

**May 17, 2020 – Sixth Sunday of Easter
Scripture Readings and Sermon**

Psalm 66:8–20

8 Bless our God, O peoples;
let the sound of his praise be heard,
9 who has kept our soul among the living
and has not let our feet slip.
10 For you, O God, have tested us;
you have tried us as silver is tried.
11 You brought us into the net;
you laid a crushing burden on our backs;
12 you let men ride over our heads;
we went through fire and through water;
yet you have brought us out to a place of abundance.
13 I will come into your house with burnt offerings;
I will perform my vows to you,
14 that which my lips uttered
and my mouth promised when I was in trouble.
15 I will offer to you burnt offerings of fattened animals,
with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams;
I will make an offering of bulls and goats. *Selah*
16 Come and hear, all you who fear God,
and I will tell what he has done for my soul.
17 I cried to him with my mouth,
and high praise was on¹ my tongue.
18 If I had cherished iniquity in my heart,
the Lord would not have listened.
19 But truly God has listened;
he has attended to the voice of my prayer.
20 Blessed be God,
because he has not rejected my prayer
or removed his steadfast love from me!

1st Reading - Acts 17:16–31

Paul in Athens

16 Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. **17** So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. **18** Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babbling wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. **19** And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? **20** For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” **21** Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

Paul Addresses the Areopagus

22 So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. **23** For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this

inscription: 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. **24** The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, **25** nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. **26** And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, **27** that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, **28** for " 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, " 'For we are indeed his offspring.'

29 Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. **30** The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, **31** because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

2nd Reading - 1 Peter 3:13–22

13 Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? **14** But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, **15** but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, **16** having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. **17** For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.

18 For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, **19** in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, **20** because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. **21** Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, **22** who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

Gospel - John 14:15–21

Jesus Promises the Holy Spirit

15 "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. **16** And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, **17** even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.

18 "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. **19** Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. **20** In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. **21** Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him."

May 17, 2020 – Sixth Sunday of Easter

"Destination Unknown"

Acts 17:16-31

Dear friends,

Our first reading is from the book of Acts, and it records one of the more well-known examples of exactly how Paul goes about his missionary work. The particulars of what Paul says are often kept frustratingly

vague, but that's ok, because talking about Jesus is such a person-by-person thing. There's no magic bullet for talking about Jesus, if there was Paul would've figured it out and we wouldn't be in this position. This is all there is, one guy using his brain and his Bible to try to say our faith in a way that makes sense. I want to look at his words and his situation to see what we can learn. How does Paul start? Where does he go?

Athens is the place here, and Athens is hoidy-toidy to put it mildly. This is a city that prides itself on its brains. Think Oxford, Yale, or Harvard, if those universities had cities that echoed their self-importance. Athens is there to produce thoughtful, educated men, and those thoughtful, educated men were expected to rise high and do great things. What made Athens so infuriating is that it had the record to back up its high opinion of itself. However, like all places of great education, Athens was occasionally guilty of disconnecting itself from how the real world worked. They were so busy trying to figure out the best way to think that they forgot that all of this education was supposed to be *for* something.

Now, remember that Paul was also an educated man. He had his degrees. They weren't as fancy as Athens, but he went to some good schools so he can speak their language. Paul in his own person reminds us that education isn't the problem, smarts aren't the problem. The problem comes when these things become idols, when they become excuses to start thinking we're bigger than our britches. Paul doesn't address that, though. He isn't here to take the smarty-pants stuffed coat types down a peg or two. He's here to talk about Jesus.

“16 Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. 17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. 18 Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babbler wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. 19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” 21 Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in

nothing except telling or hearing something new.”

What upsets Paul isn't the attitude. That's probably what would upset us, we Americans have a real deep dislike for folks who think they're better than us. But Paul – and Luke, the guy writing this – doesn't seem to care about that. What upsets Paul is the idolatry. The idols on display, just out there in the open to be worshipped. Education in our day and age is often highly secular, but in these days education was highly pagan. This was the temple of the world, all gods welcomed, cosmopolitan and culturally rich. This is what bothers Paul. He sees ignorance pretending it is education. He sees darkness pretending to be light. His response, though, is that there's work to be done, and it is time to get to it. This isn't a thing to be stomped out, ranted against, or anything like that. This is opportunity.

