

“Where Does God Live”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, May 21, 2017

Acts 17:22-31

I want to begin by reading the two verses that come before what I just read to you. “So, they took [Paul] and brought him to the R-EE-OP-A-GUS and asked him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.” Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.” (Acts 17:19-21)

The photograph that Jean Painter has put on the screens is of the Parthenon, the temple to Athena, that sits on the top of the Acropolis in Athens, Greece, and was built in the fifth century BC. It sits just above the R-EE-OP-A-GUS where Paul stood to speak to the Athenians about Christ, two thousand years ago. At that time, these buildings would have been in near perfect form, with column, capital and entablature intact and without blemish.

The Ancient ruins of the Greek world are reminders to us of an understanding of civilization that still has roots in our world. This world of Antiquity is one that we study in schools. And our culture acknowledges the roots of philosophy and art that find their way back to the thoughts of Socrates, and his students Plato and Aristotle, and to the Playwrights of Greek Tragedy, Sophocles and Euripides.

And so, the Apostle Paul stood in the R-EE-OP-A-GUS, in the midst of the world we now call Ancient, and said to the Athenians gathered, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’

Paul had quickly left Thessalonica after encounters with hostile crowds, and was taken to Athens, to await the arrival of Silas and Timothy. There was a sense of danger in speaking in Athens.

The writer of Acts staged our verses to resemble the trial of Socrates held in the same place in 399 BC. Socrates was charged with failing to acknowledge the gods recognized by the city, and introducing other new divinities. And he was sentenced to death by drinking the poison, Hemlock.

And into this uncertain political space, Paul stands and talks about how in his walking about their city he came upon the altar to an unknown God. This was the entry point Paul needed. And he jumps in with both feet, saying this unknown God to you is the God that is known to me in every way - in my life, in the breath I take, in the world I see around me.

This Known God does not live in shrines made by human hands. This Known God ‘made the world and everything in it.’ This Known God made all nations to inhabit the whole earth. And if you search for God, God is not far from each one of us.

And Paul, using a line from one of their own Grecian poets, says that in this Known God, 'we live and move and have our being'. This line can be traced to a poem by the Greek poet Aratus. Called Phaenomena, it was an ode he wrote to honour the God Zeus. Aratus came from Tarsus, Paul's home town. Paul knowingly used this line from a classical Greek poet to indicate the depth and the wonder of his Known God, 'For in him, we live and move and have our being.'

We read in Acts 17:33: "At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius and a woman named Damaris, and others with them." And the unknown god became the Known God.

Back in 1975, in February, I was walking up the stone steps to the Parthenon. Some of you here today have walked that same stone path up to the Acropolis. On that day, a photographer caught a moment which I treasure – my father, my mother in the lead, and I following. The photograph, and the memory, is fading with time.

There is another photo I look at, that my mother took, of myself and my father and siblings standing in front of the Parthenon, cloudy grey day, the tones of the photo browning into a sepia. Time moves forward, always. And just as the beauty and timeless lines of the Parthenon itself continue to decay with each passing year, I too am caught up in that cycle of decay. As our opening hymn 'Praise, My Soul, the God of Heaven' reminds us: "Frail as summer's flower we flourish; blows the wind and it is gone; but, while mortals rise and perish, God endures unchanging on."

The Elgin Marbles are the 'horses' and sculptures that were a part of the Parthenon's Entablature. The objects were removed by Lord Elgin who was the British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire for only 4 years, from 1799-1803, and taken back to England. I've seen them in the British Museum where they still reside.

The Victorian poet John Keats penned the poem, 'On Seeing the Elgin Marbles for the First Time', in 1817, 200 years ago. "My spirit is too weak; mortality weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep... So do these wonders a most dizzy pain, that mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude wasting of old Time."

When we encounter something that is ageless to our minds, like the Elgin Marbles, like ruins of antiquity, it turns our hearts, as it did Keats, to the reality of the passing of Time, and we are part of this 'frail as summer's flowers we flourish, blows the wind and it is gone.' Paul stood there in the Athens of Antiquity, saying this unknown God to you is the God that is known to me in every way - in my life, in the breath I take, in the world I see around me.

Imagine someone who doesn't know much if anything about church, driving into Stouffville. And they are noticing how religious the town of Stouffville is. They see our churches dotting the streets – some big, some small. And now they're coming through the doors into Stouffville United Church.

They're looking at the soft stained glass in the windows, the lamb in the window over the gallery, the cross in front of the organ façade. And they're seeing this table in front of me, with the words, 'In Remembrance of Me'.

And they say to us, "Stouffvillites, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the town and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'In Remembrance of Me'. In remembrance of who? Who is this unknown god?"

To paraphrase Acts 17:19-21, they add, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means."

The crossroads of culture are intersecting in our time – we are in the Age of Spirituality some call it. And the question asked by the curious is, 'Who is this unknown god?'

Even though time passes on, and our structures crumble and our generations end and new generations take the lead, the one eternal constant is that God endures unchanging on.

And, in the time we are given in this place, in this part of our timeline of eternity, our words are not too far off Paul's words "In him I move and live and have my being". We don't need a temple to find God. We don't need to build a home for God to live in with precious jewels and stones. We don't need to go a particular place to find God.

God is here. God is in this place. God is in our world. God is in our life. God is the air we breathe. God is the ground under our feet. God is the shade of the tree over our head. God's dwelling is in all of creation. God is as near to us as our breath. 'For indeed he is not far from each one of us.' Paul says.

The dialogue continues from when Paul stood in front of the Athenians, to us here today. This question is asked, 'Who is the unknown god?'

And we say this unknown God to you is the God that is known to us in every way - in our life, in the breath we take, in the world we see around us.

And the answer resides in the beating of our hearts, in the pulse in our veins, in the air we breathe, in the song we sing, in the knowledge that the God we follow, in the God we worship today, is the God in whom we live, and move and have our being.

Thanks be to God. Amen.