

Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Mark 12:28-34; Acts 17:16-34

May 17, 2020, Sixth Sunday of Easter

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A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

When Nancy and I visited Seoul, South Korea in June 2015, we stayed at a Best Western Hotel about two blocks from a beautiful, broad avenue that runs through the business district. The U. S. Embassy, City Hall, and many banks and other businesses are located on the street. Each day, as we walked down the street, we were surrounded by multitudes of people, all of them hurrying this way and that, making their way through the bustling capital city. The busy avenue is called Sejongno Street, named after King Sejong the Great who invented the Korean alphabet. There is a large statue of the king at one end of the street. There is also a large statue of Admiral Yi Sun-sin, a revered 16th century naval hero who defeated the Japanese naval forces in a war during Joseon dynasty, when King Sejong was king. One day, Nancy, Natalie, and I toured the Gyeongbokgung Palace, built in 1395 and the largest of the five palaces in Seoul and the main palace of the Joseon dynasty. The palace served as the home of the kings and their households and the seat of the Joseon government. We watched the changing of the guard, listened to the musicians play traditional Korean drums and horns, toured the beautifully restored buildings, and wandered through the breathtaking gardens. When we finished the tour and exited through the front palace gate, back onto busy Sejongno Street, I saw a street evangelist (see picture). He was wearing a large sandwich-board sign covered with Korean and English words and characters – Bible verses, numbers, warnings of the coming judgment, and calls to repent. He also had some sort of tray/platform in front of him on which he had placed his Bible, and a headset microphone with a speaker, which he used to preach. Although I couldn't understand what he was saying, his sandwich-board sign made it pretty clear what his message was.

We saw the same man on the street several times during our week in Seoul. Interestingly, I never once saw him talking with anyone or anyone engaging him in conversation.

The image of the Seoul street-preacher came to mind when I read again the story from Acts about the apostle Paul killing time in Athens as he waited for Silas and Timothy to arrive. At the time Paul visited Athens in the mid-first century A.D., Athens has passed its peak, but still remained a center of sophistication, learning, and wisdom. If you visit Athens today, you can see the ruins of the magnificent buildings and temples still standing. Imagine what the city must have looked like in all of its glory!



Here's how one writer describes what Paul would have seen as he walked around Athens: "Passing through the gates, Paul would have seen the Temple of Demeter with statues of the goddess and her daughter. A little further on he would have passed the statue of Poseidon hurling his trident. Beyond this, he would have seen the statues of Healing Athena, Zeus, Apollo, and Hermes standing near the Sanctuary of Dionysus.

"In the agora the Apostle would have passed what is sometimes called 'the Music Hall at Athens,' the odeon, a small roofed theater. In the agora the Athenians had an altar of Mercy, which stood in a grove of laurels and olives. Close to the agora, in the gymnasium of Ptolemy, there was a stone statue of Hermes, and a bronze statue of Ptolemy.

"Paul . . . must have seen the Sanctuary of the Dioscuri, the Serapeum in the lower part of the city, the Temple of Olympian Zeus southeast of the Acropolis, the Pythium on the southern side of the Acropolis, [and] the Sanctuary of Dionysus at the foot of the Acropolis.

"He would have visited the most famous and beautiful of all Greek temples, the Parthenon . . . [he would have seen] the oldest and most venerated statue of Athena, which like that of Diana of Ephesus, was believed to have fallen from heaven. Finally, there was the most conspicuous statue of the city-goddess [Athena], a dedication from the spoils of the Battle of Marathon."¹

The Roman writer, Pliny the Elder, commented that Athens had over 30,000 public statues plus many more in private homes. The Roman satirist, Petronius, observed that it was "easier to find a god than a man in

Athens.” No wonder, then, when Paul saw all of those temples and statues, he opened his remarks with this observation, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.” (Acts 17:22)

In his advice to his younger ministry partner Timothy, Paul encouraged him to “proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable.” (2 Timothy 4:2) Paul certainly did that when he debated with the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers and the many other Athenians and foreigners who “would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.” (Acts 17:21) Paul recognized a golden opportunity when he saw it. He seized the chance to meet the Athenians where they were and tell them about the one, true God.

