

“Searching for God”

Valley Presbyterian Church – July 18, 2021

8th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 66:1-4, 16-20

Rev. John Wahl

Acts 17:16-34

Introduction

One of the fundamental questions that all preachers need to answer for themselves is this: what should and what will my listeners hear? Each week, in this nation alone, there are hundreds of thousands of Christian preachers each offering different sermons to a particular people and place. You have to wonder, sometimes – as either the one offering or receiving the sermon – whether it may be more efficient or effective to have the same exact message repeated by many preachers, or to pick one outstanding speaker and broadcast it to multiple locations.

As the Christian church, we have generally chosen not to do it that way. We believe, instead, that the gospel is incarnational: it came to us – and still comes to us – through the body of Christ; it therefore sounds different every place it is told. This is because God’s message does not exist in isolation from human language, culture, context, and assumptions. It is always enfolded in some way. How could we understand it, or see it as good news, if it were not?

Today, we read the last of our ten selections from the book of Acts, the story of the birth of the church. We see Paul in Athens – the city of great thinkers and philosophers – sharing the good news in that particular culture and context. Not surprisingly, his sermon there is unlike any of his others; and likely different that anyone else would have preached, because – as it is important to remember – the gospel is the story of the living Christ in this place; told for us.

Read Acts 17:16-34

In our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), seminary graduates are required to take four tests – called ordination exams – in order to become a certified candidate for the Ministry of Word and Sacrament. Amber Balista – who will be with you over the next six weeks – recently graduated from seminary and is

now in the midst of taking these exams; she has passed two and has two more to go; so, please, pray for her. It is not an easy process.

One of these ordination exams— arguably the most difficult — is called biblical exegesis: test-takers are given a passage of scripture and asked to provide a written analysis — including translation and word studies from the original Hebrew or Greek — that would be used to write a sermon preached in a particular context.

Twenty-four years ago, as a recent seminary graduate sitting for the ordination exam in biblical exegesis, I was given this passage in Acts 17 to analyze and translate from the Greek. Thus, it has always been a memorable and meaningful passage for me; as well as for other Christian preachers who — over the centuries — have been reminded by it about the importance of knowing where and to whom you are speaking.

“While Paul was...in Athens,” Luke, the author of Acts, says, “he was deeply distressed.” The Greek word used here for distressed is *paroxyno*. It is a medical term to describe a seizure or an epileptic episode. Today, we use it for someone who gets angry or upset. *She had a fit*, we say; or, *he was irked*.¹

And for what reason was Paul deeply distressed? Because, in the city of Athens, he was surrounded by idols. Nothing would irk a Jewish Christian more than idolatry. It’s a violation of their oldest confession of faith, the Shema, which begins, “The Lord our God is one.” Our entire Judeo-Christian theology is rooted in monotheism: no other gods, no graven images.

Paul, formed by Torah sensibilities, is rightly greatly disturbed by the idolatry all around him, but he will do something absolutely stunning and marvelously productive with his outrage. Despite the fact that he was angered by the culture of his current context, he didn’t detach himself from the people. He did not turn away from these idolaters, but toward them.²

Typically, when Paul visited a new city, he would begin speaking in the synagogue. There he would find hospitality, a place to stay, food to eat, fellowship and community. There he would teach on the Sabbath and explain the Hebrew Scriptures. But Paul would not stay there; he would also go into the streets and markets to engage people there.

¹ Davis Campbell, “Street Preaching” from *Day1.org*

² Willie James Jennings, *Acts* from *Belief: a Theological Commentary on the Bible*

The philosophers in Athens – the Stoics and Epicureans – initially call Paul a “babbling;” more literally, a “seed picker.” They therefore use the image of a bird picking at the ground for random seeds, gulping some and discarding others. Other possible translations might be a “gossip” or a “bird-brain.”³ He is an outsider, a mystery; he hasn’t yet shown that he can speak their language.

Paul has to find a bridge; a cultural connection whereby he can begin to share with them the biblical truth. So, what does he do? Though he is irked by their idolatry, he actually uses it as a point of contact. He applauds the deep religious convictions of the Athenians, represented by their many idols; although his announcement might be tinged with a hint of sarcasm. Then, he picks out one idol he had seen that was erected to “an unknown god.” Paul latches onto this message to explain that the unknown god is, in reality, the one God who made everything; who is Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in shrines made by human hands. This God made all people in such a way that they would grope and search to find that God and no other; reassuring them that this God is “not far from each one of us.”

A biblical exegesis would show that Paul, in this sermon delivered to the philosophers in Athens, never directly quotes the Hebrew Scriptures – which his audience would not have known – but he does reference two Greek poets, which they would have known. Paul understands the culture and context of the people to whom he is speaking; and that while they are searching for God, they are looking in all the wrong places. He is disturbed by the idols all around him because they keep the Athenians from finding the one true God.

When his sermon was complete – after Paul finished telling them about the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ – Luke tells us about the various responses that every preacher is familiar seeing: some scoffed, others agreed to listen to him more, and still others would become believers. Like seed that is scattered on the ground in the Parable of the Sower, some of what Paul says finds good soil, some does not; some outcomes of sharing the gospel he will see, others will remain hidden.

The truth remains, though, that the gospel only exists in context. While everyone may be searching, the message must be tailored to a particular people and place. Our job, as the church, is to be translators of the gospel culturally and locally. When we speak, what will people hear? When we gather, what will people see? When we act, will it be to bring about hope, and justice, and peace, and love?

³ John Holbert, “Interreligious Dialogue or Interreligious Monologue?”

Over the next six weeks, while I am away on Sabbatical, Amber – with some other folks helping her – will be leading a worship series called “Gathering and Gospeling,” during which you will have opportunities to speak to one another about what the church, and the gospel, means to you in this place and time. My prayer is that this will be a time to listen and hear what God – who is not far from any of us – is up to in this place. Amen.