

TAKING THE GOSPEL TO MARS

Sermon, October 27, 2019

Reformation Sunday

Texts: Acts 17:21-32; John 14:1-11

A few weeks ago I told you about Buzz Aldrin taking the sacrament of communion on the moon, and this week we will talk about Paul taking the Gospel to Mars. As we just read from Acts, Paul went to the Areopagus; translated from the Greek, the Areopagus is literally the Hill of Ares, the Greek god of war. Or, to use the Roman name of Ares, this is the Hill of Mars; the King James Version does translate this as Mars' Hill. The council of leaders and lawyers and magistrates who met there was also called the Areopagus; this council was named after the place where the council met (*this group of lawyers and magistrates was also known as the Mars Bar ... not really; I made that up*). We are told in verse 21, that *"all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas."* They all spent their time doing nothing but ... talking. There's a sermon in itself here, but isn't it ironic this place where people do nothing but talk is named for the God of War? Too much talking, not enough doing is a potential cauldron for trouble! Apparently, these are people who have way too much time on their hands and are not engaging in constructive activity. As the old proverb goes, *"Idle hands are the devil's workshop"* But I digress.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus is preparing His friends for His departure. He tells them not to fear, He is going before them to prepare a place for them. I have publicly read these words probably more than any other Scripture text in my thirty-five years of ordained ministry (*the 35th anniversary of my ordination was last Monday; fittingly, it was the day after I was privileged to speak at my son's installation as pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Corinth*). I've read some of these verses in John 14 at virtually every one of the approximately three hundred funeral services I have conducted (*255 of those have been here in Warwick*). This text has brought great solace and comfort to many who have lost loved ones. It has also brought hope to many who suffer through the hardship of their final days, often with not only debilitating physical circumstances, but also with great pain. These are wonderfully comforting promises. To know our Risen Lord has gone before us through the veil of suffering and death and has emerged risen and triumphant on the other side, never to die again, and to hear His promise that He goes before us to assure a place is being prepared there for each of us ... and to hear Him reiterate, *"If it were not so, I would have told you"* ... which is another way of saying, *"Would I lie to you?"* ... these are words that help take away the sting of death and, in its place, give peace.

While the disciples are trying to take all of this in, Jesus tells them they know the way to the place where He is going. Thomas voices the question everyone is asking: *"Lord, we don't even know where you are going; how can we know the way?"* Jesus responds, *"I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* I want to note two things: (1) Jesus was directly answering a specific comment made by Thomas ... when Thomas said, *"we don't know the way,"* Jesus responds in so many words, *"Yes you do! You know Me. And I am the Way; follow me. And I am the Truth, believe me ... I will not lie to you. And I am the Life, Who has come to give you life that is full, abundant and eternal! And no one comes to the Father except through Me"* (2) When Jesus says *"no one comes to the Father except through me,"* Jesus is not laying down a condition so much as He is simply stating a fact. Jesus is God in the flesh; He is in the Father and the Father is in Him; to see Him is to see the Father; He and the Father are one. He is *not* saying that unless one understands Jesus as the Christian creeds define Him as very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made, unless one understands all that AND claims Him as personal savior, then forget it, you'll never come to God. No, Jesus is simply stating fact; He is expressing the truth about His own nature and being. When He says *"no one comes to the Father except through me,"* that means one thing: it is a statement of fact ... He and the Father are one, **whether you believe that or not**. Jesus is God in the flesh. When you come to God, you come to (and through) Jesus.

On a related note, the God we worship in and through Jesus Christ has the freedom to call whomever He chooses, however He chooses, whenever He chooses, even if they may not fully comprehend it. Sometimes God speaks to people in surprising ways in order to move them to greater Truth. He starts right where they are in order to bring them where they need to be. For one example, He did it with a group of Persian astrologers called Magi who followed a star to the birthplace of Jesus. Now, the Bible condemns astrology. But God spoke to those astrologers in their language ... in a star ... and brought them to bow before Jesus Christ.

I think Paul understood this dimension of grace, as demonstrated in our reading from Acts. Paul knew the Bible condemns idolatry, but he doesn't bash these Athenians for their erroneous beliefs. He was alert to the fact that God wants to connect with the proud intellectuals of Athens as much as He wants to connect with anyone. If God is God, then it stands to reason He is alive and active throughout His entire creation ... and, by the way, that includes the Athens where you live and work. What He wants are faithful followers like Paul who will go help people understand the God Who is already there AND interacting with their lives.

