

Acts 17:22-31

Psalm 66:8-20

1 Peter 3:13-22

John 14:15-21

Paul's journeys in the book of Acts are legendary. I mean that in the classical sense, they are the stuff of legend, being run from one place to another, trying to spread the Gospel with his trusty sidekicks Silas and Timothy, sailing boats all around the Mediterranean and going where the Spirit sends him. If he was fighting with a sword instead of his mind, and there was a little more romance, his story would be a Greek epic tragedy.

But even though Paul was a debater instead of a warrior, his journeys are still captivating stories. He was the right hero at the right time in the First Century in Greece, where in Athens, he missed out on the open warfare of the heroic age, and arrives at a much more civilized society that thrives on the exchange of competing philosophies.

Athens was a fascinating place. They were allied with and paid tribute to Rome from 200 BCE, with significant advantages during this time such as large-scale building projects and the control of Delos which is the sacred site of the Delphic oracle and the temple to the god Apollo; until 88 BCE when Athens sided with the anti-Roman king of Pontus¹ and was laid siege by Rome. Rome ultimately prevailed and the ensuing slaughter of Athens was epic: Temples destroyed, Athenians killed, priceless artifacts and art looted and taken to Rome, and Delos lost. Athens was loyal to Rome after that, and pursued a path of peace that would allow the city to flourish.

And a funny thing happened: in the first century, it became trendy in Rome to be Greek. Romans flooded the city and took on the Greek lifestyle, updated the marketplace to be the Athenian Agora, gave the city back its independence, and lowered taxes. It was the place to be.

So when Paul arrives from the corner of the Empire and untested against real philosophers, he goes straight to that brand-new Agora - literally the marketplace of

¹ Mithridates VI

wisdom or ideas - and tries out his arguments. What happens? Of course, he doesn't succeed. They call him foolish, say he doesn't know anything about them. And so when we get to our text for today, Paul is finally invited to speak by the thinkers of the day, but he's not back in the synagogues and the Agora. It's at the Areopagus.

Areopagus. Ares, meaning the possessive of god of war Ares, Pagus, great big rock. The Areopagus in Athens is a giant out of the way rock with a long history. It's said that the Areopagus is so named because it was the place where the god Ares was put on trial for murdering Halirrhothios. Poseidon prosecuted, but there were some grisly mitigating circumstances, so he was acquitted.

After that, the Pagus became the Areopagus, and a site for murder trials and later a sanctuary for those who were accused of murder.

In the greek tragedy cycle of the Orestia by Aeschylus, the final judgment comes at the Areopagus when Orestes is acquitted for his murder of his mother Clytemnestra. More interesting today than the verdict, though, is what the goddess Athena says about the Aeropagus:

“ATHENA

You citizens of Athens, you judges
at the first trial ever held for murder,
hear what I decree. Now and forever

870

this court of judges will be set up here
to serve Aegeus' people. This place,
this Mount of Ares, is where Amazons,
once marched in force, enraged at Theseus.
Here they pitched their tents. Then they built
a new city on the heights, with lofty walls
to match his own, making a sacrifice
to Ares, god of war, from whom this rock
derives its name, the Mount of Ares.

[690]

From this hill Reverence and Terror,

880

two kindred rulers of my citizens,
will guarantee they don't commit injustice,
by day or night, unless the citizens
pollute the laws with evil innovations.

Once limpid waters are stained with mud,
 you'll never find a drink. My people,
 avoid both anarchy and tyranny.
 I urge you to uphold this principle.
 Show it due reverence. As for terror,
 don't banish it completely from the city.

890

What mortal man is truly righteous
 without being afraid? Those who sense the fear

[700]

revere what's right. With citizens like these
 your country and your city will be safe,
 stronger than anything possessed by men
 in Pelops' country or in Scythia.
 So here I now establish this tribunal,
 incorruptible, magnificent,
 swift in punishment—it stands above you,
 your country's guardian as you lie asleep.

900

I've gone through this at length to urge you on,
 my citizens, today and in the future.
 But now you must get up, cast your ballots,
 decide this case, while honouring your oath.

[710]

I'm finished—that's all I have to say.²

But societies change, and places change. It turned into the meeting place for the council of elders for the city. That body underwent democratizing changes, and continued to operate. It's not tragedy all the way down - the Areopagus saw some trials for murder, for profaning the gods also known as blasphemy, and then for corruption. It is, in short, a place for the Greeks to test competing truth claims.

And then there's Paul. Why here? His sermon isn't given on the background of wisdom, it's given at this great big rock. And it's dangerous: he's been run out of Greek-Roman towns twice at this point, he has a history of violence in his own past, AND he is about to commit a big old profanity against the Roman/Greek gods in addition to the political scandal of Jesus' messiahship. They are willing to hear him out, but there is tension in the air here. It's not a casual, friendly exchange of philosophy. It's a

² https://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/aeschylus/aeschylus_eumenides.htm

courtroom drama. And it should bring to mind Athena's establishment of justice here, where she claimed reverence and terror are pillars of good judgement.

And so Paul begins:

Athenians, I have studied you. I know your religion, I know your loyalties to these gods, I know your poetry. This statue that you have to the unknown God, this agnostos Theos, I know who it is that you seek. Among your many Gods, and your philosophy, there is still something missing, and I know you want to know what it is.

And with this Paul is starting to draw them in. I know you want to know what it is.

I want to know what it is! Because we, like the Athenians, have gods here that we worship. We don't call them Ares and the Olympians anymore, we call them the gods of the accumulation of money, or self-improvement, or politics, or war, or my personal idol, the smartphone. We approach society without much reverence but with far too much terror. Yes, just like the Athenians that Paul is talking do, we are very religious in worshipping our chosen idols.

And the attention that we pay these idols, and our fear of the world, is what is keeping us from knowing the Agnostos Theos. The unknown God. Paul says, I know that God, that is the God that we are all connected to because that God created us. That God is who Jesus called Abba.

This God is not made from human hands, no, God is not a reflection of our creation. God is our creator and it is we who are made in God's image, not God who is made in ours. Not an idol, but a living, relational God. God is our creator, and God made us God's children, and we belong - we are no longer orphans, we belong - to God. And the judgement is coming, the trial is here, the sentencing has already happened, and God our Creator loves us so much that God's appointed judge has already gone before, has faced death, and was resurrected so that we can be in relationship with this unknown God.

And it is Paul, that imperfect, violent, fear-filled, unlikeable sinner Paul, who should have been a lawyer, who stood before the Athenians at the Areopagus and could tell nothing but the truth, because the Spirit of Truth was in him. You don't know God but God knows you, and you can turn your place of terror and judgment into a place of love and connection with the One who made you. You can repent - turn - from fear to love. From unknown to known. That beautiful Saint, that unlikely persistent child of God Paul, preaches the love of God into that great big rock of judgement, and it's never the same.

This is not a judgment of terror and reverence, but a judgment of love. Christ defeats death so that we will not be orphaned. That is how much Christ desires us to know him, and to know God, and to have the Spirit of Truth in us, because Jesus knows that we have become orphaned and cut off from the source of who we are as children of God. We have worshipped things of our own creation, and we have lived in fear of one another, but we are not orphaned, we will not be abandoned by God. Because God loves us. It's God's overwhelming quality of love shown to us through the life, death and resurrection of Christ that is our judgement. That love is ours now, is breathed in us as the Holy Spirit, is coursing through our veins, and unites us with the God who is no longer unknown.

God loves you, God is in you, you are in Christ. The good judge is the one who has already sent us the Spirit and has promised never to abandon us, to always keep faith with us, to be love and loved and beloved.