



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Known Mystery”

Acts 17:22-31

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Today’s text comes from Acts 17 and it occurs in Athens.

Paul has been brought here from Beroea, fleeing from place to place to escape violent opposition. Now in Athens, Paul has been debating in the synagogue and the marketplace.

The Athenians, being a curious bunch, took Paul to the Areopagus because they wanted to learn more about the strange teaching he was arguing, and to let their leading council hear as well. Listen to Paul’s argument and listen for God’s word...Acts 17:22-31

²² Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely spiritual you are in every way. ²³ For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ 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, ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ From one ancestor he made all peoples to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷ so that they would search for God and perhaps fumble about for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸ For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said,



'For we, too, are his offspring.'

²⁹ "Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰ While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

The gospel, really the whole of scripture, is heard differently in every context it is shared. That is because the gospel is, as Matt Skinner puts it, "always enfleshed in some way—linguistically, culturally, personally. How would we understand it, or recognize it as good news for us, if it weren't?"¹

This is an inescapable reality. The gospel is wrapped in culture and context; I am not saying the gospel is warped by culture, but rather that its enfleshed so that people can hear and understand it. And that is exactly the gospel Paul preaches in his speech: an enfleshed gospel.

In his Areopagus speech, Paul elicits the help from Greek poets and formulates his preaching using cultural cues to ensure that his message is heard.

Many scholars wonder why Luke, the gospel writer who authored Acts, even included this story. There is no explicit mention of Jesus by name, and this story runs the risk of blending the gospel with Athenian religion. But Paul, knowing his audience, had to be intentional in how he preached this "new teaching."

So, today, I will try this as well. With us confirming two young men and celebrating the senior class of 2023, I find it fitting to read the passage again to them... in terms they may find more familiar...

I will be reading from the Gen Z translation...

So, the Apostle Paul was bouncing from town to town, dodging hands because he was throwing shade on idolatry. He landed in Athens, a real boujee place of sophistication. Idolatry was there too, so he clapped back and picked up some Ws in debates at church and malls. But thirsty for more knowledge, they took Paul to the CEOs of learning. Paul preaches again and listens to him cook: "Yo, Fam, listen up. Y'all on it up here in Athens. I mean, you got it going on... your worship is LIT, your hunger for knowledge is RAW, and your food is bussin'. But for real, all of your idols are mad cringe. I saw something super sus... one of your altars said "to an unknown God." I am here to tell you, God

¹ Commentary on Acts 17:22-31, written on May 29, 2011, for the online commentary *Working Preacher*



is known. No cap. The God who made everything, like the whole universe, the God I know, is the GOAT. Your own poets spilled the tea on this, and you sip it.

So, fam, we vibing? We finna touch grass? Look around. God is here. God is everywhere. God will never ghost you, even if you ghost God at times. And as the GOAT with the sauce, we need to pay attention, and hit that 180 on our lifestyle. Because there will be a time when we are judged by the one in the fam that was raised from the dead. On God.

Did you follow me? Maybe only a few of you...

If you didn't know some of those words, please just ask one of the confirmands or one of our seniors.

The idea that the gospel is enfolded, speaks not to gospel relevance, for the good news of the gospel (and scripture as a whole) is relevant in all time and place. It speaks to gospel resonance. Relevance is about content. Resonance is about reaction. The words of scripture, the words of the prophets, the words of Jesus, and the words of Paul still have relevance today. Resonance is an experience with those words. Resonance comes from the Latin word which means echo. Resonance is harmony. Much like when a tuning fork is struck, sound waves thrash around bouncing off molecules and matter, and if an identical tuning fork is nearby, it will begin to resonate at the same frequency.

Gospel Resonance then is how it hits you. Gospel resonance is how it touches that deep longing and yearning for truth and identity in this world. To use another Gen Z word... it is literally about vibin' with one another.

Just as it was in Athens, we live in a world that bombards us with different ideas and beliefs, various shrines that become idols of worship. However, this only leaves us searching for truth. This longing for truth is a good thing. Just as Paul tells the Athenians, God created all people, so that they may seek after God, "fumble" to find God. This seeking is the first step in finding truth.

"seek ye first, the kingdom of God"

Seniors, as you begin the next chapter of your lives, as you seek out fulfillment and identity, you will encounter many idols, many beliefs, and many perspectives on life and faith. Confirmands, you will make a promise today that you will continue to seek after God. Perhaps you may even feel like you are seeking after an unknown God at times (I feel like that too sometimes).

And as much as God may feel unknown at times, God has revealed God's self to us. Paul acknowledged the Athenians recognition of the divine in the created order, and we too can see God's fingerprints all around us.



At the end of the confirmation year, each confirmand presents a Creative Faith Project to Session during their examination. The creative faith project allows our students the opportunity to show how the gospel, how God, resonates with them in their lives. Some talk about sports, or family, or do a fun project. But others express connection through nature: I see God in sunsets as a reminder of God's everlasting promise of life; I feel God when I am running because with each breath I take I am being filled with God's Spirit which gifts me the ability to move; I feel closer to God at the beach, because as the waves constantly crash on the shore I know God's constant love for me.

And the psalmist claims, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the sky proclaims God's handiwork." This is natural revelation, God's revealed self in and through creation, which is accessible to and understood by all people. Such revelation points to what is beyond creation... the Creator.

You see, *fam*, God is not an unknown God. God is all around us. Revealing Godself to us through creation, from the beginning of time to now.

But if we stop there, then we only perceive a general idea of who God is. We may even perceive God only in the way we perceive creation (ordered, rhythmic, wonderful, predictable). But God revealed Godself to us and confronted all order and logic we thought we could depend on.

This is the move Paul makes to set his proclamation apart, to set the gospel he preaches and the God he knows apart from all the gods in Athens.

God has appointed a day in which judgement comes through a man God has raised from the dead.

Paul presents the Gospel as the answer to Athenian spiritual yearnings. Paul shows how God is revealed through natural signs, while simultaneously challenges their worldview with the scandalous notion of resurrection.

Greek philosophy viewed the body as inherently inferior, so resurrection was a shocking new idea. Yet, resurrection is the assurance, a sure and certain hope in the face of despair.

Beloved, in the Apostle's Creed we proclaim, "we believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting."

Embrace the scandalous idea of eternal life, the scandalous idea that grace is more powerful than guilt, and that love has once and for all conquered death in Jesus Christ. And let us not be afraid to question, to explore, to challenge and be challenged, and to seek after God, the Creator God who is revealed in creation, a God who invites us into relationship, who wants us to seek after what our hearts most long for.



Remember, God is never far from each one of us. That is the source of hope that carries us through the darkness we face, so that we may walk in the light of truth, love, and grace. Amen.

