

An Unknown God

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Acts 17:22-34

Some years back my wife and I were in San Francisco and while there took the opportunity to visit the giant Redwood trees in a national park near the city. If you have ever seen these towering giants, you know how breathtaking they are. Walking in the midst of those trees is like being in a cathedral built by God. Even though there were quite a few folks around that day, it was oddly hushed in the forest. People were just taking in the wonder of it all. After we had finished our long walk among all that majesty, we went to a coffee shop in the park. At a table near us a woman was talking with a man and at one point she said, “This may sound silly but while I was walking around out there, I just felt like singing!” I didn’t do so but I wanted to say to her, “You wanted to sing? To whom?”

As Neal Plantinga has observed, lots of people who may not believe in God or in any specific god have occasions to feel thankful. Maybe it is being thankful for amazing spectacles in nature like those Redwoods. Or maybe it’s Thanksgiving Day and so, you know, you’re supposed to be grateful. But a lot of people are thankful in general. They cannot locate a specific target for their gratitude. But as Plantinga says, being thankful in general is like being married in general. Something about the very concept feels decidedly off.

Paul discovered one day that a lot of the good Greek folks living in Athens were very religious. But not a few were religious in general. Oh, they knew or believed there were lots of gods and goddesses up there on Mt. Olympus or something. Mostly they were a surly lot: Zeus, Hera, Apollo, and the rest. For being gods, they seemed to have the same foibles and petty pride and envy the rest of us have. But in the end, who wants gods who seem more like characters on some soap opera? Maybe it was a gnawing sense of dissatisfaction with all those ostensible deities that led some in Athens to hanker for something better. For someone better. And so they put up an altar to “An Unknown God.” Just to cover their bases. Just to give in a bit to the hope that maybe somewhere up there or out there is a god who might actually love us, care for us, wants to help us and even deliver us from a sad and broken world. Maybe.

Maybe they prayed once in a while. “Dear whoever-you-are” they perhaps would begin. John Calvin wrote a lot about what in Latin is called the *semen religionis*, the seed of religion that he believed resides deep in every person including, yes, even the most hardcore self-proclaimed atheist. Not sure if the Apostle Paul knew that Latin phrase but he knew the idea and in Athens the Unknown God altar opened a door for Paul that he knew he absolutely had to walk through. Paul spied an opening with these earnest but misguided Greeks and he took it.

“I see you are very religious” Paul says, conveying nary a whiff of judgment or ridicule when he said it. “But you’re looking for someone to direct all of that toward, you’re looking for a name with which to fill in the blank on that one altar I saw. Well, my Athenian friends, good news: I know who he is and I will tell you about him.”

Surprisingly in what Luke records here of Paul’s witness or sermon, he never mentions the name of Jesus once. Probably he did not have to since we were told earlier in Acts 17 that the Athenians knew Paul was forever going on and on about someone named Jesus. But in his talk there on the Areopagus he speaks more broadly about God and then more specifically about the one man God appointed to save us. Along the way he quotes a Greek poem that was no doubt familiar to all those folks. Now that is good contextual ministry!

Near as we can tell, the Greeks of Athens leaned in to listen to Paul. They may have been impressed with his rhetoric, with his intelligence, with his knowledge of their own culture. But then Paul mentions the core of what he regards the best news inside the Good News of the Gospel: God raised that one man from the dead.

Pause. Silence. And then one person after the next tried to suppress a giggle. But they lost the suppression battle and started to laugh out loud. “OK there, Mr. Paul, we, um, we will talk with you again one day! Maybe!” The Greeks saw death as a release from the prison house of the body. So the idea that anyone would regard it a happy thought to have some god give you back a body one day after you die was, well and quite literally, laughable. So maybe they still thought there was an Unknown God somewhere out there in the ether but it could not possibly be a god who would dabble in resurrections that none of them wanted.

