

## Nothing to Fear...

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This passage that was just read from the book of Acts is one of those passages I always heard in one way, and then the more I study it I hear it in a different way. Here we have Paul noticing an altar in Athens. Not an unusual thing in his travels, per say. Paul in his mission work would have been looking for ways to connect with people in the communities he visited. By the time he came to Athens he would've had the routine down.

It wasn't always a fun routine though. Paul often would enter a community, find fellow Jews or God-fearing Romans, preach the good news of Jesus Christ and start to build a faith community invested in this Good News. Then a group of people who didn't like what Paul was preaching would threaten Paul and his travelling companions and run them out of town. This is a repeating scenario in Acts. After a while that could really weigh on a person, and Paul was no exception at times.

But in this moment, Paul is really in a place of, "I gotta deliver the Word. I gotta spread this message. I gotta connect with this community." So I've always heard this message as an example of evangelism. It's a story of finding that connecting point and that place where you can speak on the same terms, and then bring in what's relevant, what's loving, what is truth.

I mean, Jesus did that. It's what the parables are all about. Tell a story people can relate to, then bring it home with a spiritual insight. If you read the church newsletter this week, I kinda did that with the ocean waves on the Hawaii beaches... I'm not gonna share what that story is right now. You're welcome to go and read it.

Yet there's more to this story in Acts than just evangelism. There's also this story of witness, especially witness when you're under threat. Cause if we continue this story, we learn a bit more of the significance of what Paul is doing. Paul certainly used the "Altar to the Unknown God" in his preaching... "*Hey, look, there's an altar! You don't know who you're worshipping. Let me tell you about that God.*" ...Well, again, as has been the repeating routine for Paul, there were people who didn't like his message. So they took Paul to the Aeropagus.

Now I've always understood the Aeropagus to be a gathering for an intellectual meeting of the minds. People liked what Paul was saying or found it intriguing and wanted to hear more about it...

Yes, and no. People heard what Paul was saying, *thought it was possibly dangerous*, and wanted to hear more about it. They brought Paul to the Aeropagus to say more about his teachings. But there's a context here we need to be aware of. Let me tell you more about the history of the Aeropagus.

Mythologically, the Aeropagus is where the god of war, or Ares, in Greco/Roman mythology, was put on trial by the other Olympian gods for the murder of Poseidon's son. It fits then, that at the Aeropagus, they would create a high court of law. This is where that learning

and context piece comes into play when you delve into scripture. Paul was not taken to this meeting place to spread the gospel because people liked what they were hearing. Paul was being taken to court to defend himself because what people were hearing was considered potentially threatening. And yet, Paul stood his ground.

Paul stood his ground in this place. Paul gave witness to the truth of Jesus Christ and to the love of God. He gave witness to God's desire to be in relationship with people. Paul's words still go even deeper than this because there's more we need to understand.

For one, Paul is a Jew. Paul is a Pharisee. Paul is talking about the God of Judaism doing something new in the person of Jesus Christ. This didn't work with how Roman culture often thought of Judaism. There was an idea in Rome that Jewish people were atheist.

Wait. What? That doesn't track.

Let me give you some more context. In 63 BCE, the Roman General, Pompey, laid siege to Jerusalem, broke through the walls, got past the defenses, and marched into the Jewish temple and walked right into the Holy of Holies.

What's the thing about the Holy of Holies?

*From the congregation:* It's holy.

It is holy. It's right there in the name.

*From the congregation:* It's untouchable. It's sacred.

It's the heart of Jewish temple worship and the dwelling place of God, the place where the divine realm and earth come together.

How many people are allowed to go into the Holy of Holies and how often? Let's see if folks know this one?

*From the congregation:* One.

One Jewish priest, once a year. Nothing more. And they had to wear a special breastplate to go into the Holy of Holies, partly because it was ceremonial and part of the ritual, and partly because if you accidentally did something wrong, you didn't want the wrath of God to kill you. I can understand that.

When Pompey walked into the Holy of Holies, he didn't see a god. He didn't see any idols. He didn't see anything that gave a depiction of who or what God is. That's a central idea to Judaism; you don't create an image of God. So all of the paintings and other art pieces we have from Michelangelo and Raphael and Donatello (I'm just naming Ninja Turtles now)... All of the artists who created images of God clearly weren't Jewish or they'd have known not to do that... Oops.

When Pompey walked into the Holy of Holies and didn't see any kind of idol, his response was, "You have no god. You are atheists. You have a temple to nothing." And it became an idea

in Roman thought that Judaism was a religion of Atheism. Which makes no sense... but I guess it is a spiritual concept, so it kinda makes sense.

Back to Paul... People who are hearing Paul's message are wondering, "Why is this Jew talking about a god? Why's he talking about the altar to an unknown god and trying to educate us?"

Another thing the Roman people didn't always understand was the concept of Jesus and the Resurrection. A common thought, because of language barriers, was this Jesus had a consort named "Anastasis," – the Greek feminine noun used by Paul to speak of Jesus' Resurrection. What many heard Paul proclaiming was the arrival of a new pair of deities on the scene. That's not confusing at all.

Then there was the way Paul preached his message of salvation in Jesus Christ and the love of God; how he talked about freedom and redemption. One of Paul's claims was Jesus Christ, the crucified Messiah, who has made a way of salvation for everyone, has cast down all other gods. Jesus has conquered all of creation and has freed the entire world from what oppresses it. The world is free from idols, from authority, from all that stands in the way of a relationship with God. When you start saying idols have no power, other gods have no power, authority has no more power, you are preaching anti-Emperor. Caesar, or the Emperor, is not gonna stand for that.

