

May 3, 2020

Acts 17:1-9

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

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.

The Book of Acts or the Acts of the Apostles is believed to have been written by the same author as the gospel of Luke: presumably Luke – a disciples who traveled and worked with the apostle Paul. For many years we've thought of Acts as the sequel to Luke's gospel, but recent scholarship sees it more as the second half of the gospel. This is important as it switches the resurrection of Jesus from the climax of the story to the middle point, with the end of the story being incomplete, written by the way that we – as the Church today – continue the story.

Acts tells the unfolding story of the beginning of the church, moving from the disciples following the resurrection, to the emergence of the church in Jerusalem around the Temple and then as it spread outwards towards the ends of the world of the Roman Empire. It begins with Peter and the other apostles, before switching to focus upon the work of Paul as he witnessed to the good news gospel of Jesus of Nazareth among the Gentile (or non-Jewish) peoples of the Roman Empire. We jump way ahead to chapter 17 in today's reading, which repeats patterns seen in other stories including Paul's operating strategy of starting at the synagogue, inviting both men and women, Jew and Greek to faith in Jesus, and the reality that he was opposed and persecuted by both Jewish and Greek/Roman powers concerned with social, economic & political power.

Thessalonica was an important city. It was capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. Because it supports Octavian (who later became Cesar Augustus) in the civil war against Marc Antony & Cleopatra it had become a free city in 42 BCE as opposed to a Roman Colony. As such it could mint its own money and govern itself. There is evidence that the imperial cult (recognizing and worshipping the Emperor as a god, the universal Lord Savior of the World) was practiced there. Coins have been found upon which the image of Zeus was replaced with Cesar. Although it was a free city, Thessalonica was another city (among many) caught in the emperor's social network involving patronage and the response of homage and loyalty. Local officials would have done everything to remain in the good graces of the emperor by enforcing this loyalty, to preserve their power and ensure that the city would not be overtaken by Rome and made into a colony.

Paul went in, as was his custom We see throughout the book of Acts that Paul's regular missionary strategy is to first begin with connection-making via the local synagogue, with other fellow Jews.

acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor ... another king | the city officials were **DISTURBED** – Paul and Silas are accused of sedition and treason, of inciting their audience to shift one's own life narrative to align with Jesus Christ that is to say against the political and social currents of this free city, beholden to Rome and the Emperor for their freedom, wealth and power.

ARGUED WITH THEM FROM THE SCRIPTURES Paul went there not to preach, but to present argumentation via persuasion or rhetoric, and engage others in dialogue and debate over the meaning of scriptures texts. He insists that Jesus' seeming defeat and suffering (crucifixion) are proof that he is the Messiah. Possibly arguing against the thought that if Jesus was the Messiah, how could he have been defeated, tortured and crucified.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

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.

QUESTIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF EXAMEN & CONTEMPLATION

- What part of today's texts grab you?
- Fear and Courage are present throughout the texts as the source of action. What are people afraid of in these texts? Why?
- In the pandemic we all can move (daily, even hourly) from fear to courage and back. Paul exhorts the folks to faith, hope and love. How is fear seizing you these days? What would happen if we lived without fear? Or specific fears of the future?

ruffians in the marketplaces jealous of Paul's success, fearful that they'll lost their power, these leaders go to the agora (marketplace) and agitate among the day-laborers who were marginalized in the highly stratified society of the ancient world, afraid of losing even more than they'd already lost. We might compare it to mobilizing the unemployed poor against immigrants: those who might take their work and who have even less power than the citizen poor.

The Book of Thessalonians is believed to be the earliest of the letters written by the Apostle Paul, probably while he was in Corinth in 51CE (Acts 18). The city was located both at a strategic point on a bay and along the main Roman road through Greece (the Egnatian Way). It was thus a bustling seaport and an important communication and trade center. It was the largest city and the capital of the province of Macedonia.

Paul writes this letter of support and pastoral advice to the emerging church there, which is facing a time of persecution following Paul's brief and suddenly-ended-stay among them for having shared a message concerning Jesus which upset the powerful and was clearly seen as being anti-Caesar. (Acts 17:1-10).

IMITATORS - This seems to be a theme throughout the book, the way in which faith is taught, developed and nurtured.

HOW YOU TURNED TO GOD FROM IDOLS - what is abundantly clear amongst studies of the culture in Thessalonica is that idols were everywhere. And not only so, but the evidence clearly suggests that idols were intrinsically religious, political, and social all at the same time. In other words, it is not possible to delineate between the possible focus of the worship that may be offered to the idols. If at one glance it appears that worship has a religious edge, a second glance will confirm that the political and/or social can and must be drawn into the perspective. Turning to the "living and true God" from idols would inevitably necessitate, in some sense, a turning from the imperial ruler and the imperially-dominated prevailing culture. www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4246

to wait for - A close examination of the word used here reveals something quite astonishing. The infinitive "to wait for" ἀναμένειν (*anamenein*: to actively wait with rising intensity and clarity about what is hoped for, about a process or event that has begun but is not yet complete). *Anamenein* is a very rare word in the original Greek. Paul could have used a more common expression, but he did not. Instead, he used the word *anamenein*, which is used by the Jewish Roman historian Josephus, writing in the first century, to express how people would wait eagerly for the arrival of the Roman Emperor Vespasian. Paul is suggesting that Jesus has become for the Thessalonians an alternative emperor, a true and living King. www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4246