

“TO AN UNKNOWN GOD...”

Text: Acts 17:16-34

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Our Biblical passage, as set forth today in the Lectionary Readings, is from Acts 17:16 to 34, which outside of Paul's Conversion on the road to Damascus, is near enough the best known and most often quoted story in Luke's second volume titled "The Acts of the Apostles." The first of course was his Gospel story of Jesus. Acts tells of the decades following the death and resurrection of Jesus and how the Christian Faith made its way out into the Gentile pagan world beyond Jerusalem. I ask you to look at it with me with keen eyes, open ears and willing hearts to see what it says and means to you and me in the hastening on first decade of the 21st Century. Let's cut to the chase:

The opening words are, "While Paul was waiting for them in Athens..." Let's stop right away: To understand why Paul was alone and waiting in Athens, we need to drop back to the beginning of Chapter 17. There he had to get out of Philippi in a hurry to save his life. He and Silas went to Thessalonica where he argued in the Synagogue, proclaiming Christ and his death and resurrection. Parenthetically, I note at this point that it appears Luke had unaccountably left the Missionary Journey. No longer does Luke, the author of Acts write "We" did this or that, as in the previous chapters. He says rather "They did this" or "Paul and Silas did this." Nobody knows why Luke departed, but that thankfully, he lived to write another day.

Anyway, Paul's sermons in Thessalonica persuaded some Jews to accept his message, and it also impressed some devout Greeks, "not a few of which were the leading women of the town." Luke seems to want us to know that influential women were part of the first company of followers. He mentions it again in Berea. This departure of synagogue members infuriated the local Jewish establishment. Pastors do not like it when you steal their sheep. But this was ridiculous: they hired some ruffians from the town to attack the home of a man named Jason (Greek for Joshua) where Paul was staying. The Town Council arrested Jason and made him sign a surety bond, so that if Paul and Silas caused any further trouble, he would lose both the bond and his house. The complaint was that "They were turning the world upside down." (Wow! What a charge to live up to.)

To prevent further trouble, some of the new believers sent Paul and Silas off to Berea, known to us as Berea, about 50 miles to the west, along the famous Egnatian Way. There they were welcomed warmly, at least at the start. Many Bereans believed, "including not a few Greek men and women of Honorable Estate." But the paid hooligans from Thessalonica were dispatched to incite the friendly crowds over in Berea, which they did so successfully that Paul's cohorts once again had to escort him out of that city for safe keeping.

To mislead the rabble-rousers, however, they did not continue on up the Egnatian Way, as you might expect. They headed down to the SE Coast, delivering Paul all the way to Athens, the legendary capital of Greece. Why Silas and Timothy, who had caught up with them in Berea, did not go with him is not clear, but when the escorts left for home, Paul urged them to send his co-workers down as soon as possible. So, as we begin, Paul is waiting in Athens, where he did not really want to be in the first place. He is all by himself, which he never seemed to have tolerated very easily. Paul, it seems, did not like to be alone.

Now if you have been to Athens you will have marveled at the outstanding wonders of the ancient world, much more so at the time of Paul. No such assemblage of art and philosophy and architecture and sculpture has ever existed in one city, unless it was during the Italian Renaissance. What we see in Athens now is largely ruins. In Paul's day the Acropolis was an active, thriving haven of sacred worship. There were no empty seats in the Parthenon when the worship bells rang. With its colossal Doric grandeur, the breath-taking statue of Athena

commanding the inside, the Temple was a place of daily worship by the Athenian people. Nike, whom we associate with Tiger Woods and his kin, was looked to as the goddess of Victory. In Greek mythology she was the divine charioteer who always won the race. They were a sports dominated culture too. The famous Winged Victory of Samothrace, headless now, but featured in the Louvre Museum in Paris as you go up the stairway to the second floor, is actually the same Nike who was worship and adored for her assistance in the pursuit of athletic victories. The intricate Erechtheum, at the northern edge of the Acropolis, had a sacred snake dwelling in its foundations, which drew a steady crowd to bow down, pacify it with gifts of food, and stand in wonder at its magical presence.

Every imaginable idea or wish had its own god. In the ancient Areopagus, where Paul would preach, stood the Altar of the Twelve Gods, the Stoa of Zeus, the Temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love and lust and sexual pleasures, plus five dozen others gods and goddesses in their own buildings. Idol worship was on the loose all over Athens, a free-wheeling pantheism and open-mindedness which allowed that it did not matter what you believed or did, so long as you did your best and did not hurt anybody else in the process. Religious belief had become a convenience to help one accommodate the changing fortunes of life. It was said that there were more idols than humans in the city. So many gods and goddesses; so little time to do them all.