“22 So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.” The unknown made known. This more than anything shows you exactly what's happening here, it shows you what's happening in human hearts the world round. Why the Athenians had this altar is unknown and frankly a little hilarious, but the general speculation is that they were covering their bases. They didn't want to miss any of the gods, so they put up an altar to an unknown god to make sure that they weren't accidentally leaving one out. Like when you're doing thank yous, you usually add something like “thanks to all the rest” or something like that. As funny as this sounds to us, paganism is very functional like this, especially when the Athenians were so concerned with giving every god their due.

Paul takes the unknown and makes it known. The Athenians didn't know what they were doing. They honestly didn't. They hadn't a clue that they were putting up a whole city's worth of altars and temples to lies, and that is what false gods are. They are lies. Inventions of human imagination, wood, stone, and false hopes. They don't exist, they have no substance, they cannot hear or answer prayers. The Athenians didn't know this. We don't either. Sinners never know that what they're turning to for answers, for meaning, for any of that. Human beings have been making up gods since we've fallen, and we haven't stopped.

America is not Athens, but we hardly more enlightened. Our false gods don't have names like the Greek and Roman gods did, but they're still lies, and they're still just as lacking. The variety of false gods is just as staggering as it was in Athens, there's so many. Some trust science to save us, solve our problems, answer our questions. Some trust government to bring justice, hope, and peace. Some trust themselves to work out the best way to go about living their life. Some trust hatred to bring about a better world somehow. I could go on and on, as could you. Sin turns our eyes from the true God and blinds us to Him. It makes God unknown.

It even does this to His children. We get trapped in circumstances like this and we wonder, God, what are you *doing* up there? We Christians don't doubt that God is there, we know He is there, but we don't know what the heck He's up to. We don't know what He's doing with all of this, how He justifies all of this. God isn't unknown, but His plan for us is, and that can lead to just as much idolatry as any statue erected by uptight Athenians.

But what does Paul do? He makes it known. That is what God Himself does to us. He reveals Himself. He doesn't do completely, He doesn't answer every question, frankly He doesn't even answer a lot of questions, but He answers enough. He gives us what we need. Look at what Paul says in verse 24: **“The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. 26 And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, 27 that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, 28 for “In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we are indeed his offspring.”**

He introduces these lifelong pagans to the basics, then he goes on in the rest of the verses to talk about the particulars. This is who God is and what He has done. This is why He made us, what we're for, and what we should do. He does the same to you, day after day, in His Scriptures. He tells you that you are sinners. He tells you that you are in darkness. Then He shows His marvelous light in His Son, telling you that this Jesus had made

you new people. *His* new people, holy and pure, and because of that, none of this has to be a mystery. The fate of the world is death. The fate of our bodies is death. But like Jesus' death, our death yields new birth, resurrection.

God is known. It's all there, in the Scriptures. What mysteries remain are the ones God has decided to let stand, and even if we cannot stand that, God gives us the heart to accept our place in His plan. If that seems too much to you in these times, if you're like me and you feel like you absolutely *need* the end of the story, remember the ultimate end. Death, then life eternal. How we get there is simply up to God in most of its particulars. What we do on the way there is what matters, how we trust Him is what matters. If these times have frayed that trust, battered it, you're not alone, but God rebuilds what our sin wrecks. He spends an entire Old Testament promising that. On the basis of that promise, we know whatever waits us will be good for us. He promises that too, incidentally.

Don't be Athens. Fear, lack of control, and all the impulses and entitlement of the sinful flesh make it so easy. It is our nature, after all. But we don't worship that which is unknown. You aren't being led by a stranger. You're being led by *Your God*, your Savior, your shepherd who wants you to get to the green pastures. He knows what that means for you, even if you really really think you do, He knows it and He'll get you there. If you're praying for Him to hurry up with it and get you there *now*, you're in good company. Keep praying for it. God wants to hear from You. As Paul says, He isn't far from you, and He isn't doing this for kicks. He's doing it to lead you on that path to knowing Him better.

Amen.