

Tell the Story
Acts 17:16-34
John 1:14-18

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Pastor Doug Browne
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Acts 17:16-31

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, “What does this babbling man want to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.” (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.” Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 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. 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, 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. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. 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.’ 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. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 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.”

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, “We will hear you again about this.” At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

John 1:14-18

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, ‘This was he of whom I said, “He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.”’). From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.

In our reading from Acts this morning, Paul tells the story of Jesus Christ without any reference to the Hebrew Scriptures. It's not because he doesn't know the Hebrew Scriptures. Paul is a Pharisee and an expert in the Law.¹ Earlier in Acts, when Paul is speaking to the members of a synagogue, he starts in Genesis and walks his way through the Scriptures all the way up to and including the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.² But here in Athens, when he is speaking with people who don't know the Hebrew Scriptures, he starts with what they do know.

The ordinary people of Athens are what we would call pagans. They worship the Greek and Roman gods, the ones we learned about in school as Greek and Roman mythology.

The philosophers who are mentioned are Epicureans and Stoics. We still have both Epicureans and Stoics today, so it might be good to have an idea what those words mean. I'm going to summarize a few centuries of philosophical thought in a few minutes here, so, you philosophy majors out there, please forgive me if I skim over some nuances.

Both Epicureans and Stoics believed that there is no afterlife, or, at least, that we can't know whether there is, so we might as well live as if this life is all there is. Where they differed was in what to do about that.

We hear the word, "Epicurean" sometimes, in descriptions of wine tastings and very fancy restaurant meals and cruises. The Epicureans' response to the idea of no afterlife was to "eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die." They believed that there was really no purpose to life other than eating the best foods, drinking the best wine, and otherwise enjoying life as much as possible.

Does anyone here know someone who lives this way?

¹ Philippians 3:4-6.

² Acts 13, 17:2-4.

I suspect that we all do.

The Stoics had a different response. The Stoics believed that it was not possible for human beings to really understand the force that created the Universe. They believed that religion was merely a useful tool for rulers who wanted to control the people.

Has anybody out there heard that line before? I know I have.

At the same time, the Stoics believed that it was the purpose of life, and every person's duty, to align yourself with that Creator, and to live the most virtuous life that you could, given your circumstances. A Caesar would live his life in a larger sphere than would a household slave, but that did not let the slave off the hook to be the best slave that he or she could.

The Stoics weren't able to point to divine authority about exactly what a virtuous life was, though, because, of course, they had said it was impossible to understand God. That meant they had to reason from saying that "everybody knows that..."

The Stoics believed in Fate, but not in any kind of personal being controlling it. Fate, they believed, was an impersonal, uncaring force in the Universe.³ They tried to accept the world as it was, without complaining or wishing that it were any different. They stressed mastering yourself and controlling your emotions and your reactions to the world, rather than the allowing the world or your reactions to control you. This is the sense in which we use the word "stoic," today.

Do any of us know anyone who lives this way today?

I suspect that we all do. Any number of motivational speakers preach this message. It is Stoicism.

³ "Fate is worse than unkind, it's uncaring,..." – Michael Longcor, *Building Fires*.

Paul starts with what the Greek pagans already know, or believe they do. He starts with their shrine dedicated, “To the unknown god.” He explains who this God is whom they don’t know, and he tells them about God. Paul is telling the same story that he told in the synagogue, but he’s using a different method of getting his story across.

Paul quotes Athenian poets to tell the Athenians that, “In him we live and move and have our being,” and that, “For we too are his offspring.” Paul knows something that I quoted here a few years ago, when we held a combined Christian-Baha’i funeral: “Truth is truth.”⁴ All truth comes from God. Now, a piece of Truth may, in a particular context, be mixed up with a whole bunch of nonsense, but that doesn’t make that kernel of Truth false. Every major world religion, for example, tells its adherents to be kind to the weak. That truth is still true, whether it is a Presbyterian who says it, or a Jew, or a Muslim; a Catholic, a Hindu, or a Mormon.