If Paul could walk around the U.S. today—or maybe many places in the world beyond North America—he might have to modify his observation about the Athenians. He might say today, “I see you are very spiritual but not religious.” That, after all, has been the underlying mantra among those who check the box “None” on surveys asking if they adhere to any specific religious faith. The Nones, as they are now called, are growing in numbers every year

according to surveys, and now constitute almost 30% of the wider population of the U.S. In those under the age of 30, fully 40% claim no particular religious affiliation.

Any number of those folks will tell you they have soured on organized religion and particularly on stances taken by the evangelical church in the U.S. In December I saw a quote from someone who said “Forget about putting the ‘Christ’ back into Christmas. I’d like to put the ‘Christ’ back into Christians!” Or we have heard any number of people say something to the effect that they like Jesus just fine. It’s his followers who offend and bother them. In short, the atmosphere out there when it comes to religion and the church is, to put it mildly, tough. Maybe it has always been this way but it seems like we have been hearing more about this in recent years.

Yet we keep coming to church. Pastors like me keep mounting pulpits to proclaim God’s Word. At the place where I work at Calvin Seminary we dedicate a lot of time and resources to training people who will be future preachers and teachers in the church. And all of us are called to bear witness to the Gospel in both word and deed all throughout our lives. As we think about that and as we look at Acts 17 today, no doubt we could, if we wanted to, extract from Acts 17 and from the example of Paul a list of things we can do when addressing skeptics and non-believers. But rather than reduce this passage to a kind of To-Do list or a series of principles for the public proclamation of the Gospel, for this morning I want to observe another thing. And just maybe long about now in this time and culture it is a word we need to hear.

On the surface it looks like Paul’s attempts to reach the hearts of the Unknown God crowd failed. Oh, yes, a few did become interested enough to learn more and even to begin to follow this Jesus. Luke memorializes a couple of their names for us. In general, though, most chalked Paul up as a fool. A fool for Christ perhaps. And Paul knew it. He wrote about that to the Corinthians after all. But he knew he’d rather be a fool for Christ than a wise sage as the world often reckons such things. Paul was savvy enough to know full well what would happen when he mentioned the resurrection. Did a slight smile curl up the corners of Paul’s own mouth when the Athenians began to snicker? Maybe. “Yeah,” Paul could have said, “I figured you’d react that way!”

But that is why this encounter was in the end not mostly a failure. It was a powerful Gospel witness. It was a respectful yet bold Gospel proclamation. And whenever this happens in the church or outside the walls of the church, this is always a blessed and wonderful spectacle. People staying faithful to their witness in the face of so much pressure to water things down are always inspiring and always the kind of people the Holy Spirit needs.

It’s not always easy. We none of us enjoy being scorned or laughed at. We would rather appear to be hip and in tune with things, to go with the flow, to go along to get along and not appear to be odd ducks. Yet we are called to risk our oddness for the sake of the kingdom. And when we do, God knows that is never a bad thing, never finally a failure.

If we look ahead to the very next chapter in Acts 18, we see something rather remarkable, following on the heels of the story we have read this morning. Because in Acts 18 we find that once Paul leaves Athens, he goes to a city called Corinth. He meets a wonderful couple named Priscilla and Aquilla and a Jesus-following synagogue leader named Crispis.

But Paul came in for plenty of abuse in Corinth too, mostly from fellow Jews. So one night in Corinth the Lord came to Paul in a dream and said, “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not stay silent for I am with you.” Paul had not been there on the occasion recorded in Matthew 28 when the resurrected Jesus told his disciples, “Surely, I am with you, always.” So now Jesus comes to Paul and makes the same reassuring promise personally. “I am with you, Paul. Always.”

Sometimes perhaps we think that someone like the Apostle Paul did not need much encouraging. He was an apostle after all! He was filled with the Holy Spirit. He had once had a dramatic personal encounter with and direct call by Jesus himself. Sure, the rest of us need all the help we can get but the big heroes of the faith in the Bible? Well, they were no doubt far more confident than we are much of the time. But it’s not true. Paul, Peter, James, John, Priscilla and Aquilla, Barnabus: they no less than any of us had moments of uncertainty, of doubt, of fear.

