

A New Expectation Acts 17:22-31

INTRODUCTION

As you know, during these weeks that we have worshiped here in our Community Center I have begun my sermons by introducing you to a church in our denomination that worships every week in some type of temporary setting. We have learned about brothers and sisters in Christ in New York, Michigan, Minnesota and Ohio who worship in homes, hotels, community centers and even pizza parlors.

Today I want to introduce another congregation not far from here. They are Abundant Life Mission Fellowship, an NALC congregation that meets in a school building.

- They are led by pastor Robert Groenke Jr. His wife Vicki is an important part of the ministry as well. She plays the keyboard for their worship.
- They were established in 2011, shortly after our own denomination was started.
- For 12 years they have met every week in Brown Elementary School on Walker Road, worshipping at 10 a.m. with Sunday School at 9 a.m. Like many small congregations they cannot afford both a pastor and a mortgage.
- During the week they hold a Bible Study at Brown Township Hall, just down the street from the school.
- They focus on four different outreach missions:
 - Serving meals and providing health care supplies to the residents of a YMCA family shelter.
 - Contributing to the Hilliard Food Pantry's butter and eggs program.
 - Making gift bags each Christmas and Easter for the residents of nearby nursing home.
 - Supporting the international work of Water Missions International.

Each of the churches we have met during our time in this space has a different style and different programs than we have here at Grace, but as sister congregations in the NALC each of us worships the same God and we hold to the same core beliefs.

When we were in school we learned about the various gods of the Greeks and Romans. Those gods had names like:

- Apollo (god of light and music)
- Ares (god of war)
- Eros (god of love)
- Aphrodite (goddess of beauty)
- Athena (goddess of wisdom and the arts)
- Poseidon (god of the sea)
- Zeus (ruler of all the gods).

To us they were the figures of "mythology." Artists and sculptors have, over the years, put images on canvasses and carved them out of stone. Nothing more.

But in the days of the Apostle Paul, these gods were not fables or museum pieces. They were gods to be worshipped and feared. People prayed to them, sacrificed to them, and did all they could to maintain the favor of these gods.

Athens was an important city, even in the Apostle Paul's time. Among other things, it was considered to be the intellectual and philosophical capital of the world, a city filled with many different religions and with people who considered themselves to be very religious. As Paul walked around that city, he would have seen the statues, idols and temples erected to every known god known.

One scholar estimated that in the city of Athens, where the events described in today's first reading took place, that there were 20,000 named gods and many additional unnamed ones.

Six hundred years before (the events of Acts 17), a terrible pestilence had fallen on the city which nothing could halt. A Cretan poet, Epimenides, came forward with a plan. Under his guidance a large flock of sheep was let loose throughout the city. Wherever each sheep lay down it was sacrificed to the god of the nearest shrine. And whenever a sheep would lay down nowhere near the shrine of one of the named gods, an altar was built so that the sheep could be sacrificed to "The Unknown God."

Over time many new gods were "identified." But by the time described in today's text, there was still one – perhaps more -- unknown god remaining.

These Athenians were so concerned that there might be a god out there that they missed, and lest they offend him (or her), they erected an altar dedicated to "Agnostos Theos" (the Unknown). There were so many idols in Athens that Petronius, a member of Emperor Nero's inner circle once wrote:

It is easier to find a god in Athens than it is to find a man. (Petronius)

But with all their wisdom, with all their philosophy, with all their religions, they still didn't know the One True God. That is, until Paul arrived in Athens.

Paul had gone to Athens to escape a lynch mob that was looking for him in Berea. His plan was to wait there until Silas and Timothy could join him, and then they were planning to Corinth. While he waited, he grew more and more distressed by what he saw and heard from the citizens of this city. So, in true Paul fashion, he began to engage people in conversation.

One day he was invited to make a formal presentation to the gathering of the city's intellectuals at a place called Mars Hill, a gathering spot surrounded by idols. Paul began by saying:

I'd like to tell you about a god who is unknown to you. For you see, this is the God I know.

We can sum up what he told them in three statements:

Statement #1: God is the source of it all

In the audience that day were a group of people known as the Epicureans. They believed that there was no beginning, that matter always existed, that what we see around us was the result of the result of cosmic forces and evolutionary processes. They were the forerunners to “the big bang theory.” (The theory, not the TV show.)

There were also Stoics in the crowd. Stoics were “pantheists,” which means they believed that God was in everything (rocks, trees, water, etc.).

