

May 14, 2023 – Acts 17:16-31

It was probably the moment in the trip I was looking forward to the most. I was in the midst of a high school trip to Greece. I went to a Christian high school and we were visiting various New Testament archaeological sites. Corinth, Ephesus, Patmos. But that particular day, we were visiting the acropolis of Athens. Where we could not only see the Parthenon and all the other temple ruins, but stand upon the location described in our First Reading: the Areopagus.

The Areopagus is large rock formation at the base of the larger hill that acropolis sits on. Stairs were cut into the rock. The top was flattened. And it was used as a meeting place for all the great philosophers, theologians, speakers, and other educated men of the day. A famous location where ideas flowed and theories were discussed and all the gods of the known world were studied in great detail.

Because, you see, St Paul was right. The men of Athens were indeed in every way very, very religious. Historical sources outside the Bible report that the city of Athens hosted idols to no less than 30,000 different gods. There were only about 10,000 people who lived in the city. There were three gods for every person that lived there. The city was truly FULL of idols.

They were obsessed with religion. Consumed with theology. And the Areopagus where Paul had been taken sat in the shadow of the Acropolis, where all this religious fervor was centered.

Athens had once been the political center of the world. Rome had stolen that title from them. But they were still the theological center of the world. A place where any person of any religion from any part of the world could go and find their god represented among the idols.

Except, of course, for one: the God of Israel. Because there is no idol to the Lord. He is not a god who lives in temples made by man. He is not a god who is served by human hands. He is not worshipped in images of gold or silver, stone or wood. 30,000 different gods to be worshipped. And yet, ironically, they had missed the one, true God in all of it because he didn't have an idol for their collection.

And so when Paul starts talking about the God of Israel – when he starts talking about the God who was made flesh in Jesus Christ – they have no clue what he's talking about. And that bothers them. Because they are very religious people. They know everything there is to know about every religion. And if he's saying something that they don't know about, well then, it means he's either babbling completely nonsense, or they've missed one.

Which is, of course, is also rather exciting to think about. Because it's new. And if there's one thing the Athenians loved more than having a collection of 30,000 different gods, it's having a collection of 30,001 different gods. So they are eager to find out: is this guy crazy, or does he actually know about a new foreign god that they need to add to their collection? A new foreign god that they need to be worshipping?

And Paul sees this as an entry point for conversation. Because he has recognized something important about the Athenians. They don't just worship all these foreign gods because they find them interesting. They don't just worship them out of pride in their collection of idols and temples. They don't just worship them because it's their culture.

They worship these idols out of fear. Fear that they may have missed one. Fear that there's a god out there that they're not worshipping. And he's angry at them for being overlooked.

And that fear is demonstrated in their altar to The Unknown God. Which is really the ultimate example of hedging your bets. They're going to worship every god they know about and every god they don't know about. They are so afraid that they have missed one, so uncertain about which gods are real and which ones are not, that they have decided to worship a god that may not even exist and which they know nothing about.

And as silly as that sounds to us, they're kind of right. Because they did miss one. And he is not happy with them. And would condemn them to hell. Now, of course, setting up an altar to him in this way was never going to work. It was never going to bring them salvation. But they had indeed identified a very real problem with their worldview.

How do you know which god to worship? How do you know if any of these gods are real? How do you know how they want to be worshipped? And so the men of the areopagus would gather on that hilltop in the shadow of the acropolis. Discussing and debating and arguing and philosophizing for days, weeks, months, years, decades... trying to know the unknown god.

Ancient Athens may not seem like it has much in common with 21st century America. We are not a very religious people. We do not have cities full of golden idols. We are not a society of philosophers and theologians. "Organized religion" has become a naughty word in today's culture. And yet, we do have something in common with them: like the Athenians, Americans like to hedge our bets.

You may look at the decline in church attendance and the rise of people claiming no religious affiliation at all and think it means we're becoming a society of atheists. But we're not. Americans are still deeply spiritual and firmly convinced of the existence of some sort of divine being and some sort of afterlife. Study after study tells us this.

What we aren't convinced of is which god. Which afterlife. Which spiritual reality. Is the Bible right? How about the Koran? The Book of Mormon? The Bhagavadgita? The I-Ching? The Tao Te Ching? The Tripitaka?

And so, in some ways, we've become the opposite of the Athenians. They were obsessed with worshipping every god. We've become obsessed with worshipping no gods. Of being completely noncommittal about anything we believe. In the fear that we've picked the wrong one.

Turns out, though, that the approach Paul takes works with either group. Because whether you're an ancient Athenian or a 21st century American, the problem you face is one of not knowing. Of fearing the unknown god. And yet, what Paul tells us is that he is not unknown.

He is completely known. He's known first in creation. He's the God who made everything we see. The world and everything in it. He himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. He made from one man every nation of mankind to life on all the face of the earth.

Now, does recognizing that there is a creator mean that you're saved? No, it does not. But it's a start. For the Athenians, it narrowed the search down. They worshipped 30,000 different gods, each worshipped with idols made by human hands. Do they really think the God who made heaven and earth really cares about being worshipped with the stone and metal that he created? So that eliminates their entire collection, right off the bat.

For Americans, this concept of a creator God opens up a lot of options. Because in a society that teaches us from our earliest elementary school days that we were made by chance from a Big Bang and a billions years of evolution, hearing that there is a God who created you, who wants you to exist, who forms every atom of your body into exactly the physical form you have, and who breaths into you his own breath of life, is a really powerful thing. It opens up the possibility that God isn't indifferent to you. Therefore, you shouldn't be indifferent to him.

Ultimately, though, it doesn't get you all the way. As Paul said, you are still left at point where you are seeking God. Feeling your way around in the dark as you search for him. So how do you find him? How do you know this Unknown God?

Well, that's actually the easy part: you look for the God who makes himself known by doing something Godlike. Doing something divine. Doing something that only God could do. Something like rising from the dead.

The Athenians wanted to know The Unknown God and so Paul pointed them to the resurrection. He pointed them to Jesus. And he said, "If you want assurance of who God is and what he has promised he will do, look to Jesus. God made flesh. God crucified and risen for us."

He is not a god who lives in temples made by man. He is not a god who is served by human hands. He is the god who became man. He is the God who lived among us. He is the God who serves us by dying for us. That we might know that our sins are forgiven. And that on the last day, he will judge the world in righteousness. His righteousness given to us.

It's a message that the Athenians needed to hear. It's also a message that 21st century Americans need to hear. Because we don't need to hedge our bets. And we're not doing ourselves any good by being spiritual but not religious. The God who created you and loves you was fully committed to your salvation. And he gives you every reason to be just as committed to worshipping him and him alone.

Standing on the Areopagus was an amazing moment in my life. Looking out from that hilltop at the Acropolis of Athens and all the temples upon it. It was an impressive sight. But ultimately, those temples are meaningless. Because they're in ruins. Crumbling shells of what they once were. Memorials to 30,000 dead gods, most of which are long forgotten.

The only God who matters is the God who lives. The God who became man. The God who died. And the God who rose again. The God who is fully known to you and to me because he made himself known to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.