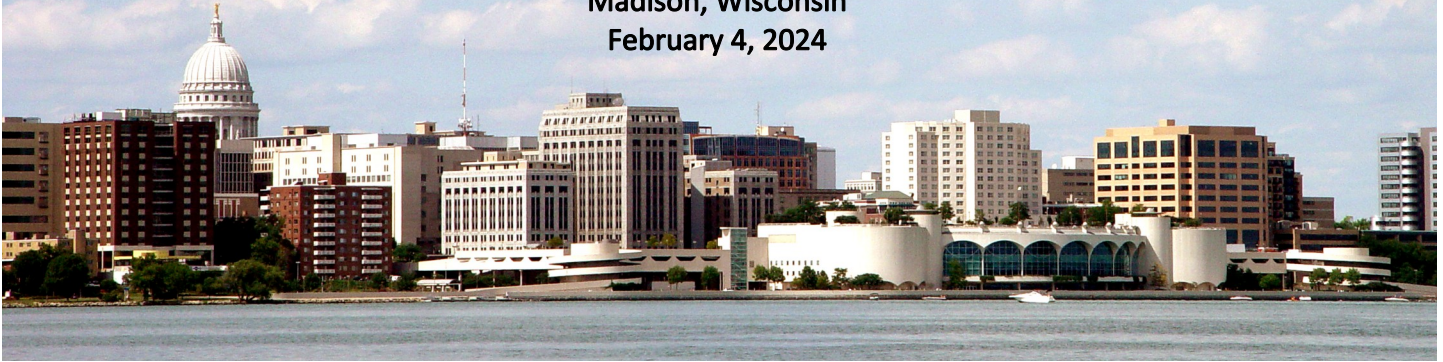


Preaching Jesus to the World

Part 2: Acts 17:22-34

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Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
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Good morning, and welcome to the Four Lakes congregation! If you are visiting this morning or joining us online or on the phone, we are glad to have you with us. We'd like to ask that you fill out a visitor card online if you can, or you can use one of the cards from the pew in front of you. Whatever works for you, we would love to hear from you, and we invite you to pass along any questions or prayer concerns.

As most of you know, we are mourning with the Schudlach family this morning. Carson passed away this past Monday afternoon. What a wonderful human being! I have some artwork from Carson in my study at home, going back probably close to 15 years or more. Carson was an inspiration to many, and we certainly need to continue praying for Bill, and Norma Jean, and Bryor, and the entire family in the days and weeks ahead.

In terms of our schedule, I hope to head out this afternoon for the Freed-Hardeman University Bible Lectures, where we plan on spending several days studying the book of Revelation. I hope to then stop by to see Tabitha, and then Keola's dad in Ohio, and then a friend who preaches in Detroit, before heading home by camping through the Upper Peninsula and along the north shore of Lake Superior. My goal is to make it to the Canadian border and to do some winter camping along the Superior Hiking Trail. Thank you for allowing me to be away, and thanks to John Palmer and Caleb Richter for preaching over the next two weeks!

We are here this morning to preach the love of God who sent his Son to save us. He died in our place, he was buried, but he was raised up on the first day of the week. This is the gospel, and we obey the gospel by believing it, by turning away from sin, by confessing our faith in Jesus as being the Son of God, and by obeying the Lord's command to be buried with him in baptism (an immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins). And as a part of our invitation to you, we've been sharing examples of what this looks like. And today, we have several that we could have shared, but I'll limit it to this one from the Philippines, where they say that "The pastor of an Evangelical church obeyed the gospel and was baptized into Christ. He attended the Preachers Training Classes Program here at Malagos Church of Christ. After the morning session of the class, he understood the truth and decided to surrender himself into Christ. Include this new brother of ours in your prayers." Wonderful news! And if you have not yet done what this man has done, we invite you to get in touch. Pull me aside after worship this morning, or give me a call, send a text, or send an email using the contact information in our bulletin or on the website, and we would love to study together.