To these two groups, and to all the others gathered that day, Paul described a God:

...who made the world and everything in it ... and does not live in temples built by human hands. (Acts 17:24).

In other words, God made it all and none of it cannot contain Him.

Some in his audience called him a “babbling.” Others thought he was inventing some new foreign god.

Some of them asked “What is this babbling trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” (Acts 17:18)

But Paul wasn't deterred by their criticisms. Instead he told them that it wasn't necessary for them to consider God to be “unknown” anymore because

Statement #2: God wants to have a personal relationship with them

This was new, because in Greek mythology the gods kept a safe distance between themselves and us mere mortals. Humans, those gods believed, were nothing but trouble.

But Paul told them about a God who was always nearby, a God who wanted humans to seek Him, to reach out for Him, to find Him.

God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. (Acts 17:27)

This was the God Paul knew. This was the God who came to him on the road to Damascus and who spoke directly to him.

This unknown God, Paul told them, not only exists, but He wants come into a personal relationship with each and every person. This Almighty Creator of everything didn't just

make it all and then walk away from it! He seeks intimacy with all that He has created, right down to the smallest detail. I love the passage of Scripture that reads:

Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. (Luke 12:7)

Numbered! Imagine that! God knows me so well that He knows #86 got stuck in the comb today!

Can we stop here for just a minute? The fact that God knows you isn't just about numbered hair follicles. It means that God knows and cares about what is going on in your life right now:

- Those things that embarrass you, and that you hope no one ever discovers.
- Those things that worry you
- Those things that frighten you
- Your burdens, your hopes, your disappointments, your joys, your family, your loneliness, your diagnosis, your _____ (fill in the blank)

This so-called "unknown God" is near you. Let's just pause for a moment to let that sink in. (PAUSE)

That kind of relationship with God happens when ...

Statement #3: God calls us to a moment of decision

At this point in his speech Paul moves away from the standard rules of intellectual debate and dialogue. Up to this point he had been following the rules of logic and arguing from the perspectives of their own teachers and poets. But as he ends, he gives them a distinctly Christian dose of theology.

Paul tells his audience that not only did God create everything, not only does He invite humans to come to Him, He also raised Jesus from the dead. And what's more, this unknown God expects every human being to turn away from their sinful ways and prepare to stand before the final judgment.

In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. (Acts 17:30)

The God we worship isn't content for people to know **about** Him. He wants them to know Him and to follow Him and to worship Him and to conform their lives to His teachings. Even today, the world is interested in knowing about Jesus. Hollywood is even making movies about the stories of the Bible! People want to know ... but knowing about isn't enough.

You can listen to Christian radio, read Christian books, attend every Bible study in the city, but if all you are doing is gathering more information about Him, you aren't all that different from the Stoics and the Epicureans. God calls you to live differently because of what you know ... and He isn't offering any free passes!!

APPLICATION

There's one more thing I want to point out about this God I know ... This isn't found in something that Paul said, but it is reflected in what Paul did. And it is in Paul's action we find the NEW EXPECTATION for this new church that was being formed.

The Apostle Paul was well equipped to share the story of Jesus in this place – among the intellectuals of Athens. He had been trained by the best scholar in Jerusalem (Gamaliel). He knew how to craft a philosophical argument and how to counter objections. He was the right man for this moment.

- Peter would never have survived a conversation on Mars Hill. He wasn't trained for it and his personality would have gotten him stoned.

It occurs to me that every one of us has unique experiences and gifts that make us perfectly suited to share the good news of Jesus with someone or in some situation. Your experiences are different than mine. There are some audiences, some personality types that will easily listen to me. There are others that will turn me off before I ever get started.

I can picture Paul sitting in Athens, waiting for Silas and Timothy to arrive. I can see him pacing the floor, asking “Why am I here?” But as the text shows us, he was there because a city needed to know Jesus ... and he was the best one to share the story.

I want to encourage you to be aware of what God is doing in your life right now. I encourage you to look back over your life (at all things good and bad). God has led you through those moments so that you can be His witness at this moment. The people in your life, the circumstances and situation around you... God has equipped you for right now.

You may not be as eloquent as Paul, but think about it ... how many Epicureans do you know? In your conversations, in your relationships, in your casual encounters, see each one as specifically ordained by God and see yourself as perfectly prepared to serve Him in it. You will be amazed at the results. Trust me.

Amen.