

AN UPSIDE-DOWN GOSPEL/ OR DO YOU KNOW THE WAY?

A SERMON PREACHED AT SAINT JOHN'S PARISH, THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTERTIDE, APRIL 24, 2005
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Assigned texts:

First Lesson:

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. That very night the believers sent Paul and Silas off to Berea; and when they arrived, they went to the Jewish synagogue. These Jews were more receptive than those in Thessalonica, for they welcomed the message very eagerly and examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, including not a few Greek women and men of high standing. But when the Jews of Thessalonica learned that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Berea as well, they came there too, to stir up and incite the crowds. ... Acts 17:1-13

A portion of the Second Lesson:

... Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ ... 1 Peter 2:1-10

The Gospel text for the day:

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." ... Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it." John 14:1-14

"These people have been turning the world upside down ... and are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying there is another king named Jesus."

Set your troubled hearts at rest," Jesus tells us in today's gospel text. "Trust in God, also in me," he enjoins us. For "there is a place" prepared for us, he says; and that place is with God, and in Christ, and he is "the way." This Jesus says he's also the truth you've sought, amidst all the half-truths and false truths and anything less than the whole truth and nothing but. And he is life.

It is little wonder that these verses — which comfortingly assure us of such gracious accommodations, and even confirm our reservations — are those most often read at funerals and memorial services. Since the dearly departed is obviously no longer in *this* place, we faithfully hope and assume there's *another* place. When pressed to describe such a place however, it seems we have an equally poor sense of direction; despite the fact Jesus asserts "the way is known to us."

What is that place? More so, what is the *way* to such a place?

As one commentator observed, for those caught up in the popular *Left Behind* biblical "rapture" novel series the "place" is a heavenly mansion that's out of this world. But for the Jesus of John's gospel — who conveys the message that he and the Father are one-in-the-same — it is not so much a place "out there" somewhere as it is "in here." It is a mystical in-dwelling of the Spirit of God, which — and here's the astonishing thing — Jesus tells us we can experience as deeply, or even more so, than he. "You will do even greater things than these (signs)," he says.

This is a sermon about *how* to do that. How to know the way.

But first, within the same passage in this gospel text, there are also two verses with which I frankly find it difficult to "set my troubled heart at rest." The first one is translated, "No one comes to the Father except through me." And the second is, "If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it."

In the first instance, there is a seeming assertion of not only being *the way*, but the *only* way. And then there's a kindred claim of absolutism, where a truth that exceeds all other truths not only precludes the dynamic reality of a living God's ongoing revelatory power to show us and tell us something powerfully new and redemptive; but also guarantees a set-up that'll collapse — if taken literally — like a house of cards. For it doesn't take much to point out Jesus won't, or can't, *always* do just *anything* we ask in his name; as much as we might like to believe in such seductive magic.

In this pluralistic world with its multi-cultural mix of many faiths, we witness daily the twin tenets of exclusive-ism and absolutism as dangerous weapons in the arsenals of fundamentalists of any religious stripe or color. For, more than blind prejudice and intolerance — which are common, everyday human shortcomings, by nature — they suppress, and suffocate, and silence the voice of the one God of all speaking *now*, *again*, in those new and redemptive and revelatory ways.

To use the imagery of today's gospel text, such exclusionists cancel our reservations for the true place God has prepared for those who truly love and listen to this living God. Each religious claim to the exclusive and absolute truth is a door closed, and a "No Vacancy" sign hung out. Regrettably those left without a place to hang their hats are the ones, I believe, to whom this living and revelatory God will stand at the door in the middle of the night and say, "Depart from me. I do not know you, I do not know where you come from."

Now, in this tumultuous and unsettling world, the Church is often viewed and held to be the anchor in the storm; or a solid *rock of ages*, personally cleft for *me*. However, when Jesus gives Peter the keys to the Kingdom, and tells him he's the *petros* ("rock") upon which the Church will be built, does Jesus have in mind something unmovable and changeless? Or something more like the "living stones" spoken of in the II Peter text of this morning's second lesson?

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Here's a contemporary example: As the Roman Church prepares for the pageantry of the new pope's installation, I read a background article in the morning's paper which looks back at the formative development of this spiritual leader. The reporter's assessment suggests it was social and political controversy and protest forty years ago that solidified the man's view of the Church in the world:

For all Pope Benedict XVI's decades as a Vatican insider, it may have been the crucible of a university town swept by student radicalism in the late 1960's that definitively shaped the man who now leads the Roman Catholic Church. During his Bavarian childhood under the Nazis, Joseph Ratzinger became convinced that the moral authority based in Catho-

lic teachings was the sole reliable bulwark against human barbarism. While his deep reading and thinking in theology, philosophy, and history were fundamental to development as a theologian, it was the protests of student radicals at Tübingen University - in which he saw an echo of the Nazi totalitarianism he loathed - that seem to have pushed him definitively toward deep conservatism and insistence on unquestioned obedience to the authority of Rome.

Here's a man whose view of the Church emerged out of a time and place of great upheaval; and whose own papal election is viewed by some as reactionary, regressive or intransigent. In light of today's scripture passage from the *Acts of the (first) Apostles*, however, it is apparent this kind of controversy is nothing new. Just look:

In the story we read, Paul and Silas are in Thessalonica on a missionary preaching tour. Luke tells us Paul goes to the synagogue, "as was his custom." The setting is most likely implausible, but a soapbox on a street corner would have been equally confrontational. We're told he "argued" scripture for three days, "explaining and proving" the Messiah should suffer, rise from the dead, and that Jesus of Nazareth just happens to be *the One*. Some were "persuaded," but others obviously were not, as it turns out.

