

The Sixth Sunday of Easter (May 17, 2020)

1852

Lesson from Acts: Acts 17:22-31

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Epistle: I Peter 3:15-22

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Gospel: John 14:15-21

Psalm 66

Text: Acts 17:22-31

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Theme: Paul Proclaims The Unknown God.

377 vs. 7-8

I. Revealed in nature that we might seek him.

377 vs. 9-10

II. Revealed in his Son that we might repent.

Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

Acts 17:22-31

Heavenly Father; sanctify us by your truth; your word is truth! Amen.

Dear worshipers of the one true God, the God who has saved you in his own Son, and given absolute proof of this by raising him from the dead,

An altar to an unknown god. How strange! The Greeks worshiped many, many gods, so that in Athens it is said that there were more gods than people. But what if they had forgotten a god here or there? What if one had been lost from their records? Surely they did not want to offend some deity or incur his wrath upon themselves by neglecting to worship him. In order to cover all the bases and make sure no god was being left out, they included also this altar to an unknown god.

The apostle Paul used this altar to an unknown god to explain to the people that in the midst of their many idols, the most unknown god in Athens was the one true God. Yet he is not left without record. Paul Proclaims The Unknown God; the God revealed in nature that we might seek him; the God revealed in his Son that we might repent.

On Paul's second missionary journey he, Silas and Timothy went and preached the gospel in the province of Macedonia. Remember how Paul had had that vision of a Macedonian man saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" There were many in Macedonia who believed the precious message of salvation that Paul spoke, but as always, there were also those who rejected the message and made life as difficult as possible for the Apostle. In Philippi Paul was whipped and put in prison. In Thessalonica the Jewish agitators tried to arrest him, but when they could not find him at Jason's house where he had been staying, they dragged Jason before the city officials. Then the believers sent Paul and Silas off to Berea. But when the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the gospel in Berea, they followed and stirred up the people there. So some of the believers accompanied Paul and took him to Athens.

Athens is familiar to us from history. It had once been one of the most famous and prominent cities in the world, the capital of Greece. Though in Paul's day it was no longer the capital, it continued to be the literary center of the entire civilized world. Its citizens were proud of their learning and philosophy, and spent their time discussing and debating, always trying to learn something new. But despite their great learning, the city had fallen prey to social decay and moral rotteness.

Having arrived in Athens, Paul sent those who accompanied him back with instructions to tell Timothy and Silas to join him there as soon as possible. But while Paul was waiting for his assistants in Athens, he was by no means idle. As he wandered

up and down the streets of the famous city, he was greatly upset and disturbed, distressed to see that the city was full of idols, thousands of figures of gods and goddesses erected along the streets, and many altars, inviting sacrifices. Here was a great city, full of people who thought they knew everything, but they were as far as they could be from knowing that which is all-important, salvation in Jesus Christ. So Paul reasoned with the people in the synagogue, and also day by day in the market-place, where the learned men regularly gathered for their philosophical discussions, and a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him.

The Epicureans taught that the gods are not interested in the lives of people, and that there is no afterlife in which we will be called to account. Their philosophy was simply to enjoy life to the full. "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die." Needless to say, there are many in our day who hold to this same philosophy. The Stoics, on the other hand, considered it their goal in life to do their duty, and their highest duty was to act reasonably. There is no lack of people today who hold to this philosophy, who consider life a matter of doing their duty to God and to others.

These philosophers didn't think too highly of what Paul said. When he told them the good news about Jesus and the resurrection, they said, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." Finally, their discussions came to a climax, and they brought Paul to a meeting of the Areopagus, the grand ruling council of Athens. They said to Paul, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean."

Paul was more than happy to tell them. He stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. I'm happy about that because I'm very religious too. Why don't we all get together and be religious together, since we're all really worshiping the same god anyway. It doesn't make that much difference what we believe as long as we try to be good people. All good people go to heaven no matter what they believe."

NO! that is not what Paul said. Paul was a snob there in Athens, a real snob. He thought that what he believed was true, and that what everyone else believed was wrong. He really thought he was right. How dare this outsider come into town and suggest that the way people were doing things was not good enough.

NO! Paul wasn't being a snob, though he was right and everyone else was wrong. Paul cared enough about those condemned and dying sinners to hold to the truth, and to share with them the only truth that could save them from eternal destruction in hell and grant to them instead eternal life in heaven.

