

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, April 21, 2024

This morning we will hear God's word read and proclaimed from the book of Acts. We've been in the book of Acts for a couple of weeks now in this Eastertide season. Before we begin though our lesson, just a a moment of personal privilege. I've been overjoyed over the last few days to have some family in town. I have three aunts on my father's side who live up in Boston, and they are all here this morning. You might be here visiting because you were their Uber driver over the last 3 days, or you saw them in a restaurant, because everywhere they're going they're saying, "My nephew is a pastor at Idlewild Presbyterian Church." You might be the kind gentleman that bought them shots at BB Kings on Thursday evening. If you're here, a special thank you to you. Was reminded a bit during our time together over the last few days of the...the significance of family, and so today as we welcome Dabney into the family of God, I'm deeply appreciative for the family that we have here at Idlewild, for the ways in which we promise to love and care for each other. We should not take it for granted. This morning, as I said, we'll read from the book of Acts, the 17th chapter. We are going to be introduced for the first time to the Thessalonians, okay? So this is the first time in the book of Acts when one of the communities—to which, later, Paul will write—is introduced. We are...we're moving a pretty significant way from where we were last week when Joshua proclaimed the word. We're moving a great distance in the sense that we are moving away from Peter and those disciples who had firsthand experience with Jesus, now to Paul as the main...one of the main characters in this book of Acts. And that's important, especially for the ways in which Paul carries that message into the world. You should know that Thessalonica was a city in Greece, very much under the rule of the Roman Empire. We'll speak about the significance of that in just a moment.

Before we read together from the 1st to the 9th verses of Acts 17, let us go to God In prayer.

Good and gracious Spirit, fall fresh upon us this morning. Fall fresh and quiet us, that we might hear your word for us this day, and in hearing we might respond. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

After Paul and Silas had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. 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 brothers and sisters 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.

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The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So, Thessalonica is thoroughly imperialized as a city. They are committed, that means, to the ethos and politics of the Roman Empire. It's not insignificant for us. It means that they have bought in whole hog to the lordship of Caesar and all that comes along with it— hierarchy, dominance, influence, power, oppression, marginalization. They're all in. That's how their world works now. It hasn't always worked that way, but it works that way now, as they find themselves as Roman citizens first. They have as a community— they've been the frog in the pot and they don't even know that the water is boiling—and what they have become are communicators of the Imperial message, those who embody it in the ways that they live and treat their neighbors, even in the ways that they practice their faith. What we know also from Biblical historians is that Thessalonica was full of Idols. There was this interesting alchemy that happened between Roman imperialism and Greek tradition, and all throughout the city there were images, icons, all idols that would draw attention, the attention of the citizens of that place, of the Thessalonians. They would in some ways distract and in other ways really draw worship from these people. They were signs and symbols that would take God's place in their daily lives. Maybe we know a little something about that. Maybe we know what it means to move through a world where many other things would vie for our attention and supremacy of our thought and action, of our time and our treasure as well. Into that community Paul comes. Paul and Silas together. I like Silas. It doesn't seem like Silas is all that ready to jump up in the pulpit, but Paul is unafraid. Scripture says that he goes into the synagogue, the first one he finds there in the town, and he begins to preach. You can imagine the first Sabbath day the folks were disturbed but imagine this is a one-time visitor. “We'll let him speak. He won't come back next Sabbath.” But then he does, and he asks to engage in another deep conversation. This time they're probably getting a little bit more annoyed. Then he comes back a third Sabbath. This time they... they realize he's not giving up; he is continuing to proclaim over and over that there is this one named Jesus, who has come and who was put to death by the Empire and then rose from the dead. For these folks—for the Thessalonians—they would have believed that death had the last word. In fact, crucifixion would have been the way of communicating that the Empire has power, ultimate power over all of us. “So we're not going to listen to a message that you're saying this person is the Messiah, because that means that the Empire has already had dominion over them. We can't buy in to the idea of Jesus as Lord,” but Paul's doing something else here as he proclaims the lordship and the Messiah role of Jesus. He's actually inviting the people to align their lives with Jesus's life. They haven't experienced Jesus first hand, and neither has Paul, but what Paul has had is a life changing experience of God. So the message proclaimed in the city was an invitation to shift one's own life narrative to align with Jesus Christ, and also that message would upset the political and social sensitivities of the powerful in the city. That's important for us to understand. This is a theological debate that Paul is engaging in each time he makes his way to the synagogue, but it has resonance, deep resonance of politics and social culture. There aren't just undertones. It's really out in the open. It's one of the reasons why people are so angry at Paul. He is telling them, “Caesar is not your lord. No matter what the emperor has said to you, no matter how well- ingrained it is into your cultural context, it is untrue. This one is the true living God.”

