

God, For Whom Humankind is Groping

Text: Acts 17:22-23

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Men of Athens, I see that in everything that concerns religion you are uncommonly scrupulous. ... What you worship but do not know - this is what I now proclaim. Acts 17:22-23

The season is Epiphany, the word is manifestation, the light has dawned. Jesus said, "I am the Light of the world." We've just celebrated that the word became flesh and dwelt among us, and John says, "We beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten Son of God, full of grace and truth." Jesus in human flesh. We look into the face of Jesus and we see into the heart of God, and the great truth of the season of Epiphany is the fact that the Light has come. The Light has dawned in our world of darkness; the Light is shining, and the darkness will never overcome it.

Epiphany, a season of manifestation, and the good news is that, in the face of Jesus Christ, we have an insight into the very heart of God. That wonderful truth which we celebrate annually is celebrated in this season as a truth that is to be shared with the nations, for the Gospel of Jesus Christ that begins with the Incarnation of the Word concludes with the Resurrection and the Great Commission which says to the Church, "Go into all the world, to all nations, preaching the Gospel, telling the story of Jesus." And Jesus said, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

So, the Christian faith has always been a missionary faith. It has always been a people with a mission. It has always been the calling of the Church to share the good news because the Church believed that in Jesus Christ, in that particular and localized revelation of God, there was the manifestation of a worldwide mission and a universal purpose. In that little, narrow line of Israel's history, and in that event that is centered in Jesus, the Church always understood that what God was about was not simply Israel, and not simply events of that localized community gathered around Jesus, but what God was doing in Israel and in Jesus was something that had the world in mind, that the purpose of God was to bring Light to the nations. So, we have that particular story with its universal

impact and Epiphany is the season in which we celebrate the fact that Light has come into the world, and we hear that call to be Light to the nations.

The whole New Testament is really the response of that early Christian community to its conviction that, in Jesus, the one True God, the Creator of the whole of Reality, had become clearly focused. Paul is converted, and Paul becomes the great Apostle to the Gentiles. The major bulk of the New Testament is simply the story of how Paul took this message of Jesus and the Resurrection and began to go to the world. In his heart there was a yearning to reach earth's farthest bounds. He wrote letters to the congregations that he founded, constituting a large portion of the New Testament, which is the story of the expansion of this Christian movement flowing out of the wake of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

So, we stand in that great tradition that has found, in the face of Jesus, the heart of God, the good news that is to be trumpeted to all people everywhere. Today we find Paul in Athens. Now, if that isn't spectacular! Athens! I've been to Athens. It's still impressive. The very ruins of Athens speak of another age and another day. There are few places on earth that can compare with Athens. Maybe Rome, eventually, and certainly we would say Jerusalem. But, when you say Jerusalem and Rome and Athens, you've said about all there is to say about Western civilization. I am parochial in that I don't know much about the great Eastern civilizations, but I know that Athens was that place where in 500 B.C., in the Golden Age of Athens, there were philosophic discussions which still today are as relevant and meaningful as they were then. Someone has said that all of Western philosophy is but a series of footnotes to the dialogues of Socrates and the writings of Plato and Aristotle. It was an amazing phenomenon. And there's Paul in Athens, at the Areopagus, at the very center where the Council met and ruled the city. There's Paul, 500 years after the Golden Age of Pericles, Plato and Socrates but, nonetheless, Athens was still the place where they loved to discuss, to dialogue, to debate.

You don't get a very positive picture from Paul in his account in the 17th chapter of Acts. With all of the magnificence of the temples and statues and the artwork, I'm disappointed with Paul, frankly. He looked at it all and got disgusted. I just wish he could have said, "Wow." But, he was so fanatically concentrated on Jesus that he came to that city and he saw it all and he saw it as a manifestation of a human hunger for God, totally covered with darkness. And so, he went to the marketplace and up and down the streets and in the synagogue where a few Jews were gathered, and to everybody to whom he spoke, he spoke of Jesus. Finally they said, well, why don't you come right up to the Areopagus itself and we'll hear you out. Athens was always open, looking for a new idea. What a moment. What a moment. What an audacious person this Paul was! He is at the very center of civilization, of culture, of education, of enlightenment, and he's not intimidated! He's not even impressed. He's got something to tell Athens that Athens never dreamed of.