But Paul did not even try. He was not your average Tommy the Tourist. Discouraged already by having been run out of three towns in a row, he sulked and wandered around from one pagan deity to the next, wondering how on earth they had managed to get so far from where they should be. (I often wonder that too.) His boredom soon turned into anger. It says he argued again in the synagogues with the Jews and with other devout people in the marketplace all day every day: The Stoics, the Epicureans, the Modernists, the Post Modernists, the agnostics and the atheists, anybody, everybody. Socrates, Plato and Cicero had left their mark on the city.

You want to say: “Come on Paul, relax, settle down. Get hold of it! Don’t take yourself so seriously. Enjoy a few days taking in the sights. It’s fun to look around Athens. I mean, Timothy and Silas will be along before you know it, but meanwhile, you are going to get an ulcer. These idols were here long before you came and they will still be here long after you are gone.”

Good advice maybe, but not for St. Paul. He lived as if every single day belonged to the Lord God and he refused to spend a single one of them for anything else. They called him “a babbler,” hinting that he should ease up a little on the chatter. But he didn’t care. They said he was presenting a new foreign deity, and, like some people we know, verse 21 actually reveals that, “All the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.” Others, I suspect, never wanted to hear anything new; they were wedded to the way things used to be.

Some of local leaders meanwhile were intrigued with his words and Paul was officially invited over to the Areopagus, the public market place on an elevated section of the city, more familiar to us as “Mar’s Hill” in the King James Bible. The official Court of Athens met there, and heated discussions took place in the square, something like a Hyde Park Corner of the day. It was an honor to be selected by the powers that be to speak to the high and mighty folk on the Areopagus, almost like a college debater being invited to speak in the Oxford Union. So he willingly went and delivered one fine sermon which, thanks to Luke, has never been forgotten.

Now, if you are at all familiar with St. Paul and his preaching, usually garnered from his letters to the various churches he founded, you might be surprised and puzzled at the content of his sermon in Athens. It does not sound like Paul at all. His major themes were Justification by Faith alone, Original Sin, which was covered only in the death of Christ on the Cross, but you must surrender your life to Jesus Christ who is coming again; and of course he usually tacked on some mundane, straight-laced advice about matters of personal behavior.

None of these is mentioned in Acts 17. Why? I think it is because Paul knew that he was not addressing Christians, or Jewish converts. He was addressing the secular of the world, those outsiders who have had no church or synagogue experience. They took him out to the Areopagus and asked him to tell them what kind of god this new god was (verse 19). “It sounds so strange to our ears.” Paul stood up to answer them. We should always be ready to give reason for the faith which is within us.

The first thing he said arose out of his wandering about. “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are. For as I went through your city I looked carefully at the objects of your worship...” (Verses 22-23) Let’s stop there for a minute. Paul began by making contact with them. You can almost feel their pride being puffed up when he complimented them on their spiritual acumen. Everybody loves a compliment.

Some scholars say that Paul did not intend it as compliment. One even said it was intended as a slap in the face. He eventually took them further but he needed their attention first. I think it was Paul’s way of approaching those who had not yet heard. And they were religious. To us it was pagan worship and idolatry, but it was meaningful to them. They were searching. They were trying to come to terms with life and its vagaries. They knew there was something spiritual there worth finding, and they were doing the best they could.

Sure, the Athenians were worshipping idols. Sure, they were mistaken. Sure, they honored the gods like Mars, the god of war who was a companion to Venus. Sure, they loved power. Sure, they revered Athena who brought them victories in battle. Sure, they worshipped pleasure which had been heralded by the Epicureans, pleasure of the body, mind and soul. Sure they adored success and power and money and sex. Most of their gods wanted them to succeed. Cupid is cute to us with his little arrows; but to them he was a god with power to make love happen. Juno, the consort of Jupiter, was the goddess of money. Yep, you guessed it; “Money” was also a goddess! She, it, was an object of worship. Sure they worshipped the idol of money. Clear? Crystal clear!

Paul could have condemned them outright as he does in some of his letters to the Churches. He could have told them they were going to hell in a hand-basket. They were, after all, pagans. But he gave them credit for trying. They thought they knew what they needed to know about religion and worship and making their way through the spiritual struggles of that and any other age.

Paul began by admitting that he could see they were religious, just as we are. In the world around us are myriads of those who echo each and all of the misguided idolatries of ancient Athens. And not only in the world, also in the Christian churches of the land. People hanker after the gods and goddesses of the day: success and popularity, pleasure and money and sex and power and war and victory and compromise, and all the rest. No one in his or her right mind would ever dare to bray that we have managed to modify, let alone eliminate, the vast inequities between the rich and the poor, the developed and backward countries, the equality of

education or health care for all who need it. We worship our own little chosen gods and goddesses too.

We might not erect statues and little temples all around, but everywhere you look people are worshipping the wrong things. What is worshipped in our day, day by day, is equally pluralistic as the Athenians, whose gods were representations up on Mt. Olympus. And the worst idolatry of all, Paul is going on to say, is when we worship ourselves, as if me and mine were all that mattered in the world. Theirs was not so much an alien practice as first appears.