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As Edward Pillar says, “Turning to the living and true God from the idols that they worshiped would inevitably necessitate, in some sense, a turning from the Imperial ruler and the imperially dominated prevailing culture.” Paul was inviting the people to reorder their entire way of living, their daily lives, certainly, but also their politics and also the way they related to each other. But it is an invitation, of course. He's inviting them to take seriously what it means to align their lives with the life of the crucified and risen one, and they resist. With having family in town I was thinking a lot about what it looked like for me, even to the last few years, for my dad to give me advice. I'm sure y'all are a little bit different when your parents give you advice. I'm sure you listen and take it and implement it immediately into your lives. If you're a parent, I'm sure your kids listen immediately. My father told me about a decade ago, “I'm going to stop telling you what to do because you never listen to me. I'm going to send you emails, and you can choose whether you respond or not.”

It is natural, when we are invited to change our lives, for us to resist, particularly if we are being asked to reorder things that we have been committed to for a very, very, very long time—things that are so ingrained in the way that we move through the world, so ingrained in the community that surrounds us, that we actually don't even understand that they are problematic for us. And so it's understandable then that the people would be upset at hearing Paul's message not only about the Messiah, but even more so, this invitation to align their lives with his death. “No thanks, sacrifice of self. I'm out. I'd rather be subject to the Imperial authorities than to change things up.” Frustration and anger can be very instructive to us. In this case, in this text, I think it's really instructive of the way in which Paul's message is challenging who they understand themselves to be. What they have done is equate the social and political context as being the defining component of their identity. They have lived into so much the Emperor's role in their lives and the Empire's influence on them that they don't even know how to separate themselves from it. So it makes sense that they would be angry. I get frustrated when my Dad gives me advice. Somebody comes in that doesn't even know me and says, “David, I'm seeing something in the way that you're living that's actually not only unhelpful for you, but unhealthy for the way that you understand yourself in relationship to your creator.” They come in and don't know me. You think I'm going to listen. Are you? Paul walks right in and begins to preach to them, and here's what I want us to understand. Paul is actually not all that worried about winning a theological debate. What he is interested in is communicating the way in which your life and my life and their lives could be transformed by aligning themselves with the one whom he calls the Messiah, Jesus the Christ. It will be a completely different way of life, but it will be one that brings life in a way you've never experienced before. And they can't hear it, and so they—the phrase is so interesting—they go get “some ruffians” from in town. They gather a little mob. I don't know about you, but sometimes when somebody gives me advice that I haven't solicited from them, I'll call up one of my good friends. “Can you believe what they just said to me! Let's make this a four-way call. Let's get two other buddies on here. Can you believe what they are saying I need to do?” And so they go, and they grab a group of people, and they go and they seek out Paul and Silas. And here's the interesting thing. Sometimes when we are being called to a new way of life and we are frustrated by it and angry about it, it comes out sideways. So when they can't find Paul and Silas, Jason will do. Their anger is misplaced of course. All he's done is show

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hospitality, but they go and get Jason and the brothers and the sisters that are with him, and they drag them out in front of the city authorities. And here is the really important line for us to pay attention to. "These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also." Empire, we know that you're paying attention to the other ways that they are moving through the world and the ways they've been carrying on this message. They've come here now. It's at your doorstep. What are you going to do? They are trying to upend your authority. It's interesting. They don't make a theological debate back to Paul and Silas even in front of the authorities. They make a political debate. They're saying someone else is Caesar. This Jesus. Paul doesn't even know

them. Paul turns their world upside down, but, of course, it's not Paul. Of course, it is truly the Christ. He doesn't know them, but he knows the life that they're living. He doesn't know them, but he knows that there is more for them than what they have been told. He knows that there is a fullness of life when one embraces sacrificial love, when one extends hospitality to those on the margins. He knows that..he knows that oppression will not win the day, knows that marginalization is not the way of the Lord. He knows that there is a more fruitful way that walks alongside those who are in deepest need of care. On this fourth Sunday of Easter, this season in which we celebrate the holy possibilities of new life, we must ask ourselves, "Are we open to hearing Paul's message to the early Church in this Greek town? Are we open to the naming and setting aside of idols that we have ordered in our own lives? I don't know what they are for you, but you do. You know the things that you pass by daily which would distract you from living in a way that would honor God. Not only that, but are we open to allowing the life of Jesus to change ours, to reshape not only the ordering of our day, but the way we understand the political sphere and the social spheres in which we move? I know not the ways in which aligning your life with Jesus will turn your world upside down, but I do know, like Paul did, that a life offered by Christ will reorient you to a power greater than any Earthly power, greater in love, greater in peace, greater in grace. And so we have to ask ourselves when God meets us with an invitation to align ourselves with the life of Jesus Christ, when our world is turned upside down, will our response be frustration and anger that even comes out sideways, or will it be as a great many did in the text? Here's the beautiful part. A great many were persuaded by the message. Greeks, not a few of the influential women of the community, not everyone got with the ruffians. Others heard the message, understood the ways in which they needed to be reoriented in their life toward God, and they followed. The question for us on this fourth Sunday of Easter is how will we respond when a message of Christ is proclaimed, the crucified and risen one?

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.