

Bridge Over Troubled Waters

For the children:

Do you know who made the world? Yep. It was God!

And God told us we are supposed to take care of the earth – and everything in it (Gen. 1:28).

So, how do we do that? How do we take care of the earth?

And what if no one else takes care of it? Do we stop taking care of it?

Tomorrow is Earth Day. It's a day some people celebrate to remind everyone that we are supposed to take care of the earth – and everything in it. I don't know what you will do, but tomorrow I plan to walk outside and thank God for the trees and the grass and the flowers. And then I'll find a way to make the earth a little bit better.

Let's pray:

God: thank you for making the earth. Thank you for the plants and the birds and the animals. Help us take care of everything you have given to us. Amen.

Paul and Silas journeyed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, then came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As was Paul's custom, he entered the synagogue and for three Sabbaths interacted with them on the basis of the scriptures. Through his interpretation of the scriptures, he demonstrated that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. He declared, "This Jesus whom I proclaim to you is the Christ." Some were convinced and joined Paul and Silas, including a larger number of Greek God-worshippers and quite a few prominent women.

But the Jews became jealous and brought along some thugs who were hanging out in the marketplace. They formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They attacked Jason's house, intending to bring Paul and Silas before the people. When they didn't find them, they dragged Jason and some believers before the city officials. They were shouting, "These people who have been disturbing the peace throughout the empire have also come here. What is more, Jason has welcomed them into his home. Every one of them does what is contrary to Caesar's decrees by naming someone else as king: Jesus." This provoked the crowd and the city officials even more. After Jason and the others posted bail, they released them.

Acts 17:1-9 (C.E.B.)

For the adults:

In the early morning hours of Tuesday, March 26, the container ship Dali was leaving the port of Baltimore when it struck the Francis Scott Key bridge. In the middle of the night, the bridge collapsed. In response to a Mayday from the ship, police were able to avoid loss of life by stopping traffic from entering the bridge. But there was not enough time for the workers on the bridge to get off. They were doing routine road repairs on the night shift, presumably taking advantage of light traffic. Eight of them went down with the bridge. Six men from Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, fell to their deaths. Only two survived.

When I first heard the news, I remember wondering what bridges I cross on a regular basis. I counted 22 different bridges between my house and the church and another 13 underpasses. About half of the bridges cross water; the others cross roadways and rail lines. They all look sound, but how do I know that?

I also know there are bridges that span the gap between me and people who are on different sides of political and economic divides. How often do I consider what holds those bridges up? And how fragile are they?

And what about the bridge between sinful people and God's forgiving grace? The Apostle Paul finds ways to point to that bridge by building other bridges, spanning the gap between the people of Thessalonica and the story of resurrection. How well are we doing at maintaining those bridges? How secure are they?

I know I can't live without bridges, so I trust the engineers who design them, the contractors who build them, and the road crews who maintain them. I assume no one will interfere with my safe use of them. But I can't control what others do.

It's like Earth Day, I suppose. I must still take care of what I can, even if no one else does.

A curious aspect of that responsibility occurred to me as I was paying attention to the various bridges I cross. I realized someone completely unrelated to the people who use the Francis Scott Key bridge directly impacted those who live on either side of it, people who rely on that bridge.

In a similar way, someone completely unrelated to Philadelphia commuters crashed a truck into the support of the I-95 freeway last June.

By the way, there was a pilot on board the Dali. Pilots are not part of the ship's crew; they are paid contractors who guide the ship in the shallow waters of the channel. It's a role that has always been curious to me.

Most ports require a pilot to be aboard; and every Navy ship I was on used them to navigate that dangerous trek from the port to the open waters and back into port when they return. It doesn't matter how familiar the passage is. A pilot is always brought on board, someone who knows the terrain, someone who knows the way the water shifts, someone who only traverses this particular stretch of water.

The Captain is still in charge of the ship; but if he or she doesn't follow the guidance of the pilot, the Captain can be fired. On the other hand, if something goes awry, the pilot is almost never held responsible.

I'm sure that is part of the conversation taking place behind the closed doors of the owners of the Dali and the insurance companies who are trying to determine the costs associated with repairing the bridge – as well as payments to the families of those six men. Is there someone to blame or was it simply an accident? And who should bear the financial costs?

But I'm also thinking about that conversation from the perspective of Jason in our text today. We know almost nothing about Jason. In fact, all we know about him comes from this short passage!¹ And what we learn is both limited and subject to conjecture. It says Paul and Silas were staying at his house (Acts 17:7).

- Was he running a Bed and Breakfast?
- Was it a boarding house?
- Maybe he was simply hosting the visiting preacher?

We don't know; although it is implied Jason is a convert to the Christian faith.

¹ The name Jason listed in Romans 16:21 appears to be a separate Jason from this one.

