

We have two readings today, an account from Acts of Paul and Silas' visit to Thessalonica, and the beginning of the first letter to the Thessalonians, which is the very earliest letter of Paul that we have. The story that Luke tells us in Acts represents Paul's missionary work: he would travel to a place where there was a Jewish community and, as Jewish scholars were wont to do, he would argue about the meaning of the scriptures with the other men. Paul's particular argument is that the Hebrew Bible, properly understood, foretells the passion and resurrection of the Messiah, and that Jesus was that Messiah. Some people found that persuasive; others didn't. But apparently enough Jews did find it persuasive that the leaders of the synagogue became alarmed and incited some non-Jewish ruffians to form a mob to attack Paul and Silas. They couldn't find them, so they found someone named Jason instead, and dragged him and a few other unfortunates to the city authorities, complaining, "These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has entertained them as guests." The mob accuses Paul and Silas of acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor by calling Jesus "king." The city officials follow appropriate legal procedure, but that doesn't ensure the safety of Paul and Silas, so they leave Thessalonica. Some time after that, Paul writes the letter whose beginning was our second reading.

Luke tells the story as a one-off, but from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians we gather that this kind of persecution is ongoing. "In spite of persecution you received the word with joy . . . so that you became an example to all the believers . . ." That's one interesting thing: the Thessalonians—and probably the people for whom Luke wrote Acts also—live under ongoing persecution whose end is not in

sight. Both Luke and Paul want to encourage them in a difficult situation.

The other interesting thing is the accusation: “These people have been turning the world upside down.” Well, who’s running around town forming mobs and breaking furniture? Not Paul’s little group. That would be the ruffians from the marketplaces. The accusation of “turning the world upside down” refers, of course, to their commitment to the kingdom of God over and above the Empire of Rome. But what does that look like, and why is it so disturbing to the local leaders?

It looks like, in Paul’s words, “your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope,” for which he praises the Thessalonians in his letter. Their commitment to Jesus as messiah means that they take a stance of hopefulness in a context of resignation and cynicism. They engage in the works of love despite their meager prospects of success. They are “turning the world upside down” not so much with what they accomplish (although that too), but with the space they create in which to envision the new world that is possible. What I mean is that by acting from hope, rather than defaulting to cynicism, that little group of people makes it possible to at least imagine things being different—and once you’ve imagined it, the “way things are” is no longer inevitable. This turns the world upside down.

The Green Team acts like the Thessalonians when they envision the containment of climate change. Such enormous momentum and inertia has brought us to the point of melting icecaps and rising oceans, a reasonable person would say that the Indianola Green Team is wasting its time. But faith and love and steadfastness of hope do not allow disengagement. They compel the faithful to sound the alarm, persist in seeking amelioration, continue to cultivate awareness

and appreciation of the natural world from which so many of us are disconnected. A vision of an alternative turns the world upside down.

We also hold an alternative economic vision. As you know, I spent three days last week in Washington DC lobbying for a bill that would abolish secrecy about who owns any corporation. Right now there are tax havens—Panama, obviously, but also the Cayman Islands and also Delaware, Wyoming and Nevada—where a person can stash a lot of money in the name of a corporation that actually has no human beings on staff except the director, who is often the receptionist or cleaning lady at the address of the corporation. There are something like 18,000 corporations in one building in the Cayman Islands, but the “directors” do not have control or reap the benefits of these corporations. This is a good thing in a few cases: for instance, Jimmy Buffett lives in a condo that’s owned by a shell corporation because he doesn’t want Parrotheads looking him up and coming to his door. Most of the time, however, these shell corporations are incorporated as a way to launder money from illicit enterprises, such as human trafficking and drug trafficking, or as a way to avoid paying income tax. When very rich people don’t pay their income taxes, roads, schools and clinics don’t get built, national debt increases, and the burden on everybody else increases.

An anonymous Delaware company is alleged to have purchased property tax liens in Maryland, Iowa, Kentucky, Ohio and DC to force homeowners into foreclosure proceedings . . . but it can’t be proved because there’s no law against the human beings behind this company remaining anonymous. In Nevada, one firm formed over 2800 shell companies and helped customers evade more than \$30

million in federal taxes. That's a lot of Headstart classrooms and conservation law enforcement money that never materialized. The son of the President of Equatorial Guinea, a tiny oil-rich country in West Africa where most people live on less than a dollar a day, used a shell company to disguise his purchase of a \$30 million mansion in Malibu. That's a lot of schools and clinics that didn't happen.

The Panama Papers are the tip of the iceberg. I've known for a long time that the world of shadow banking was enormous, in terms of the amount of money, but I didn't know the stories. One expert says that "62 individuals have as much wealth as half the world's population, and a handful of the super-rich control governments around the globe." [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-perkins/confessions-of-a-panama-p\\_b\\_9670882.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-perkins/confessions-of-a-panama-p_b_9670882.html) So a group of agencies that represent small business owners (who can't compete with anonymous competitors) and faith communities organized this week of lobbying on the Hill that I went to. We went to everyone in the Iowa delegation except Steve King, and at every one, I told them that my congregation cares passionately about alleviating human suffering, and that we give gladly to those in need—but that our generosity and compassion should not be abused by those whose refusal to pay their fair share is the cause of hunger, disease and hopelessness. We are more than happy to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, but too many of those people wouldn't be hungry or naked, if their countrymen were not stealing from them.

If you need further inspiration, there's ReShonda. (sick, worked Sunday, dad's company)

This is an enormous phenomenon, and it's grown for such a long time that it

seems almost ridiculous to think that we can reverse the trend. Seventy-five of us trundling around Capitol Hill in the rain on Tuesday telling our stories to congressional aides doesn't seem like a real death blow to the shadow banking industry. If even just the US passed this law for incorporation transparency, it would truly turn the world upside down. It would upset the operations of countless drug merchants and human traffickers, and it would bring in billions of tax dollars in the US alone.

It's our job as Christians to turn the world upside down—by working as if it could be done. Maybe it can; I sure hope so. What I did last week was to share with our representatives the alternative vision that motivates us at Crossroads, and make them pay attention for a few minutes to the alternative reality that we have discerned as God's kingdom. Now I want to remind you how important it is to hold that vision, to be like the Thessalonians in our work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in Jesus Christ, so that we become an example to our neighbors. God does turn the world upside down, but always from the bottom, never from the top.

Let us pray. Messiah, Jesus, your followers established the vision in communities near and far. Now it is our turn. Show us how to witness to your presence and turn the world upside down in places near and far.

Amen.