

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
 East Moline, Illinois  
 Pastor Becky Sherwood  
**May 17, 2020, The 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Easter**  
 Psalm 66:8-20, Acts 17:22-31  
**THE GIFT OF THE SEVEN LAST WORDS**

**INTRO TO OT LESSON:** This morning's Old Testament Lesson is Psalm 66:8-20. This is a Psalm of remembering God's faithfulness to the nation of Israel as they left slavery in Egypt, safely crossed the Red Sea, and traveled to the Promised Land. It is in looking back at God's faithfulness in the past that the Psalmist can celebrate and have hope in God's faithfulness in the present moment. Listen for the Word of God.

When I was a new pastor someone told me a joke that has never grown old. She whispered to me during a long, tedious Presbytery meeting, "Do you know the seven last words of the church?" And then leaned in to give me the answer: "We've never done it this way before!"

In the last two months of a world changed by the Coronavirus, in a world of sheltering at home, working at home, doing school from home, doing church at home, feeling stuck at home, being separated from family and friends we love who used to come to our homes, it feels like these aren't just the seven last words of the church, but the seven last words of our daily lives.

"We've never done it this way before" fits a lot of the ways we are living through these days doesn't it?

We are in a world season of change, and change asks a lot of us.

Unplanned change changes us day by day,  
 as out of necessity we try new things, and learn new things,  
 and really, really miss the old familiar ways of living our lives.

In this morning's reading from Acts we hear the story of Paul coming to the people of Athens and bringing change to them by challenging the way they thought about the gods and goddesses whose idols filled the city. He came to a city known for the ways they did things and challenged them to think, and ultimately believe, in a new way.

Paul was a follower of Jesus; whose ministry began after Jesus ascended into heaven. As you may remember, Paul went from town to town throughout the Mediterranean world telling the story of Jesus: his life on earth, his death on the cross and his resurrection to new life.

In the passage we read today Paul had come to Athens, Greece:

a city of learning and philosophy and many religions;  
 a city remembered for the teachings of Plato and Aristotle;  
 a city known for being a place where people asked questions,  
 liked to learn new things,  
 and could sit for hours debating different beliefs.

The Apostle Paul comes into Athens wanting to share the good news of Jesus. What Paul finds is a city filled with shrines to the many Greek gods and goddesses. The book of Acts says that Paul was distressed to find himself in a city filled with idols--idols of wood and stone and gold and silver.

But instead of going away feeling defeated, or silenced by this city filled with idols, Paul is wise. He spends some time walking through Athens looking at the shrines, talking to the people, listening to daily life in the city.

We read that he argued about the life of faith with people in the church, the Jewish synagogue, but he also went out into the marketplace, the place where many of the people gathered to buy and sell, and discuss a great variety of faiths and beliefs, and he talked about Jesus.

He caught their attention. They gave him an unflattering nickname, they called Paul “the babbler.” Literally this word refers to a type of sparrow. They were saying that Paul was like a sparrow chirping around, picking up and collecting scraps of learning.

Oxford Annotated Bible notes, pg. NT187.

But the people wanted to hear more. So, they invited Paul up to the Areopagus, or Mars Hill. This is a rocky place up near the Acropolis in Athens. It was where the town council met; it was a place of debate and discussion. The people said to Paul: “We want to know about this new teaching you are presenting to us. What you are saying sounds strange to us and we want to know what it means.”

“The babbler” had caught their attention!

Paul had spent time walking and talking around Athens, and this gives him an amazingly creative way to tell the story of Jesus.

There at the Areopagus he says: “I’ve walked through your city and I’ve seen that you are very religious people in every way.

I’ve looked carefully at your many shrines and altars to a great variety of gods and goddesses.

And while I was walking around and learning about you, I found an altar that caught my attention.

On that altar I read these words: “To an unknown god.”

And I’m here today to tell you that the god you’ve worshipped as “unknown” is the Creator of the Universe, the one true God.

This is the Lord of heaven and earth, this is the living God, not made of wood, or gold or silver. God wasn’t created by human hands, from human imagination, but this God is the one who created us.

This God gives all people life and breath and all things they need.

No wonder Paul was able to spread the good news throughout the Mediterranean world. He didn’t put the people down for worshiping idols. Instead he took their curiosity and caught their attention and then told them the amazing story of Jesus.

He told them, “This living God made people so that they would search for God and grope for God and find God.”

This God, who created us all, is the one true living God that you have been seeking and groping for. You are children of this God, in whom you live and breathe and have your being.

Now that you know about God, it is time to follow this God, who has proven who God is through Jesus, who died for us and then rose from death for us.”

