

“Preaching Outdoors”

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Opening Prayer

Good Morning, and welcome out here to Pleasant Corners for worship. The only place more beautiful, as far as I am concerned, than being inside this church is to be outside of it. While having church outside has its own set of challenges, at least we are here together in body and spirit. It certainly feels more like proper church, although likely a touch strange. While it may be a little different than what we are used to, there is certainly precedent for outdoor worship like this. In the book of Acts, the Apostle Paul preaches outdoors from up on a high hill.

Acts 17 takes place during one of Paul’s missionary journeys. Paul and his entourage have been spreading the Gospel throughout what is modern day Greece. Macedonia, Thessalonica, Thyatira, Berea, and everywhere in between Paul has been preaching. Paul has been commissioned by the other Apostles, and by the time we get to our reading for today he has already been through much for the Lord. Our story though takes place when Paul comes to the city of Athens, a city that at the time was known for its high thinking... and great idol worship.

“Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols.” (Verse 16) Athens, as a major city of thought in ancient Greece, was a mingling place for trade and for political thought and ultimately for idolatry. Paul, when he travels through, is struck by the idolatry and is moved by the Spirit to share the truth. He begins by sharing in the synagogues (which is what he would normally do), but eventually some of the philosophers from the greater community ask Paul to come and

preach at the Areopagus. This is a discussion place on a big hill, called "Mars Hill."

"So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, 'Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'To an Unknown God.' Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.'" (Verses 22-23)

The thought process that was at work in all of these idols was that there were gods for everything. Zeus is the god of thunder, Hades is god of the underworld, Morpheus is the god of dreams, etc. Thousands and thousands of gods, each who watched over various things and ruled various things, needed to be appeased. In the area surrounding Athens and on Mars Hill (Mars was the god of war) there were many different idols. One of the idol stands that was around was one referencing an unknown god... this Paul sees and begins to speak outdoors to these folks who have invited him to preach about a God they had never heard about before; the one we serve.

"The God who made the world and all the things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things." (Vs. 24-25)

The first thing that Paul tells these folks, who all believe in some form of god or gods, is one that we wouldn't think about much, but would have been very surprising to these people. Paul asserts that there is only one Lord who has created everything. Everyone else who was there who was not Jewish or Christian would have been a polytheist, meaning they worshipped many gods. To hear that there is one Lord who created all would have been something new for them. The idea of

monotheism (“One God”) is actually a pretty unique perspective that is shared by just a few religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. I would argue that monotheism is also a major point in what determines absolute morality. There are not multiple gods to appease with varying levels of thought and morals between them, there is only one God who is the ultimate determiner of what is right and wrong. Furthermore, there is only one God who determines where you go, who you are, and what will happen to you. Those are completely foreign to the concept of polytheism. Additionally, Paul continues, this Lord who he serves is not to be found in any temple or dwelling, He is above all of that. The prevailing thought for the Greeks (that is still echoed today if we are honest) is that the gods need something from. The Lord, Paul asserts, needs nothing from us... but He wants us to follow Him.

“And He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist.” (Verses 27-the first half of 29) For every one of us, all humanity, who has ever existed, there are questions that we ask, that we seek the answers to. “Where do we come from?” “Why are we here?” “What is my purpose in life?” Every religion and thought process (yes including atheism and agnosticism and nihilism) do their best to answer these questions. For the nihilist, nothing has purpose and nothing truly matters, so pleasure is the only thing worth seeking. For the atheist, the argument is that we come from chance, that we are not here for a purpose, and that humanity’s ultimate moralities can be boiled down to treating other humans well. For almost any religion that ascribes belief in a creator, the answer is that we are made by a god/gods for some reason or by

accident, and that we must appease those god/gods for good things to come our way. Morality for most religions also boils down to treating other humans well (mostly) and appeasing some god or gods. In the city of Athens that Paul is preaching, these thought processes were there, this is what they understood. None of these thoughts are new, but Christianity's core principles were and are a bit different.

In these verses, from 27-29, Paul lays out the foundation for our faith. That we were created by one Lord, who determined ahead of time our lives in many meaningful ways, so that we might search Him out of our own free will. This, by the way, is a very short answer to why bad things happen to us... nobody is truly good, our free will can hurt us and others, and the stuff the Lord allows us to endure is a reminder to us that we are not in control, He is. It is a reminder that we need Him. In verse 30, Paul continues by stating "Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead." This is the Gospel Beloved. On a big hill, surrounded by people who knew nothing of Jesus, Paul preached the saving message of Christ as the one who takes away the sins of the world.

In the end, many did not believe the message. They had their own beliefs, they didn't want proofs of Jesus, they just wanted to be entertained. However, by Paul's boldness, in verse 34 we read "But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them." While many did not believe, some did... and with that belief we know comes eternal salvation.

So what does all this have to do with us? Well, as we worship and praise outdoors much like the Apostle Paul did at Mars Hill, we should remember that salvation comes from hearing. Salvation comes from hearing the truth from believers like us, and it comes outside the church walls. The faith that you hold needs to be on display for all to see more than just on Sunday mornings here in our parking lot if you truly care about others. To be missional, to do as the Lord has commanded us and share the saving faith we have, we have to be living and breathing and sharing the Gospel “outdoors” in our regular lives. If Paul only ever preached the Gospel in the small churches of Athens, then Dionysius and Damris and many others would not have ever heard the saving grace that Jesus brings by His perfect life, death, and resurrection. They wouldn’t know anything about how the Lord loves us enough to take our place, to take our sins from us that we have earned in placing ourselves ahead of Him and others. They wouldn’t know the joys and fulfillment that come from finding true purpose in serving our Creator. They wouldn’t have received the eternal life that we look towards. For us, if we only ever talk about our faith in our homes or in church, if we never share Christ “outdoors”, if we never prove through our words and our actions what we hold to be true, then we withhold so much from our fellow men.

Beloved, we must be willing to share outdoors. As we finish our outdoor worship out here at beautiful Pleasant Corners, we have to remember that we are called to share Christ outside the church just as Paul did at the Aeropagus on Mars Hill in Athens all those years ago. Perhaps now more than ever, it is important that we preach outdoors. Let us pray.

Closing Prayer