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“He Is Not Far From Each Of Us” Acts 17:22-31

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Two questions for today: The first is this: Does God want to be known? And the second: do we really want to know God in return?

I think the answer to that second question is pretty clear. Whether we admit it or not, we all want to know something akin to God. If not God himself, then at least something beyond ourselves. We spend our lives reaching out for something to hold onto; we search for something to give our lives meaning. In our passage for this New Years Day, the Apostle Paul says, we “feel [our] way toward him,” almost like the feeling of stumbling along in the dark, looking for something we’ve lost. But the trouble with stumbling along in the dark is that it’s tough to know what you’re looking for if you’ve never even seen it in the first place.

So, we end up settling for things that seem good enough. Maybe it’s money or power or respect, or maybe it’s some other person or some ideal lifestyle or an ideal self-image. Something we chase after, thinking it will bring contentment. We’ve got a hunger to be made whole, but we’ve got no idea how to satisfy it.

John Calvin, the great hero of Presbyterianism, says that “the human heart is...a perpetual forge of idols.”¹ He’s not wrong about that. You won’t often find stained glass windows or statues of Jesus in a Presbyterian Church for that very reason. Calvin wouldn’t like it. He thought it was idolatrous. And we’re pushing the envelope with that cross back there and that bible up here. Calvin warns that we might find ourselves bowing down to them if we’re not careful. But I think he was a little bit more sensitive to that sort of thing than most folks because Calvin had some unresolved issues with the Catholic church. But the heart of what he’s saying remains true. We may not bow down to images like Calvin thought we would, but we certainly bow down to those things which are not God.

In our scripture for this morning, we find the Apostle Paul on his missionary journey through Greece. He was making some progress in Thessalonica, but the authorities didn’t like what he had to say, so they ran him out of town. He makes his way to Athens, and he’s waiting around for the arrival of his buddies, Timothy and Silas. He has some time on his hands, so he does a little bit of sightseeing. And what does he find? Idols. Do the Athenians want to know God? Yes. But they went looking in the wrong places. Verse 16 says “the city was full of idols, so he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.”²

¹ (Calvin, 2008)

² Acts 17:16-17

Some philosophers overheard Paul teaching in the market, and because they were the curious type, they brought him to the Areopagus to hear what he had to say. They invite him to give a speech. One commentator says we can think of the Areopagus as a place where you could hear the TED talks of the ancient world.³ It was the place where new ideas were heard. And this new idea that Paul was preaching is perhaps the most compelling bit of evangelism you'll ever find. This sermon that Paul delivers in Athens is a textbook example of how to share the gospel.

Of course, the worship of idols is not something that Paul approves. Like John Calvin, Paul recognizes the human tendency to search for and sometimes create something to worship. The Athenians were indeed searching. Their idols made that fact abundantly clear. Their philosophy was, itself, a quest for meaning. Paul recognized this as he walked the city. But unlike Calvin, Paul did not condemn these idol-worshippers with a harsh rebuke. Instead, he used the idolatry of the Athenians as an entry point for proclaiming the gospel. He says,

“Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything”⁴

The Athenians wanted to know God, but they didn't know where to look. Are we any different? Do we want to know God?

But let us not forget that first, and more important question: Does God want to be known? Paul's answer, which is the answer he has received from God through the Spirit, is that God most certainly does want to be known. God wants to be found. Paul says,

“And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each of us, for ‘In him we live and move and have our being.’”⁵

“He is actually not far from each of us.” The Athenians had a vision of what the gods were supposedly like. These gods they worshipped on altars in stone temples were greedy and fickle and demanding. They had to be appeased, pacified, satisfied by those who worshipped them. And so, the people of Athens didn't want to make any wrong moves. They wanted to cover their bases, so they create an altar to the ‘unknown god’, lest they leave him out and unknowingly provoke his wrath. When it comes down to it, they were scared. Scared of the gods they knew. Scared of the gods they didn't know. Scared of what terror might befall them if they make the wrong move. Why did the gods cause that earthquake? Or why haven't the gods sent rain? Why won't the gods heal my sick child? Why? Am I being punished? I must have done something to make them angry.

³ (Smith & Zimmerman, 2020)

⁴ Acts 17:22-23

⁵ Acts 17:26-28a

Paul had some sympathy for their situation. As you'll remember, before his conversion, Paul was known as Saul, a devout pharisee. Christians feared him because he was brutal in his persecution. The God he thought he knew was an angry God who demanded that his followers defend him with violence. But he had the wrong idea about God. He had the wrong idea until God revealed himself to Saul in Jesus Christ. By God's grace, Saul was transformed into a new person. The violent Saul became the gracious Paul. Paul was gracious because he had received grace. God made himself known to Paul just as he makes himself known to us: in Jesus Christ. And this is the truth to which he testifies when he says,

*"The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."*⁶

Paul's argument up to this point has been very logical; very appealing. Paul meets the Athenians where they are. He finds common ground with them in their worship and in their shared humanity. He appeals not to the Scriptures to make his point, but to their own Greek philosophers when he tells them that they are all children of God. His message is accommodating and gentle and compelling; it is gracious. Then, right at the end, he takes a flying leap. Seemingly out of nowhere, Paul brings up the resurrection of the Jesus. There is no logic that can make sense of this. No philosophy can codify it. To believe in the resurrection is a matter of faith.⁷ So why does Paul bring it up and risk losing his audience? And more than that, why does he make it the climax of his sermon?

Christ's resurrection is the climax of Paul's sermon because it's also the climax of all of history. Past and present and future all find their culmination in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Today is New Year's Day. We think of it as a time of new beginnings. A time to change who we are. A time to decide to be better people. It doesn't usually work out. And that's ok, because there's something else about today that's far more important. It is the Sunday when we celebrate Epiphany; the dawning of the light of Christ upon the world. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul says that,

"when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law,⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.⁶ And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God."⁸

The only time that matters is God's time. It makes no difference how many new beginnings we think we might have when we travel all the way around the sun. The only new beginning we will ever need is the one we receive in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. For, "the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning: great is your faithfulness."⁹ It also doesn't matter whether you keep your New Year's resolution or not, because there's nothing you can do to make God love you any more or any

⁶ Acts 17:30-31

⁷ (Willimon, 1988)

⁸ Galatians 4:4-7

⁹ Lamentations 23

less. In his death and resurrection, His love for you is a promise he has kept. “When the fullness of time had come,” says Paul, “God sent forth his son.”

The event of Jesus Christ, his birth, life, death, and resurrection; It wasn't an accident. It was planned from the beginning. There's this idea that exists within Christianity that God sent Jesus down to earth out of exasperation or desperation or something like that; as if God has tried every way he can think of to redeem humanity, but none of his ideas have worked. He gave the law, but it didn't work. He sent prophets, but nobody listened. And then, in an act of divine frustration, he throws up his hands and says, “Fine! I'll do it myself!”

It makes for a good story, but it's wrong. It's wrong because,

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”¹⁰

Does God want to be known?

I count it as a miracle that anyone would wake up on a Sunday morning, get themselves dressed, and drive to an old building to sing songs and listen to someone in a funny outfit talk for 15 or 20 minutes. And indeed, it is a miracle. The fact that you're here testifies to the power of the Holy Spirit's invitation. You could be a million other places, but the fact that you're here means that you're responding to that deep longing within you to know God. But the fact that you're here also means something else, which is even more miraculous; that God wants you to know him too, for, as Paul says, he is not far from each one of us. Thanks be to God.

References

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¹⁰ John 1:1-5