

He Has Not Left Himself Without Testimony
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
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Acts 14:8-20

Our sermon series on Acts has a subtitle, and that subtitle is, *The Gospel Engages the World*. When we chose Acts as our summer series we noticed that the book of Acts is a book about engagement. Acts starts with the disciples huddled together in Jerusalem, and then in the rest of the book the Holy Spirit comes on them and pushes them out to engage the world. We are coming out of our isolation—the pandemic—and we are slowly re-engaging our world. As we do that, we can learn a lot about who God calls us to be and how God calls us to be as we watch the early church in action. Engaging culture with the gospel has always been complicated, and I think it's fair to say, over the last 60 years, that task has become more complicated. In the middle of the 20th century, Christian faith and Christian culture permeated our society. People knew about the Bible and they knew about Jesus. The stories of the faith were part of our cultural consciousness. Even people who weren't believers would understand biblical references if you dropped them into a conversation.

It's different now. All the surveys of religious participation tell us that people are dropping out of church. One of the most sobering surveys came out in March of this year. It was a survey done by the Gallup Organization and according to its survey of 6000 American adults, for the first time in the history of their record keeping, less than half of Americans are members in a religious congregation. If you belong to a church, you are now in a minority. That's a sobering fact, but even more disturbing are the trend lines. Just 20 years ago, when Gallup conducted the same survey, 70% of Americans said they belonged to a congregation of some kind. So in just 20 years, membership has gone from 70% to 47%. You look at the graph from 1940 to now and it goes like this—pretty steady till 2000, pretty steady for 60 years, and then a drop. This decline is across all age groups. Religious participation is down in the greatest generation, it's down among baby boomers, it's down among generation x, and it's way down among millennials. The data seems to show that we are heading into a post-Christian society, a secular age.

These trends have implications for the way we engage the world. When we engage our culture with the gospel, we can no longer assume that people know much about Jesus or the Bible. How can the book of Acts help us with this change?

As you read through the book—as I hope you are all doing—you see the apostles are engaging people with the gospel. Paul goes on his missionary journeys with the purpose of engaging people with the Gospel. Paul doesn't just do that randomly; his communication is strategic. Paul has a missiology; he has a philosophy of how to do missions. What's his strategy? Well it depends.

When he comes to a new town, where does he usually start preaching? He usually goes to the local synagogue. He starts at the synagogue because he knows that he will get an audience there. So most of the time Paul preaches to Jews and God-fearing Gentiles who know the Old Testament and its stories. He knows he will be talking to people who have some grounding in the law and the prophets. There are, however, two instances in the book of Acts where Paul finds himself in front of a very different sort of audience. An audience more like the audience we face in our modern world. There are two recorded sermons in Acts where Paul preaches to pagans. One of those occasions is here, in Lystra. The other occasion is that famous passage where Paul preaches to all the academics at the Areopagus in Athens. When Paul talks to these pagans, his strategy changes. His preaching changes. How does it change?

When Paul preaches in a new place, he always starts with a point of contact. He looks for a place of agreement, a place where both he and his listeners can agree. In synagogues, that point of contact is the Old Testament. Both he and his audience trust the Old Testament, so Paul uses the Old Testament to point to Jesus. He tells them that all the law and the prophets have pointed to Jesus! He tells them that Jesus' death and resurrection was foretold in the Psalms and Isaiah. He refers to Moses and Isaiah. The Old Testament is his common ground. When he talks to pagans he can't use the Bible as his point of contact. It's not an authority for them. They don't know David. They have never heard of Moses. So Paul uses a different point of contact. As Paul tells the people of Lystra in verse 17, "God has not left himself without testimony." The people of Lystra and Athens may not know anything about Moses or the Prophets, but God has shown himself to them in other ways. In both Athens and Lystra, Paul selects two points of contact, two places of shared agreement. In both cities he goes to the same common ground. In both cities he uses the same point of contact. Let's look at those points, because they might give us some idea about how to engage our world.

First, Paul points to the natural world. Paul points to the beauty and bounty of creation. Verse 15: we are here to tell you about "the living God who made the heavens and the earth, the sea and everything in them." This God has "shown his kindness by giving us rain from heaven and crops in their seasons." He points to God's goodness in creation. He does the same thing when talking to the people of Athens. In Acts 17:24 he tells the people at the Areopagus that he is there to proclaim the God who made the world and everything in it and "who gives everyone life and breath and everything else."

When all the other voices that proclaim God fall silent, when no one is telling God's story and no human being is proclaiming his praise, creation keeps talking. It reminds me of what Jesus says to the Pharisees when he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. All the people were praising him as a king and the Pharisees said to him, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" Do you remember what Jesus said? If they keep quiet the rocks and stones will cry out." (Luke 19:40) The heavens are telling the glory of God and the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech. People may abandon churches. People may avoid preachers and their sermons. But God continues to press on people's souls through the power and glory of the natural world.