This was no mild-mannered symposium of heady theological dialogue and debate. Rather, heated "jealousy" resulted in a mob of ruffians ransacking Jason's house in an effort to catch the troublemakers, who slip out of town and escape with their lives. As those who were more than a little ruffled by what Paul had to say put it:

"These people have been turning the world upside down ... and are acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying there is another king named Jesus."

We've heard those leveraged lines before, haven't we? When the religious authorities - those who had an uneasy understanding with the civil authorities to coexist in a conflicted allegiance to God and acquiescence to Caesar - feared the delicate arrangement was in jeopardy, they had the crowd shout out to Pilate, "We have no king but Caesar!" And Jesus got crucified.

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So, as this morning's story continues, Paul and Silas set off to Berea, and do their customary scriptural debate in the synagogue there; but this time the listeners are more receptive to this new message -- even though it was a message that *controverted* the old message. Still, these irrepressible preachers of the gospel of Christ were pursued by the preservationists from Thessalonica, and the pattern of proclamation and controversy continued. It swirled about either the conflict or confluence of new, divine truths with long-established, former truths. Again, which *way* to go?

As I've suggested, one might look at the gospel passage in John 14, or this story about the early Church in *Acts* and see it as a competing struggle of exclusive claims and absolute truths. I once regarded such fundamentalism as mildly irksome, but harmless. No more. These are two very dangerous principles; and we see them acted out with deadly consequences on a daily basis. Nowadays I issue a warning: Caution: Popular fundamentalism can be dangerous to your spiritual (if not physical) health. But more than such narrow tunnel vision is the deeper struggle perhaps to distinguish between the danger of *relativism* (as the new pope recently warned of this), and the power and authenticity of new divine *revelation*. How do you tell them apart?

The criticism of *relativism* it seems is not only the distinct possibility of passing fads becoming merely passé, but the greater fear of forsaking and losing some essential, abiding truths of God's eternal power and presence.

As one example in our own Episcopal Church, some of our brothers and sisters in some of the more theologically conservative parts of the world-wide Anglican communion believe the American Church has given in to post-modern Western attitudes about human sexuality; with the consecration of an openly-gay bishop, and the mere consideration of liturgies for the blessing of same-sex unions.

Despite the gospel truth about the Father's house having many rooms, these sincere folks are unable to abide with *us*, or find accommodations for *some* of us. While I believe I can understand their concern, I'm unconvinced the particular *manner* in which God's eternal power and presence is made manifest to us in one (former) time and place is fixed for all eternity, as well.

Here's a second, personal example. Many years ago, before I ever came to Saint John's, I was interviewed for another church job. During the course of the conversation with the search committee, a woman first shared her own personal religious experience and relationship with God, and then posed her question. For her, God was love. That was it. She then asked if I believed shame and guilt had any place in the Church.

Less interested in getting the job than I was in being candid with her, I replied by similarly sharing something of my own personal experience and relationship with God. About shame, I said something to the effect it seemed to me we do a pretty good job of dragging that around ourselves wherever we go. But guilt -- I clearly remember responding without hesitation -- guilt was a wonderful thing! It convicts us. It can bring us to our knees, before we rise again and head off in a fresh, new direction. It's why there's a confession within the Lord's Prayer we may recite daily. And, it's what makes grace, and forgiveness, and sometimes even love possible.

The reaction on the woman's face to my response was readily apparent: first there was astonishment, then disillusionment, and finally retreat. The gospel truth, as it had been revealed to her, was unable to accommodate the way it had been revealed to me. Needless to say, I didn't get offered the job.

The point: How does one believe and hold fast to the power of the living God to reveal divine truths in new, redemptive ways without -- as with Paul and Silas in Thessalonica declared it -- "turning the world as it is upside down?" Clearly, it seems, avoiding such controversy is not always possible.

The question then: Do you believe in a God and a gospel that *controverts* the ways of this world when you discern those ways to be so contrary to the living will and ways of the God of us all? Do you know the way?

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Yesterday, up north in the rural town of Lakeport, there was a memorial service for a twenty-six year old woman, named Marla Ruzicka. In what is described as a small, relatively conservative town, she was considered a controversial figure because of how she lived and died.

Marla fervently believed there should be an accounting and an acknowledgement of all innocent civilian deaths that are the consequence of nation's deliberate actions to wage war on each other; in order that we might appreciate (and compensate victims for) the full consequences of our actions. She founded CIVIC (Campaign for Innocent Victims In Conflict), and worked in the most dangerous of circumstances the last few years; first in Afghanistan, and more recently in Iraq.

As you most likely read or watched on the news, last week she was killed when her car was blown up on the risky airport road in Baghdad, as it drove near a military convoy that came under attack. Reportedly, she was on her way to interview a child purportedly wounded in an earlier bombing. One journalist who knew her described her indefatigable spirit as a "cross between Mother Teresa and TV's 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer'."

I don't know if they read John 14 at Marla's memorial service in St. Mary's Immaculate Catholic Church; or if the pastor had the Father's house with many dwelling places in mind when he remarked, "Heaven will never be the same." I don't know if it set family's, friend's and neighbor's "... troubled hearts at rest." I *do* know she was considered to be controversial.

On the one hand, for the life of me, I don't understand why. What is so controversial about caring for the fate of so many nameless faces and children of the same God, in this ongoing conflict of differing claims to *the* truth and the *only* way?

On the other hand, of course, I do understand why she was so controversial; for the same reason the Church is always "turning the world upside down" when it is most authentic to the gospel calling to seek that place prepared for us. It is a place which is not "out there," but within the heart of our eternal God's living word and message to us today.

And, as Jesus reminds us, "the way *there* is known to us."

Amen. *jb+*