

Acts 17:22-31
May 29, '11

“SEARCHING FOR GOD”

(Before scripture)

OUR SCRIPTURE READING TODAY – AS IT HAS BEEN FOR SEVERAL WEEKS NOW - IS TAKEN FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS.

ACTS WAS WRITTEN BY LUKE & IS REALLY THE SECOND OF HIS TWO-VOLUME SET THAT CAN LEGITIMATELY GO BY THE TITLE “LUKE-ACTS.”

THE EVENT OF OUR SCRIPTURE IS ONE FROM THE MINISTRY OF PAUL WHEN HE WAS IN THE HISTORIC CITY OF ATHENS.

IN THE VERSES PRIOR TO TODAY’S PASSAGE, WE LEARN WHY PAUL WAS THERE.

HE HAD BEEN TAKEN THERE, BASICALLY, BECAUSE HE WASN’T WANTED IN THE PLACES HE HAD PREVIOUSLY BEEN & IT WAS SIMPLY FOR HIS OWN PROTECTION.

HE WAS WAITING FOR SILAS & TIMOTHY TO JOIN HIM & SO IT APPEARS AS THOUGH HE SIMPLY HAD SOME TIME ON HIS HANDS – TIME FOR WANDERING AROUND & SIGHTSEEING.

HE DOESN’T APPEAR TO HAVE HAD ANY PLANS TO EVANGELIZE.

BUT, THEN AGAIN, THIS IS PAUL WE’RE TALKING ABOUT HERE & PAUL WAS NEVER ONE TO PASS UP AN OPPORTUNITY TO PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL.

ATHENS HAD BEEN THE HOME OF THE GREAT PHILOSOPHERS FROM ARISTOTLE TO PLATO.

IT WAS WHERE THE GREAT DRAMATISTS WROTE THEIR PLAYS.

WHEN PAUL ARRIVED THERE, FOUR HUNDRED YEARS HAD PASSED SINCE THE GOLDEN DAYS OF THE CITY & YET ATHENS WAS STILL SEEN AS A GREAT INTELLECTUAL CENTER & EPITOMIZED THE CORE OF PAGAN CULTURE.

THIS EVENT TAKES PLACE AT THE AREOPAGUS – LOCATED ON A SMALL, ROCKY HILL NOT FAR FROM THE ACROPOLIS.

IN PAUL’S DAY, THE AREOPAGUS WAS A PLACE WHERE LAW, PHILOSOPHY & POLITICS WERE DISCUSSED.

THE STORY IS FOUND IN THE 17TH CHAPTER OF ACTS, VERSES 22-31. ACTS 17:22-31.

(After scripture)

PAUL IS ONE OF THE GIANTS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT.

HE’S KNOWN AS “THE APOSTLE TO THE GENTILES.”

WHEN WE THINK OF PAUL, WE THINK OF HIS MISSIONARY JOURNEYS.

WE THINK OF HIM CARRYING THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST BEYOND THE CONFINES OF ISRAEL & INTO THE REST OF THE KNOWN WORLD.

ASTOUNDINGLY, THOUGH, THIS IS THE ONE & ONLY TIME WE HAVE RECORD OF HIM ACTUALLY PREACHING TO GENTILES!

WHENEVER WE READ ABOUT PAUL PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL, IT’S ALWAYS TO A JEWISH AUDIENCE.

WE ONLY HAVE TO GO BACK TO THE BEGINNING OF THIS VERY CHAPTER – CHAPTER 17 IN ACTS – TO GET A PICTURE OF PAUL’S REGULAR PRACTICE.

IT SAYS, “NOW WHEN THEY PASSED THROUGH AMPHIPOLIS & APOLLONIA, THEY CAME TO THESSALONICA, WHERE THERE WAS A SYNAGOGUE OF THE JEWS. AND PAUL WENT IN, AS WAS HIS CUSTOM, AND FOR THREE WEEKS, HE ARGUED WITH THEM FROM THE SCRIPTURES, EXPLAINING & PROVING THAT IT WAS NECESSARY FOR THE CHRIST TO SUFFER AND TO RISE FROM THE DEAD...”

THIS WAS WHAT PAUL DID – HE WENT INTO A NEW PLACE, FOUND THE LOCAL SYNAGOGUE & TOLD THEM ABOUT JESUS.

SO PAUL, THE APOSTLE TO THE GENTILES, WAS REALLY DOING SOMETHING HERE THAT WAS COMPLETELY OUT OF THE ORDINARY FOR HIM.

