

(Acts 17:22-31 NRSV)

²² Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.²³ For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands,²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.²⁶ From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live,²⁷ so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him--though indeed he is 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 too are his offspring.'²⁹ Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals.³⁰ While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent,³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

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Surprised by God

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge,
Massachusetts

Date: May 9, 1999

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Text: Acts 17:22-31

High above the city of Athens, only the Acropolis is higher than the Areopagus. At 377 feet the rock outcropping provides an expansive view of the birthplace of western philosophy, literature and religion. When Paul ascended the windswept overlook halfway through the first Christian century, Greek religion had a throng of Gods. The Areopagus itself was home of the Greek God Ares, from whence the place got its name. And in case the number of Gods found in Athens didn't cover all the possibilities, the Greeks had covered themselves. For among the various statues in the city, Paul had found one dedicated "to an unknown God." Lest any God feel left out, the statue allowed the Athenians to say, "We just didn't know who you were."

Paul is glad to find the opening. He wants the Athenians to know that he brings them news of this very God unknown to them, the God of the Jews and Christians, the God who made everything, who set creation in motion, who established the seasons and cycles of life, who set out geography and homelands, and who placed human beings in the midst of it all to wander, to work, and ultimately to seek the presence of this God. Paul's discourse is meant to take the opening the statue gives him and then run with it. Paul makes claim that the God unknown to the Athenians is actually the true God, of whom they should no longer be ignorant.

As a sidebar to those who want to make a similar claim today, who want to claim that the Christian God is the only true God and subsumes every other God, Paul's situation has an important feature often neglected. When Paul comes to town, no one knows Christianity. It's less than twenty years after Jesus' death. The church is in its infancy. And Paul is trying to get his God, the God of Jesus, on the map. That is, Paul is trying to get Christianity established in a land where a hundred other Gods already have standing. In truth, he is but trying to get a hearing, a foothold, a little recognition. Whatever Paul said, in his wildest dreams he could not have imagined the future ascendancy of the Christian Church. Paul was arguing strongly for a minority, actually less than minority position. He was looking to get tolerated rather than beaten and jailed, which were how he was often

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received. I think people should realize this situation before they use Paul's words to preach intolerance.

If we shouldn't derive a superiority complex from Paul's ideas, we should find something very interesting in his notion of the unknown God.

Where is God unknown for you? Where is God missing for you?

Kate spoke to us this morning of abandonment. In a hundred places in our lives God may seem absent. Many of us are lonely or terrified, anxious or desperate, at least in some of the spaces we inhabit.

In Littleton, Colorado a town seeks to put itself back together. The parents and siblings and friends of those lost try to imagine a life without their loved ones, and in truth, each day they are sure they will come around the corner and the whole thing will have been a dream. But in another sense, they know it is in fact a nightmare. Even those less directly affected know that getting back to normal is a fantasy, because normal will never come again. And you could hardly blame them if they told you that they aren't sure where God is right now.

And you don't have to live in Littleton, Colorado, or Kosovo, or Belgrade, or Sierra Leone, or Liberia or any of a thousand other hot spots in the news to be left wondering where God is. All you have to be is awake to the reality that human life, even at its best, sits on the edge of fear and trembling. Our existence is a fragile thing. My guess is that the Athenians weren't just hedging their bets with their statue to an unknown God. My guess is that they knew that even with all the Gods they had, there was something still uncertain and unsettling about living. There needed to be more to counteract the uncertainty than the Gods they knew about.

But Paul offers his hearers a different kind of God from the one they expected. The Greek Gods each commanded a sphere of influence. Presumably, if one were to get on the good side of all the Gods, which of course was made difficult by the Gods' infighting and internal politics, but if one were to get on the good side of all the Gods, then one could expect things to turn out just the way one wants. We know something of this line of thinking, don't we? Who of us hasn't sought to strike a deal with God: "I want x, y, or z. Just tell me, God, what I need to do to please you. Just tell me God what I need to do to get you to help me out here." Who of us hasn't sought to strike such a deal? And who of us hasn't felt abandoned and unlistened to by God when our bargain seems to have fallen on deaf ears? It is here, in these moments, that God seems unknown, missing.

