

Acts 17:1-7

After Paul and Silas* had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ²And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures, ³explaining 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.' ⁴Some 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. ⁵But the Jews became jealous, and with the help of some ruffians in the market-places 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. ⁶When 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, ⁷and 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.'

Sermon: This isn't your parents' church
Reverend Joylynn Graham
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Hopefully everyone has read my email about the new sermon series I've put together for us. During the summer the narrative lectionary takes a break, and so I wanted to use the time to really talk about some of our contemporary church issues.

I've been in the company of a lot of church leaders lately, and let me tell you there are some issues. But I think a lot of the issues we identify these days are really symptoms of THE issue... And that is the issue of the church itself.

We know that the church is changing.
We know that people are leaving the church.
We can't help but notice.
We can't help but wonder.

Most of us were raised in the church. It was the mainstay of our family life.

The church was the glue that held American society together.
Everyone knew that –

Now our landscape is dotted with empty church buildings.
25% of Americans freely admit that they are not interested in belonging to a church.
Not belonging is the new norm.

So we wonder:
What's going to happen to the church?
Is it going to survive?

I am happy to be in church today. And not just any church, but our church.
Whether there's just a handful of us here, or a hundred, every time we worship together I feel enriched – I feel spiritually fed.

I don't spend my time worrying about our numbers. I used to, but I have come to realize that numbers do not reflect who we are as a church community. What is important is the welcome we extend, the hospitality we offer and the relationships we build. What is important is our mission and vision, and our genuine desire to follow Jesus and serve God.

This is Plymouth.
I feel good about this church.
I see it as a healthy church...

So you might be wondering then, why I want to talk about the state of the church if we're doing okay?
If it ain't broke don't fix it right?
Except we are a part of *it*.
We are a part of the body.
And if one part of the body is broken,
Then the whole body is broken.
So we have to talk about it.

You see I believe in this thing that Jesus dreamed out loud – about followers who would become brilliant beacons pointing to God. About followers whose

character would provide testimony of God's goodness, and whose love would draw others to seek the source of what they'd experienced.

I believe in this thing because of him AND because of those first followers. They were in it all the way. They gave everything — to the point of being persecuted, arrested, tortured, and eventually martyred. We just read about Paul in Thessalonica and all the drama going on there, but that was just another day in the life of an early Christian.

The freedom to follow Christ and serve others, was not something to be taken for granted. It was a statement; it was Paul standing in a synagogue in Thessalonica — three Sabbaths in a row — making his case for Jesus. It was a rabid mob of church folk coming after him with pitchforks.

By the thousands people risked everything to dedicate their lives to the truths of Jesus rather than the ideals of the ruling empire.

That is seriously powerful stuff.
Where did it come from, and where did it go?

Because now what we're looking at is a broken institution that has been used for all the wrong causes and served all the wrong purposes.

Even Pope Francis gives it a thumbs down, acknowledging that people all over the world are rejecting this top-down form of Christianity because clearly it is not the path of Christ.

20 years ago when I was still very much "not a Christian," I read a book by Aldous Huxley titled Brave New World. It was one of those game-changers. It was one of those books you can never unread — it's with you for the rest of your life.

Huxley wrote Brave New World in 1932, creating a dystopian society where God is phased out as science and technology keep people in a constant state of happiness — or numbness if you prefer. It is a world where God ultimately outlived God's usefulness.

It was hair-raising 20 years ago, but today, we're right on the threshold. In the new world, there is no God, no religion, no Ten Commandments, no spiritual pilgrimages.

Why?

Because when you eliminate suffering, and you don't need God to give you comfort.

We are a long way from eliminating suffering, but we are getting better every day at managing our perception of it. We are surrounded by images urging us to "enjoy!" and we are surrounded by products and advertising, all geared toward exciting and stimulating our desire to consume.

From our chemically engineered food, to the dazzling and vibrant images on our screens, we are surrounded by stimuli that is designed to excite our hunger, overcome our resistance, and drive us to indulge.

We are on a treadmill of death. We don't know who we are, or what we think because we are so preoccupied with all the pretty golden carrots being dangled in front of us. We need God more than ever, yet God is the very thing we're running from.

This world is different from the world our parents grew up in. It's different from the world we grew up in. It's different from the world we lived in 10 years ago, and tomorrow it will be different from today. Never before in history have we moved so fast, and the speed is increasing exponentially. Huxley's world happens in the future, 500 years from now. We'll be there long before then at the rate we're going.