He begins to preach. Thank God he was sensitive in relating positively to his audience. He commended them. He said, "I see that in things religious you are uncommonly scrupulous. You folks are serious. Everywhere I see the manifestations of a religious quest or hunger." Good preacher that he was, he had in his introduction something to hook them from which to move on into his message. He said, "I saw a statue with an inscription to the unknown God." The Athenians were uncommonly scrupulous. Just in case there was a god they might have missed, so that he wouldn't be miffed, they raised a statue to the unknown god. Paul says (now, this is audacity), "This unknown god whom you worship, I proclaim!" Wow! Now, there's confidence, there's courage, there's certitude. Do you get the picture? This is Athens, folks. This is the Areopagus; this is the center of enlightenment, and here is this Apostle of Jesus daring to stand there and to say what you are searching for and don't know I proclaim.

He went on to say he was talking about the One true God Who created the heavens and the earth, the One true God Who couldn't be visualized by something created with human hands, by human imagination; the God to Whom we can give nothing, but Who is the giver of all things; the God Who breathes life into all life, the source of all reality. This God, Paul says, "In whom we live and move and have our being," quoting some stoic philosophical thought, "I proclaim." Quoting one of their own poets, "We are God's offspring," he preaches the God of Jesus. This God Who is the Fountainhead of all Reality, this God I proclaim to you. This God, Who is responsible for all that is and all life, this God has now at this critical moment in human history and in the whole cosmic drama, revealed Himself in the face of Jesus, and this God will now call all peoples to account. The time of ignorance, the times gone by, God in His forbearance, has overlooked, but He calls all people now to repent, that is, to change their mind and change their thinking, to open up to the truth. And He has demonstrated the certainty of it by raising Jesus from the dead. Paul, starting with the statue to the unknown god, moving to the Creator of the heavens and earth, ends up preaching Jesus and the Resurrection.

There was quite a stir. There were those that mocked and laughed, but some believed. There was a little Christian community that was founded in Athens. Paul, convinced that the one true and Eternal God had now shown the light of the revelation of Himself in the face of Jesus, dared to go right into the lion's den and proclaim Jesus and the Resurrection. That's really something. It is really a dramatic moment. I stand in awe of Paul. I would feel my own knees knocking. But, he did it, and what he did is still our calling to do, because it is our conviction that the Creator God has given life and light to the world in Jesus Christ, and this good news needs to be shared with people who are thrashing about in all sorts of human bondage, darkness, superstition, fear, and guilt.

There is good news to tell; the Light has come. Jesus reflects the very heart of God, and God is good and God is full of grace, and God has a purpose to redeem the world. That's why the Church has always been a missionary enterprise,

because there is this marvelous message to proclaim. And God knows in our day, too, this message needs to be proclaimed. Our day of enlightenment, our day of advanced scientific understanding and amazing technological breakthrough is still searching for this word.

The moon was out last night, and it shone in all of its brightness. The lake was absolutely silver, awash with light, the waves dancing in the moonlight. I looked out of my window and I saw that big silver thing hanging there and it looked like I could almost touch it. I thought, you know, had I been a part of NASA, I would have planted my rocket on my bluff and then shot straight for it. How did they figure out that you can't just go right to the moon? It blows my mind. I'm out of my realm. It seems like you could just keep steering your rocket right toward that moon, but I guess it doesn't work that way. This amazing, wonderful, fantastic world. This age of which we are a part has put a person on the moon. This world still needs to know about the God revealed in Jesus.

