

## “Religious... or Ready?”

Acts 17:22-31; 1 Peter 3:13-16a; John 14:18-21

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Three years ago, when we considered these same passages, I am pretty SURE that I shared with the church... at least in LC... why this Acts passage is so special to me. Anyway, this passage took on special meaning when I had the opportunity while in ‘cemetery’ (‘seminary’) to travel to the Middle East with a group of students fr. other schools, and we made a brief stop in Athens on our way back to the U.S. SO ‘brief’ that when we came upon this historic landmark of the “Areopagus” (aka, “**Mars Hill**”), our tour guide said that we didn’t have time to go up on the hill, but just had to continue to walk on past it. A ‘hill’ that was definitely more ‘mole hill’ than ‘mountain’ (one that would NOT have required much effort to ascend)

Sooo, as our guide continued on, one of my fellow ‘tour-mates’ and I decided that we were NOT going to be denied an opportunity to ‘stand where Paul stood.’ So we kind of slyly ‘held back,’ and quickly hustled up that ‘hill’ to relive that most powerful ‘testimony’ of Paul in his defense of the Gospel of that ‘unknown god.’ We were willing to suffer whatever consequence we might because of the significance of that moment, and this place, in Biblical history.

This was a man of principle willing to stand up to the most powerful and wise leaders, who all worshipped many different ‘gods,’ in order to bear witness to the One TRUE God greater than all of them. In those words of Peter we just read, the Great Apostle Paul was most certainly ‘**ready**’ to make his ‘**defense**’ to those who were asking him the ‘**reason**’ for the great ‘**hope**’ he had inside of him. And if it was good enough for Paul to ‘take his stand’ there for the Jesus he ‘defended’... it was sure good enough for me and my ‘accomplice’ to, in some way, ‘follow in his footsteps’...

Why is this story so significant to me? Well, for one, of course, because it is one that has truly ‘come to life’ for me in actually BEING there. In the same way that during that same trip, I was deeply moved to have the opportunity to be ‘sittin’ on the dock of the bay’ on the Sea of Galilee with those same fellow students one night, under a beautiful full moon... picturing just how Jesus could have done the very same thing, under the very same moon, with

a group of his own fellow laborers, separated from us only by a mere 2000 years of time. Few experiences in life can beat that of 'walking in the steps of Jesus.' (and disciples).

But aside from reliving the truth of Scripture... that there is indeed 'nothing like being there'... what I find so memorable about this passage is the discussion >> that centers on that inscription on an empty altar: ***"To an unknown god."*** In this extremely polytheistic culture they had a god to worship for *every* occasion (including that very gathering place, the "Areopagus"... which lit. means the 'hill of Ares,' the Greek god of war. "Mars" would be the Roman equivalent. As in 'Mars Hill'). They even had an unnamed spot, one left blank... 'generic,' if you will... so as not to 'offend' some god that they may have overlooked. NO REALLY! I guess that even then, they made efforts to be 'P.C.' ('Politically correct.') Or, would that be 'T.C.' ('Theologically Correct.')? After all, they WERE a very 'religious' people.

Now, while this all may seem a little ridiculous to some of us today, it was certainly no laughing matter to Paul. This was 'his world and welcome to it.' Every day he encountered folks who believed in any number of gods. In fact, in many places to worship 'the One True God' would make YOU an 'oddball.' For some, when it came to what gods you believed in, 'more was better.' The Apostle encountered every day those who considered themselves 'religious'... for which HE always needed to be 'ready'...

And in truth, you and I aren't that much different. We too encounter those that when asked if they attend a particular church, they might answer, 'Well, none, but I AM very 'religious.' A word that can run the gamut from true **seeker** to devout **atheist**. We too will come across regularly those who worship any number of 'gods': gods of money... science... pleasure... cynicism... self. They may even worship an 'unknown god'... just to 'cover their bases' so as not to offend. Like those ancient Greeks. Sooo... as the educated, 'faithful followers' of Christ who fall somewhere between 'Plato' and 'Paul,' we should ask ourselves the same question we might ask others: 'Do I consider myself to be **"religious... or ready?"**

This is not to say that one who might consider themselves to be 'religious' is so bad. Certainly to acknowledge, and seek to follow, a power greater than oneself does indicate a healthy sense of **humility**, recognition that WE are not the ultimate source of knowledge and strength. We simply must be careful that the 'greater power' we follow doesn't look too much

like what we see in the mirror! So, even though those Greeks might not have had the right motivation, their idea of an 'unknown God' is not so far off ... in that God's ways and image are indeed 'unknown' to us. Unfathomable. Indescribable. ***"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord."*** (Isa. 55:8) That is why we must be careful not to put too much stock in our 'religion'... our 'man-made construct' of how to honor and understand our God. Our understanding of God is limited, at best. Ultimately, it's not about our 'religion' for God... but our 'relationship' with God.