When it came to arguing with the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, Paul himself was no slouch theologically, philosophically, and literarily. He was a student of Gamaliel, a leading Pharisee and teacher of the Jewish law. Paul was fluent in at least Hebrew and Greek. He was a “world traveler.” And, on top of that, as he puts it in his letter to the Galatians, “the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.” (Galatians 1:11-12)

But Paul also described himself this way: “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.” (1 Corinthians 9:22-23) Paul didn’t water down the gospel when he talked with the Greek philosophers at the Areopagus. He didn’t pull any punches when he told them, “now [God] commands all people everywhere to repent.” (Acts 17:30) But neither did Paul go out of his way to insult the Athenians (if some took offense at his message, which they most certainly did, that was their problem, not Paul’s).

You might have noticed that, in his speech at the Areopagus, Paul didn’t talk about Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Joseph and the covenant and the Exodus and the law and all of the other “Old Testament” things you would expect a Jewish scholar of Paul’s caliber to reference. That’s because those things wouldn’t have impressed the Athenian philosophers, if they even knew what Paul was talking about.

Instead, Paul met the Athenians where they were – “extremely religious in every way” but, in Paul’s estimation, still searching and groping for God. When I went to Tabasco, Mexico for the first time in 1994, a few of us took a cab into downtown Villahermosa (the capital city) one afternoon when we had some free time. I sat in the front passenger seat. The cab driver had a spectacular assortment of icons from several different religions

on his dashboard and hanging from the rear-view mirror. I remember thinking, “I guess he’s just covering all of the bases.”

Maybe that’s what Paul thought when he saw the altar the Athenians had erected “To an unknown god.” According to a story from the 6th century B.C., Athens was besieged by a deadly plague. With no cure available and no end in sight, the Athenians began to worry that one of their many gods had somehow been offended. But, because they had so many gods, they couldn’t figure out which god to appease through sacrifice; so, they continued to suffer.

That’s when they brought in an outside expert from the island of Cyprus, a poet named Epimenides. When he heard what the Athenians had tried, he concluded none of their many gods was the one offended. He recommended an unusual plan: he gathered a large flock of sheep of different colors and kept them from feeding until they were very hungry. Then he turned the sheep loose on Mars Hill [which is the Areopagus of today’s scripture lesson]. He figured hungry sheep would immediately graze rather than lie down and rest. However, to everyone’s amazement, several of the sheep did lie down and rest. Epimenides concluded these spots were sacred. He ordered altars to be erected at each of these spots and the sheep sacrificed (you guessed it) “to an unknown god.” As the story goes, the plague that was ravaging Athens almost immediately stopped.²

Perhaps it was one of those altars “to an unknown god” that Paul saw as he walked around town. What Paul did see was a golden opportunity to share with the Athenians, the Epicureans, the Stoics, and the foreigners in Athens his witness and testimony about the one, true God, the God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, [who] does not live in shrines made by human hands.” (Acts 17:24-25)

It’s true that not everybody in Athens accepted what Paul had to say about God and Jesus. Some of them called him a babbler (v. 18). Some of them scoffed when they heard about the resurrection of the dead (v. 32). But others were interested in what Paul had to say – “We would like to know what it means. . . We will hear you again about this.” (vv. 20, 33) Paul seized the unexpected opportunity before him to share his faith in a new and (maybe for Paul) unusual way. He might have stuck to his tried-and-true methods that he knew so well, but those ways didn’t fit the situation he found himself in as he walked around Athens. Unlike the street preacher on Sejongno Street in Seoul, Paul seems to have attracted listeners and, in turn, he must have listened to what they had to say. Then he presented the gospel in way and in a form the Athenians could understand and accept (at

least some, such as Dionysius the Areopagite, Damaris, and others with them).

