

“KNOWING THE UNKNOWN GOD.”

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

June 13, 2021, 9 and 10:30 AM

Text for the Sermon: Acts 17:22-34

Prayer:

Introduction:

We are in Athens with Paul. Last week we considered three things, what Paul saw in Athens, what Paul felt in Athens, and what Paul did in Athens.

This week we come to what Paul said in Athens and that lends itself nicely to three more points.

First, he tells them that God is (Acts 17:22-23).

Second, he tells them who God is (Acts 17:24-29).

Third, he tells them what God says (Acts 17:30-31).

And that is followed by three responses of the people in Athens.

We live in what is increasingly becoming a post-Christian and non-Christian culture. There are lessons here for how we live in and relate to and speak to such a culture.

Paul is brought to the Areopagus, and he is brought in front of the Areopagus. The Areopagus is both a place and a group of men, a public place where these men debated and deliberated.

First, Paul tells them that God is (Acts 17:22-23).

He calls them religious, but not in a good way. The implication here is they are superstitious. They are religious in that they want to give all the gods equal time and equal billing.

Do you know that it means when someone puts up an altar to an unknown god? It means that they have no certainty in their beliefs. They are admitting they have no idea what is true, or who the true God is.

They have all their domestic gods they have made up in their imaginations, but there is a nagging uncertainty. What if all our sacrifices to our domestic gods aren't enough?

Do you think this kind of worship is pleasing to God? “Well, God, we don't know you and we don't know if you are real, but just in case.”

Paul confronts all of this. “You don't know what you are doing, you don't know who you are worshipping. Your worship is worthless. God cannot be truly and rightly worshipped until He is rightly known. You can't worship rightly what you do not know. God is and God is knowable.”

It is an incomparable privilege to know God and an incomparable privilege to make Him known. So Paul proclaims to the ignorant Athenians this Unknown God.

Second, Paul tells them who God is (Acts 17:24-29).

Having said that there is in fact a true God to whom all our worship is owed, Paul now moves to explain what is the nature of this God. How can He be distinguished from all the other gods?

Paul presents to them a very different God from their gods. Paul gives a lesson in the nature and character of God. A bit like the devotionals I have prepared over the last four months on 23 attributes and 13 names of God, helping us know more deeply the truth about our God.

God is the Creator. Verse 24a: The God who made the world and everything in it.

Their gods are too weak. To these idolatrous Athenians, god is a do it yourself project. Go to Home Depot, get some wood or marble, gold or silver and make a god in your image to worship.

Paul confronts this head on. God is not made or made up. God is the maker. So God cannot be worshiped by anything that is made by human hands. Creation is created by an eternal Creator.

Notice Paul's method. He makes a plain defense of the obvious truth. You don't have to bog down in stupid arguments about evolution and the big bang. That is a smoke screen. Creation is obviously the work of a Creator. To deny it is to believe a lie and to rebel against God.

God is the Ruler. Verse 24b: being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man.

Their gods are too small. Idolatry is dragging God off His throne and pulling Him down to earth, to our level, to what is manageable for our small minds. This is not faith, this is not worship.

God transcends all Greek gods, He is infinite in power and greatness and glory, nothing on earth and certainly no temple can contain Him.

The fact that God's wisdom and power are evident in all creation, stretching throughout the entire earth and into the heavens, this is proof enough that God can't be contained or confined to buildings or man-made objects. If the earth is God's footstool, how in the world will a temple hold Him?

We spoil the glory of God when we confine Him to spaces we have made or think of Him with mental images we have imagined. Any time we do that we turn the truth into a lie (Romans 1:25), and transfer the glory of God to outward or external forms.

God is the Self-sufficient Giver. Verse 25: nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

Their gods are too needy. Paul mocks them, exposing the folly of their worship. They think they are pleasing or appeasing their gods with their ceremonies and external things and that by doing this they have done their duty, fulfilled their obligations by their own hand.