When we last looked at this passage in 2011, my sermon title was "*Sects and the City.*" ("*S-E-C-T-S, by the way ... the namesake for the pun is a show I've never watched*") Paul found many sects in Athens; there were gods and idols too numerous to count, each having their faithful following. How do we as Christians deal with sects? (*I know, we're Presbyterians, we don't believe in sects*). What does it mean for us to be faithful to our calling, faithful to who we are, when dealing with people who practice other (or no) religions? With people who believe different things than we do about eternal life, about forgiveness, about grace, about heaven? Should we Christians be silent about what we believe in order to peacefully co-exist in a polytheistic (*and increasingly atheistic*) society? Do we have to downplay what we believe in order to just get along? For that matter, how do we respond to Christians who hold to a radically different form of Christianity than we do, even within our own denomination ... or congregation?

We do live in a diverse age: diverse in politics, in religiosity, in morality, you name it. This is not unlike the environment Paul encountered in Athens! In fact, it is not unlike the world the early Christians encountered just about everywhere they went. I think we can find three bits of wisdom in Paul's Athenian encounter: Paul chose to (1) *wake up*, (2) *show up* and (3) *speak up*. Paul could have just kept his eyes shut while traveling through Athens, but he didn't. He woke up, he opened his eyes to what he was all around him; and he did not ignore it. He "woke up" to the reality of the world he encountered, and involved himself with it. Yes, it bothered him; it would have been easier to just ignore it and move on. But he didn't. Let me underscore that we have to believe things aren't always as they appear, especially when it comes to matters of religious faith. People are rarely as "dead set" as we think they are. We should know enough about God and His grace to know He will be eminently fair, ultimately just and sovereign, that grace is the business of a God whose ways are not always our ways, and that God is constantly at work everywhere in this world. He just calls us to dogged faithfulness wherever we show up. Again, Paul woke up. He was awake and alert to the fact that God wants to connect with the intellectual yakkity-yaks of Athens as much as He wants to connect with anyone. In this confidence, Paul *shows up* and *speaks up*. He makes two key points in his speech important for us to remember in our own day.

First, there is the key step of communicating respect. Paul starts out by connecting where he can. Paul demonstrates his understanding that while these people may be wrong in what they believe, their *instinct* to worship is still good and is of divine origin. He honors and respectfully acknowledges the seriousness of their religious search. Yes, Paul is bothered by this idolatry; v. 16 tells us he was greatly distressed to see the city so full of idols. But there is more to Paul's response than fear of judgment, there is genuine compassion, and he conveys compassion in his interaction with these folks. He conveys compassion by communicating respect, by honoring the fact that these are real flesh and blood people, people who have loved ones and worries and concerns and valuable traits and things worth praising in their very real lives. He acknowledges the seriousness of their religious search and thus honors their integrity. They are very religious; look at how many gods they have! But he doesn't stop there! He goes to the second step:

He helps them come to grips with the reality that their religious search has not brought them to real knowledge of the truth about the living God he has come to know and experience in Jesus Christ. Paul says, "*As I walked around I even found an altar with this inscription: 'To An Unknown God. Well, this is the God I want to talk about.'*" Paul goes to the second step by using this altar to the Unknown God as a launching point to tell them about the God they CAN know, the God they *really* sought was the Creator, not the created. He is not *man made*; He *made man*. And it is in this God we are designed to really live, and move, and have our being, through faith in Jesus Christ who died and rose again that we might have life in all its fullness now and forever! Apparently, God has been telling them such things all long, for it is inferred that many are resonating with his words. Paul shows up, speaks up, and helps them to understand this God who is already at work in their lives. He goes on to explain how this God is revealed to us in Jesus, this same Jesus who called Himself the Way, the Truth and the Life, this same Jesus Who stated that He and the Father are one.

Let's follow Paul's example. We are to wake up to the realities about us. We are to show up, engage, get involved, find our points of connection and with respect and love and courtesy let our lives and our witness do the talking, and when the time is right speak up about what we believe. Wake up, show up and, for Christ's sake ... and for the sake of the people we know and love ... speak up.