

“The World Turned Upside Down”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Acts 17:1-9
July 8, 2018
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

On August 19, 1781, French and American troops began a long march from Newport, Rhode Island heading south. Hoping to throw the British off, General Washington sent out fake dispatches indicating that the attack would be on New York, certainly nowhere near Lieutenant General Charles Cornwallis and his army entrenched at Yorktown, Virginia.

Meanwhile, a French admiral by the name of de Grasse sailed from the Caribbean to Chesapeake Bay, creating a naval blockade of Yorktown — there would be no escape by sea for Cornwallis. By late September, General Washington and his French counterpart — a count by the name of Rochambeau — arrived with their troops and between the army and naval forces, Cornwallis was surrounded.

In mid-October, the bombardment began. British defenses were taken and weakened and over the next few days, Cornwallis’s men became overwhelmed. On the morning of October 17, a drummer emerged from the British side, followed by an officer waving a white handkerchief. The firing ceased and the officer was blindfolded and led behind the French and American lines. Negotiations began on articles of capitulation, securing American victory and propelling the Revolutionary War toward its close.

Traditional honors of war would have allowed the British to march out of Yorktown with flags flying and their band playing a French or American tune as a tribute to the victors. But General Washington refused these honors, as had been done to the Continental Army a year earlier after defeat at the Siege of Charleston. So the British troops left less ceremoniously and the band was forced to play a British or German march. The legend that has risen up, but which didn’t get started until about forty years after the battle, was that the British band played a song called “The World Turn’d Upside Down.”

There’s no way to know if the legend has any merit, but *it’s a really good story*. We imagine the cheers, the relief, the colony throwing off the empire and the empire lamenting that the world had flipped. It’s the perfect end to the war. It’s absolutely brilliant in *Hamilton*.

Speaking of immigrants who get the job done, we’ve got Paul and Silas turning the world upside-down this morning. This is a pattern in the book of Acts — Paul visits a city and preaches in the synagogue first, and then to others. Some accept the gospel, others reject it and sometimes persecute Paul and whoever is with him. Then he is off to do it again.

In Thessalonica, he begins his argument with the accepted authority of scripture. He takes that and builds upon it to make a big claim — Jesus as the messiah. If you’re an average Thessalonian Jew or gentile, this news is out there and difficult to swallow.¹ But some do.

¹ O. Wesley Allen, Jr. at http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2593

And that upsets the religious leaders. They grab the local marketplace ruffians and get a good mob going. They look for Paul at Jason's house. Paul's not there, so the crowd brings Jason before the city rulers. They shout:

“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.”

Jason pays bail and is freed, but Paul and Silas are sent off in the cover of night to the city of Berea. At the beginning of the First Letter to the Thessalonians, Paul writes: “...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, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. 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. 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” (1 Thessalonians 1:6-9)

The Thessalonian world, indeed, was turned upside-down. Despite all odds, the message Paul brought took hold all along the Via Egnatia — a major Roman highway connecting the eastern and western parts of the empire in what is now Albania, Macedonia, Greece, and Turkey.

We love when the world is turned-upside down — when an underdog army or message or people or soccer team prevails. We love when expectations are flipped, when the impossible happens. It's a glorious, hope-giving, inspiring thing to witness. Unless...

Unless we're the ones on top.

I can't believe I'm about to say this phrase in such a sacred space. Please forgive me. Okay. Here goes: I've never understood the fun in being a fan of the *New York Yankees*. What fun is it to constantly win and to never surprise anyone and to have fans everywhere thrilled when you do lose? It just seems boring to me. And yes, as a Mets fan, of course I'm jealous. I'll distract you from that by pointing out that I didn't go anywhere near Alabama football in this discussion.

The world being turned upside-down sounds great for the poor and the beaten down and those who've suffered great loss and all those who've been afflicted up until the time of the turning.

But I live in a house that Amber and I (and Wells Fargo) own in Homewood, Alabama and I have a really neat backyard and a pretty big TV and I have access to a bounty of barbecue and a ridiculous number of tacos and my biggest complain this week has been that it's taking forever for new gas lines to be installed in my neighborhood.

The world turning upside-down is really not in my personal best interest.

But God has been turning the world upside-down since the beginning, as we, God's people, have resisted it with all our might. From the highest glory Christ came to an insignificant village in an insignificant country ruled by the biggest, baddest empire imaginable. In his three decades on earth, he might have spent his time in palaces, confronting the top dogs. Instead, he dwelled in the streets, eating with ordinary people, interpreting scripture and offering comfort to the poor and stern rebuke to any on top who didn't work to care for the ones on the bottom.

He offered them all a chance to have their world flipped. The broken heard that offer and followed him around and ate with him. Some of the well-off dropped everything and allowed him to upside-down their lives. Many simply walked away, it seems, okay with the way things were. In the end, the world resists being turned so strongly that it uses any means necessary to keep things right-side-up — betrayal, arrest, threats, beating, a cross.

If you are weary. If you are suffering. If you are terrified. If you are engulfed in loss and despair. If you are sick to your stomach about how you will get by. If you are at the end of your rope — Washington and Rochambeau and Paul and Silas and Jason and the Croatian soccer team and the prophets are humming a tune for you. Sure, it's a British folk protest song from the 17th Century. And it's whatever Paul and Silas sang when they found themselves in prison. And it's the tune the angels whistled at the tomb as they waited for Mary Magdelene.

If you are comfortable and not so interested the world turning, you have options. As a child of the 80s and 90s, our culture is currently inundating me with nostalgia. It's glorious. All of my TV shows are being remade. I'm waiting for the neon pants made from parachute material to return, but otherwise, life is grand.

Nostalgia is fun. And nostalgia can be dangerous. For those on top, there is allure in craving a right-side-up world, when guys like us, we had it made. Those were the days. When everything was great and people respected the things I respect and did things the way I like things done. And, by the way, people who are not like me had it much harder, but there have to be some tradeoffs if we're to keep the world from turning all wacky and upside-down.

If we fear the flip, there is a phrase that Jesus gives us for a world that *doesn't need to be turned*: the kingdom of God. So we can hang on with a death grip to the world as it is or was, knowing full well that we're struggling against the pull of the Almighty. Or we can seek the reign of God here, turning the world ourselves, emboldened by the Holy Spirit, strengthened by Christ. We can bring the underdogs and the perennial winners onto the same field and shake things up. We can look at education, poverty, immigration and whatever else is confusing around us and wonder aloud — in our churches and in our homes and in front of the city authorities — how things look from God's perspective.

Every holy day we celebrate — the seasons of Advent and Lent, Christmas and Easter, All Saints' and Pentecost — and every Lord's Day as well tell the story how God subverts expectations and does the harder thing and confounds the world by turning it on its head.

The invitation is present at all times and in all places and always at the font and in the bread and the cup to join God in flipping the script and writing *a really good story* of justice and peace for all of us as we march in service of Christ — the one who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine — the one who leads us in a new Way.
Amen.