

Sermon: “Preach Until it Turns this World Upside Down”

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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.

Acts 17:1-9

Three statements have become foundational for my life and ministry over the years. Particularly for my view of evangelism. Like a child collecting rocks on a trail, I’ve picked up each of these on life’s journey. The first, I acquired at McAfee School of Theology when I was pursuing my MDiv during the Evangelism and Mission course. Dr. Ron Johnson would say, “God is on a mission to redeem all of creation.”

The second rock, I gathered early in young adulthood at the Ray of Hope Christian Church. The vision of the Ray is to be a “City of hope where persons will impact and transform this present world into the kingdom of God.” For decades, I have been arrested by the notion of impacting and transforming this world for and with God.

And lastly, around 2007-2008, my beloved Spelman College adopted the slogan, “A Choice to Change the World,” from a song written by the director of the Glee Club and a then-current student. It begins,

*It’s my choice And I choose to change the world
It’s my voice And I’ll speak with pride and courage
I’ll be the change I wanna see
I’ll scream out loud and say
It’s my choice And I choose to change the world¹*

Each of these statements embodies the Great Commission that Jesus gave to his disciples after his resurrection in Matthew 28:18-20, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age." And in his words spoken to them at the time of his ascension in Acts 1:8, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." You shall be my witnesses, here, there, and everywhere. You shall be my witnesses at home, across the country, and abroad. You shall be my witnesses.

Paul and Silas clearly took the Great Commission and this pre-Pentecost mandate and ran with them. They chose to lean in. How do I know? Because our text tells us in verse six that they were known by their opposition as "men who have turned the world upside down."

O, to be known as a woman who has turned this world upside down. By working for Jesus. O, to be known as a woman who partnered with God in the mission of redeeming all of creation. O, to be known as a woman who helped to impact and transform this present world into the kingdom of God. O, to be known as a woman who chose to change the world. If only I could be counted worthy of having those words spoken of me, written in my funeral program, preached in my eulogy, written on my tombstone, and most importantly, spoken from the throne in the last days. On the other side. At the other shore. When the trumpet shall sound, and the dead in Christ shall rise. When we are caught up to meet him in the air.

When you said yes, yes, I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, I confess my sins and want to live for him. When you responded to the call to preach, to minister, to serve. When you responded to the whisper, responded to the nudge, did you endeavor to turn this world upside down?

"Turn upside down" is an idiom that usually means to put something in disorder, to mix it up, or to make things untidy. The Cambridge Dictionary describes it as "to (cause something to) change completely and in a bad way."² People accused Paul and Silas of what they were doing when they went into the marketplace and rounded up the bad actors. All the people who had nothing better to do other than incite a riot. Then agitate a situation. Then jump on the bandwagon. You know the people who come into the city when a peaceful protest is going on and start tearing up the neighborhood, breaking windows, starting fires, upsetting the people on both sides of the picket line. The folks who make the neighborhood look bad, who distract away from the issues, and make national news. No, these unbelieving Jews, as the New King James calls them, were the ones who had set the city in uproar, but they projected it onto Paul and Silas. The very people that Paul and Silas tried to minister to, who did not believe. These folks were moved not to believe, not to follow ... but to harden their hearts. They were moved to jealousy and envy. That means their

petty didn't remain in their heads but moved down to their hands and feet. Instead of receiving the preacher's word with great joy, they opposed it and then them.

While they were trying to make Paul and Silas look bad, they were paying them a compliment and speaking about the effectiveness of their ministry. They were validating Paul and Silas's success. Because "turning the world upside down" is exactly what Jesus came to do. He didn't come into the world to continue the order of things, to bless the mess that the world was in or to put his stamp of approval on the synagogue. Has this ever happened to you? Someone called themselves insulting you, but they actually paid you a compliment? They tried to make you look bad, but they only made you look better? They tried to tarnish your reputation, but they only endeared people to you more. That's because Jesus was in the background working on your behalf, just as promised in Isaiah 54:19, "No weapon formed against you shall prosper, and every tongue which rises against you in judgment, you shall condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is from Me." Paul and Silas were simply following in the tradition of their savior. Remember, Jesus said in Matthew 10:34, "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword." Remember, Jesus is the one who was turning over the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves in the temple courts and calling out the Pharisees and Sadducees to their faces.