Paul spoke to all of those tangible 'objects of worship' the Greeks had, and recognized how SHORT they all fell of the glory of the ONE God. He pointed to the ornate temple on the Acropolis, built to pay tribute to those many gods they attempted to please, and he said that ***"The GOD who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does NOT live in shrines made by human hands,<sup>25</sup> nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things."*** (Acts 17:24-25)

If there is anything that we should have been taking away from our time of 'isolation' in our time to 'stay at home' is that the God we worship is bigger than ANY church building... that God doesn't live in these 'shrines' built by human hands, but in the hearts and souls of men, women, and children. WE are God's temple. WE are God's living, breathing 'shrines.' In the words of that Scripture written over the entrance to the worship space being build out at MorganField, ***"We are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building."*** (1 Cor. 3:9)

As HAPPY as many may have been to get back to the sanctuaries in Welsh and Lake Charles... and as exciting as it is to see the progress on that new place of worship on Corbina Road... the 'building' that is MOST important is YOU! What is MOST important that we be building for God is our FAITH. ***"God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble."*** (Psalm 46:1) When we come to our churches, as comforting as it may be to enter them, what is of the ULTIMATE comfort is the GOD we are to find there. One who will NOT stay there once we leave. That 'good Shepherd' whom we are assured 'will follow us all the days of

our lives.’ And how does the rest of that phrase go? ***“And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”***

From our time apart from our loved ones, both natural birth families and spiritual birth families... to the pain and suffering we see in our nation, and world... to the fears we can have about our own welfare... we know of the truth that we have, in the words of Acts, only ***‘allotted times of existence’***, and ***‘boundaries of places to live.’*** These earthly lives of ours have finite boundaries of time, location, and *understanding*. Why is it so important for us to come to grips with our own ‘limitations?’ ***“So that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being.”*** (Acts 17:27-28)

In these times when we can be so isolated from one another... either by ‘social distance’ or by these lovely ‘masks’ that we are wearing... may we KNOW that we are not to be isolated from the One who has promised NEVER to leave us nor forsake us. That God can see through those ‘masks’ that we wear... both physical and emotional... and knows JUST what you’re going through. That especially in these dark, unknown times, you and I are to search for God... grope for God... and we will find Him. Because ***“indeed he is not far from each one of us.”*** God is as close and plain ‘as the mask in front of your face.’ 😊

Confident of the truth that God is never far from each one of us... especially through, as I mentioned in Thursday’s devotional, the Holy Spirit, or the “present tense” of God... how do our lives bear witness to our belief that truly ***“In him we live and move and have our being”?*** **How will those modern-day ‘Greeks’ who worship an ‘unknown God’ come to KNOW the God that WE do?**

By living as those convicted of the words of Peter. For one, that ***“even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed.”*** Blessed that God is never far from you. ***“Do not fear... do not be intimidated.”*** (1 Peter 3:14) How? Because you cannot take a single step without God’s presence... the one in whom you live and breath, move and be still, laugh and cry. As you and I continue, every day, to ***“sanctify (‘make holy’) Christ as Lord in our hearts”***... no matter what very UN-holy, evil, scary things take place in our world, “Christ is Lord.” Our God and King is still on the throne. And our lives are to bear witness to the HOPE we have in

the 'past, present, and future tense' of our Triune God. The God who was, and is, and is to come. Unless we demonstrate that **hope**, that **confidence** that God can and WILL, in the words of Rom. 8:28, "***work all things together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose***"... unless people SEE in us a positive optimism for the future... how will we be able to fulfill that command of v. 15: "***Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.***" (1 Peter 3:15)

Rather than some deadly virus, what we need to be a 'carrier' of is the **contagious spirit of hope in Christ... one that brings LIFE, not death.** And for far too many, they have heightened 'immune systems' which make them 'resistant' to the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is up to us... empowered by the Holy Spirit... to share that 'bug' which does not weaken the body, but makes it stronger...

Earlier I mentioned my trip to the Middle East during my time in seminary. That period in my life was one of spiritual discernment, figuring out my sense of call. A time of moving from simply believing in the Christian religion to being ready to defend that belief system. It was a time in our lives that while not without its share of challenges, was in sum total the most rewarding experiences of our lives. In no small part because of the growth of RELATIONSHIPS. With family. Fellow students and colleagues. Most importantly, with GOD. That what we were doing there involved a 'higher calling' on our lives.

I challenge you to consider God's call on your life to grow in your relationship with Him, and with his children. You don't have to go to seminary. Or a small hill in Greece. You just need to be willing to step out in faith, and take risks, in sharing the reason for the hope that you have with someone who doesn't have that hope. Hope that is not just head and heart... but lips and hands. May we all grapple with the question 'Am I religious... or am I ready?'

**CHARGE/BENE:** "*I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. <sup>19</sup> In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. <sup>20</sup> On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.*

**Wherever we are, we are in God. Wherever we are, we are in Christ, and Christ is in us.**

**Wherever we are, the Spirit abides with us and in us.**

**We go forth in peace and hope, upheld by God in every way.**

**Let us go forth in faithfulness and trust.**

**May all see the Divine in and through us.**