

October 6, 2024  
As You Are Going: Proclaiming the “Unknown God”  
Acts 17:16-34  
Vernon Advent Christian Church

Thank for calling me as your Pastor. Continue to pray from me and my family as we transition into this roll and for Pastor Bruce and Andi as this is a transition for them as well as after nearly 40 years of ministry here.

Many of you know that Kathleen, Anna and I joined with the rest of her family for our big family vacation we do every couple of years. [Share story]

As I’ve been thinking about this all week these two thoughts have crossed my mind as I prepared for this message: 1) How often we as Christian’s like to be comfortable and stay up in our safe houses on the mountain tops, spiritually speaking, without any awareness or concern for those caught in the devastation below. 2) And secondly as I thought about the warning sirens were going off all night long warning people that danger was ahead, as unbelievers, how many warnings do you need before its too late to be rescued?

The truth is, as believers, God didn’t leave us stranded without hope but instead loved us so much that he sent his own Son on a rescue mission to save us. Jesus could have stayed in the perfect paradise of heaven, but he didn’t. Instead, he entered the brokenness of our world and suffered the death we deserved to rescue us from our sins. And he now calls us, those who have put our faith and trust in him, to join him in his rescue mission and shape our lives around helping others escape from the desperate situation that we ourselves were once in by sharing the good news of the gospel with them. That’s what our theme has been about all year, living our lives on mission. Hopefully we have a heart to do that.

In our passage today, we see Paul doing this very thing in the city of Athens. And as we look these verses together, we see how to engage and proclaim and make known the “Unknown God” to the culture around us. If you are able, please stand with me as I read the word of God from Acts 17:16-34.

As we work our way through the book of Acts we pick up the story here in ch. 17, where Paul has arrived in Athens after being run out of the previous cities he visited by an angry mob of Jews who had followed after him. His friends, and ministry partners, Silas and Timothy, were left in the city of Berea and so Paul was waiting for them in Athens. Athens, of course, had the reputation as the intellectual and philosophical center of the world and it was most likely Paul’s first visit. In addition, the city also boasted a lot of magnificent architecture including the Parthenon on top of Mars Hill and numerous other pagan temples. That also means, of course, that idolatry was everywhere in the city. In fact, scholars tell us that in the first century there were three times as many statues of their various gods in Athens then there were people.

So we probably shouldn’t be surprised at what we read in verse 16. Notice that word “provoked.” It was unsettling for Paul to see the lostness of that city and how far people were from the one true God. Paul was grieved, that’s what the word literally means, grieved to the point of action or doing something about it. And I think we would do well to pause here and ask ourselves whether we, who are Christians, have that same compassion for those who are far from God. As we look around us and see the brokenness of the world in which we live and how far people have strayed away from God, are we grieved? Are you grieved? Does your heart ache for

those without Christ? Do we have a genuine burden for them to the point that we're willing to enter the flood waters, as it were, to rescue them by engaging them with the gospel?

The question becomes, how we can do that most effectively. We live in an increasingly post-Christian culture that's operating on the basis of a worldview that differs from ours in the most fundamental ways. So how can we engage the culture we live in with the gospel effectively? Where do we even start? Well, I'd like to suggest, as many others have, Paul's approach to the Athenians here in our text as a great example of how to do so. And I see four things Paul did in his approach to the Athenians that I believe deserve our attention and that I'd like to focus on as we walk through this passage.

First, as Paul sought to engage the people of Athens, he went to where they were. Look at verses 17-21. So notice in verse 17 how Paul didn't just go to the synagogue in order to reason with the Jews. He also made daily trips to the marketplace in order to engage the pagan philosophers who were there. Having been "provoked," or grieved, by the idolatry of the city, Paul went to the place where the idolators were. He didn't just stay in the synagogue with his fellow Jews where he would have been more comfortable debating the OT Scriptures with them but instead went to the secular marketplace and made that his base of operations. And as a direct result of his actions, he was invited to speak with them in one of their most sacred spaces, on top of Mars Hill where the Parthenon was located.

So, let me ask you, again those of you who are Christians, how often are you around non-Christians in a context where you have opportunities to talk with them in a meaningful way? Here in these verses, we see Paul not only desiring to see people embrace the gospel but also going to where they were in order to take the gospel to them. And it was only then that he was invited in to speak because they genuinely wanted to hear what he had to say. It's about building relationships with people. Are you doing the same?

