

Acts 17:22-31

In today's reading from Acts we are following along with St. Paul's missionary journeys this Lent, and today places us in the context of ancient Greece, specifically in Athens at the Areopagus. Close your eyes for a moment and try to imagine the scene: The Areopagus functioned as a place of the elders, much like a Roman Senate, whose members primarily held some sort of high public office. And in and around the Areopagus there were a large group of philosophers just hanging around, talking philosophy. They were primarily Stoics and Epicureans, and they would get together to philosophize and debate with one another. The Scriptures tell us that these self-appointed philosophers, "did nothing but talk about and listen to the latest ideas." There are still some places that are a bit like this today - you may see it on college campuses or in and around Washington DC, but more often this kind of discourse happens online on social media. The people discussing are not necessarily there to discover an end point or Truth (with capital T). Rather, the discussions and debates, fascinating and engaging as they can be, can actually become an end in themselves. And this is what the culture was like at the Areopagus in ancient Greece.

So, Paul is just here, and he notices something in the courtyard where all the old statues of the Greek gods were placed. Paul sees a statue with an inscription that says, "To An Unknown God" and a light goes off in Paul's head. By having this statue to an unknown god, the Greeks were trying to cover all their bases... while they had a pantheon of gods to worship and revere, they figured there was always the possibility that maybe there's a god out there that they don't know about, another god that also deserves their worship. And it would be a shame if they left that god out... maybe that god was an important god. So, just in case, they made a statue to honor that god.

This Greek unknown god actually reminds of an ancient mummy I saw in London that was on display at the British Museum. This particular man, now a mummy, seemingly wasn't totally sure which god or which religion to follow so, he tried to cover all his bases and was buried with all kinds of various religious tokens, amulets, and symbols of many different gods and many different religions, he had Egyptian, pagan, Hebraic, you name it, religious

artifacts and symbols all in his coffin with him....you know, presumably just in case. It might sound funny to us...but I don't think our culture is so very different today. Many people are more hesitant than ever to join a particular faith tradition or commit to one, rather like the mummy-guy or even the ancient Athenians. How do we really know which one is right? Aren't they all "right" in their own way? We have so many unanswered questions. And with so much information out there, so many possibilities, the choices seem endless – and that in itself can be paralyzing.

As a reaction to this in our society, some people go the other extreme and become fundamentalist or absolutely adamant that only they have a corner on truth. This can lead to extremism – like the embrace of conspiracy theories and narrow concepts, because people want definitive answers in order to make them feel more in control and safe in the midst of so much uncertainty. People then divide into camps of almost opposing realities. This leads to the problem today, that Paul also faced, that Fr. Mark mentioned in his recent sermon, of a lack of a shared frame of reference- which is happening around the world and here in America.

Paul is trying to offer an alternative. Paul says in essence, that unknown God in your courtyard, can actually be known, is knowable, and has made himself known to us. That God is not only the one true living God and Creator of all of us but has done something really wonderful: God has made sure that those who seek after God can and will find God. Paul says, "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." In other words, God isn't hiding from us, God isn't out of sight or reach. God is here with us!

God is knowable. God is so knowable in fact that Paul says that it "is in him that we move and live and have our being." And here Paul is quoting an ancient Greek poet named Epimenides from Crete, demonstrating to the Greeks that their ancestors knew this truth long ago. God has been revealing God's self and God's Truth throughout the millennia, to people everywhere throughout time. But often the Athenians, like us, were too caught up either in endless questions resulting in total relativism or they

become hardened in their absolutism and extreme views, demonizing anyone who doesn't see it their way.

But Epimenides was spot on, as Paul describes. Theologian Paul Tillich describes God as "the ground of our very being." This concept of God as the ground of our very being is something that the mystics across religious traditions have described. And we Christians declare that God has become known to us in the most personal way possible: through God's Son in the Incarnation. And it is such an amazing fact, it is so incredible and wonderful and mysterious that we might even forget it or take it for granted.

I think it's also important to hear what Paul isn't saying in this story too. One of the things I love about the Episcopal Church is the fact that we are allowed and even encouraged to ask the hard questions, to search for the truth, and in that search, we are encouraged to bring the wisdom of diverse disciplines and opinions to the table. Not only do we engage the Bible and our faith tradition, but we are encouraged to engage everything from science to philosophy to other faiths and perspectives, using our God-given reason, believing that God and God's truth is knowable to us. As Anglicans we affirm that ALL truth is God's truth...and God's truth can be known and discovered everywhere. Science is not the enemy in this approach: and in fact, science can and has been a great ally: the first scientists were devout Christians: from Copernicus to Galileo to Kepler to Newton. Isaac Newton was in fact an Anglican and actually wrote more than a million words on the Bible and theological topics, more than he wrote on science, as an example.

So, notice that Paul, rather than rejecting Greek philosophy outright as we might expect him to do, actually incorporates it into his dialogue, giving it a place of honor and respect, and then affirms that the Greeks too are "God's offspring" - God's children with whom God cares deeply. I think this is a wonderful example of our baptismal vow to respect the dignity of every human being: no matter how different they may be from us. This particular story teaches us the value in dialogue that honors the dignity and the truth present in the "other" - in acknowledging the divine presence in those coming from a different

perspective and belief system from us. Some have said that this portion of Scripture even affirms the basis for all Christian inter-faith dialogue, which, as you may know, I'm a big fan of as the appointed Ecumenical and Interfaith Officer for our Diocese. The goal of this dialogue is building bridges and deeper understanding with one another...what if we did this as a society?

We can take this wonderful gift God has given us: the gift of being able to seek and find God- a God who is the Ground of our Being and who has been made known to us, and share that with others - not as a basis to exclude or deny the truth found in different perspectives and disciplines, but as a means to engage more deeply in understanding the Truth inherent in God's world and revealed to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We don't have to be either relativists or fundamentalists - we can proclaim Truth and recognize the Truth in others at the same time.

Paul apparently impressed the philosophers that day because they invited him back. They said, "We will hear from you again." I can't help but notice that they were also continuing to put off any decision about the truth that day, postponing it into the indefinite future. It's as if they were too enamored with the idea of contemplating their options with endless debate and dialogue.

So, what can we bring with us on our Lenten journeys from this story? Paul's philosophical discourse encourages us in faith to know that God has come to us personally and been made known to us. God is here, now, and God is the very ground of our being. God is knowable in our world. All we have to do is search for God in prayer- and listen for God in Scripture, in tradition, and in the wider world where God's truth is made known - being open to God's truth wherever it is made manifest, including honoring others with different perspectives. My friends, the unknown god has been made known to all of us - and may we all share in this amazing reality. Thanks be to God.