Paul is being brought to trial in this moment, to explain what he means by what he's teaching. Is he preaching rebellion? Is he preaching something that could potentially be a problem for Rome? Is Paul going to end up bringing the wrath of Rome down on to the peoples? What is this thing Paul is teaching in the name of Jesus and Spirit?

That place, where Paul found himself, is a dangerous place to be. Whenever you are trying to speak truth to power, it can be a place of fear. And yet, God can use places of fear. Do you believe that? I know it's a hard thing to say yes to, but do you believe it? Can God use us in places of fear?

I wanna go back a couple weeks for a moment. The last time I stood before you, I preached on First Peter. I preached on how much I detested the passage I was preaching on. I also got feedback from people that watched online. The first was, "how's he gonna make that palatable?" The second was, "I've never seen a preacher talk against Scripture." There's a first time for everything, I guess.

I did eventually come around in that sermon to what was good in the passage I so disliked. The good from that passage in First Peter was the message of resilience. And the author of that letter carries that message of resilience all the way through First Peter. What Paul is facing in our reading from Acts is one of those resilience moments. Let me read to you now from First Peter 3:13-16.

*<sup>13</sup> Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? <sup>14</sup> But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened." <sup>15</sup> But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and*

*respect,<sup>16</sup> keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.*

Another way of stating an important piece of this passage is, *know your faith*. Which means there's a lot of internal personal work and study and hard questions. To know our faith better is one of the reasons we're doing "Challenge the Preacher" this Summer. Study your Word. Know your faith. Know your reasons for believing.

Paul, as he gives testimony in the Aeropagus, is also living out a passage from the gospel of John. This comes from John 14:15-18.

*<sup>15</sup> "If you love me, keep my commands. <sup>16</sup> And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—<sup>17</sup> the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. <sup>18</sup> I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.*

So be resilient, stand in the Lord, know your faith, know the Spirit is with you and you are not alone. Do you know what that sounds like to me? It sounds like, "Do not be afraid."

Do not be afraid.

I've said this next bit a number of times from this pulpit. I'm gonna see if I've drilled it into you yet. What happens and what does it mean when we hear or read, "Do not be afraid," in Scripture?

*From the congregation:* Something scary is coming.

Something scary is about to happen... but there's more to it. We're going beyond the fear.

*From the congregation:* God will be there. God is working. Believe.

God is about to act. God is about to do something. Something good.

In these moments of fear, when they come and we have to stand our ground and witness to our faith, or our morals, or our dignity, or to truth, stop. Take a holy pause. Listen for that voice that says, "Do not be afraid." It's there. It's always there. The question is, are we ready to hear it? Have we worked on our faith to the point that we are ready to hear that voice?

Paul could stand in the Aeropagus because he worked on his faith. If you read Acts, you might notice Paul disappears in Tarsus for a chunk of time. In Scripture it's almost two chapters, but scholars say it was around ten years. In this time Paul likely traveled and pilgrimaged. He said, "I have seen this vision of the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus and I don't know all of what it is, but I know there is truth involved. I need to know. I need to understand. I need to study. I need to figure out what God is wanting to say through me. I need to follow Spirit and love, and find a true interpretation that speaks to heart and soul." We are called to do the same.

So how do we use this passage? This passage, this story of Paul at the Aeropagus is an example of how we witness to the world. It's an example of how we live truth when truth is threatened. It's an example of how we stand our ground and speak truth to power. We see this in action anytime people gather in solidarity with the oppressed. We see this in action anytime

people call for truth over towing the line. We see this in action anytime we examine and challenge societal practices and systemic imbalances. We see this in action anytime we call our own denominations, faith organizations, and governmental bodies to accountability. And when we witness in this way, we show the world who we are, what we stand for, and what we believe God's love is.

When we put flags out, not for the purpose of allegiance, but to say, "You are safe in this space," as we have done with the Pride flags as a Reconciling Congregation, we witness to God's love and we speak truth to power. When we stand in any way that lifts up the downtrodden, and when we give voice to the voiceless, it shows people who we are. More importantly it shows people who Christ is. We also show them that any trauma they have experienced in the past, whether it be societal trauma, or religious trauma, or generational trauma, any trauma caused by those in power spreading a message that was not one of compassion; we can help them heal from these traumas. We can show people a God, not of fear and punishment, but one of truth and love and hope and restoration.

One of the ways we have seen this played out in the last month (And this does venture a little bit into the field of politics. But I'm not going for the political message. I'm going for the action of standing with a people.) is when Gloria Johnson, Justin Jones, and Justin Pearson, three Tennessee Representatives, stood with the people they support to protest governmental inaction against gun violence... and were expelled from the Tennessee House of Representatives.

In a righting of a wrong they've since been reinstated. The point though is this. They gave no thought to, "what will this do to my image." They gave no thought to, "will this get me re-elected." They gave no thought to consequences on a political level. That was not important. What was important was standing in truth, standing in solidarity, hearing what the people had to say, hearing the hopes of the people, working for the change the people wanted, and saying we stand with you against this injustice.

In what ways can Oregon City UMC give that message to people who really need to know a true love of God. In what ways can we say, "We stand with you"? In what ways can we hear, "Do not be afraid," and live into that faith that calls us to stand and speak truth to power?

As you go through the week, think on that. Pray on that. Let the love of God fill you. Let the Spirit of God empower you. And let's work that hope may sing true; that love may rule the day.

In Jesus' name, Amen.