

The God Who Is Making Himself Known

Intro:

- Honor to be back here; I'm so humbled to be standing here before you; we are so grateful for the grace CT has been in our lives; being a part of this body has shaped us
- Before I start, I have to admit two things: 1. First time preaching 2. & jet lag
- Also want to thank my wife, who while I spent many hours this past week reading and preparing, packed and organized things for our trip here. She is really awesome!
- Spiritually mature are easily encouraged, that is my prayer for you all
- Impart a spiritual gift / encouragement

As I prepared for today, I struggled, as I assume many people who preach do, with what to communicate. I desire to say something that would be refreshing, perhaps new and exciting. *(Ironically the context of our passage today highlights the Athenians desire for something "new", which is always a fleeting desire.)* Maybe I will do that for some of you today. But maybe I won't; regardless, God has been aligning my heart & overcoming my fears with a simple desire is to give you Jesus this morning, to remind you of his infinite worth; to stir you to worship God for who he is; to perhaps help recalibrate a high view of God. The work of Jesus, especially his resurrection, are not new truths! They are ancient truths of a mighty, loving God who desires for you and all peoples of the earth to know him closely!

This morning lets savor Jesus; love him; adore him; be with him! FOR out of this flows life and mission. When we savor the work of Jesus, we more fully understand his heart for the nations. We more fully understand that if he loves us this passionately, he loves all people this passionately.

Global Focus

-The beauty of a week like Global Focus is that it helps recalibrate us to God's heart for us and for the nations! Whether we have forgotten about his mission or we are currently in awe of it, this week of prayer, fasting, and proclaiming the gospel is a call to remember God's heart!

- Yes, my family is living abroad, but these words are for my heart too. Just because we have been sent out doesn't mean we don't struggle to engage with God's heart for the nations. It doesn't mean that we have it all figured out. Actually, we battle fatigue and struggle on a weekly basis. Living on mission is difficult, especially in a foreign land where communication is sparse and cultural differences are like mighty chasms that prime offense and hurt. This morning, I need to hear the good news of the gospel to compel my heart to proclaim his excellencies to our neighbors in SE Asia.

As we focus on God's global purpose, we ought to feel the weight & be overwhelmed with humility for the task. *(e.g., looking out the window of our apartment, we often ponder the difference we can make amongst 20,000 people who we can barely communicate to).* How can CT make a dent in OKC with the thousands of foreign workers & students here? We need the Holy Spirit's ministry in our hearts! That is my prayer for this morning!

Big Picture Overview:

I studied and read a lot of information to prepare this sermon. At the end of it all, God drew me to three things:

1. God is making himself known; God has entered our story to lift us up to himself
 - a. God is a God who comes down to earth, to our feeble understandings, so that he might bring us up to himself. The creator of the universe has humbled himself in making himself known to his creation. With that reality, we can have hope that God is working around us, in us, and through us to spread his fame all over the planet.
2. God is so merciful!
 - a. He is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love
3. Expect & Love his return
 - a. May we be a people who anticipate Jesus' return and long for the day through prayer and fasting; we long for his return because we have tasted and seen that he is good, and we must have more of him!

We are going to look at and talk about Acts 17, with the hopes to be stirred with these mentioned emphases.

PRAY

- Invite the Holy Spirit to come and pause to ask him to prepare the soil of our hearts
- Thank him for being near; Emmanuel
- Reacquaint us this morning with deep love for you, Jesus! Out of our worship and adoration of you comes joyful submission

****Read Acts 17:16-34**

Turn with me in your bibles to Acts 17, starting in verse 16. We will read through verse 34.

The Gospel in Paul's Speech:

What we see here is one of six sermons/speeches that Paul gives in the book of Acts. In this particular speech, Paul is speaking to a Greek audience; he starts by pinpointing the error of idolatry, moves on to highlight the nature of the true God, and concludes with the proper response and why that response is necessary.

There are many ways in which we could talk about this passage. I went back and forth about going line by line and giving a lot of contextual information or chunking ideas and themes to see a bigger picture. I settled this morning on looking at two things:

1. For what this passage for what it reveals about the character of God
2. For what this passage shows us about Paul's lifestyle and posture as an ambassador of the gospel

Lets start with Paul and end with who God. Paul's lifestyle and posture, especially in this address, is something we need to highlight as believers seeking to live on mission.

