

When an Unknown God was Revealed

A message by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
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- Scripture: Acts 17:22-31 Good News Translation ²² Paul stood up in front of the city council and said, “I see that in every way you Athenians are very religious. ²³ For as I walked through your city and looked at the places where you worship, I found an altar on which is written, ‘To an Unknown God.’ That which you worship, then, even though you do not know it, is what I now proclaim to you. ²⁴ God, who made the world and everything in it, is Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples made by human hands. ²⁵ Nor does he need anything that we can supply by working for him, since it is he himself who gives life and breath and everything else to everyone. ²⁶ From one human being he created all races of people and made them live throughout the whole earth. He himself fixed beforehand the exact times and the limits of the places where they would live. ²⁷ He did this so that they would look for him, and perhaps find him as they felt around for him. Yet God is actually not far from any one of us; ²⁸ as someone has said, ‘In him we live and move and exist.’ It is as some of your poets have said, ‘We too are his children.’ ²⁹ Since we are God's children, we should not suppose that his nature is anything like an image of gold or silver or stone, shaped by human art and skill. ³⁰ God has overlooked the times when people did not know him, but now he commands all of them everywhere to turn away from their evil ways. ³¹ For he has fixed a day in which he will judge the whole world with justice by means of a man he has chosen. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising that man from death!”

Whether or not you consider yourself a religious person, I bet that you are searching to discover what truly gives meaning to your life. In our lives we find many attractions and distractions that vie for our attention and allegiance. What thing or things in your life seem to demand your loyalty and consume your time and energy and resources?

For some, their lives are dominated by the pursuit of beauty and youthfulness and health. They hope that, just perhaps, this piece of exercise equipment or that new facial treatment or another new concoction of dietary supplements will hold off the arthritis and wrinkles and gray hair just a little longer.

For others, what consumes them is technology: having the smartest phone to be connected to all the essential apps to stay as current as possible on those trending topics that are creating the most buzz. Some seem to worship technology.

Other people worship at the altars of busyness – the busier they are, the more useful or important they feel. People who thrive on being busy are feeling particularly out of sorts these days because so many work and school and recreational and social and religious activities have been cancelled.

Foodies are consumed by what they like to consume. Others are swept up in creating the picture-perfect home through decoration or renovation. And of course, there's always the desire for money and the desire for more money – striving to attain wealth can preoccupy a person.

Those pursuits or obsessions can demand your attention and energy and resources. They can keep you pretty busy if you let them. But as much attention as we may give them, they don't satisfy us ultimately. They don't answer our unspoken

yearning to know why we're here. Though it might seem that we bow at the altars of youthfulness or busyness or connectedness, or culinary skill or interior design or accumulation of wealth, in the end they are just false gods.

Today's story from the biblical book called The Acts of the Apostles contains a clever and fascinating "twist." The apostle Paul was on his second of three "missionary journeys" through the lands of the eastern Mediterranean. It was around the year 49 A.D. that his preaching and church-founding tour brought him to Athens. Though Corinth had replaced Athens as the political capital of the region by this time, Athens was still a center of commerce, culture and education.

The book of Acts states that Paul engaged folks in discussions in the local synagogue and in the public square. The Athenians had a reputation for philosophical curiosity, always being interested in the latest thought or fashion or trend. Paul's talk about Jesus and the resurrection was sometimes misunderstood: the Greek word for resurrection sounded like a woman's name, so the Athenians thought Paul was talking about some new god and goddess. People encouraged Paul to bring his discussion to the Areopagus, Athens' most important public forum.

So there was Paul, in the big city filled with shrines and temples dedicated to the favorite gods of the Greek people:

There was Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Statues of her would be placed throughout the city, and residents would walk by and worship [and] pray to her.... There was Poseidon, god of the sea. When men traveled on ships, they prayed to Poseidon for safe passage. When the sea became violent, they cried out to Poseidon to save them. There was Apollo, the sun god. Every morning when the sun rose, the people turned to it and worshipped. Gold images that reflected the sun's brilliance surely dotted Athens and called the people to prayer. There was Hermes, the god of flight; Ares, the god of war, and Zeus, the king of the gods, the god of the sky, the god of thunder, the god of lightning.¹

And now Paul had been invited to address the Athenians, a people accustomed to worshipping a whole list of deities. Paul was asked to tell the people of Athens about Jesus the Son of God. In a complimentary tone he addressed the locals. "I see that in every way you Athenians are very religious...." That's how he began, probably nodding toward some of the nearby temples and shrines. Then he said, "As I walked through your city and looked at the places where you worship, I found an altar on which it is written, 'To an Unknown God.'"²

Yes, the Greeks had a long list of gods and goddesses who they acknowledged with offerings and prayers, with sculptures and shrines. Gods and goddesses for just about every aspect of life, it would seem. But just in case they had unintentionally overlooked one, the Athenians didn't want to incur the wrath of a neglected deity. So just to be safe, there was an altar with the dedicatory inscription reading, "To an Unknown God."

¹ <https://sermonwriter.com/sermons/new-testament-acts-1722-31-see-extremely-religious-molin/>

² Acts 17:23a Good News Translation

And here's how the apostle Paul twisted that point to his benefit. Knowing that the Athenians were always in search of novelty and the latest trends, Paul gestured toward the shrine to the Unknown God and said, "That which you worship, then, even though you do not know it, is what I now proclaim to you."³

Then, to the curious, inquisitive, sometimes skeptical Athenians Paul laid out his five-point argument for why they should place their trust in God the Father and the Son Jesus Christ.

First, Paul reminded them that obviously we certainly didn't make ourselves. No, the God of heaven and Earth created everything and everyone.

Second, the powerful God of Creation isn't dependent on anything we make. God doesn't *need* our temples and shrines and idols and offerings and prayers. God doesn't depend on us.

Third, Paul said, God is not far from us. That was a revolutionary concept: rather than believing that God is ensconced in some high, far-off temple, God has taken up residence right within us, in the human heart.

Fourth, Paul assured the Athenians that God *wants* to be sought after and *wants* to be found.

And fifth, God revealed God's own self, God's own nature, in the Son Jesus Christ. Paul asked how we can be sure that Jesus is the unmatched embodiment of God? Because of the unprecedented act of God raising Jesus from earthly death to everlasting life for our sake.

What had been unknown to the Athenians was made apparent by the testimony of the apostle Paul. Though they searched for life's meaning through a network of gods, Paul shared the good news of the Creator of Heaven and Earth, the God of everyone and everything, who had come to earth – who had come among us – in Jesus of Nazareth.

In our day we may fill our lives with the pursuit of the perfect home or perfect souffle, the accumulation of technology or riches or connections. But none of that satisfies our deepest yearning for meaning, for relationship, for assurance that we are not the end but that we can look to a power greater than ourselves.

What gives meaning to our lives is not the things we have. It is the God of Heaven and Earth who created us and all that is. The meaning of our lives is found in the incarnation of God's love in Jesus of Nazareth. The meaning of our lives is made clear in the life and ministry, the death and resurrection of Jesus our Master.

In obedience to his Divine and Holy Parent, Jesus calls us to lives based on love – unconditional love, generous love. The world will know we are Christians by our love. And it is in the love we show and share that our God is made known to all.

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³ Acts 17:23b Good News Translation