I have made a great discovery that occasionally to the seminary, even to the seminary, comes a brilliant mind. I had one manifest himself to me, one of my students whose sermon I will now cite. Preaching on this text, he said,

You may be saying right now, "What does this have to do with Acts 17:16-28?" Well, to be honest, it has everything to do with how we read and understand, and then eventually proclaim, the message of the gospel. We still operate in a Newtonian world, an ordered world. But our children will grow up in a Quantum universe, where the underlying principle of reality is that of randomness and uncertainty.

These principles are not wild, unproven theories. Breakthroughs in Quantum Physics have led to the development of semi-conductors for your computer, satellites for your cable system, and of course, the worldwide nuclear arsenal. What Acts 17:16-28 has to do with this is that Paul's speech places our view of God where it should be. We are not Stoics, or Epicureans, but modern Quantum theorists. Our worldview must be placed within the context of Acts 17. Paul speaks to us now as clearly as he did to the Athenians of the first century. God must be present in our lives as a firm reality amidst the Heisenberg Uncertainty principle, the observer-determined reality, and a world teetering on the edge of destruction.

Our physics has opened up our minds to the awesomeness of creation. In our theories we can either see a Cosmic Christ, or a cosmic emptiness. Paul says to the Areopagus, 'God ... is not served by human hands.' God is the bedrock of our existence. To Bertram Russell and countless other modern intellectuals, the universe only reveals an UNKNOWN GOD. The secular physicists search for God in their theories, hoping to find Him conforming to their preconceived ideas. The Athenians, likewise, sought after God, but in their endless philosophical debates. We, as modern Athenians, must see

God, not as some vague force, but as the fountainhead of all creation, the necessary being, the one independent being in all of the cosmos. We must, therefore, listen to Paul's words, not pretending to be first century Athenians, but remembering that we are twentieth century Quantum....”

And then he rewrites the text of the morning; he imagines a great seminar somewhere in some Hilton Hotel with sauna and indoor pool and all, a gathering of the world's greatest scientists and physicists, and he imagines old Paul coming on center stage and these are Paul's words to such a twentieth century gathering:

“Men of science, I perceive that in every way you are very important, very scientific. For I observed the objects you worship. I saw a telescope, a particle beam accelerator, a copy of your scriptures, *The Scientific American*. I also found a monument to the future and its potential achievements; it was made of the finest marble and I stood in awe of it.’

The little man coughed and continued, ‘Gentlemen and ladies, I will tell you the future. I will tell you what you seek for, what you hope to find. For, in this scripture I read of a theory called TOE, or the Theory of Everything. In it you state that God will be discovered as the source of this TOE. But I will proclaim to you that this God is here, today, among you. This God made the world and everything in it, and He needs none of you to explain or to discover Him. He made the world and set the courses of history in order that people like yourselves should yearn to seek after Him. You do seek after Him, but I will end your search. For we are His offspring, and we must realize that He is not like our theories or our art, but is Spirit. He is everywhere, but He is also here. His name is Jesus Christ.’

At once there was a loud commotion, scientists were all grumbling at once and shifting in their chairs. They were saying that God was dead, and that Jesus was proved to be a hoax in the last *AMA Journal*, etc. Finally, the chairperson called for order and forced the man off the stage. They jeered and mocked the man, but some of the scientists followed him out.”

Well, I sat enthralled with that sermon because that young man, whose name is F. Scott Petersen, was able to speak Jesus Christ in the context of contemporary Western civilization with all of the effectiveness of Paul in the Areopagus. Now, that's what preaching is and that's what the Christian mission is - to say to the world in all of its wonder and all of its fantastic potential and all of the marvel of this age of which we are a part, with all of the ingenuity in which we stand in awe, to the human mind, the imagination - to say to it all, “God is the fountainhead of Reality and can be known through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

