

Title: “To the unknown god”

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Acts 17:23

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Service Readings: Acts 17:16-31, 1 Pet 3:13-22, John 14:15-21

The world is falling apart and any lack of boldness we have in our proclamation in our workplace, in our families, and in our social networks is akin to dusting off the altar of the unknown god and providing it room in the world to do what it does best: contribute to the despair of life and the false formality of death. The world doesn't don't need more uncertainty. It doesn't need more diluted promises and comprisable truths. It needs Jesus Christ crucified. It needs Jesus Christ resurrected. It needs the hope that this truth brings.

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

This morning's reading from Acts makes clear that Paul was living in a world much like our world today. This much is clear just based on the audience he attracted. For in just the first portion of this passage we discover three different groups that have turned their ears to him. Let us read this portion of Scripture once again and to refresh your memory:

¹⁶ Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, "What does this babbler wish to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities"—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰ For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean." ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

They said, "We wish to know what these things mean." Why? What motivated their curiosity? Quite simply, they were living in a world that they did not understand. The Stoics believed in the gods of logic and reason and searched for truth through what they could discover. And this might have worked well as they looked up to the heavens and monitored the stars, but all logic seemed to fall apart when they looked at the world around them. They couldn't account for things like suffering and pain and so accepted that maybe life itself possessed no value.

The Epicureans, on the other hand placed experience above logic. They found truth in what could be sensed by the individual. For them, they had a diminished need for any gods because life is just

something that “happened” and when a life ends, so does the soul. It just goes back into the universe.

The Jewish community? Well, they believed in a single God, maker of all, who adopted them as his own people, led them out of Egyptian slavery, and kept freeing them each time they found themselves in exile. But they were actively searching for his will because they had found themselves oppressed once again, this time by the Roman empire, and so they waited for God to deliver them once again.

You see? The world 2000 years ago is similar to the world today. The people of the world look around and try to find meaning in what they see. They turn to logic, or nature, or themselves for the source of that meaning. But whatever they chose, there is a commonality among them all: they turn to *something*. We all do. We always have because God created our very nature, and our very nature acknowledges him and knows the laws he has written on our hearts. And so the world can try to lie to itself as much as it wants, but it will never be able to completely ignore this truth. And so the world searches. It seeks meaning. It seeks understanding. It seeks reason.

And it asks the “why” questions: There is suffering. Why? There is war. Why? Good people suffer and die? Why? Injustice seems to be more common than justice in every place we look. Why? The world searches for answers in all the wrong places and when they can’t answer these questions with any secular satisfaction, they construct their own gods instead. They build gods with names like Evolution to explain how people came into existence, or Post Modernism to explain why there should not be one single truth. In the United States they even build an altar for the god of killing the inconvenient because they cannot understand why people must be forced to relinquish themselves in service to another.

And the world continues to multiply these gods because these gods don’t provide the answers that the world is searching for. And so, for example, if the god of self can’t explain the evils of the world, then maybe the god of nature can. But when that god can’t explain it they construct yet another in hopes that this one might just be the one to bring answers, to bring meaning, to bring hope. And so the altar that was built for the unknown god in Paul’s day still stands erected, still stands reserved in hopeful anticipation that the god of meaning will make itself known.

And also, just like Paul, this is where we can make our connection to the world. We can meet them there, at the very altar of their unknown god and we can give it a name. We can tell the world that what they are searching for has already been found. The meaning to what they see in the world, the meaning to what they are experiencing in their lives, is already known and already has a name: Jesus.

We can proclaim to them this glorious story of God. We can tell them about creation, about sin, about the prophets, and about Jesus. We can teach them about his death and resurrection and we can tell them how we are part of all of this, how we are the *reason* for all of this. We can give them what they are searching for – we can give them meaning. And we can connect them to this meaning in a way that offers them hope, real hope in a life to come.

But here's the thing. The world doesn't need more uncertainty. In this postmodern world of self-proclaimed truths, in a world where the message of Jesus Christ is being drown out, it is not enough for us to simply meet them where they are at and then give them a watered down message of the gospel. They already receive this from the rest of the world. So often they already hear about Jesus but it is not the Jesus of Scripture; it is the Jesus of the world. It is a Jesus who loves human-defined morals. It is the Jesus who loves whatever the world loves. And in so many of today's churches, it is a Jesus that will bend to our own desires and demands. These churches teach that Jesus wants everyone to be happy, healthy and wealthy and so if people can stir in themselves enough faith, he will pour onto them the blessings that they so deserve. That's not Jesus – that's just another devious name for the unnamed god. And the problem with this message, besides it being false is that the moment a person becomes unhealthy, or loses a loved one, or loses their home and all their possessions, what message is spoken into their heart? Maybe Jesus doesn't really love them, or didn't find them worthy enough. Or maybe Jesus doesn't have the power the church said that he does. Or maybe.... Jesus isn't God. They become crushed with the weight of life and the emptiness of this false message and their hearts become hardened to Jesus and to the real, certain hope that he offers! They tune out this saving message, they reject the meaning that it offers, and instead search for meaning themselves. And the weight of the world continues to build until they can carry it no longer. And then what? If they won't turn to Jesus, what will they turn to?

You see? We have the message that the world needs to hear. But in this day and age, we can't just sit quietly and wait for the world to find us. No. We *also* need to go into the world and boldly proclaim. We need to call out the altar of the unknown god, just as Paul did, and give it a name. The world *needs* this message. The world *needs* this God. The world *needs* Jesus. They need Jesus Christ crucified. They need Jesus Christ resurrected. They need Jesus proclaimed boldly and unashamed, without compromise and without human influence. They may not receive this message; they may even reject it. Some did exactly that with Paul, the disciples, and even Jesus! We must be ready for the same rejection but we must not stop preaching because of it.

The world is falling apart and any lack of boldness we have in our proclamation in our workplace, in our families, and in our social networks is akin to dusting off the altar of that unknown god giving it additional room to live. We must not allow it. We must name that god for our God is known! And our God has a name. Jesus, Son of God. He has given himself for us and through him we receive God's forgiveness and grace. Through him we find meaning, hope, and everlasting life.

And so I challenge you this morning to go out into the world and preach Jesus crucified. Do not be ashamed. Do not compromise. Preach Jesus in your homes as you raise your children. Preach Jesus in your workplaces. Preach Jesus everywhere you go. The altar of the unknown god needs to be destroyed and your message can do exactly that. Don't compromise. Don't wait.

Please pray with me.

Lord, in you we find meaning for all that we see and experience in this world. In you we find hope for everlasting life. Send the Holy Spirit to embolden us to proclaim this message to the rest of the world.

Amen.