About 5 years ago my son Patrick and I went on a 3-day hike in the Adirondack mountains. We hiked 25 miles down narrow, treacherous paths, we carried 50 pounds of gear up and down mountains, we endured biting insects, we endured rain, we slept on the ground and we pushed our muscles to the limit. Why did we do this? Were we serving a sentence? Was this a court-ordered punishment? No. We chose to do this! And we weren't the only ones. The woods were full of people just like us. Why are the woods full of people in voluntarily pain when they could be at home watching Cable TV? Because there is something transcendent about nature. When you are on top of a mountain, with the hills rolling away from you for miles in all directions, watching the shadows of the clouds skim across the hills, it's...glorious. Why do non-religious people—including avowed atheists—climb to the tops of mountains? Why do they stop for an hour at the foot of a woodland waterfall to watch the water dance? Why do they make pilgrimages to the edge of the Grand Canyon? Because it stirs their souls. They may never acknowledge his voice or praise his name, but it is God who calls them to those places and it's his Glory that stirs their hearts. God has not left himself without testimony.

Creation is one point of contact that Paul uses to connect with his pagan audience. The other point of contact is the longing of the human heart. In verse 17 Paul tells them that God is the one who fills their hearts with joy. 'The joy you feel in your heart points to God,' says Paul. Maybe you remember, C.S. Lewis said the same thing. That's where he felt God moving in his own heart before he was converted. Maybe you remember the story. Lewis was reading the poem of a Scandinavian poet that had been translated by Longfellow. The poem opened with the lie, "Balder the beautiful is dead, is dead." And somehow those lines split him open. He found himself filled with a deep longing that he called joy. Later when he became a Christian he came to see that the joy was God working in him.

In his preaching to the Athenians, Paul also points to the stirrings of their heart. He doesn't mention joy, but he does comment on all their idols by saying, "I see that you are very religious. I see that your hearts are searching for something." And then he quotes a poem that they would have known. A piece of their pagan literature which expressed their religious longings. He says to the Athenians, "As one of your own poets has said, "We are indeed his offspring." Paul says to them, "You know about the restless hunger, your own poets write about it, I'm here to tell you about the God who fills that hunger."

Notice something. Paul reads pagan poetry. Paul knows pagan poetry and he knows the habits and the practices of the culture around him. He doesn't cut himself off from that worldly stuff, he learns it because it helps him understand the souls of his listeners. It helps him see their longings. It enables him to speak to connect with them more effectively. Recent surveys might tell us that people are abandoning the church, and they might tell us that people say they have no religion, but if you read modern literature and if you listen to what people are saying, if you pay attention to the art and music of people who say they have no faith, it's pretty clear that they are all very religious. Their restless hearts are looking for something. Their lonely hearts are longing to give themselves to someone.

I listen to a fair amount of indie music. I know that's not what you expect to hear from your 55-year-old minister, but there it is. I find it interesting because in this music artists share the stuff in their soul—stuff that people don't express in regular conversations. One of the artists I've listened to a fair bit is Phoebe Bridgers. She's a 20-something indie artist from California. Phoebe Bridgers could be a poster child for the recent religious surveys. She grew up without religion, and she says she has no faith. Some of her music even expresses hostility toward faith. But there's also yearning in her music. Her most recent album, Punisher, has a cover where she's standing out in a desert at night, she's wearing a skeleton t-shirt acknowledging death, and she's looking up into the starry skies as if she's searching for something. It's an image of religious longing.

One of her songs, Chinese Satellite, she talks about how she and all her friends believe that when you're gone, it's forever. But she can't shake this feeling that there's something more. That she is meant for something more. "Sometimes, when I can't sleep It's just a matter of time before I'm hearing things. Swore I could feel you through the walls. But that's impossible. I want to believe that if I go outside I'll see a tractor beam, coming to take me to where I'm from. I want to go home." Somehow she has this desire for a home beyond this one. In an interview she did for Apple news, she explained the song. 'I have no faith—and that's what [the song] is about. My friend Harry put it in the best way ever once. He was like, "Man, sometimes I just wish I could make the Jesus leap." But I can't do it. I wasn't raised religious. I do yoga and stuff. I think breathing is important. But that's pretty much as far as it goes.' And yet she admits that there's something in her that wants to believe. "I want someone to shake me awake in the middle of the night and be like, "Come with me. It's actually totally different than you ever thought."

I want to go home. God has not left himself without testimony. He still speaks in creation and in the inconsolable longing of human hearts.

Modern religious surveys paint a dim picture of faith in this world. And if you ask me to predict what's going to happen, I think things will probably get worse before they get better. But this is still God's world. Christ is risen and he is on the throne. This world will not end in loneliness, fear and alienation. It will end in love, communion and joy. It will end with all things made new. Don't be afraid of the future. And don't be afraid of engaging this culture. Because we have a message of hope that people are genuinely looking for, and our God has not left himself without testimony.

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