

Never Too Far
Sermon 184 | Greystone Baptist Church | May 14, 2023
Acts 17:22-31

The reading this morning invites us to join the Apostle Paul on one of his famed missionary journeys. This time he is in Athens, a first century hub for culture, commerce, and philosophy.

While he's there, he observes the Athenians, their city and their culture; and he notices how *religious* the people are. And from this particular observation, he ends up preaching one of the most significant sermons of his life.

As always, there are multiple layers to this text.

If we were part of the first century audience, just hearing or reading the words "Paul was taken to Areopagus" would summon memories of Socrates who, after daring to suggest that God could be present in all of creation, was sentenced to death in that very place, the Areopagus. You see the Greeks were open to new ideas, but that openness only stretched so far. So when the Athenians brought Paul to the Areopagus, it probably wasn't a nice little field trip, they were staging an inquisition, a trial before the court of powerful opinion. The risk was high. Paul was preaching for his life.

And, of course for anyone who understands the Gospel and believes in the power of God to change a life - even to save a life - we might also say that while Paul was preaching for *his* life, he was filled with concern and compassion for the Athenians. He *knew* the God they had called "Unnamed" and he wanted to offer hope in their searching and seeking, so while he was preaching for *his* life, he was preaching for *their* lives as well. Maybe the two aren't all that different, after all, if Paul doesn't convince them that what he is saying is true, they're going to label him a heretic and then they're going to kill him. But if he can convince them, if he can help them see the God who made them and who loves them and who is the one they've been searching for... *then* Paul might not only save their lives... but his as well.

Paul is preaching for their lives and he is preaching for his life. The stakes have never been higher.

When I read this piece of scripture, I can't help but feel the urgency of the moment. It feels like the *anxious bench* in an old country revival after the preacher gave the invitation. Do y'all know what the anxious bench is? It's that front row pew where folks would gather after some lively preaching, waiting to pray the sinner's prayer in order to receive the gift of salvation. This kind of revival is an American phenomenon that started in the 1800s and kept on until.. well I suppose you can still find them, mostly out in rural areas where fiery preachers with hell, fire, and brimstone sermons still draw a crowd and resonate with the people. I can remember attending a revival or two like this as a child - I wonder if you can too?

You know, actually, I think Paul might have gone a little easier on his crowd than the 19th and 20th century revivalists went on their congregations. The ones I heard in the 80s and 90s were well schooled in the theology and tradition of Charles Finney (the original revivalist) who insisted on the total depravity of mankind and worked that into the better part of most of his sermons, which all culminated in a serious call to conversion.

It was a fear-based coercion that filled that anxious bench and kept the congregation singing all 12 verses of *Just As I Am* as people walked the aisle to confess their sin and accept Jesus.

But Paul didn't take that approach with the Athenians. With the tender heart of a pastor and the quick mind of a missionary, well versed in making quick connections across lines of deep difference, Paul sees in the Athenians a common pursuit and he builds his sermon upon what they share in common. I see how extremely religious you are, in every way. For 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."

Paul has their attention now. He's affirmed their quest and displayed that he sees them. He's been paying attention. What you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you: 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, Nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times for their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so

that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him - though indeed he is not far from each of us. For IN him we live and move and have our being.

Drawing from the leading Jewish, pagan, and Greco-Roman philosophies of the day, Paul builds his sermon not on our human flaws, but rather on our common search for the Creator God. This relentless searching and seeking after God is part of the human condition. We all long to live lives of meaning, to belong to a beloved community, to be loved just as we are... this is what Paul found in Christ and this is what compels him to share the Gospel - no matter the risk. This is the tie that binds us all together! Not our total depravity. Not our impermeable theology. But our most primal desire to know and be known by God.

...to love and to be loved by God.

In many ways we have come a long way from the days of the Pantheon and maybe even from the revivalist preachers. Many of us might even say that we have already found the God that Paul proclaims to the Greeks in Athens, that we have already given our lives to the God of the revivalist preachers... and so I wonder this morning, if this piece of scripture has *anything* to say to us?

