

Scripture Readings for May 10, 2020

-Tree of Life translation (about this translation: see note after the readings)

Varying responses at the synagogue and beginning of the church in Thessalonica (today's Greece) **Acts 17**

After passing through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. ² As was his custom, Paul went to the Jewish people; and for three *Shabbatot*, (sabbaths) he debated the Scriptures with them. ³ He opened them and gave evidence that Messiah (*the Christ*) had to suffer and rise from the dead, saying, “This *Yeshua (Jesus)*, whom I declare to you, is the Messiah.” ⁴ Some of them were convinced and became attached to Paul and Silas, as were a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and no small number of the leading women.

⁵ But some of the Jewish people became jealous. Taking some wicked fellows of the marketplace and gathering a crowd, they stirred the city into an uproar. They attacked Jason's house, trying to bring Paul and Silas out to the mob. ⁶ When they did not find them, they instead began dragging Jason and some of the brethren before the city officials, shouting, “These men who have upset the world have come here too, ⁷ and Jason has welcomed them! They are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king, *Yeshua*.” ⁸ Hearing these things, the crowd and the city officials were confused. ⁹ But after receiving bail from Jason and the rest, they released them.

1st Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians, Chapter 1

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the community of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord *Yeshua* the Messiah:

Grace to you and *shalom (peace)*.

We always give thanks to God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers—continually remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadiness of hope in our Lord *Yeshua (Jesus)* the Messiah (*Christ*). We know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that you are chosen, because our Good News did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the *Ruach ha-Kodesh (Holy Spirit)* and with complete certainty—just as you know what kind of men we proved to be while among you for your sake.

⁶ You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having accepted the message in much tribulation, with the joy of the *Ruach ha-Kodesh (Holy Spirit)*. So you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. For the word of the Lord rang out from you—not just in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faithfulness toward God has gone out, so that we have no need to say anything. For they themselves bring news about what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve the living and true God.

A note about the translation: It is called Tree of Life, produced by the Association of Messianic Jews, that is Jews who are also Christians, just as the earliest disciples were. I choose this translation because the text tells of Paul beginning his ministry of evangelism at the weekly Jewish service, among his own people. This early in the history of the church we need to be reminded that whether one believed in Jesus Christ was an inner- Jewish discussion. I translated the Hebrew words into English and put them in brackets.

“What made it all worthwhile? “

1st Thessalonians 1: 1-10

I hope to bring you today some stories and insight into the earliest days of the Christian church. My hope is, that in the social isolation days we undergo this spring, where so much we took for granted was taken, we find re-orientation in going back to the basics- even of our faith.

About a decade ago when the church was faced with lawsuits over residential school damage, some dioceses in the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches found themselves faced with the possibility of declaring bankruptcy. In an interview with media, a bishop was asked “if you go bankrupt, what will happen to your buildings, your cathedrals, your mission, your pension plans, personnel...?!” And the church leader is said to have answered: “ In the end all we need is the Word of God, a little water, a little bread, a little wine and we will be fine to continue our work.” Perhaps these words of wisdom were said like this, perhaps not exactly like that- (I could not find the original source) in any case- we can relate to these words today. Have we not all thought in some manner about what we can live without, and what not? This “minimal equipment”, - a little water (baptism) ; a little wine, a little bread (communion) and the Word of God to study- that is indeed the basis of all church life. We need this little and we can still be church- but we do need to be allowed to gather- at least as two or three!

As Christian communities were born the early church had no buildings and very little structure. Evangelists were travelling part time ministers who worked a trade on the side, or they were given a living allowance so they could dedicate themselves to full time work. People pooled their resources to look after the poorest members. Several wealthy women (and a few men) of the upper class Roman and Macedonian families became patrons of house churches. At the core of it all was instruction in the faith, service to the poor, worship in people’s homes, and breaking bread together.

Simplicity can be freeing. I wonder how your simplified life has been for you...?

I know that some have indeed experienced the joy that comes with freedom from pressure to “be on” and to “perform” and to “be busy”. When we come back to “church as we know it” with physical gathering, I expect that some will say “I realized I am better off without...” I also expect some to say “Now or never” and “ I missed this so much, but I did not miss ...that”. And God’s Spirit will be there to help us discern what needs to come back and what needs to stay away, and what new ways beg to be embraced as we move forward.