UNLIKE PAUL’S REGULAR AUDIENCE, THESE ATHENIANS KNOW NOTHING OF THE PROMISES MADE TO ABRAHAM.

IN FACT, IT’S QUITE LIKELY THEY’VE NEVER EVEN *HEARD* OF ABRAHAM!

THEY DON’T KNOW ABOUT MOSES OR THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OR THE EXODUS.

THEY DON’T KNOW ABOUT THE HOPED-FOR MESSIAH IN THE HISTORY OF JUDAISM.

THIS IS A BRAND-NEW EXPERIENCE FOR PAUL & YET ONE HE CAN’T PASS UP BECAUSE OF WHAT HE OBSERVES ON HIS SIGHTSEEING TOUR OF THE GREAT CITY OF ATHENS.

HE SEES ALTAR AFTER ALTAR & GOD AFTER GOD & FINALLY, THERE’S ONE THAT JUST SENDS HIM OVER THE EDGE.

HE SEES AN ALTAR WITH THE INSCRIPTION – “*TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.*”

HERE HE IS – IN THE MIDDLE OF A CITY THAT’S OVERRUN WITH VARIOUS GODS & IT APPEARS AS THOUGH SOMEONE IS JUST TRYING TO COVER ALL THE BASES.

“*IT COULD BE THIS GOD – OR MAYBE THIS ONE – OR MAYBE THIS ONE. OR...MAYBE IT’S NONE OF THEM! WE’LL JUST NOT TAKE ANY CHANCES HERE, AND LABEL THIS ALTAR TO AN ‘UNKNOWN GOD.’*”

PAUL APPLAUDS THE PEOPLE FOR THEIR BELIEF.

HE MEETS THEM RIGHT WHERE THEY ARE IN THEIR SEARCH FOR GOD.

HE SAYS IT’S A GOOD THING THEY’RE DOING IN SEARCHING FOR THE ANSWERS TO LIFE’S ULTIMATE MYSTERIES.

HE EVEN QUOTES SOME OF THEIR GREAT HISTORICAL POETS & PHILOSOPHERS.

BUT THEN, HE TELLS THEM THE TRUTH.

HE TELLS THEM THAT WHAT THEY’RE SEARCHING FOR HAS ALREADY BEEN FOUND!

AND HE TELLS THEM ABOUT JESUS.

I THINK SOME OF US TODAY WOULD BE MORE COMFORTABLE IF PAUL HAD SAID SOMETHING LIKE – “*YOU KNOW, YOU PEOPLE ARE TO BE APPLAUDED FOR YOUR SEARCHING. YOU’RE DOING A GOOD THING BY BEING SO VERY*

SPIRITUAL IN YOUR APPROACH TO LIFE. I'M NOT HERE TO TELL YOU YOU'RE WRONG BECAUSE MAYBE YOU'RE NOT. MAYBE YOU DQ HAVE – FOR YOU - THE RIGHT ANSWERS TO ALL THE DEEPEST QUESTIONS OF LIFE.

WHO AM I TO IMPOSE MY RELIGION ON YOU?

ALL RELIGIONS ARE GOOD. ALL ROADS LEAD TO THE SAME PLACE.

IT WOULD BE ARROGANT OF ME TO SAY THAT, BECAUSE I BELIEVE IN JESUS, YOU HAVE TO BELIEVE IN HIM, TOO.”

YEAH, THAT’S WHAT MANY OF US WOULD RATHER PAUL HAD SAID – AND CERTAINLY THAT’S WHAT MANY OF US WOULD SAY TODAY TO SOMEONE OF A FAITH DIFFERENT FROM OURS.

JESUS MAY BE THE ANSWER FOR ME, BUT NOT FOR EVERYONE.

IN THIS PLURALISTIC AGE & SOCIETY IN WHICH WE LIVE, IT JUST SEEMS LIKE THE RIGHT THING TO DO.

MAYBE – BUT MAYBE NOT.

HAVE YOU EVER HEARD THE SAYING THAT “JUST BECAUSE YOU’RE PARANOID DOESN’T MEAN THEY’RE NOT OUT TO GET YOU?”

I THINK THERE’S SOMETHING INSTRUCTIVE IN THAT STATEMENT FOR US WHEN IT COMES TO FAITH.

BUT BEFORE LOOKING AT IT IN TERMS OF FAITH, LET’S LOOK AT IT IN TERMS OF SOMETHING ELSE.

TODAY IS MEMORIAL DAY SUNDAY.

I’M A STICKLER ABOUT HOLIDAYS LIKE MEMORIAL DAY.

