

May 17, 2020

Acts 17: 21-34(a)

Dear Lord, We thank you for the ability to know you as a personal God, one who can be known, one who dwells among us. Please open our hearts to your Scripture this morning. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

'An Unknown God'

When I was a sophomore in college, I took a winter term trip to Athens, Greece. We were to study ancient Greek civilization.

But the professor who was teaching the course was the epitome of the absent-minded professor. As soon as we landed in Athens, he hopped on a plane and flew to Turkey.

He left 25 college students alone in a country where none of us spoke modern Greek – or biblical Greek, for that matter.

We quickly located the Red Light District, and spent the next four evenings in nightclubs.

I remember thinking it kind of odd, even at the time. Later, as the parent of college students, I'd have been on the phone calling the university president, calling Scotland Yard, calling Interpol to fly over and take a look.

But this was decades before cell phones, and I don't think it occurred to any of us to even tell our parents.

Decades later, when the Summer Olympics were held in Athens in 2004, a good friend went over to cover the games for a news service. When she came back, she said, "That was incredible. Do you remember the Parthenon?"

No.

"Do you remember the Acropolis?"

No.

"The Arch of Hadrian?"

No. But I did get to the Red Light District.

Admittedly, *my* memories of Athens are a little blurry. But this seat of one of the world's great democracies is the subject of today's passage in Acts.

Even today, in this bustling, modern city, I am told there is a great, bare exposed rock – not unlike Table Rock – called Areopagus. “Pagos” is Greek for big rock or hill. Ares is the Greek war god. Thus Areopagus. The hill of Ares.

The Greek war god Ares was also known by his Roman name, Mars. So the Romans called the place Mars Hill.

By Paul's time in the first century, this Areopagus had existed for centuries. A government council and a homicide court met in the open air upon this great rock.

It was an important place in an important city.

And according to Luke, the writer of Acts, it was a place where philosophers and thinkers gathered to discuss the great ideas of the day.

Paul came to Athens to wait for Silas and Timothy. And as he looked around, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was filled with statues of idols. He even saw one altar built to an unknown God. The Athenians were covering their bases.

So Paul began to speak in the synagogues and in the markets, introducing the gospel of Jesus Christ and arguing that he represented the one true God. The philosophers of Athens were glad to hear something new. So they invited Paul to the Areopagus to explain this new teaching.

Let's turn to **Acts 17: 21- 34 (a)** and see what happens when Paul agrees to speak in this learned place.

²¹Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god."

'What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴The 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, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.

²⁶From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷so that they would search for God and

perhaps grope for him and find him — though indeed he is not far from each one of us.

²⁸For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.”

²⁹Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals.

³⁰While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.’

32 When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’ ³³At that point Paul left them. ³⁴But some of them joined him and became believers....”

You may have picked up on Luke's not-so-subtle dismissal of the intellectuals of Athens: He said they spent **“their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.”**

We have ways of leveling that same criticism. We say someone is elitist. We say people live in ivory towers. We talk about “ladies who lunch.”

I have a friend who could have been a lady who lunched. She was born well. She married well. But instead of lunching and playing tennis and sitting by the pool, she runs a successful business.

When she was in her early 40s, she returned from a girls' week at the beach. And I will never forget what she told me.

Many of her beachmates that week were privileged women in their 50s. Their children had gone off to college. They were sick to death of volunteer work.

And they absolutely did not know what they were going to do with the rest of their lives.

Now there's probably a part of all of us that might like to try that life, just for awhile. But I have to admit: It sounded terribly empty.

I think that is the picture Luke is trying to convey here. He presents Athens as a community of empty people, who could afford the luxury of chasing the latest new thing, the latest theory, the latest philosophy, the latest theology.

But in his view, they were coming up empty.

Paul arrived in the city and looked around. And he was struck by the number of religious worship sites he found.

We know from other ancient histories that Paul was right – the Athenians were fervently religious. They had idols to Greek and Roman gods everywhere. As I mentioned, the very site of Paul's speech was the Hill of Ares, or Mars Hill, named for the war god.

These people were searching for something.

These people were searching for something.

And apparently, they weren't sure they had found it. Because they had one altar that read "**To an unknown god.**"

Paul recognized their yearning. It is a yearning that we, even 2,000 years later, sometimes feel. He connected it to the yearning we feel when we are faced with the magnificence of creation.

Have you ever felt that yearning? Maybe deep in the woods or at a waterfall or on a mountain ridge?

We all have places that strike awe in our hearts.

The ocean is that place for me.

The ocean is so unfathomable. To think that this great expanse of water is controlled by the moon – 238,000 miles away. Controlled so precisely that humans are able to make tide charts that tell to the minute when that water will roll all the way in, and when it will roll all the way out.

I try to go to the beach three or four times a year. And whenever I first step onto the beach, see the ocean again, it is as if my whole being enters into prayer.

I always have a beach chair, a murder mystery and a Diet Pepsi, but before I can pop the top or read the first word, I sit there for 30 minutes or so -- in wonder or in prayer. I can't always tell the difference.

If I were not praying to the Christian God, to the Creator God, I would probably be praying to – or yearning for -- an unknown god.

For you, that wonder may not be inspired by the ocean. It may be inspired by rivers or mountains or canyons or the huge, white expanse of the Antarctic.

To my mind, this is our greatest weapon against our enforced isolation from the coronavirus. That we are able to go outside, to walk, to jog, to exercise, to enjoy creation.

This is what Paul was talking about to the Athenians. The creation. He appealed to their logic for a Creator by observing the creation.

“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....”

Paul knew it would do no good to appeal to these Greek citizens on the basis of Jewish Scripture. They knew nothing of that. So he appealed through the very creation they saw all around them.

The creation is not an end point for Paul. But it can be a beginning.

He used it in his letter to the Romans as well. In his opening to that very complex letter, he wrote that mankind really had no excuse not to know God even before his revelation in Jesus. The Creator was evident in the creation.

Here's Paul to the Romans: **“What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.”** (Romans 1: 19-20)

But the time for knowing God *only* through creation was past. The time for God's benevolent overlooking of human ignorance was past.

Through his coming to earth in the person of Jesus, he was commanding all to recognize not just the creation, but his revelation to mankind. Raising Jesus from the dead was that revelation, that personal word from our Creator.

And then Paul was interrupted. Speeches in Acts were often interrupted, and this one was no different.

Some who had listened to Paul about the creation got to the part about the resurrection and **“scoffed.”** They turned him off.

Others wanted to hear more.

And some became believers.

To this very day, that is how the gospel is greeted – with rejection or with curiosity or with belief. And that should come as no surprise.

Because our gospel is offensive. It is offensive to its core.

It is offensive that God came to earth as a human and was executed in the most inhumane way possible.

Paul was well aware that many people – even the leisure-loving intellectuals of learned Athens – could agree that 4a God was behind the wonder of creation.

But few could accept the idea that he revealed himself as a man, and that man, in turn, was murdered and raised from the dead.

To this day, our souls yearn for that God.

Only now we know his name.

Amen.