We need God more than ever because it's hard to stay grounded when suddenly you have all the world's information right at your fingertips and instant gratification is implied in everything. We can get almost any question answered – immediately. If I want to know the weather, all I have to do is say: "Hey Siri..." I can buy almost anything in the world with one click and have it dropped on my doorstep tomorrow.

We need God more than ever because without God all that's left is a dystopian world that holds no meaning.

I don't want to live in world where there is no God, or religion, or Ten Commandments, or spiritual pilgrimages.

As I quoted in your bulletins: "I don't want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin."

Today it is more important than ever that we hang on to our scripture and our traditions. When I read and study the bible, it is because I love how those ancient words whisper across the millennia – letting me know that what's going on now is not at all new,

or unique,

or even surprising.

I read the bible to learn something about human nature, and the great surrounding mystery that we call God.

God, Yahweh, Adonai, Elohim, Abba, the almighty "I am that I am" ("Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh,").

We have so much science and neuro-science and psycho-science at our disposal, yet human nature is just as elusive as the nature of God. The bible portrays raw human nature, as it struggles with itself and with God.

For the first time since it was written, we're learning how to read the bible and interpret it in ways that speak to our time. All of us...not just certain representatives of God.

I don't know about the rest of you, but my childhood religious education required that I check my brain at the door. In my confirmation class we didn't have discussions; we memorized the books of the bible. It kept us occupied and it kept us quiet.

We knew not to question,

But as we grew and explored our world,

We learned to fear

And to worry

And to stress that we were not spiritually up to code

Because those nagging questions wouldn't go away –
They only clamored louder.

And now the whole thing has cracked wide open.
Now we know that our planet is actually four and a half billion years old;
we know that humans have been around for over 200,000 years;
we know that the earth is not the center of the universe;
we know that that diseases are caused by microscopic organisms – not sin,
and we know that the earth is not flat.

All because of questions, beautiful, beautiful questions.
When I learned the truth I came back to church,
Only to find myself swimming against the flow of everyone leaving.
It's kind of a beautiful irony.

People feel betrayed.
I see it; and I honor it.
But here's the thing,
The truth has not betrayed us;
It has set us free.

What betrayed us were all the doctrines that were concocted and all the
enforcement that went into them. From Genesis alone came the doctrines of
creation, imputation of sin, justification, atonement, depravity, wrath, grace,
sovereignty, responsibility, and many more.

Two thousand years of guilt and shame and loathing for our own humanity, and
the only thing we thought could save us was the church.

Except the church didn't save us.
It collapsed under the weight of its own deceptions
while knowledge kept opening our eyes.

God, Yahweh, Adonai, Elohim, Abba, the almighty "I am that I am" ("Ehyeh-Asher-
Ehyeh,").

Those names call like a gentle breeze, whispering between the lines of established
doctrine.

I am reminded of Iraqi citizens toppling the statues of Saddam Hussain in the market place.

We're toppling our sacred cows and walking away from the institutional church.

We're walking away from organized religion.

But here's what we're not walking away from...

We're not walking away from the awe and wonder that should have been part of the package all along. In fact, what we're learning to do, is reclaim them.

That's our hope –
that's our salvation.

Can the church be salvaged?

Absolutely.

This is not our parent's church.

It is not the institution's church.

This is *Christ's* church.

The one who changed everything.

Jesus was the science and technology of his time exposing the synagogue,
and turning over the tables of the corrupt institution it had become.

Jesus disrupted things.

He went against the grain.

He opened people's eyes.

And they started to ask uncomfortable questions.

He had to die.

The exposure was too great.

But he wouldn't stay dead...

And that's the thing that matters the most.

He wouldn't stay dead...

And here's another thing...

He's still not dead.

This is Christ's church.
The institution gutted.

And that's powerfully good news because there are still thousands and thousands small churches in small communities, just like ours, doing the same sorts of things we do.

Quietly listening and trying to understand what it really means to follow in his footsteps. Serving our communities, opening our arms and our hearts in welcome, and shining God's love in the world.

The institutional church is imploding, but we are not obliged to implode with it. What we are obliged to do is listen and wait, rescue, salvage, reshape and renew...

The church Jesus imagined was one where his followers would become brilliant beacons pointing to God. He dreamed that our character would provide testimony of God's goodness, and our love would draw others to seek the source of what they'd experienced.

When you think about it, he essentially dreamed our closing prayer. Are we still dreaming it with him? I think we are.

Amen