In one of his books, John Ortberg, Pastor of the Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in Northern California, delineates the variety of approaches Christians take to try to understand God and his mysterious universe. Some people come to the faith on the intellectual road; they need to think it out. Others find their way within their emotions; they need to feel their way. Some arrive through relationships; they need to feel the presence of God and other people. Others come to Christ through the pain and worries of life; they need to find something to hold on to, and someone they can trust. God made us all in separate stations and places. There is no one single highway direct to the heart of God. Christ holds the keys to the kingdom, but he parcels them out off a huge ring with a variety of different keys which he gives to the variety of individuals as he sees fit.

But Paul moves on, and so should we. He told them that as he was looking around he came across a particular statue which he could not get out of his mind – a peculiar inscription indeed. It read quote end quote: “To an Unknown God.” I have been there on the Areopagus in Athens where you can see a plaque marking the spot where Paul spoke that day. There was one more statue. When every other god and goddess had been covered, there was one left. He found an altar “To an unknown god.” Paul said: “That which you worship as unknown, I now declare to you!”

You might have expected to hear him say “I declare Jesus Christ to you, and Him crucified! Take it or leave it!” That confidence in the Gospel is a constant theme in Pauline theology and familiar to us. But he didn’t say that. Remember, I pointed out that his congregation was not made up of those who were not debating Christian theologies of the atonement. They were non-believers, who didn’t know an apostle from an epistle.

Paul told them that while he understood their fascination with the Unknown God, he wanted to introduce them to “the God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands.” These words come directly out of the creation story in Genesis One. He also echoes the Old Testament prophets who warned of a God who is not enshrined in the buildings we call Temples and Churches. Archbishop William Temple once chided that “It is a mistake to assume that God is solely, or even chiefly, interested in the things we call religious.”

Jesus the Christ is quintessential to our faith; of course we would not be here without him and his sacrifice. But if you listen closely, Jesus is also the Eternal God, part of the Trinitarian presence of the Creator. John writes in his prologue that Jesus, the Son, was there at the beginning. The Gospel writer John refers to him in the Greek word Logos, The Word. The Logos was a popular philosophy of the day. John writes: “without him, without the Word, without Jesus Christ not anything was made that was made.” It is John’s way of repeating what Paul is saying on Mar’s Hill in ancient Athens. He, She, It, they are the same God. This God does not dwell in those homemade temples you have erected to honor him or her. He does

not need anything, for He himself gives all things, including the gift of human life. We do not choose the moment of our birth, and we do not choose the moment of our passing from the earth. All that is critical to Paul's argument.

He then adds that this same Creator God chose to make all the nations and peoples of the earth from one ancestor, Adam, and Eve of course. And he created them all in such a way that they would long for contact with the creator. It is part of our genetic make-up, in the double-helix of our being. Augustine said "Our hearts are restless, until we find our rest in him, in the one true God." If we decide to worship anything else other than the Creator God, we become idol worshippers, no matter how holy or agreeable it sounds. Paul Tillich added that you will know what God you serve when you define your Ultimate Concern, that which you worship first and most of all.

Paul goes on: the good news here, he continued, is that while indeed we are made to search or even grope for God, we will be able to find him "for he is not far from each of us. In him we live and move and have our being." (vs.28) And he added "as some of your own poets have said." Luke mentioned that there were some Stoics and some Epicureans in the crowd. Zeno, the original Stoic, taught that "Virtue is the only ultimate good," all you can hope to do is to keep a stiff upper lip and control things as you move along. Epicurus, who founded the philosophy which bears his name, taught that there was no "One God," but a multitude of gods all over the place. Even they do not care all that much about what you do, so find pleasure as you go: characterized laughingly as "Eat, drink, and be merry; for tomorrow you may die." We convert it in our time to "You only go around once, so get all the gusto you can!"

A couple of centuries before, Cicero had stood on that spot and added a third philosophy for those who sought the meaning of life. He called it "the academic option," the intellectual, the one which addressed the presence of gods and goddesses with a natural skepticism. Not a literal atheist, who does not believe in God, but an agnostic, who reserved judgment on who made the world and who rules it now. There are some inklings those believers taught, but there is not enough to stake your life on it. So reserve judgment, be cautious, careful, non committal; because it might be true, but it probably isn't. You know what I mean.

Paul spoke next to them. He assured them that God had overlooked their failure to accept his offer in times previous, but there are no excuses now. In the first chapter of Romans he wrote it a similar way, but it is substantially the same point: Acts 17 says: "While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance until now, he commands all people everywhere to repent," a familiar word with St. Paul. The time for excuses is over. In Romans one he wrote: "For what can be known about God is plain because God has shown it to them. From the foundation of the world, his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been seen and understood through the things he has made, so now they are without excuse." (Romans 1:18-20) The time of playing intellectual games and reserving judgment is over. The trump is being called by God himself.