I see us going on a day retreat together, at least the leaders of our church, hopefully more, and invite these questions and do some inspired listening to one another!

The early church wanted to be community in and around Jesus, the Messiah. We reconstruct across the divide of time what that might have looked like. Would we recognize them? Would Paul and Silas recognize us today as a Christian community? I don’t know. So much is different of course, and yet- we read the same scriptures, and at least to some extent, we speak the same language. Mostly, we tell the same story and allow that story to shape us: that of the death of Christ and of the Rising- the story of how we gain life when we loosen our tight hold on our ego, how we find joy when we find forgiveness and a new beginning; how we find, in Jesus, a friend in suffering, a hand to hold in the dark, a teacher who boggles our mind, a hope beyond the grave.

What fascinates me today is the price the early Christians paid for choosing life with Christ. It was steep. These conversions were completely voluntary- and as you read in Acts, some joined, others did not care for the message or felt even threatened by it. There were so many religions to choose from in antiquity, religions you could follow without landing yourself in trouble for it.

What made it all worthwhile for these women and men?

In this first generation, all the converts were either Jews or had an interest in or a connection with Judaism (the so called “God fearers”). Paul writes in his letter that the people who made up the church in Thessalonica “*accepted the message in much tribulation, with joy in the Holy Spirit*”.

We are talking about 18-19 years after Easter here. This is not the time of the systematic persecutions by the Roman empire yet. The “tribulation” is almost certainly the hostility women and men endured from their own communities. Paul was of course the “enfant terrible” of the synagogue- and much hated for abandoning the way of “The Fathers” for a new interpretation of the scriptures which included a suffering and raised Messiah. Those who clustered together into the first churches would have endured hostility from neighbours, family members and political, social, and economic disadvantages.

What made it all worthwhile?

I’d like you to think about that for a moment before you read on:

What do you think the experience of Christ offered to people in antiquity that they could not find anywhere else?

Spend some time going back to the basics of your own Christian Faith, perhaps: What is it, that still attracts you, nurtures you? Could that have been something men and women in the first century experienced?

You see, I think that historically, we really don’t know. Its a bit of a mystery why the church grew so incredibly rapidly and endured despite severe persecutions later on. We can imagine some of the engaging freedom that people experienced in this new religion: The Roman and Greek society was strictly bound by rules of class. In church now one could just belong, class was not to play a role in the church, as Paul stressed over and over. Women exercised leadership as did men, slaves and nobles would sit at the same dinner table; the widows and vulnerable were taken care of, people were given a proper burial even if they could not afford it. There was hope beyond the grave and there was a purpose for life on earth. It was expected that you led a life that distinguished itself by goodness from the average person. You were also expected to learn the faith story and to be able to give a basic defence of your beliefs. Education was provided for all.

All these are good and amazing things, but they don’t explain the intense growth in such a short time. Beyond the societal picture and in the words of Paul (*by the way these are the earliest Christian words that have survived- 1st Thessalonians chapter 1 is the earliest writing we have and at least 20 years earlier than the first gospel!*), I detect a heart touched! Hearts touched by Jesus life, death, resurrection...

Who else could cause that but the Living God, the Holy Spirit, the Risen Christ.

“You rock!” Paul says to the believers in Thessalonica. “You are an inspiration! “ “I pray for you every day” “I am grateful for you”. Can you feel Paul’s joy? Something wonderful is happening there and they know it too.

And this, my friends, would be the same Holy Spirit that propels us forward into an unknown future as churches in Annapolis. The Spirit who is the same across the ages yet fully alive and always challenges us in new forms... The wind that blows where it will... We need not fear adversity, for the church has

always fared well in difficult times. What we need to fear is our indifference and our numbness to the nudging of the Spirit.

As I imagine the return to life in community at St George and St Andrew this is what I imagine: That which is superfluous we will let go of. No longer” we have always done it that way” if no one knows why. But that which leads us to say “This church rocks!” “I am so grateful”...this we will seek and let it be birthed by Holy Spirit. Will you help? Are you on board?
Thank you! “You rock!”.

Elisabeth Bachem-Jennings, St. George and St. Andrew United Church