I DON’T MEAN TO OFFEND ANYONE WHO VIEWS IT IN A DIFFERENT WAY THAN I DO.

BUT MEMORIAL DAY ISN’T VETERAN’S DAY.

VETERAN’S DAY IS DIFFERENT.

VETERAN’S DAY IS A DAY TO HONOR ALL THOSE WHO HAVE SERVED OUR NATION IN THE ARMED FORCES.

NEITHER IS MEMORIAL DAY INDEPENDENCE DAY.

INDEPENDENCE DAY IS THE DAY WE CELEBRATE THE ANNIVERSARY OF OUR INDEPENDENCE FROM FOREIGN RULE.

THAT’S NOT WHAT MEMORIAL DAY IS.

AND NEITHER IS IT SIMPLY A DAY TO REMEMBER LOVED ONES WHO HAVE DIED.

MEMORIAL DAY HAS A SPECIFIC MEANING.

IT’S A DAY TO REMEMBER & HONOR THOSE WHO DIED IN SERVICE TO OUR COUNTRY.

AGAIN, I DON’T MEAN TO OFFEND ANYONE WHO VIEWS IT DIFFERENTLY, BUT, TO ME, IT CHEAPENS THE DAY IF WE TURN IT INTO WHATEVER WE WANT IT TO BE.

THIS IS A DAY SPECIFICALLY SET ASIDE TO REMEMBER & HONOR THOSE WHO DIED IN SERVICE TO OUR COUNTRY.

I THINK THEY DESERVE THAT FROM US.

BUT THE ONE THING WE CAN SAY ABOUT ALL THREE OF THOSE CELEBRATIONS – MEMORIAL DAY, VETERAN’S DAY & INDEPENDENCE DAY – IS THAT THEY ARE DAYS THAT MAKE US FEEL GOOD ABOUT BEING AMERICANS.

THEY’RE DAYS THAT – SOME WOULD SAY – MAKE US *PROUD* TO BE AMERICANS.

I’D RATHER SAY THEY ARE DAYS THAT MAKE US THANKFUL TO BE AMERICANS.

BUT THEN, IN OUR MORE REFLECTIVE MOMENTS, WE WONDER IF WE AREN’T THANKFUL TO BE AMERICANS SIMPLY BECAUSE WE LIVE IN THE UNITED STATES.

AND WE WONDER IF EVERYONE – IN EVERY COUNTRY ON EARTH – DOESN’T FEEL EXACTLY AS WE DO ABOUT OUR OWN COUNTRY.

IN THE WORLD OF SOCIOLOGY, THERE IS SOMETHING KNOWN AS ETHNOCENTRISM.

IT’S THE BELIEF IN THE INHERENT SUPERIORITY OF ONE’S OWN ETHNIC GROUP OR CULTURE OR, IN THIS CASE, ONE’S OWN NATION.

WE THINK WE’RE THE BEST & THE WAY WE DO THINGS IS RIGHT SIMPLY BECAUSE WE LIVE HERE.

LET ME GO BACK, THOUGH, TO THAT STATEMENT ABOUT PARANOIA.

“JUST BECAUSE YOU’RE PARANOID DOESN’T MEAN THEY’RE NOT OUT TO GET YOU.”

THE COROLLARY TO THAT WOULD BE – *“JUST BECAUSE WE’RE AMERICANS DOESN’T MEAN WE DON’T LIVE IN THE GREATEST NATION ON EARTH.”*

IT’S NOT BEING ETHNOCENTRIC IF IT’S TRUE.

BUT WHAT DOES IT MEAN IF IT IS TRUE.

IF THIS IS, IN FACT, THE GREATEST NATION ON EARTH, WE HAVE AN OVERWHELMING RESPONSIBILITY AS AMERICANS.

WE HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY THAT NO ONE ELSE HAS.

WE HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO BE FAR MORE GIVING & FAR MORE LOVING THAN ANY NATION ON EARTH.

AND NO MATTER HOW GIVING & HOW LOVING ANY OF US *THINKS* WE ARE, I WOULD SUGGEST THAT IT PROBABLY ISN’T ENOUGH.

NOW LET’S GO BACK TO PAUL & HIS MESSAGE TO THE ATHENIANS.

HE TELLS THEM THEIR SEARCHING FOR GOD IS A GOOD THING.

HE TELLS THEM THEY’RE ON THE RIGHT TRACK.

BUT THEN HE TELLS THEM ABOUT JESUS.

