

The Unknown God  
Acts 17.22-31  
May 21, 2017  
Easter 6A  
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott  
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

Two weeks ago over lunch, Temple Sinai's Rabbi Matt Reimer asked me, "Did you hear this guy on NPR telling Christians to retreat from the culture and live apart from the world? He says it's the only hope for the future of Christianity. What do you think about that?" I didn't know anything of it and turned to OnPoint.org to find the May 9, 2017, interview. Rod Dreher of Baton Rouge has written a book called *The Benedict Option* and was recently interviewed by On Point's Tom Ashbrook about his belief that Christians need to accept the United States as decidedly post-Christian and reorganize themselves in hopes of saving their faith tradition.

Ashbrook curiously began, "If you've ever wondered if American culture has drifted into a consumerist, values-free, community-starved dead-end, Rod Dreher is right there with you. If you're Christian, he's got a piece of advice: get out. Retreat, like the monks of the Middle Ages. You don't have to go to a monastery or the hills, he says, but it's time to build an ark of community and intentional living against a flood of secular culture. A lot of Christians and others will roll their eyes. This hour On Point, Rod Dreher says build an ark."<sup>1</sup>

Dreher believes Christians need to be deeply rooted in Christian community (by which I think he means physically living close to one another and spending significant, regular time in one another's homes), educating children in private, Christian schools, and devoting steady attendance and involvement in Christian church in order to maintain the Christian faith in a post-Christian Western world. Pushed on this point by Ashbrook as being disconnected from much of the teaching of scripture that points to purposeful engagement in the world, Dreher looks instead to monks in the Benedictine tradition who have closed time to honor their monastic vocation in order to be holy for others in the times the doors are open.

It's a curious notion to retreat from the world, educate your children apart from children of other faith and no faith, inform yourself with information that begins with a Christian lens and worldview. Maybe there's even something particularly tempting about

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2017/05/09/christian-life-america-modern>

structuring one's life around what is known and familiar and limiting input from conflicting, outside sources. While surely we agree that we love our families, want the best for our children, and desire to hold closely to the message of Christ, I suspect Mr. Dreher and I disagree about just how we seek to live out each one of those points. But I found myself thinking of this interview repeatedly in recent days as I immersed myself in Paul's travels and the world of 1st century Athens. How do we find truth? Who owns the right to it? Can we build shrines to it and worship truth there? Can we harness truth and hide it away in hopes of protecting it? How can we know God's ways? Where can we find God's ways? And does God need us to feverishly protect God's ways?

About 500 years before St. Benedict hid away in a cave above a lake just outside of Rome for private prayer and study, Paul was traveling through Greece meeting with Jewish and Gentile communities to teach, preach, and share his experience of Jesus. Paul ended up in Athens because he was in danger, and friends who cared about his safety escorted him there. His passionate heart and big mouth had gotten him in serious trouble up to this point. In fact, one man who housed him was dragged into court along with a group of Paul's supporters, and the whole lot of them were referred to as "people who have been turning the world upside down." People who cared for Paul and wanted him to be safe took him to Athens and told him to lay low for a while. To get quiet. To treat that time as something of a retreat where he could reflect, pray, and wait.

While he waited, he walked the city. He stared at monument after monument to gods and goddesses. He grew agitated by the images looming over this beautiful town. All of this walking and wandering and noticing and studying needed an extroverted outlet, so he didn't lay low at all. Instead, he walked some more and found a synagogue, and it wasn't too long before he was inside and arguing with the people there about their interpretation and experience of scripture. On his walks, he went to the marketplace every day and spoke and argued with the people there, too. He debated with philosophers who called him a "babbler" because he could not stay quiet. He could not withdraw. He engaged, he connected, he laughed and ate and debated. He gave himself fully to the people he met while remaining rooted in the story that shaped his life.

He made a big enough impact that eventually, we read in verse 19, the Athenians took to him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, "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." Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new. (v. 21) That's Luke's way of telling us that this crowd was, to paraphrase a Sufi teacher, digging thousands

of wells just a foot deep and never digging deeply enough to hit water. Paul seemed to be the newest well, and they were ready to dig.<sup>2</sup>

The curiosity and novelty of Paul's passionate heart and big mouth led him to the Areopagus, a public space known from Greek mythology as the location where the gods tried Ares for murder. A site where the ancient council of elders would gather. A site where judgments were handed down for various corruptions. Standing there at that important rock, you can see the entire city of Athens before you from the amazing vantage point on the hill some call Mars Hill.

Paul went with the people, people who did not share his faith story or his worldview, and he hiked up the hill to this historically significant and culturally important site. With them he looked over the beautiful city they loved and called home. They talked as they walked, and these sophisticated, learned people were either fascinated or amused by him and wanted to hear more. And when they asked him to say more about who he was and what he believed, he started by telling them their own story.

Pastor David Campbell notes, "in spite of the fact that Paul was irked by the culture, he didn't detach himself from the people. He engaged the community. It's impossible to be a witness unless you engage the culture. It's impossible to influence the world if you never leave the church. Typically, when Paul visited a new town, he would begin at the synagogue. There he would find hospitality. There he would find a place to stay, food to eat, a bed to rest, fellowship, community. There he would teach on the Sabbath and explain the Scriptures. But Paul would not remain at the synagogue. He would actually go into the marketplace, into the street, and this is where trouble begins. As long as we keep our faith private and confined to the church, we are alright, but when we go public, there's trouble."<sup>3</sup> Paul practiced a faith that demanded a particular kind of involvement in the world based on the skills and gifts and talents that he possessed. He gave himself fully to that unfolding process even though it made others nervous.