The people in Athens were very religious. It's not necessarily a complement to be called a religious person, because the vast majority of religious people hold to false religions. Just about everyone is a religious person, for only the fool has said in his heart, "There is no god." People can tell by the wonderful creation all around them that obviously there is a God who made them, their world and their universe. They understand from their conscience that they are accountable to God for what they do. That is why every culture in the history of the world, if it doesn't know the true God, makes up its own god or gods, because everyone deep down knows there is a God. But tragically most have not known and do not know who the true God is, and what he has done to save them from their wickedness. He is an unknown God to them.

Our country too is very religious, isn't it. We even print on our money the words, "In God we trust." But in which god do we trust, in whose god, in what god? There are many gods in our country, just as there were in Athens. One person says one thing about God; another person says something different. Obviously they're not both talking about the same God, and obviously they can't both be worshipping the true God, if either of them are. We have religious freedom in our country. We tolerate every religion. But religious toleration can very easily become religious indifference. People easily come to the horrible conclusion: "It doesn't make that much difference what you believe, as long as you're sincere. Everyone's worshipping the same God anyway." But Jesus says, "True worshipers worship the Father in spirit and in truth!" When people do not worship in truth, they do not worship the true God.

Paul said to the people of Athens: "Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you: The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'"

God is not like an idol that is confined to the corner of a temple where people put him. He doesn't need to be carried around and taken care of by people. God doesn't need anything from us. We don't make him God. He is God of all whether we worship and serve him or not. Indeed God created the world and everything in it. In creating one man, Adam, God created all the descendants of Adam, the nations that cover the earth. All events on earth are controlled and ordered by God. He determines when people live, where they live, and how long they live. He determines when nations rise, and when they fall. God demonstrates his great wisdom and power in creation and in the history of nations so that people will seek him, and perhaps reach out for him and find him.

The people of Athens had not found God. Instead they had found, or shall we say "made up" a bunch of false gods. The very fact that they had an altar to an unknown god shows the futility of their heathen religion. They weren't satisfied that they had found God, and they should have kept on searching to the very ends of the earth to find the true God and eternal security. Paul was saying, "People of Athens, seek God, reach out for him and find him." Nor would they have had to go to the ends of the earth. God was not far from them. God was right there in Paul's gospel message of salvation in Christ Jesus.

God is revealed in nature that we might seek him. From nature and our conscience we can see that there is a God. But from nature and our conscience we cannot know who that God is and what he has done to save us. That we learn from God's word alone. That is why those who look only to nature or inside their own heart for their God will always be worshipping an idol. That is why we must rely totally upon God's holy word. Nature is there simply to draw people to that word, where God is revealed in Jesus that we might repent.

"Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone -- an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God

overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."

How ridiculous to think that God could be an image of silver or gold made and fashioned by people. People don't make God! God made people! Still we find people who have the silly impression that they can make God by what they think or believe. "I think God is like this," "I believe God is like that," or "It's only reasonable that God should be this way." How ridiculous! Our thoughts, our reason, our beliefs don't make God either. God is the way he is no matter what people believe or think. In the past when people "made God up," he overlooked such ignorance. In patience he didn't punish them immediately, though unless they repented, they were finally condemned eternally for their unbelief.

But now God commands all people everywhere to repent. God has revealed himself, and told us exactly who he is through his Son. Jesus came to our earth and lived a perfect life in our stead for all the failures and shortcomings in our lives. He died on the cross paying the full punishment for all our many wrongs against God. God has set a day when he will judge all people. We will be judged on the basis of whether or not we have trusted alone in Jesus for salvation. God has given proof of all this by raising Jesus from the dead.

The people of Athens had the precious opportunity to seek God, to reach out and find him, as Paul proclaimed the crucified and risen Christ among them. Sadly, not many of them accepted Paul's message, and we don't hear of an enduring Christian congregation in Athens. God has also given us our precious opportunity to seek him, and he has graciously come to us in his word, so that he is not an unknown God to us. He is our Lord who has carried out our salvation. May his word continue to cause us to repent and turn to him for forgiveness and salvation! And may we continue to proclaim his word to the many to whom he remains an unknown God that they too might repent, for our Lord has won salvation for us all.

Amen.

May the Lord our God be with us as he was with our fathers; may he never leave us or forsake us. May he turn our hearts to him, to walk in all his ways! Amen.