

The Hope of the World Acts 17:16-34

Good morning Grace Family – it is so good to say that to you face to face! It has been a long time coming, but since we are in the sun, my remarks to you will be shorter than usual. This will be the pattern for the coming weeks as we gather as a covenant community, brothers and sisters in Christ who worship Jesus together. So that I might give the rest of John’s Gospel the proper attention it requires, I, and others, will be preaching shorter messages on Sunday mornings as long as we gather outside.

I want you to think back to the first of the year, which is almost half a year ago. Do you make notes at the first of the year? Do you journal, or write down resolutions or goals for the year? Do you remember what was most important to you as we began 2020? I doubt seriously any of us would have assumed that we would meet exclusively online for almost three months of the year. In the end, it may be more. Nor would most of us have anticipated the unrest that has exploded in our land. Some of you might say, “Oh, I have been expecting this for some time,” but few of us would have expected May and June of 2020 to be the time.

If life seems turbulent for you in our day, think of how turbulent life *always* was for the Apostle Paul once he began taking the gospel to the Gentiles. What if he had refused the call to suffer as he did? God would have raised up someone else, but Paul did obey God’s call on his life, and we are blessed recipients nearly 2,000 years later.

Our text for today is Acts 17:16-34. It is the account of Paul’s defense of the gospel before the esteemed council of the Areopagus on Mars Hill in Athens. I would encourage you in the next few days to read Acts 16 and 17 and you will find remarkably similar events to our own day. You will find riots and political power and singing

and praising God in jail and speaking truth to power and philosophy and authority and a masterful contextualization of the gospel. In the middle of it all, you will find the Apostle Paul sharing the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ to people, who, for the most part, did not want to hear it because it threatened their way of life.

Paul was hated and ridiculed because he was a Jew, because he was monotheistic in his beliefs, because he was vocal about his faith, because he was a threat to the local synagogue, because he was a threat to local political structures and culturally approved structures of thinking, because he was a threat to the local economy, because he represented the one true God, whose Son, Jesus, died for our sins and was resurrected for our justification, and because he preached an undeniably powerful message that went against the grain of the culture and the times. The gospel has always gone against the spirit of the age.

From my earliest days of training to be a minister of the gospel, I have heard it said that a preacher needs to prepare to enter the pulpit with a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other hand, which tells you how long ago my training began. The Apostle Paul used something of this approach in Athens, preaching and reasoning with both Jews and Gentiles. Reading and studying different accounts of Paul in Acts, you begin to understand the heart of the man and this is what you conclude: everything Paul said and did was in the service of the gospel.

Acts 17:16-34 is our text. Before we work our way through this passage, let's pray. Father – we ask your blessing on our time this morning. We are grateful to be together, but also mourning the wound in the soul of our nation. We pray that you will open our hearts to your Word, even as we examine a text that speaks truth to

our age and to every age. As we examine your Word, may your Word examine us, Lord! We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

When you read the book of Acts and when you read Paul's letters, you quickly realize the Apostle was almost always surrounded with ministry companions, When our portion of Scripture begins in Acts 17, Paul has arrived in Athens by himself. He came into one of the most impressive cities in the world, by human standards. What did Paul think of Athens? Verses 16-18:

16 Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. 17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. 18 Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, "What does this babbler wish to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities"—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

It has been said that it was easier to find a god in first-century Athens than a human being. The statues to the gods around town were made of fine marble and stone and wood. Paul's response, though, was to grieve over the misplaced worship. The Greek word for "provoked" indicated a strong emotion that expressed righteous anger and jealousy for God's glory. Ever the evangelist, Paul began at the synagogues, reasoning from the Scriptures and proclaiming Jesus to the Jews and righteous Gentiles, and then he reasoned daily with men in the marketplace, or, in our day, in the coffee houses. At one end of the marketplace were schools of the major philosophies of the day, the Epicureans and the Stoics. It is almost criminal to reduce the thought of these two philosophies to one liners, but to give you an idea, Epicureans followed an "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die," way of thinking while Stoics followed a line of thinking that would be more akin to what we know as the Serenity

Prayer – “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Oddly enough, both philosophies were influenced by the common belief that there is no afterlife. Epicureans thought if there is no afterlife, live it up. Stoics accepted what came their way and said, “Today may be the last day of your life – call your mother.” You get the point.

They were both offended and intrigued that Paul preached the resurrection of Jesus. When they asked, “What does this babbler wish to say?” they were mocking Paul. Babblers meant “seed-picker” as in a scavenger bird pecking at any seed it can find. In words, Paul had no original ideas, but he formed his religion by plagiarizing other religions and thought. The charge that Paul was preaching about foreign gods was the charge that had been brought against Socrates 450 years before Paul’s time. Then, verses 19-21:

**19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?
20 For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” 21 Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.**

The Areopagus was a council of some of the most intelligent men of the day. A modern-day equivalent might be a council in Boston made up of professors from Harvard University, MIT, Boston University, and Wellesley College. It is debatable whether the Areopagus had legal authority, but, much like our day, the influence of this council was so great that one’s future standing in society was at stake if you went before the council to argue an idea, although the council loved new ideas.

Paul's speech to the esteemed council was magnificent. Although it can be read in about two minutes, it was more likely a two-hour talk. We are only given the high points. Paul was the intellectual equal of the men he stood before, and their reaction at the end of his speech was emotional rather than rational, indicating their frustration with being unable to refute him logically. But it was not logic that Paul cared about – his interests were spiritual, and, remember, everything Paul did and said was in the service of the gospel. I will read the summary of Paul's speech without interruption and then make a few remarks before closing in prayer. We will look at the sermon itself more carefully next week. Beginning in verse 22:

22 So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. 23 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. 24 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. 26 And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, 27 that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, 28 for

"In him we live and move and have our being";

as even some of your own poets have said,

"For we are indeed his offspring."

29 Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. 30 The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” 33 So Paul went out from their midst. 34 But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

Next Sunday morning, as we analyze Paul’s talk/sermon at Mars Hill, we will think about the religious nature of all humans, regardless of their belief or non-belief in God. Paul’s sermon will address our common humanity and the differences God built into his image-bearers and the boundaries he has put on nations and individuals. His sovereignty over all matters will be on display as we think about the contradiction of racism and the foolishness of idolatry. There will be a call to repentance and a charge to put our hope and trust in Jesus, who is our only hope in this world and the next. Would you pray with me as we acknowledge the pain in our nation caused by abuse of power and unjust violence, and as we ask the Lord to heal our land?

Dear God, Creator of the universe, Creator of all mankind, and Redeemer of those you call to be your own, we humble ourselves before you. According to your command, Lord, we weep with those who weep. Our hearts are broken by cruel injustices practiced in a land that prides itself on equal justice and equal opportunity for all. We acknowledge the sin and brokenness in our own hearts even as

we proclaim – as we do every week – that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

To acknowledge that all are broken is not to deflect individual accountability for the pain and suffering experienced by men and women and children of color in our nation and around the world. We confess our brokenness and we acknowledge our responsibility to stand against evil. We ask your forgiveness for our sinful hearts even as we acknowledge that the only hope of the world is Jesus. We recognize that no divine promises are made to nations, but only to individuals who repent of their sins and put their trust in Jesus. Even so, Lord, we ask for your mercy on our land. Heal our nation.

May we treat all men and women with the dignity and respect that all image-bearers of God deserve. As believers, may we humbly yield to your will and your instruction, and may we find true hope in the message of the gospel, which promises eternal life to believers through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, before whom we bow, and in whose name we pray, Amen.