The book of Acts tells us that that very day some of the men and women of Athens became followers of Jesus.

Paul asked them to change the way they had always done things, and some of them heard that as an invitation to follow Jesus, and said yes.

Now, here we are, not called to change by an intellectual discussion about faith in the market place, but called to change by a world pandemic.

Paul found the shrine to the “unknown god” and used that to reach out in Jesus’ name. Now here we are, looking at what feels like the unknown church, the unknown schooling, the unknown home, the unknown family, the unknown grocery shopping, the unknown connections to those we love,  
and this unplanned change of Covid19 is changing us.

Paul asked the people of Athens to look at themselves and their city and their gods and goddesses.

Covid19 is asking us to look at our lives, our faith, our families, our work, our care for others, our schools and the ways we have always done things before.

This season has shown us a lot of unknowns, and it’s asking us to pay attention to what is really important and what is really true in our lives.

In the June issue of *Sojourners Magazine*, the senior editor, Rose Marie Berger wrote this: “In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Rebecca Solnit wrote, “Horrible in itself, disaster is sometimes a door back into paradise, that paradise at least in which we are who we hope to be, do the work we desire, and are each our sister’s and brother’s keeper.” Solnit reminds us that disasters and plagues sometimes signal liberation.”

“‘If paradise now arises in hell,’ wrote Solnit, ‘it’s because in the suspension of the usual order and the failure of most systems, we are free to live and act another way.’ This liberation, (Berger writes) forged in exhaustion and personal grief, must build power for the world that God intends—one where earth is sacred, mutual aid brings pleasure, labor is fairly compensated, economic inequity is diminished, priority is given to family and kinship, and praise of God is commonplace. It is ours to choose.”

Berger, Rose Marie, senior editor, “Another World is Possible” *Sojourners Magazine*,  
June 2020, Vol 49, No. 6, pp. 12-13

Now let me say that seeing, and finding, and living new ways of doing things can be exhausting: emotionally, spiritually and physically exhausting!

We need to pay attention to how we care for ourselves and those in our lives because of that fatigue.

And yes, there is sorrow, and devastation, and life disruption that Covid19 has brought to our world. I’m not ignoring that.

But we can’t just live with the refrain “We’ve never done it this way before.” Although it feels pretty good to whine loudly as we say it! This season of world pandemic has forced us to find new ways of: family time, alone time, work, care for our older parents, our children, and those we can’t physically visit,

New ways of: groceries, school and homework, time with brothers and sisters, care for those in need, care for those who don’t have the luxury of self-distancing,

New ways of: worshiping and being the church,

new ways of understanding life, and illness, and death, as the report of new Covid19 cases and new deaths here in the Quad Cities and around the country and the globe fill each news cycle,

New ways of really seeing our neighbors on the front lines in medicine and pharmacies and scientific labs. New ways of really seeing our neighbors who serve us in stores and restaurants, truly essential trades, truck drivers, first responders, and those who process and prepare meat for us in factories.

I believe that this season of newness, and change, and unknowns offers us a gift. Paul challenged the Athenians to see all the idols of wood and gold and silver that surrounded them, and instead meet the Living God who comes to us in Jesus.

What if we allow this season of world pandemic to open our eyes to the idols of “we’ve never done it this before” that we keep in our homes, our church, our faith journeys, our schools and our communities?

What if we let this season invite us to look again at what and who we are worshipping with our time, our money, our devotion, and our energy?

What if we ask at our deepest levels: what has become an idol in my life?

In this season of change what are we being invited to change in ourselves, our church and our community?

What if we open our eyes to the gifts of this season?

What if we let this season stretch us,  
not only in exhausting ways,  
but in life- and faith-changing ways?

What if we take the whining out of our voices when we say: “We’ve never done it this way before?”

What if we, with the Athenians, let our eyes be opened to Jesus in our midst?

What if we look at all the unknowns and say with a bit of fear and trembling,  
but also, with anticipation: “We’ve never done it this way before.”

What if we let all the unknowns of this season of change, change us, and that becomes a good thing?

So that when we look back on these days,  
we see them as the beginning of the season when we abandoned empty idols and turned:  
“to search for God and perhaps grope for God and find God,  
who in Jesus is not far from each one of us or our world.”

What if we begin now to say with joy: “We’ve never done it this way before!”

I’d like to end with a prayer that comes to us from Barbara Blason, the president of the Methodist Conference in Britain:

We are not people of fear:

We are people of courage.

We are not people who protect our own safety:

we are people who protect our neighbors’ safety.

We are not people of greed:

we are people of generosity.

We are your people God, giving and loving, wherever we are, whatever it costs

For as long as it takes

wherever you call us.