

April 26, 2020
A Whole New World (Welcome [or not] to Thessalonica)
Acts 17:1-10

In Disney's *Aladdin*, Aladdin sings to Princess Jasmine, *"I can show you the world / Shining, shimmering, splendid ... I can open your eyes / Take you wonder by wonder / Over, sideways and under / On a magic carpet ride. / A whole new world / A new fantastic point of view / No one to tell us, "No" / Or where to go / Or say we're only dreaming ..."*

Unbelievable sights. Indescribable feelings. Soaring, tumbling, freewheeling through an endless diamond sky ... It's all idyllic and wonderful. Sometimes life is like that.

Sometimes the "whole new world" is a bit different. Sometimes it doesn't include a hundred thousand things to see or new horizons to pursue. The whole new world means looking at the same four walls – and only those four walls. The same person – or no person. It involves shopping with trepidation. It means going to work (for some) with anxiety. It means no work for others. Our experience is the exact opposite of Aladdin's dream world.

We're in good company

Scripture reminds us when we're facing a challenging new world, we are not alone. After Jesus' resurrection, Jesus' disciples – those who believed in Him, loved Him, and followed Him – lived in a whole new world, too. Jesus has risen from the dead. They have seen Him. The Holy Spirit is within them. They try to tell people all about Him. Some people believe and it is all good. But many, many people – especially those in authority – respond with anger and violence. Stephen is stoned to death (Acts 7). One Jewish leader, in particular – Saul – *"was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison"* (Acts 8:3). Of the eleven apostles, only John would die a natural death. This wasn't Aladdin's wonderful new world, either.

Saul – Paul – has a dramatic encounter with Jesus (Acts 9). When he meets Jesus, Paul becomes part of this whole new world of people who know Jesus and are filled with His Spirit. He becomes one of the great evangelists and church planters of all time. He also goes from the world of being the persecutOR to being the persecutED.

Paul is called by the Holy Spirit to bring the good news about Jesus to Greece (Acts 16:9). First, he and Silas go to Philippi. How did that go? Yes, some people do come to faith in Jesus. But *"A mob quickly formed against Paul and Silas, and the city officials ordered them stripped and beaten with wooden rods. They were severely beaten, and then they were thrown into prison. The jailer was ordered to make sure they didn't escape. So the jailer put them into the inner dungeon and clamped their feet in the stocks"* (Acts 16:22-24). After an earthquake, the city fathers beg them to leave the city (Acts 16:39).

Now they come to Thessalonica, the capital city of Macedonia, a bustling, prosperous seaport. Paul, following his normal pattern, speaks in the Jewish synagogue. Jewish people, after all, had the biblical background to know about the promises of the Messiah – they believed He

would come one day, some day – Paul *"on three Sabbath days reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. 'This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,' he said"* (Acts 17:2-3).

What happens? At first all is good. *"Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women"* (Acts 17:4). Notice who is coming to faith in Jesus:

1. *"Some of the Jews."* Jesus is the fulfilment of Jewish hopes, dreams, and expectations of a Messiah. It makes sense that people, steeped in the prophecies of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Joel would see Jesus as the answer to all their prayers.
2. *"A large number of God-fearing Greeks."* These are ethnically Greek people who have left the religion of their ancestors (remember Zeus, Ares, Poseidon, Dionysius and all those folks). That religion had degenerated into an excuse for "ritual" prostitution and wild orgies. They rejected the Roman cult of worshipping the Roman emperor (they WERE Greek after all). But the religion of one true God, who created heaven and earth, who called people to holiness and justice, who taught compassion for the poor and forgiveness of sin – this intrigued them. But, as ethnic Greeks – not Jews – they could only ever be second class citizens – "God-fearing" non-Jews. Paul's message, however, is that in the Kingdom of God inaugurated by Jesus, ALL are welcome.
3. *"Quite a few prominent women."* Women loom large in the Christian story. It is women who support Jesus and his disciples (Luke 8:1-3). When Jesus' male disciples abandon Him, it is women who are at the cross (Matthew 27:55-56). It is women who are the first witnesses and proclaimers of the resurrection (Matthew 28:1-10). In Philippi, the key person in the new church is a woman, Lydia (Acts 16).

But notice what happens after three weeks: *"But other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: 'These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.' When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil"* (Acts 17:5-9).

Welcome to a whole new world! Not shining, shimmering, splendid, but rough, hostile, and downright violent. BUT people are coming to faith. God's **amazing grace** is speaking into people's hearts and they are being transformed by the love and power of Jesus ... The good news of Jesus, the good news of His amazing grace, is bringing hope, even in dark places.

Finding light in the darkness

I was in Thessalonica in November 2004 (CBM had a trip for pastors to Turkey and Greece – 15 of us were in a small bus). Thessalonica is built on the side of a steep hill, falling toward the Aegean Sea. When we arrived at the outskirts of the city – at the top of the hill – we were greeted by the granddaddy of all thunderstorms. The wind was screaming. The

thunder was booming. The lightning was screeching across the sky. And the rain was (to quote an old friend), "Just a-chucking it down." You get the picture.