If we want to be faithful to living our lives on mission, we have to first meet people where they are, just as we see Paul doing here in these verses, and start getting to know them and building relationships with them. Pray that God would open your eyes to these opportunities. There are probably more of them than you might think.

Then, secondly, not only did Paul go to where the Athenian philosophers were, he also established a point of connection with them. Look at verses 22-23. So, Paul remembers an altar he saw that was dedicated to "the unknown god." Apparently, the Athenians were aware that even though they had statues and idols dedicated to various gods, they still might have missed one. So, not wanting to offend this unknown god, they made sure they had an altar designated for him, her or it, whatever the case may be. And that's what Paul uses as a way of connecting with them. He basically tells them, "Look, I see that you all are very religious, and I saw your altar to 'the unknown god.' So, since you don't know him yet, let me tell you about him." Paul establishes common ground with those he's seeking to reach.

Now you'll recall that as we have made our way through this book, that Paul, as he traveled, always went to the Jewish synagogues to preach the gospel first and then went out to the Gentiles. But here, you notice, he engaged the Jews much differently than he does these pagan philosophers in Athens. Paul already had plenty of common ground with the Jews, most notably, the Old Testament scriptures. With Jewish audiences, Paul went straight to the scriptures and demonstrated how Jesus is the one who fulfilled all of the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah. But now that he's in Athens and engaging with pagan philosophers, he changes things up a bit and uses a different tactic if you will, by quoting from their own poets, and not

scripture, to make his points. And yet, it's still the same basic approach of establishing common ground and a point of connection with his audience.

And I'll just say that for us today, our society is much more like the Athenian marketplace than the Jewish synagogue. There was a day, not too long ago, when even though most people may not have been genuine believers, they still held to a basic Christian worldview, kind of like the Jews Paul encountered in the synagogues. There was already a lot of common ground there. But that's not really the context in which we find ourselves now. Our society is quickly becoming more and more like Athens which means that we might need to rethink some of the ways we approach people. That begins with us identifying some of the prevailing beliefs and values and desires of our culture.

For example, one desire that's behind a lot of what we see in our society today is the desire for freedom. People want to be free to be themselves and express themselves in virtually every area, even in areas such as gender and sexuality. "You do you" is the rallying cry of our day. But I would argue that this desire for freedom is a point of connection that we have an opportunity to use. We can acknowledge that we all have a basic desire for freedom but our mission is to help people see how they're going about it the wrong way because we come to understand that so much of what people today view as "freedom" is actually slavery to our own sinful desires. The things we think will make us happy so often end up making us miserable. And ultimately, they lead us down a path that will only lead to our destruction. That's not freedom, it's bondage.

Yet true freedom can be found only in Jesus. The Bible says that, through his death on the cross, Jesus paid the price to redeem us from our sins. That word "redeem" means simply to "buy back." And that's what Jesus has done for us. Through his death on the cross, Jesus set us free by paying the redemption price and bought us back so that we'd no longer be slaves to sin but would now be free to live as we were always meant to live. That's what true freedom looks like.

Another example of a point of connection, involves the feeling that many people have, especially these past couple of years, that this world is spinning out of control. We can all agree that something is wrong with the world and that things are not how they should be. We might not agree on what that something is, but we share this prevailing thought, or in some cases fear, with most people. The world is a scary place and we, as believers, have the only answer for those who are seeking hope and peace.

And what answer do we have? Jesus! In the midst of a world that's constantly changing, Heb. 13:8 tells us that "*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.*" In a world where everything seems to be falling apart, we're told in Col. 1:17 that "*in Jesus all things hold together.*" In a world where so much of what we hear and read in the media can't be trusted, Jesus says of himself in John 14:6, "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life.*" Jesus is the rock upon which we can build our lives. What a comfort, what a blessing, and what an opportunity to share these truths with the people who need the message of hope that we have to share.

Then, moving on in our passage, we see not only how Paul went to where people were at and how he established a point of connection with them, but also a third thing that he did was he started at the beginning. Look at verses 24-28.

Now, there's a lot in these verses, enough for a whole sermon probably, but the main thing I'd like us to see is that Paul understands that he has to start at the very beginning with his audience. He starts with the fact that the one true God, the God of the Bible, "*made the world and everything in it*" and the fact that he's therefore the "*Lord of heaven and earth.*" Paul then further explains God's nature as the only self-sufficient being who doesn't live in temples made

by man and isn't served by human hands. Paul then points out how God created humans and has sovereignly guided the human race in every way since its creation.