1. Paul demonstrates a humility as he goes about being “a witness”

- *[Perhaps one of the major themes of the book of Acts falls under the canopy of “being a witness”. Acts 1:8 {“Jesus says, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”} provides the foundation for the remainder of the book: **witness in Jerusalem** (chapt. 2-5), **witness beyond Jerusalem** (chapt. 6-12), **witness in Cyprus and Southern Galatia** (chapt. 13-14), **witness in Greece** (chapt. 15-18), **witness in Ephesus** (chapt. 18-21), **witness in Caesarea**, and **witness in Rome**.]*
- The context of our passage highlights Paul’s desire to be a witness anywhere & everywhere; For instance:
 - (second missionary journey starts on a trajectory to Bithynia, changes course to Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and now Athens)
- Once entering Athens, Paul was not awestruck by the impressive Greek structures; rather, his spirit was provoked (v.16) (*aka excited, agitated, concerned*), and this led him to action (v. 17). The rampant idolatry had to be confronted with gospel truth
 - I am impressed that Paul didn’t seem to have a posture of offense and bitterness towards Athenians for their impure worship of idols; this is convicting to me, b/c living in a foreign land I often have offense to situations that are personally attacking or religiously attacking my identity; I could greatly learn from Paul’s posture
- He saw a city set apart in superior intellect (*Socrates, Plato, Aristotle...*) for its day as a city truly blinded to the true realities of God, and it troubled him to action (v. 17)
 - V. 18 & v. 32 tells us that Paul was mocked for his reasoning about Jesus and the resurrection, yet there is no evidence that Paul was abrasive and accusative in his interactions
 - *Are we able to respond with compassion and patience when confronted with mockery as a result of our proclamation of gospel truth?*

2. Knowledge of the word (many OT allusions in his speech/sermon)

- *There are more than ten OT allusions in this speech*
- *[What’s cool to think about is that the reality of so many OT allusions is anchoring the truth of what he is saying in antiquity; perhaps this is also to counter the Athenians perspective of “new” teaching; the OT implications could show it is an established worldview and thread to the Creator of the universe]*

3. Knowledge of people, culture, and occasion (contextualization)

- Paul understood the Epicurean and Stoic worldviews, as evident in the way in which Paul navigates his address;
 - I’ll highlight a few things here, but we will also see when we get into Paul’s points about God’s character that he interweaves truth that confronts Epicurean and Stoic philosophies
- Paul is masterful at contextualization.
 - Contextualization simply means adapting the delivery of a message in order for the audience to more readily receive its purpose; not changing the message, but the delivery method
 - One commentator said this about the art of contextualization: “a missionary who recognizes the truth which lies under the system which he seeks to overthrow, is wise.”

- In v. 28 & 29, Paul purposefully uses two quotes from known poets to make heart connections to his audience
- Paul consistently supports his statement in 1 Corinthians 9:22 of becoming all thing to all people so that some might be saved.
 - *This should cause us to ask ourselves when the last time we intentionally learned about another people group in order to be better equipped to engage with them? Or is this too inconvenient?*
- Paul understands the occasion of his address.
 - After meeting the Epicurean & Stoic philosophers in the marketplace, he is invited to the epicenter of Athens- the Areopagus.
 - Now, the Areopagus was the place for trials of cases of religious affairs and crimes. It's secondary name (Hill of Ares) derived from the mythological story of Ares being tried in this location for the murder of a family member; furthermore, the Areopagus was where Socrates (the founder of Stoicism) was tried and condemned to death for his teachings against the religious ideals of his time.
 - Paul is invited to this location to discuss his views about foreign divinities, the same accusation against Socrates. While it doesn't seem that Paul was being put on trial, if Paul's speech was abrasive in posture, his status as a guest could have turned to that of tried criminal; not to mention the barriers of the gospel that would have also taken shape.

Not only is Paul's heart for the nations evident in his speech, but he also reveals and highlights several important characteristics of who God is: 1. **Creator & Sustainer** 2. **Sovereign Ruler** 3. **Intentional Revealer** 4. **Merciful & Patient Judge**. He highlights these characteristics so that the Greek audience would forsake idolatry and turn to the true God.

