

Pastor Joe Polzin
Acts 17:16-31
“Placed and Prepared”
Year A – Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 21, 2017

Tired and sea-worn, he stepped off the boat and onto the shores of Greece. Memories of the riots forming and mobs attacking were still fresh in his mind. Paul walked up to the city of Athens, thinking of all that had happened. From a human perspective, this second missionary journey was off to a rocky start. In Philippi, Paul was beaten and imprisoned. After a miraculous escape, an angry crowd attacked Paul and his associates, driving them out of the city. In Berea, the next city, it didn't take long for that same mob to find him again and drive him out of that place, too. It was all Silas and Timothy could do to get Paul on a boat, sending him off to Athens, hoping they would be able to meet him there.

And that's where our First Reading picks up, “Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens...” (Acts 17:16). He was waiting for the rest of his missionary party to meet up with him, unsure if they were safe or even alive. And I bet he had quite a few things going through his mind.

And yet, it's interesting to see what Paul did while he was waiting. Paul was never one to let a missionary moment slip by. Scripture says, “His spirit was provoked within him...” and he went around observing, noticing, speaking with others, reasoning with people, in the synagogue, as well as in the common marketplace. Not just once. It says “every day” he did this, with whomever happened to be there.

Finally, some very intellectual people, philosophers, what Athens was known for, took notice of Paul, and his message about Jesus and Jesus' resurrection. And they invited him to the Areopagus, or, in English, “Mars Hill,” the place where new ideas were heard and exchanged. “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” Paul then proceeds to give his well-known message to the Athenians.

Now, a lot can be said, and has been said, about Paul's message. Simply put, however, Paul does two things. First, he seeks to understand the worldview of the Athenians and meets where they are. And he wouldn't have been able to do this had he not spent time among them, being a part of their lives, understanding them, talking with them. He begins his sermon, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.” And they were – they were a polytheistic culture, meaning they worshipped many gods.

But, Paul realized, at any given moment, they couldn't feel certain in their life's direction or where the gods were taking them. So, they spent their time working hard, either by physical sacrifice or intellectual progress, making sure that they could appease as many gods as possible, so that life would be that much more bearable. In fact, so concerned they were in not leaving out any god and possibly offending them, that they even set up an altar with the inscription, “To the unknown god.”

Therefore, the second thing Paul does in his message is to proclaim to them the transformative news of the resurrected Lord Jesus. “What therefore you worship as unknown,” Paul said, “this I proclaim to you.” And beginning with God at creation, he explained how God has been at work in the world, not as a god made of “gold or silver or stone,” “living in temples

of man,” but as the Lord and Creator of all. And this Almighty God is not far off, as might have been thought, but rather, has drawn close to us. In fact, He came to us in His Son, Jesus Christ, whom God raised from the dead. And Jesus will come again to judge the world, to raise us from the dead, and he has made a way for us to repent, be forgiven, and to hope in him.

Next week, forty days after Jesus’ *resurrection*, we celebrate his *ascension* into heaven, when Jesus took his place at God’s right hand. The disciples walked and talked with their risen Lord for forty days, but then, when the day of ascension came, and as they stood there, staring into the sky, I wonder what they thought. First, filled awe, most likely. But then, I wonder if a sense of loneliness or even fear crept over them. For the first time in a long time, they were alone. And they knew they wouldn’t see Jesus again until they saw him in his heavenly glory.

Whether they realized it right then or not, Jesus had prepared them for this moment, the same night that he was betrayed, in the Upper Room. You see, Jesus knew the day was coming when he would depart from them, and so he reassured them, “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live.”

And he promised to them the “Helper,” the Holy Spirit, who would come to them and be with them forever. And the Spirit of truth would be his true representative to them, so even though their eyes may not *see* Jesus, they would know his presence daily and the life that he brings them. He comes in Word and Sacrament, and he will come again on the Last Day.

Peter tells us from our Epistle Reading, “Always [be] prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15). And Paul in Athens was doing just that. His “spirit was provoked,” and I don’t think we need to guess by whom. The *Holy Spirit* has placed Paul among those Athenians, so that when they asked him to say some words, he was prepared. Paul hadn’t been joined by his missionary party from Berea yet, but Paul certainly wasn’t alone. Jesus promises, “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper...” And helped by the Helper, Paul proceeded to tell them of the reason for the hope that was in him.