Today, I believe we're at the point in our society where those are the kinds of things that we also have to start with, in many cases. If we're having a conversation with someone that begins to go in a spiritual direction and we immediately start talking about how they need to be "saved," that might be okay if they have a strong church background. But if they don't, they're probably not going to have a clue what we're talking about. "Saved from what?" And even if we start talking about sin, they might not even be as familiar with that as we might think they would be. "What is sin? Why is it so bad? Why is it not okay for us to just decide for ourselves what moral standards we ought to follow?" These are the questions that many people are wondering about. [TG Ayers story]

So, really, in many cases, it's best for us to start at the very beginning with the fact that a personal and all-powerful God created the world, including us, and therefore deserves our allegiance. That's the starting point. We really can't assume that people know even the most fundamental aspects of biblical teaching. Kind of like, when you're building a house, you have to start with the foundation. That's what we have to do as we seek to engage people in a thoughtful and relevant way.

The final aspect of Paul's approach that we see in this passage is that he gave a clear call for repentance. Look at verses 29-31. It would be a mistake to think that connecting with people and being relevant to our culture means that we never say anything controversial or potentially offensive. Sadly, that's the direction a lot of churches and many Christians have taken. But, we can see here that that's not the direction Paul took. He tells these philosophers straight up that some of their most fundamental beliefs are totally wrong. He refers to the idolatrous statues that fill the city as products of human "imagination" and describes the worship of such idols as "ignorance." Then, he makes his call to repentance clear in vs. 30. He says that God "*commands all people everywhere to repent.*" Repenting means agreeing with God that what he calls sin is sin and then turning from it, which in this case, would include turning from both sinful behaviors and wrong beliefs. This is just like the sirens that were going off the night of the Hurricane around the lake. Each one, a warning, a call to get out and reach the safety of higher ground. Some of you here today, who have not yet yielded your life to Christ, need to hear this call to repentance once again. Repent of your sin and come into the safe keeping of your loving Father through faith in his Son Jesus before it is too late. Pastor Bruce and I would love to talk to you more about this if God is speaking to you today and calling you to repentance and to yield your life to him.

Well, if that wasn't enough to offend them, then Paul shares with them what turns out to be the most offensive teaching of all, that God rose Jesus from the dead. The reason they found this so offensive is because in classical Greek thought, it was believed that all physical matter, i.e., the body, was bad and evil and therefore they couldn't fathom a bodily resurrection. And it seems that this is where they cut off the conversation because it was too much for them to bare.

You see, there comes a point in every conversation where we have the opportunity to share Jesus with someone that things can become uncomfortable where we really have to take a risk and step out in faith and share with people things that may be offensive to them. There's just no way around it. Sharing the gospel involves the uncomfortable task of calling people to repentance from both sinful behaviors and wrong beliefs. Yes, we are seeking to reach out to people and meeting them where they are and finding common ground with them, but we're also

calling them to repentance and to something better. We can't miss this part, for without a call to repentance, where just having nice conversations with people that have no eternal value.

In the last few verses we see, and many of us know from experience, that sharing Jesus with people is, in most cases, is a journey. Yes, there were some who immediately embraced the gospel like Dionysius and Damaris, and that may happen for you, and praise the Lord when it does. And, of course, there were also some who, right away mocked Paul and rejected the gospel, and that will happen to us as well. But there were also others who needed more time and told Paul, "*We will hear you again about this.*"

And as we come to a close, I'd like to focus on the ones who needed more time. The further away from a biblical worldview someone is, the more time it often takes them to embrace the gospel. Seeing someone come to faith who's immersed in our secular, postmodern culture will usually require a lot more time and effort and patience than someone who grew up in church and already has a lot of the basic building blocks of a biblical worldview. And that's okay.

Remember what 1 Corinthians 1:18 says, "For the word of the cross is folly, or foolishness, to those who are perishing..." But don't give up on people. For that verse continues to say, "...but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." In some situations, it may be months or even years before those you're seeking to reach will finally embrace the gospel. But keep on meeting them where they are, keep on seeking ways to establish points of connection with them, always point them back to the beginning to an all-loving God who created them in his image and loved them enough to die for them and when the time is right, call them to repentance and trust God to do the work in their lives that only he can do.

So, as Paul was going and found himself in Athens proclaiming the "Unknown God" to a group of philosophers, as we are going, may we be a church on mission continually proclaiming this same God to those whom He places in our path. Let's pray and prepare our hearts for the Lord's Supper.