It reminds me of what we read in Hebrews 11-12 and that litany of the great heroes of the faith who had gone before. Yet that chapter reminds us that these people were not made of steel. They were flesh and blood folks same as all of us. And none of them within the span of their lifetimes saw the complete fulfillment of all their faith-based hopes and dreams. They too saw them, Hebrews 11 says, only from a distance as they journeyed toward a far country beyond the horizons of this present world. As it turns out, it’s not just weak faith that needs bolstering now and again. Strong faith does too.

It's not weak faith that led to the Psalms of Lament that make up fully one-third of the entire Book of Psalms. Lament over how bad, unfair, and scary this cynical and broken world is comes from robust faith. Believing in the Gospel and seeking to do what we can to proclaim it in the midst of a hostile world involve great risk.

For many of us when we think of more modern day saints or heroes of the faith, perhaps we think of someone like Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Here was a woman who had dedicated her life to serving the poor. She often described herself as a little pencil in the hands of Jesus but goodness knows what all Jesus accomplished through her. Yet after she died in 1997 it was discovered from her journals that in actuality she had endured many years—decades even—of what could be called the dark night of the soul.

When God called Teresa to become a nun and to devote her life to the work of Christ in the world, that call was clarion. It was clear as crystal. It was vivid. But as it turns out, after that the phone line between her and God seemed to go dead. She never again experienced a revelation from God as vivid as her initial call. She longed for it. Prayed for it. And meanwhile she continued faithfully to do the work she knew God had assigned to her, and she did it nobly and well to the end. People around her testified that she radiated the divine, that she almost glowed with the presence of Christ. Yet in her heart of hearts, she yearned for more communication from Jesus but did not receive it.

Maybe some of us here today can relate to that. We think it should be easier to live as a Christian. It should be easier for us to proclaim the Gospel in word and deed. There ought to be more tangible encouragement along the way. Yet often there is not a lot of that. Yet we persist in hope, in love, in faith, in prayer.

When I was still a teenager, I remember sitting with my Great-Grandmother Hoezee in the living room of her exceedingly modest home in Zeeland, Michigan. One of her seven sons had left the faith decades before. He drank too much, wrecked his marriage, and had nothing to do with the church or organized religion in any way. Having lived in Seattle, Washington, for many years, he returned to Zeeland when he was in his 70s. He met a godly woman and fell in love. But through her he also re-encountered the Jesus in whose name he had once been baptized but whom he had not prayed to or worshiped in decades. He recommitted his life to Christ. Before he died he became an Elder in his congregation. And I vividly remember my Great-Grandma leaning toward me and saying, "I prayed for that boy for 50 years. Just shows you what a little praying can do."

A little? Now, I was 16 or 17 when she said that. Fifty years was an unimaginably long time to me. I mean, I had a few things I had been praying about for, well, I mean, for months and I was getting a little discouraged! Yet Great-Grandma remained faithful in love, hope and prayer for a half century when so little around her gave her any encouragement that those prayers would do anything other than bounce off the ceiling over her head. Somehow, though, she believed Jesus was with her and that was enough.

God was with Paul on Mars Hill in Athens that day even if in the end he came in for a whole lot of eyerolling by those folks who hankered for an Unknown God whom Paul so desperately wanted to introduce to them. And as Paul got knocked around a bit in the next city of Corinth, God was there too. And on that occasion at least broke through the pain and the disorientation to deliver a word of grace.

And that is the same word of grace for every one of us today too. "I am with you, John. I am with you, Sarah. I am with you, Luis. I am with you, Chen." As we go out into a skeptical and sometimes hostile world to proclaim the God we know to those who know only an Unknown God, we do not go alone. When we are snickered at for our naïve faith, when people roll their eyes over the idea Jesus really rose again from the dead, when people see us praying for things that others deem impossible, uttering prayers that they deem a very simple waste of time, Jesus by his indwelling Spirit stands at our side and says, "Do not be afraid. Keep speaking. I am with you. Always." Thanks be to God and Amen.

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