Our hotel was at the bottom of the hill, near the sea. Now Thessalonica is an OLD city – founded in 315 BC). The roads are very narrow, very winding, and very cobblestone-y. So, with windshield wipers frantically trying to maintain some kind of visibility, our minibus slogged down treacherously narrow alleys, flooded with rain, squeezing past oncoming vehicles, down toward the harbour – not knowing where we were going.

Yes, there were *"unbelievable sights and indescribable feelings ... we were tumbling, and freewheeling,"* but not through Aladdin's *"endless diamond sky."* This was awful.

Eventually, after getting lost a few times, we did find our hotel. Then, of course, we had to get ourselves and our bags inside during the lightning, thunder, wind, and downpour. We got drenched. Our bags got soaked through.

But thunderstorms end. About an hour later, the thunderclaps and lightning ceased. The rain slowed, then stopped. The wind died. And – miracle of miracles – the sun shot through the clouds. I have some glorious pictures of the sun scything through the dark clouds.

What we experienced in Thessalonica was pretty awful too, though it was very different from what Paul, Silas, Jason experienced. What about their suffering? Their struggles?

Over the coming few weeks we'll be reading Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica. It was written shortly after Paul's visit, when he is further south in Greece, in Corinth. And what Paul's letter(s) to the Thessalonians tells us is that despite the violent storm of rage and persecution incited by the Jews and their rent-a-mob (the King James delightfully calls them *"certain lewd fellows of the baser sort"*), the church not only survived, it thrived.

Paul begins 1 Thessalonians, *"We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ"* (1:2-3). He goes on to praise them for holding onto their faith *"in the midst of severe suffering"* with *"the joy given by the Holy Spirit"* (1:6) *"And so,"* Paul writes, *"you are a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message is ringing out from you ... your faith in God has become known everywhere"* (1:7-8).

After the thunderstorm of persecution and severe suffering in Thessalonica, the believers' faith is like a clear bell resounding, above the chaos. Their faith is like a ray of sunlight after the thunderstorm, bringing inspiration and hope to people everywhere.

Being light in the darkness

This is a time when we, like the Thessalonians, are facing a whole new world. And it's not an easy world. It's not the dream world of Aladdin.

How are we going to respond? We can allow the challenges to overwhelm us and crush our faith. Especially if we have been led to believe that God promises us only good things, we can be in trouble. Jesus doesn't promise us a magic carpet ride. But He can give us "*a new fantastic point of view*" if we allow His Spirit to work within us.

Like the Thessalonians, we can allow the tough times to make us stronger. From the very beginning, the Thessalonians, knew this "whole new world" of believing in the risen Saviour could be a hard choice, a challenging choice, but the RIGHT choice in a rough world. It's easy to choose faith in good times. It takes courage to choose faith when you face a mob of "*certain lewd fellows of the baser sort*" – or Covid-19. But through the experience of going through those dark valleys, we can become better people, stronger people, wiser people, more resilient people. We can grow as people. We can grow as **God's** people.

My German teacher in Grade 10, Herr Böhmert, wrote in my yearbook (in German): "*You can be either a hammer or anvil. You have the choice. Be the hammer.*" In other words, don't let life beat you down. Don't allow the thunderstorms of life to overwhelm you. You may still get drenched. You may be afraid. But keep the faith. With God's help, choose hope. Choose love. Choose endurance. Choose joy. Choose faith. You have the choice.

Paul praises the Thessalonians for their new fantastic point of view. Despite their suffering, they have "*work produced by faith and labour prompted by love,*" "*endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus,*" and "*joy given by the Spirit.*" The Thessalonians' faith through tough times inspired others. How can we inspire people to find new life in Jesus?

- What "*work produced by faith*" and "*labour prompted by love*" can I choose to do these days? Call people. Email people. Encourage people. Help where you can. There are volunteer opportunities with the Soup Kitchen, hospital, and other places. Many of us are connecting more with other people these days. Will I keep that up? What will be different about my life when this is all over?
- How does my "*hope in Jesus*" inspire me? What new priorities are emerging for you through this tough time? Am I spending more time with Jesus in these days? Reading Scripture more? Praying more? Learning more about myself? About Jesus? How is my faith growing? What about my endurance? My patience? How will I be a better person when this is all over? How can I not just slip back into the "old normal"?
- Can I find "*joy in the Spirit*" in this time? Jesus promises "*I am with you always, even to the end of the age.*" How can I find joy in my relationship with Him, through these times? What am I learning? How am I becoming a stronger person?

Don't forget the lessons you're learning through these tough, tough times ... I don't know about you, but I don't want to totally go back to "normal." I want to see if there are some ways in which I can create a "new and better normal" a "new fantastic point of view" ...

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First Baptist Church
1614 – 5th Avenue South, Lethbridge, AB T1J 0W3
(403) 327-2082
bruce@firstb.net