

## Readings and Sermon for Sunday May 3, 2020

Grace and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ! May the readings, Pastor Steve's message and your reflections gather into one to guide and strengthen your faith.

### **Mark 13:9-11**

'As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them. And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations. When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.

### **Acts 17:1-9**

1 After Paul and Silas had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. 2 And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures, 3 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." 4 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. 5 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. 6 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, 7 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." 8 The people and the city officials were disturbed when they heard this, 9 and after they had taken bail from Jason and the others, they let them go.

### **1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 1-10**

1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and

the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. 2 We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly 3 remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 4 For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. 6 And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, 7 so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. 8 For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. 9 For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead -- Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

## **SERMON**

Today we join the Apostle Paul and company in Thessalonica. It can be argued that no one spread the Good News of Jesus Christ more so than Paul. Paul was a massive advocate of the life, healing and forgiveness to be had in Jesus Christ. He spread the Good News all over the eastern Mediterranean. He established churches in city after city. He had empowered leadership to conduct the business of the young churches after he would move on. Paul was a prolific writer. He would write letters to these churches. Twelve books of the New Testament containing his love, admonishment, encouragement and direction. Paul was a leader.

However, before he was the Apostle Paul, a leader in the name of Jesus Christ, he was Saul a fierce persecutor of the earliest converts to Christianity. Paul was a Jew of religious pedigree. A self-described, "Pharisee born of Pharisee's" (Acts 23:6), a tentmaker by trade

(Acts 18:1-3). Paul spent approximately 3 years persecuting Christians in Jerusalem. He was present at the stoning of Stephen and he led the charge in going house to house dragging Christians off to prison. Yes, before Paul was a zealot for the Lord he was vehemently opposed to Him.

His story is famous. On the road to Damascus to engage in more persecution of those following “the Way” Saul(as he was known them) is thrown to the ground by a light from heaven that flashed all around him. A voice from above then says to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’”<sup>7</sup>The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. <sup>8</sup>Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. <sup>9</sup>For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. <sup>10</sup> Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, ‘Ananias.’ He answered, ‘Here I am, Lord.’ <sup>11</sup>The Lord said to him, ‘Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, <sup>12</sup>and he has seen in a vision\* a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.’ <sup>13</sup>But Ananias answered, ‘Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; <sup>14</sup>and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.’ <sup>15</sup>But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; <sup>16</sup>I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.’<sup>17</sup>So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands-on Saul\* and said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’<sup>18</sup>And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, <sup>19</sup>and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, <sup>20</sup>and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God.’

Paul's life was the Way of Jesus from there. His story is dramatic and life changing. As has always been the case with God, the broken are used to the glory of God. Those who are instruments of negative cause and effect have their tuned changed by God. Paul was as he wrote in 2<sup>nd</sup> Cor. 5:17, a new creation in Christ. Paul's transformation was so radical that he devoted his life to preaching and teaching the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection for about 30 years. His teaching and preaching influenced by his story, of God giving him a new life in Christ, healing his angry heart, and forgiving him all the ill he had been spewing before God blinded Him with a loving conviction on the road to Damascus.

So that brings us to today's text, 15 years into God's mission of Paul bringing Christ to the Gentiles. Paul is in Thessalonica with Silas where on three Sabbath days (three weeks) Paul argues with them about the scriptures. You can imagine that Paul was a force to be reckoned with. He was a Jew...a Pharisee Jew. He knew the law well. But he was also a saved man. He knew the Gospel. He knew how to locate the Messiah in the scriptures of the ancestors like no other. Can you imagine the heartfelt conviction Paul brought to the table. *I know the law. I lived the law. And God set my heart free from my bondage to sin through being loved on the cross, not by keeping a law. I am saved by the cross of Christ. Spoken of by the prophet, delivered unto us by the Father. I once was lost, but now I am found. I was blinded and now I see.* And he must have told it a thousand times. He knew it well! It was working. As the text states, *many were persuaded, devout Greeks and some leading women.* After 15 years, Paul's message is not stale. People are experiencing the transformative and empowering Spirit of God loud and clear. Because Paul is successful, there is jealousy in this synagogue. The Jews of this synagogue take to the streets with the help of some rotten dudes to hunt down Paul and Silas. When they could not find Paul and Silas they shifted their attention to a believer's house named Jason. The mob drags him and some other believers before the authorities shouting, "These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also, <sup>7</sup>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.'