In their book, *The Altars Where We Worship*, authors Mark Toulouse and Juan and Stacey Floyd-Thomas, make some stunning observations about our society and how *religious* we are. Reading their book, I couldn't help but hear the echo of the apostle saying: "*I see how religious you are in every way*"

You see, the researchers found that we are - as a whole - deeply religious beings. "Religion is important to Americans," they write in their opening lines, "But the religion we practice is often *not* the religion we confess."¹

According to their studies, Americans worship at many altars... altars of body, business, entertainment, politics, science, and technology. These are the objects of our greatest affection and attention. We spend so many hours of so many days searching for value and validation in these finite

¹ *The Altars Where We Worship*. p.1

arenas and yet underneath it all, there is something more basic, more primal, more *utterly human* driving us toward them... After a while our endless searching at these earthly altars begins to sound like the words for scripture which say:

*so that they would search for God
and perhaps grope for him
and find him —*

Could it be that we are searching and perhaps even desperately groping for God in all the wrong places... at all the wrong altars?

The famous reformer Martin Luther once said that “Trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and idol... Whatever then [our hearts cling to... and rely upon, that is properly our God].”²

Then in 1960 Christian ethicist H. Richard Niebuhr quoted Luther and added to it saying, “If this is true, that the word ‘god’ means the object of human faith in life’s worthwhileness, it is evident that [we] have many gods, that our natural religion is polytheistic.”³

Maybe we are more like the Athenians than we think! Maybe we are more in need of a conversion than we realized! Maybe it is time to bring back that anxious bench and all the verses of *Just As I Am*; NOT because we need more people to be scared into religion but precisely because those of us who already claim it need to remember what it means to be a Christian in a world full of lesser gods and convenient altars. Maybe then we could turn away from the god of the body which tells us that only youth is beauty and every indicator of age or illness must be treated and hidden away. Maybe then we could turn away from the god of business which insists that making money is life’s ultimate concern. Maybe then we could turn away from the god of entertainment which helps us escape the difficult realities of life together and allows us to experience the satisfaction of our hopes & dreams by living vicariously through people we’ve never met, having experiences we will never have.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

Maybe then we could turn away from the god of politics which draws us toward community - yes - but when taken to the extreme... when politics becomes our primary and ultimate concern, it demands our highest allegiance to a particular party, and drives a wedge between us and our neighbors whom we are called to love.

These are just some of the altars around which our lives are oriented. These are just a few of the convenient substitutes that offer us meaning and security, beckoning us to come and place in them our trust, our allegiance, our identity... our ultimate concern.

But I would dare to venture that our affinity for these lesser altars are merely symptoms of our deep longing for God. ... our desire to be known and cared for during life's ups and downs...

Yes, in these anxious and uncertain times, we long for God to draw near, and when we struggle to find God on our set time and in our prescribed ways, we grow weary of crying out for help. We lose trust...

We wonder if God is listening.
We wonder if God cares for us, about us.
We wonder if God is even out there at all...

But isn't it possible that we are just looking in the wrong places?

Friends, if there is anything you hear today... If there is just *one* thing that sticks with you from this time of worship, If there is anything at all to carry you from this moment to all that awaits... may it be these few words from the Paul's *life-saving* sermon:

“Indeed God is not far from each of us”

Yes -

There is a God who is bigger than all our worries who is more reliable than a youthful or healthy body who is more secure than any savings account who is more hope-ful than any star athlete or TV star who is more powerful than any president or governor or school board or any other elected official.

There is a God who is not distant at all, who is never too far, and who is always closer than we think. "For in this God," scripture says, "we live and move, and have our being" and if we believe this to be true, then our whole lives, all that we experience, all that we worry about, all that brings us joy, every moment, every hope, and every dream all happen within God's loving embrace.

So friends let our voices join in with that of Paul as we preach with our lives and for our lives that there is a God who loves us as we are who cares for us more than we could ever know who will see us through every time of trial, anxiety, and pain... and this God is not "unknown" as the Athenians once prescribed, no, this God is ultimately and intimately known and goes by the name of Emmanuel - God *with* us.

So the next time the temptation comes and the doubt creeps in beckoning us to worship at any one of our lesser altars, may we remember that they cannot save us and they will not satisfy the deepest longings of our hearts.

Only God can do that.

And God's own name - Emmanuel - begs us to remember that God is *never too far*, always closer than we think. So when your hearts start to worry or wonder, searching for God in all those other places... rest assured that you don't have to search anymore because God is WITH us here, now and forevermore. Amen.