

Acts 17:22-31 New International Version (NIV)

²² Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

²⁴ “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. ²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. ²⁶ From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. ²⁷ God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸ ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’

²⁹ “Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. ³⁰ In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹ For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

1 Peter 3:13-22 New International Version (NIV)

¹³ Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? ¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.” ¹⁵ But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. ¹⁷ For it is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. ¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. ¹⁹ After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits— ²⁰ to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, ²¹ and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus

Christ,²² who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

John 14:15-21 New International Version (NIV)

Jesus Promises the Holy Spirit

¹⁵ “If you love me, keep my commands. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— ¹⁷ the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. ¹⁸ I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. ¹⁹ Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. ²¹ Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.”

Sermon

One of the realities of this world is that regardless of their origins or lifestyles a central feature of life for the vast majority of people is their search for God. Sometimes we earnestly look for Him, seeking to create space in our lives to know Him. Sometimes we just know that something is missing, regardless of family, friends, jobs and material stuff crowding us. In today's reading Paul finds this to be the case with the citizens of Athens. They know that their pantheon of gods is missing something and have left a place for the god they missed. In their hearts they know that this is God, because just leaving the space open reveals how lacking their gods are. Paul speaks passionately here and elsewhere in his travels and letters because he knows God and who He is. He knows the truth of Christ and what it means to us to have the Messiah in your life – or not, since Paul had both experiences. Just imagine yourself in a similar position.

Peter's letter today is of the same tone. The real crux of his text is the advice to be able to speak to who God is and what He has done.

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.

Peter follows with the injunction to do so with gentleness – compassion. His point is not to get into an argument or debate, but simply to testify to God in your life.

John's Gospel text today is about the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus tells the disciples that they know the Spirit because the Spirit is with them. Just as importantly, Jesus tells them that because he lives, so do they. Life is not independent of God – it is only in Him and when we think otherwise we are deluding ourselves – thinking that the material stuff, or even jobs or even family is what life is about. None of that is. It is about God with us. What He has done and does with us. His presence in us blesses us with what we find pleasure in – family, job and sometimes some material thing – but only in the context of whatever it is as a blessing from Him. For example, if we look at family as blessing from God to us, then that deepens its importance and meaning. Just consider your daily life if you regularly embrace that your spouse, children, parents or friends are there as gifts from God. They are indeed treasures to begin with, but coming from God those gifts become sacred – and we should treat them accordingly.

How do we live this in our own lives?

First, remember the people of Athens and Paul. The Athenians came to the meeting place to discuss who the gods were. They were seeking truth in their lives and, being good Greeks, went about it with their intellect. We, as their Western cultural successors tend to do the same. Paul, in a letter to the Corinthians explains this:

Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom.

Paul knew the fallacy of all this – the life of Jesus abounded with signs that the Judeans ignored and the Greeks kept looking for it in their intellects. We experience God. We experience Him in us and in our lives. In the world around us. And so we know Him because of this – not because we have reasoned our way through some mathematical style proof.

Second, we must have our eyes open, heads up and hearts open to experience and see God. If we surround ourselves with what the world offers – even the 'good' stuff that could be our calling – it soon preoccupies us and we cease seeing God in it. For example, we are now caught up in trying to maintain the Food Bank for the community. We have perceived a growing need and seek to meet it. But we have to keep ourselves in check and not get carried away with the action and our role, but in the presence of God. We do things not because they are good to do but because we seek to witness to what God is doing. So, when we are able to provide food, we do so because God has richly blessed us as a church and community. He has blessed us with the provision of resources that we did not

have before COVID. He has blessed us with volunteers. He has blessed us with partnerships that facilitate the provision of food even when the expected systems fail. This is not our doing – it is all His – and we have to remember that.

Finally, we must be able and willing to testify of Him. We must set ourselves aside and focus on Him. That does not mean we go off alone and meditate by ourselves (though that can be a soul cleansing exercise), but it does mean that as we go through daily life we remember the Author of it. The world does not much care about our personal opinions, but the world is seeking meaning, which means it is seeking the truth of life, which means it is seeking God. And we know that in seeking God, we find Him through Jesus the Messiah. It is not about the conventional American Protestant notion of being saved for the hereafter – it is about the reality of being with God now and forever. Remember what the Westminster catechism tells us:

The chief end of mankind is to glorify God and enjoy His presence forever.

Forever began yesterday, not tomorrow. Sit down today and ask yourself the question, what has God done in my life and where do I find Him?

We live in the blessings and power of God by His grace alone, through the faith alone he gives us, by the atoning work of Christ alone and through the knowledge that Scripture alone gives us. All this is so that we may live to give glory to God alone. Amen.