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Friday, May 27, 2011
Modified: Friday, May 15, 2020
Year A, Easter 6

Acts 17:22-31
1 Peter 3:13-22
John 14:15-21

“The water in which we swim”

- Do you remember back in 2011 someone predicted the Rapture was going to occur this month¹
 - It was supposed to be May 21, and the Family Radio Christian Network’s president Harold Camping, claiming the Bible as his source,
 - Said that beyond a “shadow of a doubt” the rapture would occur at 6pm that day, local time. :)
 - 3% of the world’s population was going to be raptured and the End Times would be ushered in.
 - This was an updated prediction from one he made about September 1994
 - And indeed he corrected it again and claimed it would occur later in 2011
 - After being wrong on all accounts, a year later he did acknowledge that predicting the date was not Biblical
 - Since we are told by Jesus “of that day no one knows.”
 - It’s funny the things that pop up in the Memories section of my Facebook feed- apparently I thought it was funny even back then
 - But really, I could not help but notice something about the society around us, both then and now
 - There is a lot of spiritual longing in our country- not the first time I’ve preached on this
 - A lot of spiritual longing.
 - One of the things I hope happens with all of our COVID restrictions is that we emerge with a deeper sense of God
 - And of just how important faith and community really are.
 - Absence from it having made our hearts fonder... more aware

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011_end_times_prediction

- But within the water which is our time and culture- this moment- people are hungry for something deep and spiritual
- I think it is in part due to the rapid change that is present in our society today
- I'm not talking just about COVID, or about computers or smartphones- I'm talking about the deep changes in culture
- Changes in what it means to be a person today
- The water is turbulent- it seems now that every generation has a different set of norms
- This change produces uncertainty and a longing for something deep, solid, and meaningful
- And thus you get people who are willing to quit their jobs and empty their savings for a concrete date with spiritual significance.
- This is not too different than our reading this morning- the people of Athens were also seeking.
- Acts says they - "would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new" Acts 17:21²
- That certainly sounds familiar!
- Paul arrives in Athens and observes their culture and their temple
 - This was a very plural society, honoring many different ideas about God
 - They even covered their bases with a statue erected to remind them of an Unknown God
 - Now I'm not in favor if erecting statues of God, but I like this idea of the unknown in relation to the divine
 - These folks knew that God was beyond their ability to define and even understand
 - And now they want an explanation from Paul regarding his teaching.
 - Paul was not pleased with what he saw in Athens.
 - He was a devout, monotheistic Christian who converted from being a devout, monotheistic Jew
 - And although the NRSV suggests they were politely asking Paul for an explanation, this is not a friendly group of inquisitors.
 - In the verses just before our reading today, they are skeptical, they call Paul a babbler, accuse him of introducing a foreign deity
 - The tension is thick- Paul is on the edge of something dangerous.

² Sean A. White, *Feasting on the Word*, 472

- Some scholars believe this is the same group who heard, and then executed Socrates for his ideas ³
- Paul is very smart here in his response: he begins his discourse starting with their altar to an unknown God
- He acknowledges their quest for the divine, their understanding that they do not have all the answers about God
- The spiritual waters are deep and mysterious.
- This unknown God, Paul says, is the God I know about
- And this God is made known to us through Christ.
- Paul shows an amazing respect for these people and their quest for God
 - Paul claims that God created the whole earth, and the people there
 - And “allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live.
 - “so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him.” “Indeed he is not far from each of us.”
 - To me, it is reassuring that God honors humanity’s search for God in all times and places throughout creation.
 - Paul states here in Acts that God honors any response to the divine: God is not far from each of us.
 - God calls to us, reaches out to us, and we respond with a longing for God.⁴
 - God, creator of all, will be found by those who search, or grope, for God.
- Sometimes people will ask me, “what is the hardest part of your job?”
 - I have to admit that preaching is the hardest part.
 - Internet preaching might be even harder...
 - Not only is there a public speaking aspect in which delivering your ideas accurately is important
 - But as a preacher, you are, on a good day, speaking to 160 people with 160 different spiritual journeys
 - Spiritual journeys that deserve respect.
 - We are all on a quest for God.
 - At our best of times we even reach out desperately for God.

³ C. Clifton Black, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=4/27/2008

⁴ John S. McClure, *Feasting on the Word*, 477

- God responds to that! ⁵
- And Paul says God “is not far from each one of us.”
- Paul goes on to say that it is in Christ that we learn more about God and that more of God is revealed to us
- Christ makes the unknown God known, accessible, and personal
- In this beautiful sermon to the Athenians, Paul uses their own philosophy and theology to support his message
 - Paul quotes a Greek poet, “In him we live and move and have our being”
 - It seems that we exist in God and God provides our very being.
 - Although the metaphor is limited, perhaps we are similar to cells and organs in God’s divine being
 - One could even say God **is** the water in which we swim.
 - God encompasses and includes all of creation, yet is not limited to it.⁶
 - There is a part of God which will always be unknown to us
 - But we have some help navigating these spiritual waters
 - In our Gospel, Jesus tells us that he sends the Spirit to our aid.
 - He sends the Paraclete, that’s the Greek word translated Spirit
 - There’s no direct translation for Paraclete, however, the best we can do is to say it is one who stands with.
 - A paraclete would stand with someone on trial or being questioned under pressure
 - This person would not speak to the judge, but would offer advice and encouragement to the one being questioned ⁷
 - Perhaps a navigational buoy in the waters of our journey.
 - It gives us a sense of peace, help
 - And like any good counselor, does not provide us direct answers, but helps us figure it out ⁸
 - This is true when it comes to contemplating the rapture
 - And also true when we face our own personal struggles and tragedies.

⁵ <http://www.processandfaith.org/lectionary/YearA/2010-2011/2011-Easter6.shtml>

⁶ Marcus Borg, http://web.me.com/lindyblack/Sermon_Fodder/Lectonary/Entries/2011/5/29_Easter_6A_1.html

⁷ Roger Hahn, http://web.me.com/lindyblack/Sermon_Fodder/Lectonary/Entries/2011/5/29_Easter_6A_1.html

⁸ Edward F. Markquart, http://web.me.com/lindyblack/Sermon_Fodder/Lectonary/Entries/2011/5/29_Easter_6A_1.html

- We can count on the Spirit to encourage, advise, and comfort us come what may.
- Like it was for Paul in ancient Athens, it is for us as well
 - We have an amazing opportunity today
 - The fields are ripe for harvest (John 4:35)
 - In a culture that is full of people hungry for something meaningful and deep, we have some good news wrapped up in ancient tradition and ritual
 - First, that God reaches out to us, prompts us to seek God, and then does not stay hidden
 - God wants a relationship with us
 - Secondly we do not have to look far- God is around us and within us.
 - And we are within God.
 - And finally, we are not alone in our search: God sends the Spirit to encourage and guide us.
- No matter how turbulent the waters around us are, we can rest in hope that they too are within God
 - Even in 2020!
 - Honor the search for the divine within yourself and others.
 - The longing for the divine is a gift from God, don't ignore it.
 - Use the online tools at your disposal- the videos, the zooms, all of it
 - And listen to that still, small voice that proclaims that you are a beloved child of God.

Amen.