HE SAYS THAT GOD *“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.”*

HE DOESN’T SAY ALL RELIGIONS ARE THE SAME OR THAT SOMEONE’S RELIGION IS FINE FOR *THEM* EVEN IF IT DOESN’T INCLUDE THIS MAN WHO WILL JUDGE THE WORLD IN RIGHTEOUSNESS.

AND HERE'S THE RELIGIOUS COROLLARY TO THAT STATEMENT ABOUT PARANOIA.

JUST BECAUSE YOU HAPPEN TO BE A CHRISTIAN DOESN'T MEAN YOU *DON'T* HAVE THE ONE TRUE ANSWER TO ALL OF HUMANITY'S SEARCH FOR GOD.

YES, THERE *IS* THE POSSIBILITY OF THINKING WHAT WE BELIEVE IS THE ONE & ONLY WAY TO THINK SIMPLY BECAUSE IT'S *OUR* WAY.

THERE *IS* THE POSSIBILITY OF BEING ETHNOCENTRIC WHEN IT COMES TO OUR BELIEF SYSTEM.

BUT I THINK, FOR MANY OF US, THERE'S AN EVEN GREATER POSSIBILITY OF DOING PRECISELY THE OPPOSITE!

YOU SEE, I THINK WE HAVE A TENDENCY TO DISCOUNT OUR FAITH SIMPLY BECAUSE IT'S OURS!

THAT MAY SEEM PARADOXICAL & YET I BELIEVE IT'S TRUE.

THERE ARE FAR TOO MANY CHRISTIANS WHO ARE BASICALLY SAYING, "*WITH THOUSANDS UPON THOUSANDS OF VARIOUS BELIEFS IN THE WORLD, IS IT POSSIBLE THAT I WOULD BE SO LUCKY AS TO HAVE FOUND THE ONLY ONE THAT'S TRUE?*"

YES – IT *IS* POSSIBLE & IT SHOULD BE FAR MORE A CAUSE FOR THANKFULNESS & EXHILARATION THAN SKEPTICISM & DOUBTING.

AND – AS IS TRUE OF US AS AMERICANS – IT SHOULD BE CAUSE FOR FEAR & TREMBLING AS WELL.

THAT FEAR & TREMBLING ARE A RECOGNITION OF THE TREMENDOUS RESPONSIBILITY IT PLACES UPON US.

IT CARRIES WITH IT THE RESPONSIBILITY TO BE FAR MORE GIVING & FAR MORE LOVING THAN THE REST OF THE WORLD.

IT'S THE RESPONSIBILITY TO BE OPEN TO THE POSSIBILITY OF LEARNING WHAT SOMEONE OF ANOTHER FAITH HAS TO TEACH YOU.

IT'S THE RESPONSIBILITY TO BE HUMBLE & OPEN-MINDED & OPEN-HEARTED.

IT'S THE RESPONSIBILITY TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT YOU DON'T HAVE A MONOPOLY ON THE TRUTH & THERE ARE ANY NUMBER OF ELEMENTS OF FAITH ABOUT WHICH YOU COULD BE WRONG.

YOUR SEARCHING FOR GOD HAS LED YOU TO JESUS CHRIST.

HE IS THE ONE WHOM GOD "*HAS APPOINTED TO JUDGE THE WORLD IN RIGHTEOUSNESS.*"

WHAT A PRIVILEGE & WHAT A BLESSING THAT THIS TRUTH HAS BEEN REVEALED TO YOU.

IT'S A PRIVILEGE & A BLESSING – AND A CHALLENGE & A RESPONSIBILITY.

THE TRUTH OF WHICH PAUL SPEAKS HERE IS THAT GOD HAS, AS HE SAYS, "*GIVEN ASSURANCE TO ALL BY RAISING JESUS FROM THE DEAD.*"

THE ASSURANCE IS *TO ALL*.

NOT JUST TO *SOME*.

NOT JUST TO THOSE WHOSE FAITH IN CHRIST IS EXACTLY LIKE MINE.

NOT JUST TO THOSE WHOSE EVERY POLITICAL & THEOLOGICAL CONVICTION MATCHES MINE.

IT'S TO ALL.

WE HAVE A STORY TO TELL TO THE NATIONS.

WITH THE PRIVILEGE & BLESSING WE HAVE RECEIVED, MAY WE ALSO ACCEPT THE CHALLENGE & RESPONSIBILITY OF SHARING THAT STORY.

AND AS WE DO SO, MAY WE LIVE MORE HUMBLLY, MORE GRACIOUSLY, MORE SENSITIVELY, MORE LOVINGLY, MORE PEACEFULLY, MORE OPENLY THAN ANYTHING THE WORLD HAS EVER KNOWN. AMEN.

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