Think about that... what could have been a very discouraging situation, Paul, emboldened by the Holy Spirit, still proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ. He could have said, “Well, it’s not been going so well in these other cities. And now I’m looking upon a city that is literally full of false gods and idolaters. I think it’s about time to hang it up.” But he didn’t. Why? Because God had placed him, and God had prepared him.

I think we as Christians in the 21st century may be tempted to “hang it up” some days. You look at the landscape of a growing non-believing society, and you wonder, how could this possibly go well? We, too, live in a polytheistic culture. Sure, not many people are worshipping the Greek or Roman gods anymore, but we have our own gods of different shapes and sizes. The god of money, the god of the American lifestyle, the god of supposed “financial security,” the god of good health, or, perhaps most deceptive, the god of myself and whatever makes me happy.

People worship all sorts of things today, and it might be very tempting to not want to speak up about the Creator God, and His Son Jesus, who are virtually unknown to so many. Afraid that it will sound too strange, afraid that it’s not your place to speak out. But it is. Because just as God had placed and prepared Paul, so, too, He has placed and prepared you.

You don’t need to go overseas to find a mission field. God has given you your own Athens. It’s no coincidence that He’s placed you right where you are in your life. Just look around, and see who’s there. Fellow students, coworkers, neighbors, perhaps even your own

family. People who live in a world created by a God unknown to them. You don't have to go far to find someone to whom God desires you to speak. In fact, you may not have to go anywhere at all.

And the location of your life, given by God, is incredibly important to realize, because how effective would Paul had been if he just sat waiting in Athens, waiting for someone to come to *him*, assuming the place where he was wasn't related to God's mission at all? Instead, Paul spent his days with the Athenians, forming relationships, seeking to understand them, so that when the time came, he could speak *with* them, not just *at* them.

You don't need to be afraid of forming relationships with non-Christians. In fact, that's *exactly* what you should be doing. Relationships without judging. Relationships for listening, and understanding. And when the time comes, you'll be given an opportunity to speak of the hope that is in you.

And God not only *places* you, but God also *prepares* you. Prepares you to make a defense to anyone who asks you for the reason for the hope that is in you. First and foremost, because there *is* a hope that is in you. Don't skip over that important foundation of Gospel news. You can't generate your own hope. This kind of hope comes from God fulfilling the promises that He has made to you so that you may have life in His name. This promise was given to you in your Baptism, strengthened and renewed every time you hear God's Word and receive His Supper. Our hope rests squarely on God and His promise, and there's no better place for it to be.

That's what Paul shared with the Athenians. He told of the Creator God, who sent His Son to bring life to all, who verified His Son's message by raising him from the dead, and who now provides us the opportunity to repent and come to Him, so that we would be ready for the day when His Son returns again. This good news is assurance of the hope that He gives to us.

And second, God prepares you to speak to that hope because He makes sure you aren't alone. Jesus promised his disciples a Helper, who would remain with them and be with them, so that even though Jesus, for a time, would be out of sight, he would still be very present. Christ is present for you, daily, in Word and Sacrament, and it's the Helper, the Holy Spirit, who makes him known to you. And the Holy Spirit allows you to speak of the hope that you have, so that it is not you who speaks, but the Spirit of God speaking through you (Matt. 10:20).

And what do you say? You certainly don't have to have a doctrinal dissertation at the ready. Instead, it can be as simple as being ready with an answer to this question, "What does the hope that Jesus brings mean to *you* in *your* life?" And though our words may not be eloquent, they will be sufficient. Because to have hope like that, in this world that is feeling their way toward God and hoping to find Him, it will sound "strange," just as it did for Paul's audience.

And I want you to note the reaction Paul gets. The very next verse after our reading says, "Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, 'We will hear you again about this.'" And some dispersed, but some believed. That's the way it goes. God works as He wills. Our job isn't to be responsible for making sure everyone agrees with our hope. The Holy Spirit has reasons why He does what He does. We are called to provide the reason for our hope in Jesus. Some will listen, others won't. The rest is up to God.

As we begin making the shift in our church season from Easter, the celebration of our Lord's resurrection, to his ascension next week, and into the season of Pentecost the week after, when we celebrate the coming of the promised Holy Spirit, we realize that we are not alone, and that we have been given a great hope in Jesus, and *to that hope* He has both placed and prepared us to speak. In Jesus' name. Amen.