And why? They might have asked him, "How is this time any different from the times of yore?" Paul said, "Because God has fixed a day of judgment, on which the whole world will be judged in righteousness by a man he has appointed for the task."

"Hey, wait a minute, how do you know that, Paul?" you can hear someone shouting on the Areopagus in the Q & A period. "Who is this appointed man, and how do we know he is for

real? How do you expect us to believe that?” Good questions, if they were asked. Paul said, **“God has given assurance to all by raising him (that appointed man) from the dead.”**

Luke goes on to conclude our Scripture lesson: **“When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed.”** Some couldn’t handle it. It was so alien to their way of thought. They preferred the gods and goddesses of their own, ones they could manipulate and control and overpower with their own reason, the ones which fit the familiar categories they could manage.

Some scoffed, but Luke goes on to write, **“but others said ‘We will hear you again about this.’”** Sounds good but we’re not sure. It is hard to accept and believe, and they used the phrases which any salesman hates to hear, **“We will come back again after we think about it for a while, and look around elsewhere.”** Which being interpreted means, **“Bye, bye, we are out of here!”**

I pity Felix, the Procurator of Judea, a couple of chapters later in Acts 24, who after he heard Paul proclaim the Gospel and was literally on trial in the courtroom because he had preached about the Resurrection of Jesus. Poor old Felix was frightened by what Paul said and what he should do, so he dismissed him, and said, in the old translation: **“You have almost persuaded me to become a Christian. Go and when I have a convenient time, I will call for you again.”** In the New Revised Standard which we use, it reads, **“Go away for the present; when I have an opportunity I will send for you again.”** But he never did. He was so close, but no cigar. He was in the presence of everything he needed and wanted, but he would not stay long enough to embrace it. And the convenient time for another meeting to listen to St. Paul never ever came again. I have often wondered if Procurator (Governor) Felix ever wished that he could go back and start to listen to Paul all over again. How about you?

But, the passage is finished and so are we, almost. When Paul completed his address to the Athenians on the Areopagus, Luke writes: **But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius, the Areopagite (one of their very own leaders), and a woman named Damaris. We never hear from Damaris again: no one knows what happened to her next, except God himself. But someday you can ask her. Many commentators say she must have previously been a woman of questionable values, for no highly respected woman would have been in the Marketplace alone. I don’t know, but it makes a good story. What is certain is that on that day she heard a man speak of another man who did not want to use her, who wanted to treat her as an equal and gave her freedom to be herself.**

And Dionysius, well, it is a legend and not historically verifiable, but I like to think it is true that he went on to become the Bishop of Athens – there was one with his name (Eusebius the honored historian around 170 AD said it was the same man.) So that while Paul’s sermon in Athens seems to have yielded little fruit – e.g. no Christian Church was founded and the city did not change – it could be that in Dionysius, Paul’s efforts might have been blessed and rewarded a thousand fold. You never know what might happen when you touch the life of one young man or woman. What happens next is up to God.

Raphael, the classic Italian Renaissance artist, has a lesser known series of tapestries commissioned for the Vatican which now hang in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, one of which is this exact scene from Acts 17. Paul is standing in front of the Temple of Mars, the God of War. The artist cleverly depicts the crowd around him portraying all of the responses which are mentioned in the Scriptures. One listener is looking at Paul disdainfully, as if he thinks Paul is crazy. Some others are disenchanted to be sure. Some of them are talking to each other, in the middle of the sermon, which is a no-no now and then. Others

appear to be polite, but have expressions which seem to say, “That’s nice, but not for us.” One seems to be fiddling with his clothes, impatient for the sermon to be over. The sole man behind him is seated with a pose almost like Rodin’s Thinker, his chin resting on his hand.

But, on the far right of the painting, you can make out one who is surely Damaris, rapt with attention: her whole life is about to change. And Dionysius, reserved and proper, but excited and reaching up in wonderful anticipation and relief that he has finally found what he has been looking for. “That which you worship as Unknown, I now declare to you.”

So, one little question before we leave: if, like Rembrandt always tried to do, you tried to find a place for yourself into Raffaello’s scene, where would you put yourself, how do you see yourself? What expression would you paint on your face? Would you be ready?

Or would you be saying or thinking: “Oh dear, I have heard all that before, I think.” Or, “Oh, I have been a Christian since I was 13 or so.” Or, “It is almost time for brunch.” Or, “I have to think about that for a while; you don’t expect me to decide something so important now, right here, on the spur of the moment.” Or would you, like Damaris and Dionysius, unfamiliar names to be sure, would you jump up willingly and join them, and hold their hands and confess that God has made your life and that Jesus Christ is Lord, for now and forevermore. Amen