Because he had been walking and watching, listening and debating, Paul had a good sense of who his audience was. He began first by talking about the significance of statues across the city of Athens. The public statues of a city speak to the values and priorities of the people, as we have come to know quite keenly here in New Orleans in

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<sup>2</sup> "to quote a Sufi of the last century (the Shaykh ad-Darqāwī) 'like a man who tries to find water by digging a little here and a little there and who will die of thirst; whereas a man who digs deep in one spot, trusting in the Lord and relying on Him, will find water; he will drink and give others to drink' (Letters of a Sufi Master (Perennial Books, London, 1969) p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> [http://day1.org/3827-street\\_preaching](http://day1.org/3827-street_preaching)

recent days. Paul had studied the stone images hovering everywhere, paying close attention to the story they told with their presence, and he was drawn to one referred to as the unknown god or the god who is not known.

In their expansive spirituality and a broad acceptance of ideas, a marker had been erected by the Athenians to the unknown. Some say it was the old story about a plague that wouldn't leave and then was lifted after a sacrifice on a certain hill. Whatever the story, they marked that spot with an openness to that which cannot be named or known. And Paul stepped into that openness with the story of one who breathed the world into being and in whom we continue to live and move.

Paul speaks to art and responds with poetry as he expands the space for the people around him to stretch their imaginations to explore the unknown. Of course, in thinking on this I was drawn back to our study on the psalms and the lesson I shared on poetic imagination. Specifically, the words of Maria Howe to Krista Tippett as she described becoming a poet in her 30s.<sup>4</sup>

I didn't know one could be a poet and live. As a child I would read the old Harvard Classics. We had them in our living room. I would pore through these dusty books and try to find language that was adequate to experience, or try to find language that could somehow hold the unsayable. And some of the Mass did that. Some of the parables do that, you know. I love the parables and the stories of Noah, and Abraham, and Isaac, and all those great old stories. They've struck me as poems. They hold so much mystery and complexity. A story is all there, but we know that the story, the real story, is inarticulate. And I love that. I love the spaces in between what happens.

Krista Tippett then asks, "I wonder how you experienced and thought about what it is about poetry that we can't do with other kinds of language, and what need it is salving in us?" To which Howe replies:

Well, poetry holds what can't be said. It can't be paraphrased. It can't be translated. The great poetry I love holds the mystery of being alive. It holds a kind of basket of words that feels inevitable. There's great, great, great prose, ...But poetry has a kind of trancelike quality. It has the quality of a spell...this is what we all need to walk around with, a handful of counter spells. And poetry, when you think of its roots, is that.

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<sup>4</sup> Krista Tippett, *Becoming Wise*, pp. 43-45

*"Making magic with words," Tippett adds.*

That's what Paul does at the Areopagus. He looks to the images of the city, finds a creative opening, and makes magic with words in hopes of expanding the imaginations of the people who have invited him to speak. The source of life and breath and all things is the one who is unknown, and we who stand here together looking over the city, Paul said, are the offspring of the unknown god.

An unknown god. An inarticulate story. The space in between what happens. The people are grasping at something true but think that truth exists in a space beyond themselves. In his commentary on Acts 17, Mikeal Parsons makes this observation, "Here then is the basis for Paul's attack on idolatry which follows: 'we are God's offspring'; thus, humans are the true image of God. Therefore no image made 'by a person's skill and creativity's could possibly be anything other than a distortion of the image of the one, true God'"<sup>5</sup>

Magic with words. Paul searches the city. He understands the people's effort to put meaning in anything and everything no matter how fleeting. He sees them throw energy and allegiance to objects and places beyond themselves. He isn't afraid of their efforts, though. He doesn't run to the synagogue and tell them to make a border around themselves and hide from the Gentile Athenians. He honors the search and taps into what is good and true in all those whom he meets. Then he tells them that the God who they do not know has made an image, too, and the image of the one, true God is not found in a sculpture but in the living, searching, moving humanity—the children of the unknown one. The unknown god isn't marked by a statue, the unknown god is marked by the very breath of your life.

Centuries later, our quest is the same. We want to believe our searching will lead us to find a truth out there that is separate from the lives we know. Or maybe we think we have own the truth and need to circle around it to protect it and guard it lest the secular world take it away from us and dismiss our story to a museum as another closed chapter in history. The true image of God is not far off to be discovered out there and too grand to be owned in here. The true image of God cannot be pinned down by an idol or hidden away and contained in a cave above a lake or protected by an ark of Christian community. The true image of God has been breathed into each one of us, undeserving as we may think we are, from the beginning of all things.

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2068](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2068)

Unlike the Athenians gathered with Paul at the Areopagus, it is not that we have not known this truth about God, it is that we have forgotten. We forget again and again. We forget the poetry of One who hovered over the nothingness and breathed and spoke as light and dark and land and sky and water formed. We forget the story that tells us this One breathed into holy soil and formed our very beings. We think surely the story got it wrong. How could the very thing we seek and crave already exist right here within us? Instead, we decide we are unworthy of that legacy and begin to chase after idols in their myriad forms.

But this I proclaim to you, the one in whom you live and move and have your being is near. The one who seems unknowable wants to be known by you. The one in whose image you were created can be known by you. Listen to Paul's invitation to release and return. Release the chasing and anxiety that some truer way or better solution is around the corner. Return to the one in whose image you were made. The truth you chase after, the path you want to find, the wholeness you seek is as close to you as the next inhale you will take to fill your lungs. This is the good news of God. This is the grace by which we are being made whole. Amen.