

The reading from the Book of Acts tells of some of the earliest stories of what happened to the apostles and what they did and said not long after the resurrection of Jesus. These are memories of the earliest forms of church as the apostles tried to discern how to talk about what they had experienced and what it meant for them to believe in Jesus.

So there are some early forms of *sermons* in Acts. Actually, they are probably more like sermon *summaries* or *outlines* as they are written rather than the full thing. And that is what we heard this morning—a summary of a sermon from the apostle Paul when he first visited Athens, Greece sometime after the resurrection of Jesus. It is worth looking at this sermon because even though it is very old, it also has some very helpful cues for how we may think about God ourselves in our own challenging times.

What I find so striking about Paul's speech to the Athenians is that he had obviously *listened* to the lives of the people of Athens *before* he spoke. He had *wandered* through the streets of Athens and *observed before* he spoke. He had decided that it was important to have some sense of *who Athenians were before* he spoke. So during his wanderings in Athens he had noticed just how very religious the Athenians were with their many temples and shrines—and he had particularly noticed along some street there a shrine to an “unknown god”. And he had already managed to read or hear quoted some of the Greek poets, specifically Epimenides and Aratus, each of whom Paul quotes respectfully in his sermon.

The way that Paul spoke to the Athenians at the Areopagus was quite different from the way Christian preachers sometimes have preached—as if they did not even need to *know you* to *preach well to you*...as if there was no need to find *common ground*. Paul sought common ground so that the truth of God could be intelligible and reach the hearts of the Athenians. And he did indeed find some common ground that day—for one of the people named Dionysius who heard Paul speak would become Christian *and* would later become the first bishop of Athens. *It matters when we pay attention to each others' lives and when we seek some common ground between each other. Little or large miracles become possible.*

The other thing I want to speak of more this morning is *that shrine to an “unknown god”*. It was important to Paul because it was yet another sign of just how earnest Athenians were about seeking God—so much so that they even built a shrine to a god whom they realized they could have overlooked somehow and yet wanted to show respect. It also gave Paul a window of opportunity through which Paul could say in a way that they could understand—Hey, I have witnessed that you are concerned about an unknown god whom you may have missed? Well, actually, you already know something of this god through your poets you revere...and, by the way, I can tell you more about this god that you don't know yet which I have discovered through a man named *Jesus*. So the shrine to an “unknown god” became a powerful way for Paul to connect with the Athenians.

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Personally, I want to say that I find the idea of such a shrine to be powerful to me too, not as an Athenian of course, but as a Keswickian :) ...and as a priest...who has had my own experiences and challenges of faith. I have spent so much of my life speaking of the “known god”—the god whom we can indeed *know* through *Jesus Christ* precisely because this god *wants to be known to us through Jesus Christ*. And I have spent so much of my life speaking of the stories of Jesus from the gospel books and the other writings from the New Testament *that reveal this god*. And I have spent so much of my life administering the sacraments of the church, such as Holy Communion, which have been given to us from Jesus *to also reveal this god to us as this god wants to be revealed*.

And yet. And yet, this true god is also still the “unknown god”. And it does not go well for us when we forget that

...when we think we have sufficiently reduced god to a size that we think we can then *manage* god and presume to have *expectations* which god *must* fulfill for us in just the way we think we should have them  
...when we think that because we may indeed know some exceedingly important things about god that therefore we know *everything* about god...

when we fool ourselves into thinking that god is somehow *less interesting* than the whole universe which god has created

...when we may even somehow tell ourselves that god is *boring*?

...when we *suffer* greatly from the “slings and arrows” of this life and we forget that there is actually a *mystery* to that which cannot be precisely explained *because there is still a mystery to god which we cannot know*

...when we suffer the deaths of those precious to us and we in our grief forget for a while that there is a *mystery of God* which is far *greater* than death.

*We are surrounded by many unknowns...that are not always merely accidents...or gaps in our knowledge that we can fix...but we are surrounded by many unknowns in our life precisely because our god whom we can indeed partly and significantly know and love through Jesus Christ is still also...profoundly...unknown and mysterious.*

And the proper response to that is...*humility...and reverence...and awe.*

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That is what I am especially thinking about this morning and this time of my life.

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And I believe Jesus knew this experience so very well. Jesus could recognize the unknown god...the mysterious god...in the wilderness times of his life...on the cross of his death...and Jesus could still speak to this god and say...

“my Abba”, “my Father”, whom I yet trust.