

“Making Christ Known”

*“What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:23).*

Like many Christian traditions, our worship schedule is built around a Church Year calendar that follows the life of Christ. Beginning with the season of Advent, which usually occurs in late November or early December, the Church moves through different seasons all designed to highlight and examine the life of Jesus and the saving truth that His story reveals to sinful people like us. To accomplish this purpose, the Church follows a schedule of readings called a “lectionary” and this reading schedule forms the backbone of our worship experience. Every week the lectionary provides three readings which are almost always comprised of a reading from one of the four Gospels, a reading from one of the letters that make up the bulk of the New Testament, and also a reading from the Old Testament. The Old Testament text is always the first reading of the day and it’s designed to provide a prelude to the Gospel by showing a direct connection from the Old Testament to the story of Christ. This pattern is followed throughout the lectionary in every season of the Church Year...except for Easter.

If you examine the lectionary (look at pages “xiv” through “xix” in the front of the hymnal) you’ll notice that there are no Old Testament readings during the season of Easter; instead the first readings during the six weeks that follow Easter Sunday are all taken from the book of Acts. There may be many reasons for this variation in the lectionary, but the primary reason Acts becomes our focus during the Easter season is because the Resurrection of Jesus changes everything and nowhere is this difference more clearly seen than in the early days of the Church...and nowhere do we see this difference displayed more dramatically than in the life of the Apostle Paul.

In last week’s reading from Acts 6 and 7 we heard the about the stoning of Stephen and as Luke details the brutal execution of the first Christian martyr he writes, “At this (the Jews) covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at (Stephen), dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul...And Saul approved of their killing...” then Luke tells us that, “On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison” (Acts 7-8).

This man who would go on to found countless Christian congregations and author essentially half of the books in the New Testament was by all accounts, the number one enemy of the Church. He was zealous in his mission to hunt down disciples of Jesus and he made it his life’s work to destroy what he believed to be a blasphemous and blatant attack on the faith of his fathers. And yet it took one encounter with the Risen Christ to change everything for this fervent Jewish leader. In Acts 9, Luke details the conversion of Paul where, in a flash of light, Christ meets him on the road to Damascus saying, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4). For three days, Saul was blind and then through the hesitant help of a Christian named Ananias, Paul’s blindness was taken away, he was baptized and he began to learn about the Messiah who had saved him. Luke tells us that after his conversion, “Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, ‘Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?’ Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah” (Acts 9:19-22).

For Saul, the Resurrection of Jesus had changed everything. Before his encounter with the Risen Christ, he was, as he later described himself in his letter to the Philippians, a model Jew; a Pharisee who was unmatched in his adherence to the law and unsurpassed in his hatred of Christ. He had carried out the arrests of countless Christians and supervised the brutal murder of Stephen and now his life had been completely transformed! Paul had become a disciple of Jesus Christ and was God’s handpicked messenger to carry the Gospel to – of all people – the very Gentiles the zealous Pharisee Saul had once hated. *This* is the Paul Luke is writing about in today’s text and as our reading from Acts 17 opens, we find this changed Paul in the midst of a city that personified the Gentile world and would have been the absolute antithesis of all that Paul stood for.

Athens was the cultural center of the ancient world and the people of Athens prided themselves in their religious and philosophical pluralism. As Paul made his way through the streets of the city, the signs of idol worship and pagan philosophy were everywhere. He was in a city that had no regard for the religious tradition in which Paul had been

raised and would have considered the monotheism and moral requirements of the Jewish faith to be both outdated and illogical. For all intents and purposes Paul was in the midst of a godless and immoral place and, as he walks through Athens, we are told that, “his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols” (Acts 17:16). It’s important that we stop here and consider just what this verse tells us about Paul. The ESV translation in our bulletin says that Paul’s “spirit was provoked.” The NIV translation tells us that Paul was “greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols” and still other translations characterize Paul’s reaction as one of anger and revulsion. But I think there is more going on here than patronizing disgust or moral indignation.

You see Paul knew what this meant for the people of Athens; he understood that this was more than an attack on the doctrines he held so dear; the idols Paul saw meant that these people were living without Christ! That these men and women who so prided themselves on their intellectual sophistication were ultimately living and were also going to die with no hope. And I think it was his compassion for these lost souls that distressed Paul and provoked his spirit and, I believe, this is why he approaches the people of Athens the way he does.

After debating in the synagogue with fellow Jews, Paul then moves the conversation into the marketplace. He carries the message of Jesus Christ with him into the arena of ordinary, everyday life and, as he interacts with the people of Athens who were always so taken with the latest and greatest ideas, they begin to ask Paul about his teaching and suddenly the conversation has shifted from the mundane surroundings of the marketplace into the Areopagus where Paul was given the opportunity to proclaim the Gospel in a very public setting. And what does Paul do? *He meets them where they are!* “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:23).

This is amazing to me! Paul actually begins his sermon in the Areopagus by *complementing* them! You see, Paul could have condemned them for their idolatry. He could have ridiculed the lifeless statues that lined the walls of the Areopagus. He could’ve called on his extensive knowledge of the Old Testament and cited curses from Leviticus. He could have quoted the Ten Commandments and damned them for their disobedience to God’s Law...but Paul knew his audience and *Paul loved his audience* and Paul met his audience where they were and then began to move them toward the Risen Christ.

Was he angry about the idols he saw in Athens? Absolutely! Was he disgusted by the open immortality and hollow ideas of the Athenian philosophers? No question! But the Resurrection of Jesus Christ had changed Paul and rather than standing in judgment or shouting out angry words of condemnation, Paul had compassion on them and he saw these misguided and worldly Athenians as brothers and sisters for whom Christ died. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ changed Paul and today as we read this text, the question we need to consider is: How has the Resurrection changed us? What is our Areopagus?

We live in a world very similar to the Athens of Acts 17. Our culture is replete with idols. Our society is cynical about the Church and religious pluralism is the order of the day. Athens is all around us and as we are provoked in spirit by the idolatry of *our* day, we need to stop and consider Acts 17, because the truth about Athens, is also true of our world: We are surrounded by brothers and sisters for whom Christ died and the only thing that will change them – *the only thing that will save them* – is the Holy Spirit working through the message of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This reading ends too early because as you read on in Acts 17, Luke tells us that, “when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” So Paul went out from their midst. *But some men joined him and believed*” (Acts 17:32-34). In today’s epistle reading, Peter writes that we should always be, “prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect” (I Peter 3:15-16). The world needs hope and this hope doesn’t come from keeping the rules. This hope doesn’t come from judging others or from a message of condemnation. This hope and this faith and this life can only come from the Risen Christ. This Good News of the love and forgiveness of the God who is unknown to the world *has saved us!* And as we carry the Gospel with us from our church and homes out into the marketplace and on to our Areopagus, people will be led to the Risen Christ the Holy Spirit will work and the world will believe. May God grant us the courage to give the reason for the hope that we have in Christ. Amen.

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