God is totally self-sufficient, having all life within Himself. He is the ultimate decisive cause of all things in the universe. God holds divine ownership over all human life, and since He owns it He is free to do with it as pleases Him.

Since God has given us everything, including our very life and breath, what can we give to God that He has not already given to us?

Every breath we take is an undeserved gift of God's grace. Everything that we have comes from His hand. What do you have that is solely your doing, solely your effort?

Do you live your life in perpetual gratitude? In perpetual thanksgiving and worship?

God is Sovereign. Verse 26: 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.

Their gods are too many. The Greeks had domesticated their gods, and assigned them to all their tasks, a god of the sea, a god of the crops, a god of the weather and storms.

Paul shows the utter folly of this in the light of the one true sovereign God. God has final authority over all things, God is the one who determines the time and places. God is the one who is in control of us, not us in control of Him.

God guides all of history. His hand, His will, His purpose is behind everything that happens, the rises and falls, the successes and failures, the advances and retreats.

God creates nations, decides where they will be, how far their borders will extend and how long they will last.

God rules over this world by His sovereign hand and purpose, nothing is by chance or accident.

When we see nations rise and fall, when we see rulers come and go, when we see destruction and terrorism, when we see pandemics move across our planet, these things are not done by out of control forces, but by the fixed purposes of God from before the foundation of the earth. These things are appointed, determined.

Does anyone give careful consideration why they are on this planet, why they were born, for what purpose they live and receive so many good things?

Do we ever ask the question, why did God give me life? That I have life is proof that there is a purpose for it. To not think about this is to live life like an animal lives life.

God is the Revealer. Verses 27-29: that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, 28 for

“In him we live and move and have our being’;

as even some of your own poets have said,

“For we are indeed his offspring.’

29 Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.

Their gods are too distant. There is nothing more absurd than for men to not have any knowledge of their Creator. And it is even more shameful when you consider how many clear signs God has given to know Him. We are surrounded by countless reminders of God's power and wisdom and goodness.

God has left Himself a witness in creation and nature and history to His own presence and power and greatness, and He has set in our hearts the desire to seek God and know God. This is clearly evident by the countless shrines and idols, all the gods, which are attempts to find God. Everyone is groping and grasping, trying to find their way to God. We have an innate desire to worship, it is what we were created to do.

God does what He does to draw all men to Himself. And the good news is He is not hard to find, He is not far away. God created us to have a knowledge of Him, to know Him, to seek after Him, to love Him.

God is not in hiding, God's fingerprints are all over the universe and our daily lives.

“In him we live and move and have our being.” This is said to remind us God is worthy of our constant thoughts, for He never ceases to be a part of every detail and every minute of our lives.

In other words, to both the fatalistic Stoics and the hedonistic Epicureans, Paul describes a God who is intimately involved in time and space so that we can find Him. It is no accident we find ourselves in this time and this place. This is a crucial insight in a world that, since the pandemic, feels like it's suspended in time.

Did we just lose a year of our lives to Covid? Was this past year a waste? Should we write it off as a total loss? Should we try to reboot and start over? Not if these words of Paul are true.

God is Lord of history, ruler over all things. This past year was not a detour or an interruption. It was real life. God put us all here at this time and place in history for a God glorifying redemptive purpose. God is revealing Himself.

Before I move on let me ask you a question. Is it unsettling to you to think that God owns us, He creates us, sustains us, gives to us whatever He pleases, determines our days and where we live them, sends pleasure and pain, and sets the date of our death? Is that hard to fathom or accept that none of us are our own, babies are not their own or our own, children are not their own, we are not our own?

So here is the question. What would you rather have be the case? That you are the sole determiner of your life, or that fate and chance are the sole determiner, or that Satan is the determiner? In whose power would you like to leave your life and death?

Or would you rather commit and surrender everything to God who does all things wisely and well for His glory, and our good?