Last week, we started looking at a series of questions that came in (primarily from the young adults of the congregation); basically, “How do we share Jesus with the world around us?” And as we started looking at those questions, we noted that we are facing a world that is quite different from the one that most of us grew up in. The world is changing, and we noted that most people around us no longer have anything resembling a Biblical worldview. Most today, in fact, are completely unfamiliar with the word of God, and many have never even heard of men like Abraham, and Moses, and even Peter and Paul.

Last week, then, we started answering the question: Where do we start? And does the word of God give us any guidance on this? How do we share Jesus with a world that has absolutely no concept of God and his word? Last week, then, we started looking at Paul’s approach in the city of Athens in Acts 17. And we plan on returning to Acts 17 this morning (in our pew Bibles, we’ll be on page 1734). By the way, by giving the page numbers in our pew Bibles, we are doing what we can to communicate to a world that doesn’t know the Bible. The same goes for weird abbreviations. In our bulletin articles, by the way, I always try to spell out the references to books of the Bible. John, for example, is often abbreviated as “Jno.” What in the world? Why make it any harder for those who do not know the Bible to find references in the Bible? So, we always try to make the message as easy to follow as we possibly can. But, back to Acts 17, in context, Paul is on his Second Missionary Journey, and he’s basically been run out of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea; he’s left some coworkers behind to help get some new churches off the ground in those cities, while Paul goes on ahead (alone) to Athens. As he arrives in Athens, he interacts with the locals, and he ends up being invited to speak on the Areopagus (which is a gathering place for philosophers and is pictured in the bottom half of the image on the wall up here, basically in the shadow of the Parthenon).

Last week, then, we looked at Paul’s initial approach to the people of Athens, and in Acts 17:16-21, we learned that he started by THINKING SOULS. He was provoked by the idols in the city – not in a shake-your-fist-and-scream-at-the-sinners type of way, but in a way that would cause him to do something productive. Basically, Paul loved these people, even though they were different, and we learned that we cannot skip Step #1. Secondly, we also learned that Paul TAKES THE MESSAGE TO THE PEOPLE. Yes, he went to the synagogue first (this was his custom, these were people who had a similar worldview), but we also find that Paul then heads out into the marketplace, where he has these ongoing discussions with the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. And we learned from this that we may need to get creative in how we reach out to the world around us. Thirdly, we also learned from Paul that as we reach out to a world that doesn’t know God, we might as well go ahead and EXPECT OPPOSITION. They listen to Paul, but they also accuse him of being an *“idle babbler,”* a seed-picker, an intellectual dumpster diver. Paul, though, doesn’t take it personally, but he accepts their invitation to come explain himself further on the Areopagus (this is where we are heading this morning). But then we closed last week by noting that CULTURE IS ALWAYS CHANGING. And we learned that instead of moaning and groaning and longing for the “good old days,” it’s probably best to just acknowledge that culture constantly changes (for better or worse), and get to work. A changing culture means that we may have some new opportunities now that we haven’t had in the past.

Well, this morning, we pick up with what Paul actually says as he is invited to speak to these people on the Areopagus. As we noted last week, all the sermons we have in Acts up to this point were aimed at those from a Jewish or God-fearing background and started with scripture: This is what the word of God says, and this is how all of it applies to Jesus. But today, we have the first transcript of a sermon preached to those who have a completely different worldview. And Paul is not new to this. Paul has been on the road for roughly 20 years at this point. He’s been jailed, and beaten, and left for dead. He’s interacted with both Jews and Gentiles, but this is the first record of what Paul actually says in such circumstances. We know he won’t be compromising the truth, but where will he start in a situation like this?

Let's pick up by looking at Acts 17:22-34,

22 So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. 23 For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.' Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. 24 The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; 25 nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; 26 and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, 27 that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; 28 for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' 29 Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. 30 Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, 31 because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead." 32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, "We shall hear you again concerning this." 33 So Paul went out of their midst. 34 But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

As we look at what Paul actually says here, I want us to arrange our thoughts around four big ideas that will guide us today as we interact with those whose worldview is quite different from ours.

- I. And first of all, based on how Paul starts here, I want to suggest that as we reach out to the world around us, we need to start by LOOKING FOR CONNECTIONS.

