

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Easter 6 – May 26th and 29th, 2011

Acts 17:22-31

“Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. 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.’ “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.”

Dear Friends in Christ,

Would you have come here today if the sign outside said, “The Church of the Unknown God”? Isn't church where we are supposed to learn more about God? Really, how could anyone worship or serve a God that they did not know? Yet, this is exactly what Paul encountered in the city of Athens. Athens was a Gentile city. They had very little knowledge about who the true God was. They did not have the Law of Moses. They had not witnessed many of God's mighty works. Such was the case for many who lived throughout the Old Testament.

Today, we want to consider God's revelation of himself in the Old Testament, especially as we see how Paul preaches and encourages the people of Athens, and us too, to:

Theme: Worship The Known God!

- 1. He reveals himself to us**
- 2. He saves us from our sins**

Could there really be people who are religious, yet don't know what or whom they worship? Look all around you. Do you have neighbors who are kind and helpful, yet do not worship Jesus? Do you have relatives who live according to the same set of morals and values as you do, yet have never confessed their faith in the one true Triune God? Don't be surprised if you do or that you will someday have such neighbors or relatives. So, what do you do about it? Paul's example and speech in today's text gives us good insight as to how to deal with such unbelievers. First, know for yourself who God is!

For Paul, this revelation came by means of a miraculous conversion on the way to Damascus as he intended to persecute Jesus by persecuting Jesus' followers. Instead, Paul heard the words of Jesus, was filled with the Holy Spirit, was baptized, and began to preach and teach about the life and love of Jesus. Paul was instructed and inspired by the Old Testament Scriptures and the followers of Jesus to know of Jesus as the Christ and to believe in him as his Savior!

We, too, need to know who God is if we are going to be able to show him to others. What do you know about God? What do you need to know about God? How much do we need to know about him? If you know

him as your Savior God, and believe in him for your forgiveness, you know him well enough, but the better we know him, the better we can share him with others so they too can know him.

God reveals himself to us on the pages on his Holy Scriptures and we therefore do well to search through and study these words regularly. We learn in this book that God exists, which gives us answers for the atheist who asks us “who is your God?”. We learn that God is everywhere, but is not everything, which gives us answers for the pantheist or the Wiccan (who believe God is in all things). We learn that God is intolerant of sin and condemns those who remain in their sin through impenitence, which gives us answers for the antinomist (who denies the law of God). We learn that God is gracious, having forgiven us of all our sins and having fully secured our salvation, which gives us answers for the fatalist or the Muslim (who deny the love of God).

But, God has now revealed himself, and this is heart of Paul’s message. He says, **“Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.”** Even though they said that this God was unknown, Paul reminds them that God has revealed himself to all people in certain ways. It is true that they were Gentiles. It is true that they did not have God’s Law or his abiding presence. But, listen to what Paul says, **“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.”** Nature itself is a proclamation of God’s presence. Remember what you just sang in **Psalm 19, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.”** In nature, we see the power, wisdom, and existence of God.

In addition, God was once known to all people on earth. We hear, **“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.”** All people came from one man. There would be a seed of knowledge even among the heathen. True, this knowledge was limited, but what was its purpose? Again, listen to Paul, **“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.”** In Athens, they had certainly sought, but they had not found. For all their wisdom and culture, they had come up with only spiritual foolishness. How can the Creator be contained in temples? How can the creatures expect to capture an image of their Creator? Such is the foolishness of sin! So much had it hidden God from them! Clearly this would have to change.

Here is where Paul turns next. **Turn to the Known God and see how he saves us from our sin.** Let’s take a moment to consider what God’s Word tells us about reaching out with the message that has been revealed to us. A great place to start is with the creation of the world. We can share how the almighty hand of the Father is display in the creation of all things. We see light. We see water, land, and vegetation. We see the sun, moon, stars, and planets. We hear, **“He is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.”** God created all that there is. Notice also that it was perfect, as God himself said, **“God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.”**

So, what happened to that creation? Clearly, it is no longer perfect. So what happened next? The next big event that affected the whole world is the Fall. We think can talk about the serpent who is the Devil. We can talk about the temptation of Eve. We can talk about the sin of Adam, and reminds us of the curse that all creation bears. Sin entered the world, and it remains in the world. Such was the problem in Athens, in our culture, and in us. What a terrible curse it is!

And what was its cost? We can talk about the ark of Noah. It is the Flood. Again, an event that affected the whole world! It was the result of the great wickedness wrought by sinful people. We hear, **“The LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time...So the LORD said, ‘I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth.’”** Yet in his grace, God preserved his creation and his people. Those flood waters saved Noah as Peter says. It was a clean start. All people on earth knew this God as Savior again. He was not hidden then, but it did not last. Now come back Paul’s message in Athens. He says, **“In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.”** Their consciences told them that all was not right. They knew that they were accountable to Someone greater. Everyone has a conscience which reminds them of guilt and sin, sin for which they are accountable. God said so in Eden. We saw such evidence in the Flood. The Athenians knew it, and we understand it too. Really everyone in the world knows it deep down in their soul.

Paul goes on, **“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.”** Judgment will come. The day has been set. Justice will be served. The judge has already been appointed. He was marked by his resurrection from the dead. Repentance is the only acceptable reaction. Turn away from sin. Turn to forgiveness. **Look to Known God!**

To be at peace, **sin must be dealt with.** But how? You can almost hear the next words out of Paul’s mouth, but he was cut off. Most laughed at the resurrection. Some wanted to hear more. A few believed, but sadly this ended Paul’s sermon at the Areopagus. Paul was about to share with them the answer to sin, death, and hell. The answer is Jesus. He was put to death to pay for sin. He was the one who was raised from the dead. He was the only way to peace with God. He was the only one who makes the unknown knowable to sinful people. He is the reality to the Old Testament shadows. He was the one appointed to judge.

But, the one chosen to judge is also your defense attorney. He was present at creation. He was the one who would crush the serpent’s head. He is the basis of God’s promise that is tied with a rainbow, **“Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between [me] and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.”** How sad that they only got a little taste of this answer in Athens! But you know the whole story! God is not unknown to you. You see his face in Jesus. You know his love from the cross. You live under the umbrella of God’s promise. What a blessing to **look to the Known God, knowing that you know him because he revealed himself to you and he knew you well enough to save you from our sins.** Amen