People turning the world upside down, are here now also, and they are acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor. In other words, the lived lives of these Christians is in defiance of political and social norms. Those who were persuaded to leave the synagogue, likely left with their money. The shift of power and wealth always gets people's attention. Especially if that has been their track record. *Have been turning the world upside down are here now also.*

The Way of Jesus has been making its way, and according to these upset Jews in Thessalonica, their world is being turned upside down as well.

It's amazing how the Way of Jesus survived as it did. On the backs of 12 apostles, the Holy Spirit persevered in individuals and places beset by idolatry and persecution. The Way of Christians promised life after death for those who believed in all that the cross accomplished, regardless of societal pedigree, gender, or ability. The Way did not discriminate. The Way of Jesus gave hope to the hopeless. The way of Jesus stressed that grace was an essential tenet of understanding our relationship to God. God is forgiving, more than foreboding. These and other points of Paul's were disturbing the peace, per se. A look at the 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians text from today proves that the church had some measure of success. In the opening of the letter from Paul he compliments them for their reception of the gospel in word and deed, and the conviction of the Holy Spirit. Paul states that they now imitated the work of Paul. He goes on to state how he knows they turned from idols and became examples to fledgling churches in Macedonia and Achaia. Paul concludes this opening spiritual pat on the back with a reminder to wait for the return of Jesus. This last bit about waiting on the return of Jesus was a part of Paul's theology they especially clung to.

The return of Christ to them was going to happen now, as in yesterday. This young church family in Thessalonica felt an urgency in Christ's return. But when? And what to do in the meantime? We have been living in the meantime for a long time now. Christ will come

again but when. The ending of Paul's letter sums it well, *12 But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters,\* to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; 13esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. 14And we urge you, beloved,\* to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. 15See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. 16Rejoice always, 17pray without ceasing,18give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 19Do not quench the Spirit. 20Do not despise the words of prophets,\* 21but test everything; hold fast to what is good; 22abstain from every form of evil.* In other words, keeping living and working at this way of life in Christ.

As the world turns day after day, we Christians are called to be a part of purposefully turning the world upside down as did this earlies of churches did in Thessalonica. Loving God's people can be dangerous. Consider Paul's final exhortations for us:

- Helping the fainthearted and weak and being patient with them....
- Not repaying evil with evil....
- Giving thanks in all circumstances...
- Testing everything...

That is what to do in the meantime. And yes, it will turn the world upside down. But as we know with each story the Holy Spirit possess within you and points to God's work in Jesus Christ through you, there comes the possibility of their being saved and transformed into a new creation.

I read about this church who came across a time capsule during a building project.

- Jonesboro, AK...The tin box — which had Stewart Bros. Tin Shop, Oct. 1, 1933, scratched onto the inside surface — contained the written history with a medallion attached to it; a 1931 ORDO, a book providing the calendar of events for liturgical purposes; a 1930 penny, an 1851 Liberty Head gold dollar; pictures

of the then-current pastor and bishop as well as the building's contractor; and the Nov. 7, 1932, edition of the Jonesboro Daily Tribune that contained a front-page story about the church building's construction...

I was kind of saddened to read that there was not mention of their future. No mention of their hopes and aspirations. Nothing in the time capsule spoke of how they visioned their future going forward.

Someone recently posed the question, "What will Nativity be remembered for 20 years from now." What will be remembered for?

The same goes for us individually "What will you be remembered for years from now, or more specifically at the time of your death."

A lot for us to all think about at time such as this in the life of the church...What are we doing? How are we positioning ourselves to inspire hope, to offer and be sources of blinding light for those living in darkness, all in the name of Jesus Christ.

The cross of Christ indeed turned the world upside down. Brothers and sisters in Christ may the word and deed of the gospel be your source of strength, and in the meantime, be a large part of making this world go round. Amen.