Jesus came to turn the world upside down. To set the crooked places straight. To fulfill the law. To upset the kingdoms of our world. And he told his disciples to go and do likewise. As a matter of fact, do it better! Greater works shall you do in my name!

My sisters and brothers, we have been called. We have been commissioned. The Holy Ghost empowered us to turn this world upside down for Jesus.

- To call out injustice, oppression, and hypocrisy, in his name.
- To speak truth to power, in his name.
- To hold leaders and the government accountable, in his name.
- To model love and grace and mercy, in his name.
- To take care of the least and the lost and the left out, in his name.
- To cast out demons and wickedness in high places, in his name.
- To pray and heal and deliver, in his name.
- To speak those things that are not, as though they were, in his name.

And if we are faithful to do so, we will have much success, great success, uncommon success, sustainable success, and it will cause us much opposition. But keep on going, because it will turn this world upside down. Paul and Silas did it. They understood their assignment and remained faithful to it.

- Paul was called in Acts 9 to "carry Jesus's name before the Gentiles and their kings"
- Silas, was called in Acts 15 to go with Paul to "carry Jesus's name before the Gentiles and their kings"

To carry is to bear, put on, take on the burden of Jesus. Paul and Silas carried the name of Jesus to Antioch where they gathered the church together, delivered a letter, encouraged and strengthened the people, and fellowshiped with them. They carried Jesus over to Syria and Cilicia and strengthened the church there, they carried Jesus to Lystra where they picked up a mentee named Timothy, and they carried Jesus through Galatia and Troas and over to Philippi. Where Lydia, a rich entrepreneur, was converted and birthed a church right in her home. Paul and Silas kept on carrying Jesus there and were beaten and jailed for it. But they carried Jesus into that jail, where they prayed and worshipped, worshipped and prayed, and as they did an earthquake came through and it shook the foundation of the jail, and the doors flew open freeing them and the other prisoners. But that's not the only thing that happened, the jailer came forth asking what must I do to be saved? What must I do, to carry the name of Jesus, too?

When they got to Thessalonica in Acts 17, they kept it going. They kept carrying Jesus. The Bible says that Paul and Silas went into the Jewish synagogue and did what they usually did. It says that they didn't switch it up when they got to Thessalonica. They didn't try to act brand new. They didn't attempt to impress others. No, they did what was customary for them. The Greek word for customary here is "*etho*," which means doing what one is accustomed to do; to do what is usual based on your habit or tradition. And because of that, they turned the world upside.

My sisters and brothers, if we want to be effective. If we want to be successful. If we want to make a meaningful, sustainable, life-changing impact for God, we must do what we are called to do, the way we have been called to do it, in the lane given to us, and we must stand on it. The young people say, "stand on business."

Paul and Silas had the discipline, they had the trust, they had the confidence, and they had the boldness to do what was customary for them. What were they accustomed to doing? They were used to carrying the name of Jesus, so they did just that; they preached Jesus. And it was enough. It was more than enough.

If we want to turn this world upside down for God, we need to follow the direction of Paul and Silas and carry the name, bear the name, wear the name of Jesus, and make it our custom to simply stand tall and preach Jesus. We must trust God above all else. Trust God's ways. Trust God's plans. Trust God's promises. And trust God's choice to call us, to anoint us, to speak to us and through us. We must have the confidence to be who we are, all of who we are, no more or no less. Take up all the space given to you. We must have the boldness to preach the gospel, full and free. No matter the occasion. No matter who is in the room. Come what may, we must make it our custom to carry the name of Jesus. Even when those to whom we try to minister resist the word, resist our preaching, and resist our ministry.

Where I come from, it is customary that something happens when you say the name Jesus. Something happens in the spiritual realm, and something happens in the natural. There is power in that name. Power, power, wonder-working power, not just in the blood of lamb, but in the name ... Hallowed is that name. Holy is the name of

Jesus. Righteous is that name. Precious is that name. Oh, how precious is the name of Jesus. Demons tremble and flee at the name of Jesus. Salvation is found in the name of Jesus. People are healed in the name of Jesus. Minds are regulated. Hearts are healed. Families are reconciled. Communities are delivered. And this world will be impacted and transformed in that name, and that name is Jesus.

