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Psalm 66:8-12, 16-20 and Acts 17:22-31

The Gift of Life

The season of Eastertide is drawing to a close. This is the season where we move from the direct witness of Jesus in his life, death and resurrection to the witness of the disciples and the birth of the church, which we will celebrate in two weeks on Pentecost Sunday. As Episcopal priest David Schalfer notes, we are moving from “proclaiming “Christ is risen!” to examining what it means for us to live in the light of the resurrection.”¹

It is through the work of the Holy Spirit that the message of the resurrection is communicated and acted upon. This morning we hear from the apostle Paul, as he brings a witness to the resurrection of Jesus to people outside of the religious traditions associated with Judaism. Scholars divide Paul travels into three journeys. The first was to Cyprus and portions of what was known as Asia Minor, now known as Turkey. In this journey, Paul often wrote about the struggles of welcoming non-Jewish believers of Christ into the fold, how to handle the issues of circumcision and dietary laws. The second and third set of travels occur after these issues have been settled by the Council in Jerusalem. Gentiles - that is non-Jews - are welcomed into the fold. Paul now addresses how to be a follower of Christ while living in a world where the person and work of Jesus Christ is barely known, if known at all. We hear a piece of that journey this morning as Paul is in Athens. Hear now from Acts 17: 22-31.

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely spiritual you are in every way. 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. 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, 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. From one ancestor he made all peoples to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps fumble about for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us.

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.’ “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. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which

¹ David Schalfer. Sixth Sunday of Easter. Acts 17:22-31; *Connections. A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2019 p272.

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." **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

One of my favorite podcasts is "Not Gonna Lie" by Kylie Kelce. Kelce was star field hockey player and coach and is married to retired Philadelphia Eagle Jason Kelce. She is a fierce advocate for women in sports and she tells it like it is with respect to raising four very young daughters, as well as the ironies of contemporary life. Her tag line is "not gonna lie" and she straight up dishes on the good, bad, and the ugly, interviewing folks from the sports world, pop culture and even politics. I think the Apostle Paul would make a great guest for the podcast. I imagine a conversation something like this...

Kelce opens with a softball, "So you have been traveling around Greece and Macedonia with your bud Silas. What have been the highlights?"

Paul responds, "I've been able to share the Good News of Jesus' life, death and resurrection in a couple of places. We have made some new friends and have some folks who are supporting our travels."

Kelce follows up: "I hear the Greeks are very hospitable – lots of food and drink and comradery. Has that been your experience?"

And Paul quips: "Not gonna lie. In Thessaloniki, it started out great. This guy Jason offered to let us stay at his place – very nice. We had three good weeks. But it ended up a pretty bad scene. I made some of the religious leaders mad and they rounded up some bad dudes from the marketplace and they stormed Jason's house looking for us and when they couldn't find Silas and me, they dragged Jason out because he had housed us. They accused us of defying Caesar's decrees because we were claiming Jesus as a king and Lord. A riot started – it was pretty ugly. They made Jason pay a bond to ensure that there would be no more disruption."

Kelce: "Wow. Sounds pretty scary. I hope you got out of there safely."

Paul: "Not gonna lie. It was pretty awful. But some of our new friends got Silas and me out of town, helping us get to Berea, about 50 miles away."

Kelce: "Well I hope you had a better time there."

Paul: "Not gonna lie. Basically the same thing happened. We were encouraged at first. Our friend Timothy had rejoined us and our message about the resurrected Christ was resonating with the crowds. Our words were received with enthusiasm and we had many join us in our work. But then some of the folks from Thessaloniki came to Berea and got everyone in a

tizzy. I was quickly sent out of town – escorted to Athens by some of our followers. Timothy and Silas stayed behind and planned to catch up with me in Athens.”

Kelce: “Well I hope Athens was more hospitable.”

Paul: “Not gonna lie. When I got there I was deeply distressed by all of the idols in the city. Everywhere I looked, there was a statue or a temple to a different God. I did spend some time in the synagogues and had some good conversations with Greeks who knew and loved God. And I also spent some time in the marketplace – that is where the philosophers hangout. All sorts. I got into some tense debates with Stoics and Epicureans. They thought I was just babbling at first, called me a “seed picker.” Like my words about the ministry of Jesus were just some random seeds I was picking up and strewing about, scraps I was taking from conversations I heard in the marketplace. But ultimately they were curious about this “foreign God” I was referring to and so they brought me to a meeting of the Areopagus for more discussion.

Kelce: “Wow. That’s a bit intimidating.”

Paul: “Not gonna lie. This was pretty intense. The Areopagus is the court and council. Originally they were the judicial body that decided all kinds of cases from homicide to offending the gods. Now they were mostly responsible for religion and morals. They considered themselves the custodians of the teachings that introduced new religions and foreign Gods to the Greeks.² Based on my experiences in Berea and Thessaloniki, I was pretty nervous. But they were genuinely curious. They asked, ‘May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.’ So I stood up in the meeting and said:

‘Athenians, I see how extremely spiritual you are in every way. 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. 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, nor is he served by human hands.’ Not gonna lie. It was a pretty powerful moment.