Paul starts with the truth that his listeners already know, and then he expands on it, to get to the Truth that he wants to tell them, the Truth of Jesus Christ. He explains that God is far beyond anything that can really be depicted in gold or silver or stone. He explains that Jesus was killed, and that God resurrected him for us. He explains that Jesus taught people how to live, and he goes on to explain that Jesus’ resurrection applies to us, his followers.

Now, as you might expect, some of the people who heard this scoffed at Paul. I mean, for people who had spent a lot of time and effort convincing themselves that this life was all there was, the idea of resurrection was a lot to take. But some people listened. Some people came and

⁴ *Enemy Mine* (motion picture, 1985).

found Paul afterwards, and joined him, including a man named Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris.

Dionysius and Damaris and the others who came with them became the core of a new Christian church there in Athens. You may have heard of it. Two thousand years later, we call it the Greek Orthodox Church.

Cool story.

So what?

What on earth does this story mean for us, two thousand years and five thousand miles away? I mean, that's not quite "Long, long ago, in a galaxy far, far away," but it's close.

Well, it's like this.

As Christians, we are called to derive our identities, who we are at our core, from one simple truth. We are the beloved children of the Almighty God. There is literally nothing about any of us that is as important as that.

However, most of us have Epicureans in our lives. Many of us know people who don't believe in God, who don't believe that there is a purpose to life beyond enjoying it. Many of us may know people who claim to believe in God, but who live as though there is no purpose to life beyond enjoying the moment. That piece of human nature hasn't changed in two thousand years.

Many of us have Stoics in our lives. Many of us have people in our lives who are trying to be "good without God." Their struggle to master themselves and not to get carried away with

destructive emotions is a noble one, but they will never completely succeed. They are doomed to have the same trouble defining what “good without God,” looks like that the original Stoics did.

All of us have, frankly, pagans in our lives, people who derive who they are, their very identities, from things other than God, whether those things are flags, or previous experiences, or sports teams, or weapons, or tribal identities.

Paul shows us how to deal with these people.

First, Paul loves these people of Athens. He is new to the city, he’s not even Greek, but he loves these people. He wants them to have the amazing good news of Jesus Christ, the news that God loves them enough to come down here and live and die and be resurrected for them. He wants that enough that he’s willing to be embarrassed. He’s willing to face rejection. He’s willing to have them say insulting things like, “Who is this babbling?”

Then, Paul does not insist that they get everything all in one chunk. He doesn’t insist that they have to understand the intricacies of Leviticus and Hebraic law before they can come to Christ. He starts with what they already know and understand. He starts with their altar to the unknown god, and proceeds from there. He is not too proud to hijack Greek poetry and hymns that were originally written to the pagan Greek god Zeus. He grabs that little piece of Truth that is there in what they believe, and he expands on it.

Paul shares with them about what they have in common, and, yes, we have more in common with the people around us than we don’t. He tells them the story, the story of God and God’s people. He tells them his own story, the story of Saul and a blinding light and Christ’s forgiveness and the Apostle Paul. He tells them about God’s amazing grace to sinners.

Paul accepts that not everyone is going to take what he says to heart. Many of the people of Athens write him off as a foreign babbler. But some don't. Some become followers of Christ. Not followers of Paul, but followers of Christ. Dionysius and Damaris and the others whom they bring with them create a church there in Athens, and that church brings a lot more people to Christ.

The whole church-planting ministry of Paul follows this pattern. Paul tells stories. He tells THE Story. Some people listen, others don't. But those who do listen, those who take it to heart, make all the difference.

We all have opportunities to tell the story to people in our lives. We tell the story of what's important to us every day, by what we do and how we do it.

By how we deal with the other children of God around us.

This week, I urge you to, as Francis of Assisi said, "Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words."

AMEN.