

Every so often, within the Bible itself, there is a sermon—a whole sermon, not just something to be the topic of a sermon. That is the case with our Scripture lesson from the book of Acts.

Now this took place when Christianity was still pretty new. The situation was that Saint Paul, the great Christian missionary of the time, the one who wrote a great many of the books of the New Testament, had been left in the city of Athens, in Greece. He was to wait there for his co-workers, Silas and Timothy. This was right after all three of the missionaries had been very badly and even violently received, elsewhere. It was just time for them all to re-group and figure out what to do next.

It seems that Paul was not just a person to sit and wait—something we are all learning to do these days. So, Paul walked around the great city of Athens, the great and important city of Greece.

This was a place very big on philosophy and debate. The philosophies of the Epicureans and the Stoics are mentioned in this passage, and there were many others. It was also, as the Bible says, full of idols, carved statues and objects. Paul was “deeply distressed at this.” Other versions of the Bible put this as “outraged” and “deeply vexed.” All in all, he was not happy that this city was “a junkyard of idols.” (The Message version of the Bible)

Of course he wasn’t! Paul was a very dedicated, committed Christian man who had made spreading Christianity his life’s work. He was on his second missionary journey in the area around the Mediterranean Sea, at this time. And, here, in the place where he was staying, Athens, there were lots of false gods, pagan idols whom the Greek people back then worshipped!

So, this waiting period for Paul, became an opportunity for him to continue his missionary work, proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ, his teachings, his life, his death, and his resurrection.

Unfortunately, the people there misunderstood Paul. Their mindset, with all those pagan gods, led them to think that Jesus was just another such pagan god, and their own goddess Anastasis, the Greek goddess of resurrection, was being put forth.

As it turns out, “proclaiming new gods . . . was a capital offense in classical Athens. . .” (Storyteller’s Companion to the Bible, Acts)

That kind of surprised me, because my impression of all this is that the people of Athens liked having lots of gods and goddesses, so why not some more?

At any rate, the Greek people took Paul (with all these newfangled Christian ideas) to Mars Hill (also called the Areopagus). This was to give him an opportunity to present his ideas. They loved hearing new ideas: “Downtown Athens was a great place for gossip. There were always people hanging around, natives and tourists alike, waiting for the latest tidbit on most anything.” (Message)

So, Paul begins his sermon. “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.”

Hmm, what a clever way to get started, being complimentary and positive, rather than negative, and this from a person who was “deeply distressed” and “outraged.”

“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.”

An unknown god? How odd. It would be like calling it the “just-in-case- god.” (Storyteller’s)

So, not only did the city of Athens have statues and objects of the mythological, false gods and goddesses, they had this one altar (empty, I suppose) for a just-in-case, unknown, unseen god.

Apparently the Greeks were afraid of missing some deity, and therefore offending one. They were afraid of any and all the gods and goddesses.

If you are familiar with Greek mythology, you can understand this. The myths are great, entertaining stories, but the deities are not portrayed as kind, or steady, or loving, or relational to human beings. The Greek gods and goddesses were very jealous, and vindictive, very easily offended, and very quick to punish. The religion sometimes required human sacrifice.

So, since this is how they believed, the people of Athens did not want to take any chances. By all means, set up an altar, just in case.

Paul's sermon went on to explain that even though unknown to the people of Athens, even though this one could not be seen, he, Paul, did know this god.

This god, the one with no statue or object on the altar, this unseen being, was God Almighty, maker of all the universe.

Paul went on explaining, kindly and cleverly, that God is God. God is our Creator. God is not a statue made with "gold or silver or stone." God is not "an image formed by the art and imagination of" human beings.

To me, that is an excellent piece of logic, which should have impressed the dickens out of the Athenian people! Yes, people are able to create art and statues and all. But that is all they are, things made by human hands, not living beings, much less divine ones. Why would anyone want to worship such a thing?

Paul explained that not only had God created humanity, starting out with Adam, through whom the world was populated. God had also sent Jesus, God's very own Son, to live and die as a person, then be raised from the dead, to bring hope and salvation and righteousness and forgiveness to all humanity.

That was Paul's sermon. We can't say that this sermon was tremendously successful, compared to some of the evangelism in the New Testament. Some folks got turned off by the idea of resurrection. Only a few men, a man named Dionysius and a woman named Damaris became Christian believers. It was a good sermon, though, and quite clear.

Now, I am going to indulge in a preacher habit of trying to add to someone else's sermon, which is rather uppity of me.

If Paul could only have added the Scripture lesson from the book of John, with Jesus still speaking with his faithful eleven disciples, at the Last Supper, it might have helped.

Jesus spoke of love and obedience to God's commandments. He spoke of the Holy Spirit, to be sent to guide and help believers. He spoke of God as Father.

This all goes to show that we people are meant to have a loving, obedient relationship with God, who is the Almighty, the Creator of everything.

God is in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But God is one. We call that idea the Trinity. And God is holy. God does not chase women, or turn into an animal to do so, or any of those crazy things in the Greek mythological stories. God values human life, and hates human sacrifice.

God cares about us. God loves us. Everything God asks of us, for example with the Ten Commandments, is for our own good and happiness and well-being.

God knows what is best for us, and God wants what is best for us. God is our loving Parent, not a cosmic spoilsport (C. S. Lewis), or a cruel and frightening power.

Could the people of Athens have grasped the idea of a loving God, rather than one among many which all had to be appeased, maybe they could have become Christians then. Eventually, though, the country of Greece became Christian, and the Greek Orthodox Church is a long-standing part of Christianity.

We all know now, though. We know that with God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, in our hearts and lives we are blessed and loved and helped, now and forever. Amen.

Presented by Reverend Sally J. DeMasters, May 17, 2020.