



“The Search for Reality”

Text: Acts 17:22-31

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The scene must have been incredible. The ruins of ancient Athens are imposing enough. Just mention it and our minds can conjure up the images of the glory that was the ancient city. The Parthenon glistening in the sun. The temple of Apollo, ancient even in Paul’s time. And the rocky knob, known as the Areopagus, a place where Ares was supposed to have been tried here by the gods for the murder of Poseidon’s son Halirrhothius, It became a place where trials for murder were held and punishments were meted out. Later named Mars Hill, by the Romans, it was a sacred site, with altars set up to the gods who protected the people and who, in turn, were honored and worshiped.

The Apostle Paul was there, when it was in its glory, and it must have been a time of intense culture shock. Paul had been a faithful Jew and ingrained in his soul was the commandment against creating any graven image. Yet, Athens was filled with graven images of people, gods, and animals.

Paul began where he always began – in the synagogue, talking with the Jews about their common heritage and then introducing the subject of Jesus Christ. Some of the philosophers caught wind of him and began to engage him in philosophical discussion. The Epicureans and Stoics were not all that impressed with Paul or his arguments. But others decided to engage him further and took him to the Areopagus – up to Mars Hill – and asked him to speak further about this God Paul was proclaiming,

Paul looks around and sees altars – altar upon altar – set up to the various gods in whom the people believed. Contemporary preachers and evangelists would probably have started with a condemnation of the people for setting up altars to false gods and derided the people for their ignorance and lack of true faith.

But not Paul. He compliments the people for their abundance of faith. They are not irreligious people, but quite religious and committed people. The presence of this host of altars and other signs of their religiosity are evidence of their faith.

Then he tells them that he has seen an altar set up to an “unknown god.” It was there, perhaps, just to be sure that they hadn’t missed one of the gods. It was – maybe – an altar intended to cover their fanny, in case they had missed one of the gods.

And then, the brilliance of Paul came forth.

“People of Athens, I see that you are very religious in every way. As I was walking through town and carefully observing your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: ‘To an unknown God.’ What you worship as unknown, I now proclaim to you. God, who made the world and everything in it, is Lord of heaven and earth. He doesn’t live in temples made with human hands. Nor is God served by human hands, as though he needed something, since he is the one who gives life, breath, and everything else. From one person God created every human nation to live on the whole earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their lands. God made the nations so they would seek him, perhaps even reach out to him and find him. In fact, God isn’t far away from any of us. In God we live, move, and exist. As some of your own poets said, ‘We are his offspring.’

“Therefore, as God’s offspring, we have no need to imagine that the divine being is like a gold, silver, or stone image made by human skill and thought. God overlooks ignorance of these things in times past, but now directs everyone everywhere to change their hearts and lives. This is because God has set a day when he intends to judge the world justly by a man he has appointed. God has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

Paul met the Athenians right where they were. He didn’t embarrass them, or make fun of them. Nor does he offer a ham-handed correction to their mistaken ways. Paul met them where they were, spoke to them of their search for understanding and reality, and suggested that what had been unknown to the people of Athens was, in fact, known and experienced by others.

And the result? It’s not in our passage for the morning, but in the verses that immediately follow, we read:

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, “We will hear you again about this.” At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Paul didn’t threaten, cajole, or shame. He didn’t impose judgment or shame them with guilt. He simply met them where they were and shared his good news.

Now, you veteran sermon listeners could write the end of this one yourselves. Right? But I don't want to short-change you, so give me just a couple of more minutes.

We may be tempted to think that we live in a time that is, at best, irreligious and, at worst, completely non-religious. But it's not true. The people of our day, like the people of ancient Athens, are quite religious. What confuses us is that they don't necessarily believe in the God in who we "live and move and have our being."

Think of it this way. Go up to our own version of Mars Hill. Go up to Reitz Hill and look down on the city of Evansville. What will you see? Monuments and altars to the gods of the people.

There, on the river, is the temple of luck. It's floating on a boat, right now, but is about to move onto the land. It is a temple to the god of luck - a religion all around us today. It is a religion practiced by thousands every week. And, in our neighborhood stores and stop-ins are branch offices of the religion of luck where we can buy the communion token we call a lottery ticket. And when - not if - but when the god of luck smiles on us, life will be good and blessed and made new.

Look at little to the left, from the temple of luck and you'll see the ancient temple of justice, with its new lights illuminating the dome in the night sky. The practitioners of the religion of justice believe that justice is independent of any system of morals or values. This religion of justice believes in a retributive justice - a justice that demands "an eye for an eye." This religion believes that punishment, not restoration and repair, is the goal. And there is growing evidence that those who have power and prestige and money are given the right to determine what is justice for the powerless, the disregarded, and the poor.

Look just a little up the street from the temple of justice and there is a flurry of activity as a new temple is being built. It is a new temple of knowledge and science, that will be added to others downtown and around the city. Knowledge and science are good and noble endeavors. But, there are times when knowledge and science overstep their bounds and fail to consider the human factors, ethics, and moral principles that are at the heart of human life.

And look all around the city at our feet. The view from Reitz Hill contains steeples and spires and towers, all attached to buildings that are called "houses of God." They are of every size and style - some ancient and some made new. And yet, many of them are remarkably empty. If you were to calculate the number of seats in every church, temple, mosque, and other holy place in the city, and compare it to the population, you would find that there are not enough seats - even if they were filled - to accommodate all the people. And the number of people in those seats is declining, and churches are merging and churches are closing.

Why? It's not because people are not religious. They are very religious. Could it be that we, in the church, have disengaged from the people? Could it be that after decades of shaming them and disparaging them they have simply walked away? Could it be that after all of the fun we have made at their expense and looking down on them they don't want anything to do with us?

We have focused our attention inward and spent decades talking about who can love who, and what kind of organizational structure will better serve us, and when we want to be seen as making progress, we publish a new hymnbook. Have we forgotten to engage with those who have deeply held beliefs that may be a bit different from our own? Have we decided that when they "come to their senses" and "stop all this foolishness" they will come running back to us?

Friends, that is never going to happen. The world around us is searching for reality, and meaning, and significance and if we are unwilling or unable to join in that quest, the world will continue the search without us.

To those who worship luck – we can speak of blessing.

To those who worship justice

– we can speak of mercy and compassion.

To those who worship science and knowledge

– we can speak of ethics and values.

The Apostle Paul saw that the ancient Athenians were seriously and significantly engaged in a search for reality. He met them where they were and shared with them the good news that was the source of his life. He told them of his experience of Jesus Christ, raised from the dead and giving life to all who believe in his message of love and compassion. He connected with the people and walked with them and shared with them and accepted them as they were. He joined with them in their search for reality.

That search for reality continues today. The only question that remains is will we join with those who search? The answer to that question will shape everything we know as a church and as a community. May we find a faithful answer.

For now and evermore. Amen.



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