You see the Athenians were a people who at their hearts wanted to make meaning out the world in which they lived. The writer Luke who told this story in his writing The Acts of the Apostles, even included a note about them saying: “Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.” (17:21). And I was definitely telling them something new.”

² The NIV Study Bible. Notes on Acts 17. Zondervon, 1985 p1680

In my mind the podcast interview ends with an appreciation of Paul's authenticity in sharing the realities of his work as one bringing news of the promise and Good News of Christ to those who have ears to hear. And a promise to bring Paul back to share more about his journeys.

Paul came to Athens with a lot weighing on him. He has a particular way of being an evangelist - reaching out to people in ways that they can hear and appreciate based on their background. In the book of Romans, Paul says he wants to be all things to all people. To those of the Jewish faith he meets them in synagogues. To those who are Greek, Paul engages philosophers by using their own cultural references to teach about the true God.

Athenians - all humans really - have always had a deep awareness of God even if they cannot articulate it. God's power transcends human power and human made creations. This means that God's love is accessible to all. God's earthly plan for humanity surpasses earthly imagination. It is a gift of life. As the commentators note in the words of preparation I share in the bulletin: "A human relationship with God, then, isn't about relating to a far-off presence. Nor is it about relating to a merely "interior" one. Nor is it a matter of luring God to "come closer." If we take Paul's speech at the Areopagus seriously, God is already there, already here, already everywhere; it's we who need to become more "present" and attentive. The divine life is swirling in and through and around all things, all the time, all the way out to the edges of creation and beyond." ³

At the end of the day, it is about meaning making. As Paul strolls through Athens, probably with an eye out for those who were chasing him in other cities, he sees idols -statues dedicated to gods of the weather and the sea and fire and the moon; gods of music and harvest and war and love. He sees a people trying to make sense of the world in which they live. A world with competing and antagonistic tensions that seem to be battling out for supremacy. Will our crops die because there is draught this year? Will we succeed in battle? Will there be enough children to harvest the olives? Will the seas be favorable for fishing? And how do the people make sense – make meaning - of this confusing world? The Athenians try to make meaning of this world by building bigger statues and grander temples.

And here comes Paul, turning the world of the Athenians upside down. Telling them that the ultimate God, the one they do not yet know, the God who made the world and everything in it, does not live in shrines made by human hands. What a radical concept this must have been to the Athenians. Paul goes onto share that God doesn't require our sacrifices, doesn't need what is created by human hands, because God is the one gives us life – or as Paul says, "since God himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor God

³ The SALT Project Commentary. Called Alongside. Easter 6, May 9, 2020. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/5/9/called-alongside-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-easter-6>

made all peoples to inhabit the whole earth, and God allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps fumble about for him and find God—though indeed God is not far from each one of us.”

Talk about the ultimate meaning making. This God Paul shares with the Athenians brings the gift of life, for in God, we live and move and have our being and we are God’s offspring. This imagery of a God who bears us as a mother bears a child, of a relationship so intimately connected that breath is shared, that is so universal that every aspect in our lives falls under God’s protection; that is so precious that God took on flesh to walk among us and gave his life so that we might live. This cosmic, and yet oh so personal, God is a world away from the pantheon of the Greek gods, with their battles for supremacy and the need for statues carved from gold and temples made of marble to pay them homage.

This gift of life we receive from the one in which we live and move and have our being is the way we make meaning in our lives, the way we understand that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. That we are part of a shared community who make meaning together. This is one of the messages of Psalm 66 that you heard Siri read a piece of. Psalm 66 goes back and forth between language in the singular and the plural, alternating between personal songs of gratitude and communal songs of praise of the people of Israel. If this is a Sunday when it is difficult for me to worship, then the prayers of others will carry me.

The author Anne Lamott shares a similar insight in her book *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*. It is in the chapter titled “Why I Make Sam Go to Church” - Sam being her son. After stating that she makes him go because she can, she reflects:

“But that is only part of it. The main reason is that I want to give him what I have found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want — which is to say purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy — are people with a deep sense of spirituality. . . . They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful. I saw something once from the Jewish Theological Seminary that said, “A human life is like a single letter of the alphabet. It can be meaningless. Or it can be a part of a great meaning.”⁴

This is what Paul is wanting to the Athenians to understand. They are part of something more, something bigger than their statues and idols. They belong to a God who nurtures and extends grace to all. We are God’s offspring. The one who gives us a the ultimate gift of life, the mother of us all. Join me in prayer.

⁴ Anne Lamott. *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*. Pantheon Books, 1999. p100.