Paul and Silas got their marching orders, and they followed them. Acts 17 says that they reasoned with people from the scriptures. They went from city to city, town to town, and introduced Jews and Gentiles to Jesus. And they used the scripture to do so. They showed them that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah by reasoning and explaining, discussing, dividing, proclaiming, and instructing from the Law and the Prophets.

My pastor, Dr. Cynthia Hale, says that “It is the word that transforms lives and not our interesting stories.” For God’s word is eternal. God’s word is living and active. God’s word is sharper than any double-edged sword.

Paul and Silas had great success on their missionary journey because they told the old, old story of a man named Jesus using God’s word. And look at the Jesus they introduced people to. They introduced them to the scandalous Jesus. One who came riding on a donkey and not in a chariot. They introduced them to the Jesus who came not to rule in a palace or overtake Rome. They introduced them to a suffering servant who was crucified and resurrected. They told them about the “*pascho*” of Jesus. In biblical Greek, this word relates to the capacity to feel deep suffering. They told them about a Jesus, a Messiah, a savior who has great capacity for feeling. Hebrews 4:15: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.”

Paul and Silas introduced them to the Jesus of my custom. The God of my ancestors. The one who can meet us in our suffering. In our pain. In our hurt. In our sorrow. In the troubles of this world, because he faced them. That’s why he can walk with me and talk with me. He knows what it feels like to be among the least, the lost, and the left out. He knows what it’s like to be underestimated and dismissed. He knows what it’s like to be persecuted and hated. Paul and Silas introduced them to the Jesus of the gutter, the trailer, and the ghetto. The Jesus of unpopular borders and the wrong side of dividing walls. The Jesus of people who come from s-hole countries, enslavement, and stolen land. He introduced them to the God of the foreigner and the oppressed. And it turned the world upside down.

But Paul and Silas didn’t leave them there. Because Jesus didn’t stay there. Jesus was resurrected from his suffering. He was resurrected from the grave. We love to put Jesus on the cross and in the grave. But the hope for the hopeless, the way out for the lost, the bridge over troubled water, the map through the valley, the comfort for those who mourn, is found not on that cross. Not in that tomb, but in the resurrection. Hope is in the getting up.

Paul and Silas proved, using God's word, that Jesus was the Christ, because God resurrected him from the grave. And because of that, not only could the people of Thessalonica get up, so can every lost, left out, forgotten, abused, oppressed, neglected, disrespected, and suffering person until the end of time.

So don't stop now, my sister. Don't turn back, my brother. Keep your hand to the plow and keep on carrying Jesus. Keep carrying him into courtrooms. Keep on carrying him into hospitals. Keep on carrying him into prisons. Keep on carrying him into schools. Keep on carrying him onto streets. Keep on carrying him into voting booths.

As you preach and teach and proclaim, we will see things turn. Can't you see the world turning? It's turning toward justice. I can see the world turning. It's turning toward righteousness. I can see the world turning, it's turning toward joy. I can see the world turning, it's turning toward equity. Turning toward hope. Turning toward love. Turning toward peace. Can't you see it? Can't you see this present world turning into the kingdom? The place where there is no more suffering, no more hatred, no more bigotry, no more lack, no striving, no more pain, no more violence, no more loss, no more lying, no more cheating, no more stealing. Can't you see every knee bowing, every tongue confessing the lordship of Jesus? Thanks be to God; I see us in the future. The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of our Lord, and it happened because you found the discipline, you found the courage, and you found the boldness to tell the story, to share the scriptures, and to reason with people from God's word, despite the opposition. Despite the resistance. Despite the knuckleheads that resist you.

And it made all the difference. In fact, it will be written in the annals of history that you participated in God's redeeming work and it turned the world upside down!

Notes

1 Stephens, Sarah and Kevin Johnson, "A Choice to Change the World" 2007.

2 Cambridge Dictionaries, s.v. "turn (something) upside down," accessed October 12, 2024, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/turn-upside-down>.