That's only one side of the contemporary scene. The other side is even stranger to me. The other side is the side of religion. Charles Colson, in his most recent book *Kingdoms in Conflict*, writes in the first chapter an imaginary scenario. The Christian Religious Right walked out of the Republican Convention in 1992

because their needs were not being serviced. But in the succeeding years, the gulf was bridged, the wound was healed and a Christian Right candidate, a marvelous professor from Baylor University, a good Southern Baptist, was the candidate for the presidency and was elected. This gentleman no sooner took office than it was discovered by the CIA that the Likud Party in Israel, the conservative party, having been unable to find a coalition partner in order to form a government, finally had found in a radical Right minority group a willingness to join. The condition of this radical minority party was, however, that the temple of the Rock, the Dome of the Rock, the Muslim mosque, the most sacred shrine be bombed and taken over by Israeli troops, commandos specially trained. And this little party was also training priests who could institute the rituals of the Old Testament sacrifice because this little group believed that until the Temple Mount was reclaimed and the temple was rebuilt and the sacrifices restored, the Messiah wouldn't come!

Well, the scenario, as Colson puts it together, has this president hearing this and thinking, "This is it! Russia will come from the north; the troops will meet in the valley of Armageddon, and I will be the president at this cosmic point in human history." So, rather than acting like a president should act, and doing what a president has to do in order to forestall that kind of internal maneuvering within Israel itself, he waits and waffles until it actually happens. The commandos of this little minority party blow up the Dome of the Rock and then, of course, the chapter ends. Colson says, in the footnote, "I've made this up, but the statements that I've quoted I quote from public figures out of the press." And I wouldn't even be so impressed by that opening shot of Colson had I not recently heard Martin Marty, the person par excellence with his finger on the culture and religious development and history of America, say recently, that World War III will erupt and be ignited by the fanaticism of religion in our world today. Colson says not since the Crusades have religious passions and prejudices posed such a worldwide threat. If not through a religious zealot or confused idealist whose finger is on the nuclear trigger, then certainly by destroying the tolerance and trust essential for maintaining peace and concord among people.

Friends, this world is a world that can land a person on the moon, and has a space vehicle going out to Mars. This world in which we live is a world so fantastic that our forefathers would not have believed it. And it is a world that is so screwed up spiritually, that it is falling for every kind of superstitious myth and cult, and even satanic worship. This is a world where the great religions in a worldwide resurgence are standing toe to toe and where there is a fanaticism that has groups in all religions ready to go to war, whether Christian Fundamentalists, or Islam Fundamentalists, or some other.

This world in which we live is a world that needs to know that the one God Whom all people are searching for and groping after has indeed come to us in Jesus Christ. Does it matter whether we tell the story? Does it matter whether or not we

share the good news? Is there anything incumbent upon us who stand in the great tradition of Light and Life? I would say there is. The world is at stake.

We believe that, in the face of Jesus, we've seen into the heart of God, and we believe it's true. It doesn't mean that we believe that God has no concern for all of the rest of humankind. It doesn't mean that we should be so narrow and closed and dogmatic that we do not think that God has made God's self-known beyond the limits of Jesus Christ. It doesn't mean that we cannot have our own insights deepened and our viewpoint broadened as we enter into genuine dialogue and encounter with those who are also seriously groping after God in their own way. It doesn't mean that we will not be willing to enter into genuine dialogue, which means a willingness to change and to adopt and to adapt and to deepen and to broaden; all of that is true. But, it does mean that we have something very important to bring to the party. We have Jesus in whom we believe God has most fully revealed God's self. So, I wish somehow we could reclaim the fire and the passion and the fervency, the urgency and the certainty, the assurance of Paul in Athens.

It is a different world, but that same kind of rootedness in Jesus we have. In confidence, not fear; with openness, not defensiveness, we can bring Jesus, the Light of the World, to the discussion, perhaps ourselves coming to see, in the dialogue, dimensions of Jesus we've never even seen before, therefore, being transformed ourselves, we will but share with this wonderful, crazy world, our conviction that God, the source of all, is the goal of all, and that in Jesus Christ our Lord, God is about reconciling all things to God's self.

What a message!

What a task!