So, what's that got to do with us in the year 2020? I wonder if, as Christians and as the church, we don't have a golden opportunity to bear witness to Jesus Christ in new and unusual (or at least unfamiliar) ways. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the watchword seems to be "we won't ever get back to normal, we'll have to adjust to a new normal." That's going to be true for us as a congregation. Already we realize that at some yet undetermined date in the future, we're not going to be able to walk back in this building and pick up right where we left off and do things as we've always done them. "Church" is going to be different.

In the meantime, we've had to make adjustments in how we do ministry and worship together and serve the community. We were fortunate that we were already up to speed when it came to live-streaming our worship services, since we've been doing that for about six years. And yet, for many of you, it's a brand-new experience, right up there with Zooming in for Bible studies and other virtual gatherings.

But you know what? That's where the world is – and has been for quite a while. In January 2005, Pope John Paul II wrote an Apostolic Letter "To Those Responsible for Communications," which he titled "The Rapid Development." In his introduction, Pope John Paul made reference to a statement from Vatican II in December 1963: "Man's genius has with God's help produced marvelous technical inventions from creation, especially in our times. The Church, our mother, is particularly interested in those which directly touch man's spirit and which have opened up new avenues of easy communication of all kinds of news, of ideas and orientations."

Then, in a reference to today's story about Paul using a new method of communication with the Athenian philosophers, Pope John Paul explained, "Many challenges face the new evangelization in a world rich with communicative potential like our own. Because of this, I wanted to underline . . . that the first Areopagus [where Paul argued with the philosophers in the 1st century A.D.] of modern times is the *world of communications*, which is capable of unifying humanity and transforming it into – as it is commonly referred to – 'a global village.' The communications media have acquired such importance as to be the principal means of guidance and inspiration for many people in their personal, familial, and social behavior. We are dealing with a complex problem, because the culture itself, [cut off] from [and leaving out] its content, arises from the very existence of new ways to communicate with hitherto unknown techniques and vocabulary."

Near the very end of his Apostolic Letter, the Pope offers these words of encouragement to those in his church charged with communicating the gospel in the 21st century: “Do not be afraid of new technologies! These rank ‘among the marvelous things’ which God has placed at our disposal to discover, to use and to make known the truth, also the truth about our dignity and about our destiny as his children, heirs of his eternal Kingdom.”³

Change is hard, isn’t it? But sometimes change is forced upon us, and we’re faced with a golden opportunity to find new ways of doing and communicating what is most important to us. Perhaps nowhere is change harder than in the church. But, maybe in the midst of this most trying coronavirus pandemic and its long-lasting aftermath, we are being given a golden opportunity to reach out to many people who surely must be searching and groping for God. In a day and age when it’s easy (and maybe even accepted) to bemoan the demise of the church, we have a golden opportunity to be the church in new ways that meet people where they are with good news that can make a real difference in their lives and in the world.

Let us pray: Holy God, we are a people who would like to think that we love you with all our hearts and souls, with all our might, but there are so many other things in our lives that clamor for our attention. Most of us really do want you to be the one in whom we live and move and have our being. We really do want to hear your voice above all of the other voices in our lives. But we get bogged down in the daily routine. We forget who we are. We forget who you are. We forget what the church is supposed to be. Lord, we pray that you would make yourself known to us, that you would help us to recognize the presence of the Holy, that you would continue to challenge us, inspire us, and make us into the people you want us to be. Amen.

NOTES

¹David Padfield, “The Unknown God,” at www.padfield.com/2000.

²Bob Deffinbaugh, “The Apostle in Athens, Preaching to Philosophers (Acts 17:15-34) at www.bible.org.

³John Paul II, “Apostolic Letter to Those Responsible for Communications: The Rapid Development,” at www.vatican.va.