Third, Paul tells them what God says (Acts 17:30-31).

In the past God has not revealed Himself plainly to pagan nations as He dealt mostly with Israel. He has kept Himself hidden behind mystery. But now all of that has changed. Before man could be excused for his ignorance and folly, for making things up as he went along. The times of ignorance are now over.

Paul sums up five centuries of Greek culture in one word: ignorant.

God may have been patient in the past with ignorance and folly and stupidity, He may not have been as harsh as He could have been, but that is over. Now is the time of repentance.

Repent.

Of what? Clearly of their futile idolatry which is a mockery of the true living God who made them and made them in His image. Why repent?

The day of judgment is coming.

Acts 17:30-31 God commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 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.

Does this seem like a strange way to end a sermon to unbelievers? Does it strike you as a bit negative? The good news of the Gospel always contains warning.

This passage is an alarm, a warning signal. Our lives are filled with warning signals. Our refrigerators start beeping if we leave the door open too long. Our cars beep if we leave the key in the ignition or don't fasten our seat belt. Our computers and phones beep out all kinds of warning signals, like when the battery is low. Smoke detectors give ear piercing serious warnings of danger. We might be the most warned civilization on earth.

This call to repent is a spiritual warning signal. We are headed straight toward the judgment seat of God and a day of reckoning, face to face with the living God and Jesus Christ who is judge of the universe.

The proof of all of this is a resurrected, risen Christ.

Notice what happens as soon as Paul mentions the resurrection. The resurrection is a scandal, it is utter foolishness to the Greeks.

What they do (Acts 17:32-34)

There are three responses to Paul's sermon.

Some hear and mock.

This is laughable. What strange notions from this strange Jew.

“The very idea of a dead person coming back to life introduces a concept for which they have no categories. They realize that any God who can raise the dead requires more than philosophical reflection—He demands to be reckoned with. Why do you think government, the media, and the public schools can accept almost any viewpoint except a Christian one? They welcome atheism, agnosticism, humanism, pluralism, postmodernism, even witchcraft; they welcome anything and everything that enables them to remain autonomous. But they cannot tolerate faith in a God who intervenes in human culture, who raises the dead, and who calls upon people everywhere to repent” (Mike Andrus).

The resurrection is the game changer, it blows everything up. The resurrection is militant. The resurrection proves everything Jesus said and claimed about Himself is true. The resurrection is ultimate proof of the uniqueness of Christianity.

The world is willing to engage Christianity as one religion among many, as one idea along with all the others as long as it makes no claim to being unique or absolute or above the rest.

It is galling to our world to say Christ is the only Savior from sin so repent and believe in Him. It is maddening to say there is no middle ground, no compromise. It is intolerable to even suggest all the world's religions are false having no redemptive hope.

So some mocked and sneered. It is a fearful thing to shake your fist in the face of God. Only a fool rejects an offer from God. It is the fool who says there is no God.

We either deny it or we spend our lives repenting.

Some hear and procrastinate.

One of the most dangerous words in the English language is tomorrow. Tomorrow is one of the easiest words to say, and one of the most dangerous.

When we put off important matters, decisions, choices, tomorrow ends up being never.

Tomorrow is dangerous when an I forgive you is needed, or an I love you, or can I help you is needed.

II Corinthians 6:2 Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.
Hebrews 13:7 Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.

Don't put off doing business with God. Paul left Athens and never returned.

Some hear and believe.

Dionysius and Damaris believed. It is a miracle of God's grace in such an idolatrous culture.

If this is you, it is cause for humble worship, because few there are who truly believe, who repent, who humble themselves, who die to themselves, who know the Unknown God.

John 20:29 Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

Paul's speech is a model for presenting the Gospel in a non-Christian culture, a model for confronting the gods and lies of the world. Simple, plain, clear, unapologetic.

This Gospel is the only hope for our post-Christian culture. Proclaim it and then call for repentance. Be faithful and trust the fruit to God.