

Easter 6 Year A  
May 17, 2020

In many ways, it was a place much like Southern California is today. With upwards of a quarter million residents, Athens Greece, in the time of St. Paul, was one of the largest cities in the world, a bustling community filled with people who had gathered from places near and far. Even in Paul's day, 2000 years ago now, Athens had already been around for at least 3000 years before that. So, if we think of Athens today as an ancient city, it would have been considered almost as ancient a city back then as well. Located along the coast of the warm waters of the Mediterranean Sea, and at the western end of the famed "Silk Road" – the trade routes connecting Europe with China and the rest of Asia, Athens stood at the world's cross-roads – attracting sailors and business people, soldiers and merchants and wanderers from every corner of the known world. The word "Medi-terranean" means "the middle of the earth – the center of the world." And Athens considered itself the center of the center.

In addition to being an ancient city, Athens, again like Southern California, was also known as one of the most progressive cities of its day as well. So, as these people from many different cultures immigrated to Athens, they brought with them their own religious customs and traditions. If there was a god to be worshiped, or a religious tenet to be espoused, or a theological claim to be made, you could be sure that there was a shrine or a temple or a statue or an altar somewhere in Athens dedicated to that cause. It's no surprise, then, that as Paul visited this great city, he came face-to-face with all of its complexity, all of its diversity. In the section of the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Book of Acts which immediately precedes the portion we heard as our first lesson today, we read of Paul arguing with the Jews in the synagogue,

and debating the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in the temples, and even discussion theology (as the 17<sup>th</sup> verse of the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter tells us) “in the market place every day with those who chanced to be there.”

It wasn't long, however, before all of this religious conversation attracted the attention of the city's leaders. And so, as our lesson began this morning, Paul had been brought to the Areopagus, a hill in the center of Athens, where the elite would gather each day to debate politics, and philosophy, and theology... so that he might state his case for Christianity to the brightest and the best that the city had to offer.

Do you know of someone who just seems to have the gift of gab... the kind of person who would be the perfect guest at a cocktail party, because they seem to be conversant in just about any subject that might come up... the natural-born silver-tongued salesperson who, as the old saying goes, could probably sell ice cubes to the Eskimos? Well, that's probably the kind of person Paul was. As you read the Book of Acts, you discover a man who is constantly talking his way into – and then out of – trouble at every turn. And so, when Paul stands before the city leaders at the Areopagus, we find him at his oratorical best.

Like any good public speaker, Paul starts out by buttering up his audience a little bit. “Good people of Athens,” he begins, “I see how extremely religious you are in every way.” Apparently, Paul believes, flattery will get you everywhere. In this world of infinite religious choices, Paul simply names the world as it is, placing himself firmly within the context in which he finds himself. Paul then goes on to say: “For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship (here's a man who understands the importance of paying attention), I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’” And it was

from that small observation... “To an unknown god”... that Paul built his case for embracing the Christian message and the Good News of God as found in the story of Jesus Christ.

Like the streets of Athens during the time of St. Paul, the streets of Los Angeles are littered with indications of the countless gods that are worshiped just within a one-mile radius of St. Alban’s. I’m not just talking about churches, though a quick Yelp search indicates that there are at least 20 within a one-mile circle of our congregation. I’m talking about all of the other gods that people worship around here as well. Situated as we are on the edge of the UCLA campus, in addition to all those houses of worship, there are psychic palm readers, and tattoo parlors, and places to buy Lotto tickets, and fancy high-end shops, and theatres, and gyms, and spas, and countless expensive restaurants. Every one of them has a come-on. Every one of them has an angle. Every one of them has something to sell... with only the cost of a chunk of your wallet, and a small piece of your heart, in return. None of those is inherently bad, I suppose. But all of them have the potential to become an altar or shrine for whatever god somebody happens to want to worship most dearly right at the moment.

What is it, do you think, that kept the Athenians – and keeps us, for that matter – on such a fruitless search for God in life? Why are we so consistently prone, in the words of a particularly bad country-western song to always be “looking for love in all the wrong places”? I think part of the reason – as the song suggests – is that we’re looking for God in the wrong place. To fill whatever emptiness we might find within, we’re always on a quest for the newest gadget, the newest wonder drug, the newest diet fad, the newest self-help book, the newest restaurant, the newest style of clothes, the newest car to drive – always believing

that there's something "out there" that can fix whatever's wrong "in here." But I've got to tell you, my friends, if you've got a hole in your soul the size of the Grand Canyon – and all of us do from time to time – the way to fill that hole isn't going to be found "out there." The way to fill that hole in your heart is to climb in to that hole, and to recognize the presence of God alongside you in that hole, and then to start filling that hole from the inside out.

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus says to his disciples: "I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever." That Advocate... that Holy Spirit... doesn't exist in some far-off place, playing celestial hide-and-seek with us in some kind of divine melodrama. That Spirit, as Jesus promised, will be with you forever... among you... within you... a part of you... as close to you as your next breath. Amidst all of the distractions of the world... all of the false gods calling to us from every quarter... all of those external attractions beckoning to us to find salvation in something "out there"... the promise of God is that we will not be alone, we will not be abandoned or orphaned or forsaken. For ours is not a God who lives in some remote, inaccessible, far-away corner of the cosmos. Ours is a God who is with us, among us, within us. That is the Good News which Paul brought to the people of Athens. And that is the same Good News which Paul brings to us, and invites us to bring to others, today and every day.

Amen.