1. The Creator & Sustainer
 - a. In his speech, Paul identifies an altar inscribed with "To the Unknown God"; the Athenians wanted to cover their bases in case there was a god out there that they would upset out of ignorance
 - b. Creator:
 - i. Verses 24, 25, 26, 29 highlight that God is the Creator.
 - c. It was important for Paul to start here because of his context. If he was in a Jewish synagogue, this would not have been the jumping point; but, because he was speaking to Gentiles steeped deeply in idolatry, Paul starts at the beginning.
 - d. First one needs to know who God is so that he can rightly worship him. The one is dependent on the other! *[the other sermon/speech in Acts directed towards a Gentile audience also started with creation- Acts 14:8-16]*
 - i. Athens was Pantheistic society, (meaning God was the universe & everything came from and went back into him) and was full of religious ideals and traditions; in fact, Petronius (a Roman official during Reign of Nero) humorously said that it was easier to find a god than an Athenian in the city of Athens
 - e. Philosophical connections

- i. Paul highlights two main themes in the doctrine of God as the Creator:
God **created the universe** and he **created the human race**
 - These truths would have pointed to the Epicurean idea that matter had always existed, thus no divine guide to it all; God is creator & is intentional within his creation
 - These verses also targets the Stoic view of “fate” being in control of the universe.
 - Paul asserts that God the Creator is supreme and sovereign over creation

f. Sustainer:

- i. Paul then moves on to imagery of God as the Sustainer.
- ii. V. 24-25-
 - doesn't dwell in man-made temples
 - a. Lord of heaven & earth (all authority), does not live in human constructions
 - i. Isaiah 66:1- “Heaven is his throne, earth is his footstool”
 - ii. You can somewhat imagine Paul using the backdrop of the Parthenon & Greek architecture as Paul is saying this.
 - b. This is an interesting statement that Paul is making in light of the OT's narrative regarding the building of the Jerusalem temple and God's active presence there. The OT describes God sitting between the cherubim and temple being his eternal rest (Ps. 80:1; 132:14). Calvin says it well, “I answer, As he was not tied to any place, so he meant nothing less than to tie his people to earthly signs, but rather he cometh down to them that he might lift them up unto himself.”
 - i. In other words, God does not desire for himself or us to be tied to earthly things, but God has graciously come to us so that we could be in relationship with him. This idea is further expounded as we will see in v. 27.
 - does not need anything from human service
 - a. In my study I came across this excerpt, “ In the dialogues, Plato represents Socrates as analyzing the nature of service to a god, and points out that the god can only receive actual benefit from service if he is in need or lacking something. Paul masterfully adapts himself to the thinking of the Athenians, demonstrating to them that the gods whom they serve with sacrifices and worship cannot really be gods at all, unless it is possible for a god to have faults or needs that have to be satisfied. This is also a good point for the Christian to bear in mind; believers are to serve God, but this is not a service that in any way actually benefits Him, because He is perfect and in no need of anything which man can supply. “

- Paul is intentional to highlight the intentional love of God in light of the Stoic skepticism of love, as it carries many emotions that can be volatile & too emotion driven.
- Furthermore, the good news of v. 27 is not just for the unconvinced, but also for us! Don't forget that God is near! Remember what we just celebrated during Advent, that God came to dwell among us; he is Emmanuel! And he has not left us or forsaken us! He has empowered us by his Spirit to live redeemed lives and proclaim his excellencies!

4. The Merciful & Patient Judge

- a. The last character trait Paul highlights in his speech is God the Merciful & Patient Judge.
- b. To put these words together it seems paradoxical. It could imply that God allows man to “get off easy” with their rebellion. In fact, in v. 30 on the surface could seem that God is “Ok” with people's sin. That is not the case, as we will see in a moment.
 - i. Paul caps his speech by concluding with God's expectation of his creation and the reason for this expectation.
- c. Merciful & Patient
 - i. V. 30 states that God overlooked times of ignorance
 - This does not mean that God did not care about previous sin & rejection of his glory, rather his patience has led humanity to the ability to repent and find reconciliation in Christ Jesus
 - a. *** Romans 2:4- Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?*
 - b. ***In a chapter talking about the return of the Lord, 2 Pe 3:9- The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance*
 - c. In other words, God did not bring immediate judgement on the world, but judgement is coming
 - ii. This is the point of Paul's sermon that struck my heart the most. God is rich in mercy and abundant in compassion. He does not give us what we deserve. We deserve annihilation when we sin; he is not only patient as we grope for him, he has also provided us a way to be saved from his punishment. This reality should spur us to a life of mission and global outreach
 - But, don't be mistaken. We could easily lose sight of this. Jonah, a prophet of the Most High God, who received God's mercy over and over, failed to truly understand God's mercy.
 - After seeing God's merciful towards a merciless people, Jonah was fuming. And he had this to say...
 - a. *Jonah 4: 2-3 I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. ³ Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.*