But this is not the God which Paul offers. He comes right out and says that this God is not served by human bargains and offerings, as if God needed anything from us in the first place. This is not a God we can bribe. But Paul does say that God set up creation in such a way that we would look for, even grope for God, and in the end, find God. God set things up so that we would be looking for God.

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But the truth is, we don't find God quite where we thought we would. Or maybe better said, we don't really find the God we thought we would. We want a God to command the universe to behave according to our wishes. We look for God to do it. We experience God's abandonment when our hopes are unrealized.

But then, then, right in the moment of God's failure, there comes a flicker of light, and that flicker of light is God. I don't know why the universe is so hard on us. I don't know why there is so much reason to fear and tremble. In the end, I am reluctant to blame that on God. But, maybe it's better to just leave it at this: I don't understand it; I simply don't. But what I do know is this: The flicker that comes in the hardest moment, the flicker that comes in the deepest of night, the flicker that comes quite by surprise is God. And I know that God has something to do with getting us to keep looking, even if we are most of the time looking for the wrong sort of God.

And just where do we find this God for whom we look and this God who surprises us? While we may notice God in the hardest of moments, Paul tells the Athenians that God is always close by, never far from us. Quoting the sixth century b.c.e. poet Epimenides, Paul says that it is in this God that we live and move and have our being.

When science came along a few hundred years ago, religion began to beat an unfortunate retreat. Religion began to claim that even if science held sway in the realm of the material world, the world of the spirit belonged to religion. In time the strict distinction developed an unfortunate side effect. Religion came to be seen as concerned only with the supernatural, only with the things science couldn't explain. As science could explain more and more, religion found herself relegated to miracles and the afterlife.

Too bad. Because the God Paul understands is a God in whom we live and move and have our being. Paul's God, close by, never far away, hands dirty in the business of living, is far more present than a unknowable force in the beyond. This is the God who "made the world and everything in it," who is "Lord of heaven and earth."

So, where do we find this God? We know the answer, don't we? Any of you who have experienced even the faintest flicker of this God's presence, perhaps in a dark night of the soul, you know that this God may be found in any tangible element of creation. A mountain, a night sky, a spring flower, the eyes of a lover, or even in the mundane of a day at work. God may be in the earthquake, the fire, or as Elijah found, in the still small voice of silence. God is indeed never far from us.

And one place, perhaps the most profound place where God is found is in one another. Today we celebrate Mother's Day, that day when we honor our mothers for all they have meant to us. Mother's Day is not an uncomplicated holiday. Each of our relationships with our mothers are in a different place. Some of us have in

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this past year lost our mothers, and so we relate to a beloved memory and cope with our grief. Some of us have mothers who are ill and fragile, and we are filled with concern about them. Some of us have had troubled relationships with our mothers, and so this day stands in stark contrast for us to the greeting card version of things. Some of us are mothers, and some of us want to be, or have struggled with the likelihood that we won't be, and each condition brings us a different feeling of the day.

This is a complicated day. But assuming that it is meant to do more than sell cards and flowers, and that may be assuming a lot, but let's do it anyway; assuming that Mother's Day is about more than marketing, I think it is most else about the way that God lives and moves in our being. If God is close by, if God is found as a flicker in those most troubling of moments, if God works through each of us, there is perhaps no relationship filled with more possibility to evidence God working in us than the relationship between a mother and a child. And there is perhaps no more obvious time God is evidenced in this relationship than when the world seems to be falling apart and we are taken into our mother's lap and made to know that there exists a love that is even greater than our fears.

This is the surprise of God. It is a surprise because I think we often believe we will find God at the top of heights we ascend, and sometimes we do. But we are less prepared to find God when things seem to be descending into the valley of the shadow of death. Our mothers who may have held us in such moments are but one of the instruments of a God who meets us there, too. This God, unknown, or at least unexpected, is often the God we need most. Gladly, this God is never far from us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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