Silas travel to new towns and teach the ways of Jesus, they face disbelief and opposition by local authorities. We hear a key accusation against them from this description of a scuffle in Acts: “These people...have been turning the world upside down....They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus.”

You see, the Roman emperor had decreed that all religions were free to practice so long as they didn’t challenge a more important allegiance to Rome. But Jesus and the Christians who followed him refused to accept this idea that the emperor was more important than the God of the universe. This is why the Christian way of life was so threatening to the status quo—it offered another ultimate loyalty than that of the Empire. Converts to Christianity joined a whole different world, a movement for freedom, justice and love. To be a Christian was to set yourself apart from business as usual, to live according to the righteousness of God rather than the corrupt or violent ways of those in power.

Jesus gives his followers the Love Commandment, then and now. Loving our neighbors as ourselves includes acting as a bandage for those who are wounded and hurting. The other part of our calling is to love God and God’s ways so much that we will resist that which is ungodly, that which injures the people and planet that God has made. This is why Christians—especially in the United Church of Christ—have been active in supporting every freedom movement from women’s suffrage to racial equality to

immigrant rights to environmental justice. Churches are hospitals for wounded souls and bodies. We also resist what causes such woundedness in the first place.

Just before Easter, Tom Martens posted to our EMC Facebook group an article that cautioned us to “[Prepare for the Ultimate Gaslighting](#)”, and I’ve been thinking about it ever since. Author Julio Vicent Gambuto describes how this pandemic has made newly visible what has been in plain sight for years: a broken health care system, unequal access to technologies for learning or commerce, and “a government that has so severely damaged the credibility of our media that 300 million people don’t know who to listen to for basic facts that can save their lives.” The Indian writer Arundhati Roy says [something similar](#): “The tragedy is immediate, real, epic and unfolding before our eyes. But it isn’t new. It is the wreckage of a train that has been careening down the track for years.” In other words, we’re seeing that the world was upside-down already, this whole time!

If that’s the case, a Christian faith that makes visible God’s justice and love *will* be disruptive and overturning again, because it is so counter to the way the world works now. Christian voices I know and admire are calling for bold public policies that match the scale of what’s been revealed in these times. We can make changes now to protect the health of every person no matter what, because Jesus reminds us that every person is made in the image of God. We can create a world closer to that of the first Christian communities, where generous sharing by all meant scarcity for none. Now more than ever, that’s the compassionate, open-hearted, world-changing faith that Christ calls us to be. So when we finish worship, meet in smaller groups, and go into this week, how does what you will do—what we do together—meet the needs of the world, and connect with God’s eternal realignment? What part will we play in creating a world that’s upside down again, in all the upright ways of God’s Good News?

Writer Arundhati Roy concludes that “Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.”

In the end, those ancient opponents to Christianity had it wrong. Paul, the leading women, Jason, and other believers in Thessalonica are not turning the world upside down. *God* is turning upside down the ways of corruption death and despair in the world, making all things new by the power of resurrection. We have the privilege and responsibility of being the body of Christ that bears witness to this transformation by our words and deeds. We are co-creators with God and one another of the world we want to live in next. Amen.