Paul and Silas are trying to bridge the gap between the leaders of the local synagogue and the story of Jesus. When that doesn't work, they turn to the gentiles who have become part of the synagogue community, so called "God-fearers" and "quite a few" prominent women (Acts 17:4)

That's when ruffians are recruited to tear down the bridge. They try to keep Paul from bridging the gap between the story of resurrection and the people in Thessalonica – by running him out of town. Unlike the Dali in Baltimore, they are intentionally trying to destroy this bridge. They want to remove Paul and Silas, the pillars that are holding the bridge aloft. They are so determined to do so, they follow Paul into a neighboring city and try to stir up trouble there, too (Acts 17:13).

But not before the mob turns on Jason and his friends, the very people who were using the bridge Paul was building (Acts 17:6). Presumably the people in the crowd are neighbors of Jason. In fact, Jason may have been friends of the synagogue leaders – before jealousy led them to act with such fierce determination.

Now, this isn't the first time Paul has found himself on the receiving end of violence. Nor will it be the last. But this is new for Jason. And as far as I have been able to find, it is the first time someone on the sideline experienced the pain of persecution.

And it's not the last time that happened, either.²

About the year 1539, there was a God-fearing peasant, named Tjaert Reynerts, who lived near Harlinger, in Friesland. He was brought a prisoner to Leeuwarden, where he had to suffer much for the truth. The cause of his imprisonment was, that, out of compassion and brotherly love, he had secretly harbored Menno Simons in his house. This having been brought to the notice of the enemies, he was apprehended and very cruelly [put to death].

Like Jason, he was collateral damage. Caught in the net that was being used to capture someone else.

It reminds me that the crew of the ship, people completely unrelated to those crossing the Francis Scott Key bridge, are the ones who cause its failure and demise. But it's the people on the bridge who pay the price.

I suppose it's not unlike the Palestinians caught in the crossfire between Israel and Hamas. That bridge was already quite fragile. In fact, maybe it wasn't even working.

It does make me wonder again about the other bridges I cross – and the ones I am called to build or support.

I think about the work of Justice Together, for example. How am I called – how are *we* called – to bridge the gap between those who are suffering in our community and those who can alleviate their suffering? Could it be that the Nehemiah event in a few weeks is an example of people helping make a bridge over troubled waters?

Using the words of a different Paul, Paul Simon, maybe we need to speak to those who are unhoused and to those who struggle with mental illness:³

When you're weary, feeling small,
When tears are in your eyes
I will dry them all
I'm on your side

² *Martyrs Mirror*, p. 454 (with thanks to Kendal Warkentine for helping me find this reference).

³ "Bridge Over Troubled Waters," © 1970

When you're down and out
When you're on the street
When evening falls so hard
I will comfort you
I'll take your part
Oh when darkness comes
And pain is all around

Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down

Too often, those who are unhoused are collateral damage; they end up there because of actions taken by others. Just like those workers on the bridge in Baltimore who had no control over the ship. Those unhoused people need us to undergird the bridges they are trying to cross.

On May 9, Justice Together will make requests for public officials to take specific actions, helping build that bridge. If you haven't made plans already, I hope you'll plan to be there.

During one of the weeks I was off this month, I attended the funeral of my dad's brother, Pat. At Pat's service, the preacher made connections between the story of Easter and our story, of Pat's story. In his meditation, he reminded us that the people in Thessalonica didn't believe in resurrection. But we do.

In his letters to the church in Thessalonica, Paul notes that the heart of his message is that Jesus was "raised from the dead" (I Thess. 1:10).

Now, there is an abundance of literature from that era suggesting death was seen as the very symbol of all that was wrong with the world, the irrefutable evidence of the alienation of creation and humanity from God.⁴ When the Romans put Jesus to death, it was not just an example of the powerful excising their power over the weak. It was also a bold claim that the Empire is in charge, making it clear that there was no bridge between life on earth and life after death.

It also makes it clear that the crucifixion was a political act, it was a reminder of the absolute power of the Empire. But then, as Paul declares, the Thessalonians responded to the gospel concerning the raising of Jesus from the dead (1 Thess. 2:13). He was reminding them – and us – that the resurrection of Jesus speaks of a bridge that God has built, a bridge over troubled waters, a bridge that calls into question all imperial claims to absolute power over the affairs of nations, communities, and individuals.

To believe in the resurrection is to deny the power of the Empire.

That is why the locals are so perturbed by Paul and Silas. They are challenging the very foundations of society. They are building a bridge too far. It leads from a system of oppression to one of freedom.

In the end, Jason eventually posts bail and is freed.
Paul and Silas are forced to leave Thessalonica.

And through it all the church thrives. We know that because Paul writes letters to them. They are the first written part of the New Testament, in fact. And in those letters, Paul apologizes for not being able to visit

⁴ Edward Pillar at *WorkingPreacher.com*

in person (1 Thess. 2:18). Some scholars think it may have been a condition of Jason's bail that Paul and Silas are not allowed to return.⁵

But the bridge Paul was building, one built on a radical belief that the resurrection took place, continues to stand. And the good news is that because Jesus was raised from the dead, there are no more victims of collateral damage. Instead, we are invited to cross the bridge over troubled waters, where we become recipients of the gift of life eternal.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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www.WorkingPreacher.com

⁵ Faw, p. 191