- Living on mission will cause us to be trampled and wounded by the very people who need the Merciful God to touch their lives
 - a. Are you ok with being poured out like this? Like Paul?
 - b. Who are “those people” for you? God loves them with a fierce love!
 - iii. I can’t help but think that Paul constantly live in the reality of God’s mercy that he received on road to Damascus (Acts 9)
 - This compelled him to preach to the nations
- d. Judge
 - i. In v. 31 Paul gets into the uncomfortable part of the speech; the fire & brimstone part; the “hell is real & there is accountability in this life” part
 - Again, Paul is intentional in pointing to the reality of the afterlife; Epicurean view of death resulted in ceased existence of body and soul; Stoic worldview was that everyone absorbed back into the world/god after death
 - It’s a bit ironic to me that Paul is proclaiming a future judgement from the Creator that will far outweigh the impact of an Areopagus ruling
 - ii. V. 31- God commands people around the world to repent;
 - Why repent?
 - a. b/c God has fixed a day where his righteousness & justice will come down on wickedness
 - b. And he will use the one who “he raised from the dead”
 - i. **The resurrection of Jesus is foundational to the witness of Acts**
 - I. One commentary put it like this: “**17:31 He will judge the world** means that God will hold all people accountable, even these philosophers in Athens. **raising him from the dead.** Jesus is not just a religious teacher. The resurrection of Jesus is at the center of God’s plan for history and is the basis for hope in the future resurrection of the body (1 Cor. 15:42–57; Rev. 21:4)... Most importantly, the resurrection placed Jesus at God’s right hand, showing his authority to be the judge and the giver of salvation that Paul is describing (2:30–36).”
 - Two types of realities on the day of judgement:
 - a. Those who belong to Christ will rejoice
 - b. Those who don’t belong to Christ will be crushed by the weight of punishment b/c of their sin
 - c. **Paul is furthering the invitation to experience the real and near God of the universe through the resurrection of the Son.**
- iii. What joy it will be when those who are in Christ see him as the judge; they will see his mercy, his patience, his love; but oh how dreadful a day it will be for those who reject Christ as King & Lord; they will see his wrath, his power & might come down on sin

- iv. Jesus will return; my heart longs for this day! Imagine for a moment some of the movies that depict this story: Lord of the Rings, Simba, Superman. But how they pale in comparison to the Jesus' return and triumph.
- v. *Jesus' return (his judgement & restoration) is compelling for our perseverance to share the gospel.*

Summary:

In conclusion, Paul demonstrates as an ambassador of Jesus how to live a life of humble posture, always aware of people's need for a Savior. His sermon in Athens is compelled from the Athenians' error of idolatry. He unfolds the gospel, revealing the Intentional Creator of the universe who is rich in mercy, and so demonstrates his mercy by commanding people to repent and be spared from coming judgement. Like God sending Jonah to the Ninevites, God is warning people to repent and enter life with him.

So, what do these things have to do with Global Focus? Why say these things?

- When we know who God is, we can rightly worship him. Out of worship flows life and mission
- Paul had an understanding of God's character, and his encounter with the living God moved him to live in a way that allowed him to be provoked when a city was full of idolatry; he saw how idolatry falls so short of giving God the glory he deserves and people the satisfaction their hearts long for;
- In Romans 10:13-17 Paul says
 - a. *¹³ For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." ¹⁴ How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ¹⁵ And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" ¹⁶ But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" ¹⁷ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.*
- John 5:24- Jesus says, "... I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life."
 - i. How beautiful and amazing is this!?! And we get to be a part of it!
- Is there a call to action? – YES! But, may it be out of right thinking of who God is... not as obligation and duty alone!

-God, abundant in mercy, is making himself known. He enters the story of humanity so that they can be brought up to him!

CLOSE IN PRAYER

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