Isn't this what Paul does in verses 22-23? In his mind, Paul can't be more different from these people! Last week, we talked about Paul being "*provoked*" by seeing so many idols in Athens. Paul was mad! But do we see that come out in verse 22? Not at all! We see no hint of anger in his voice. At all. He doesn't start out ranting against these low-down, good-for-nothing, idol-worshipping heathens. Nothing like that. But instead, Paul starts out looking for anything he might have in common with these people. And he finds it, doesn't he? "*Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects.*" Knowing what we know about the apostle Paul, that has to be one of the most self-controlled and level-headed opening lines of all time. In fact, it almost comes across as a compliment, doesn't it? You're religious, and that's a good thing! And the implication is: I, also, am religious. This is something we have in common.

He continues (in verse 23), "*For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.' Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.*" One thing I hope we notice here is that in the passage we studied last week, these people were accusing Paul of being a "*proclaimer of strange deities.*" In other words, we shouldn't listen to this guy, because he is preaching a new god. Which is funny, because these people also prided themselves in "*...spending their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.*" So, you would think that a new god might be a good thing, but in another sense, any attempt to switch your allegiance to a brand new god might make a lot of people pretty nervous. That can be a big leap. So, instead of introducing God as a brand new god, Paul ties the one true God of heaven to a "*god*" they were already worshipping, the "*unknown*

God.” Paul had seen this statue on his way in, and he uses this idol as an illustration. And I should add: In verse 23, Paul doesn’t even refer to this thing as an “idol.” Not yet, anyway, but at the beginning, he refers to this thing as one of their **“objects of worship.”** That is so neutral!

They worship idols, but instead of condemning them right here at the beginning, Paul starts with a compliment. And further, Paul offers to fill in a gap in their knowledge. We will get to this in the next section, but this is how Paul starts: You are obviously very religious; that’s great! I have some new information that may fill in a gap that you yourselves have admitted. One of your own altars is dedicated **“TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.”** Allow me to make this God known to you. Paul, then, starts with a compliment.

And the fact that he starts with a compliment means that he does NOT start by quoting scripture to these people. Why not? Because they don’t care! In Acts 2, speaking to Jews, Peter starts by quoting the prophet Joel, and this pattern continues throughout the book of Acts. But here, Paul (rather obviously) avoids scripture altogether. Again, because these people do not care. So, he starts where they are. He starts with a compliment about them being **“religious.”** So also, as one commentary has suggested: Although many of us grew up in an “Acts 2” America, we are now living in an “Acts 17” America. This means that how we approach people today may need to be different from how we might have approached people even 20 or 30 years ago.

So, where do we start? If somebody we know is spouting off nonsense about God, we start there, “So, it sounds like you’ve done some thinking about spiritual things. Have you ever given any thought to who Jesus is?” And then, perhaps, we move to scripture to reveal what Jesus said about himself. Or maybe we offer to study through one of the gospel accounts, written by the eyewitnesses. Or maybe we have a friend who’s always concerned about the environment. Perhaps we use that as a way to share that our church spends some time cleaning up the parks in the neighborhood. Why do you do that? Well, we believe God created the earth, and he told us to take care of it, so we do. The point is: We have something in common. We may have different REASONS for what we have in common, but it’s somewhere to start. Or maybe someone is concerned about justice. Justice is good, isn’t it? We agree. But why is justice good? Can biology alone explain why justice is good as opposed to the survival of the fittest? Or is justice good because we are made in the image of God? We start with what we have in common and move on from there. We don’t bury our heads in the sand. We don’t AVOID culture (as the Amish might do), but we ENGAGE in culture by finding common ground for the purpose of teaching Jesus.

And before we move on from this, I just want to emphasize that we might need to LISTEN to the people around us. The only way Paul knew to start with the altar to the Unknown God was to pay attention to what was important to these people. Too often, it’s easy to come into a discussion with what we want to say all planned out, without really taking the time to understand what is important to this other person. And we may need to ask. Many times, Jesus taught by asking questions. Or, they may tell us first. They find out who we are, and they may tell us what they think about the Christian faith. We start there. Last week, I mentioned Pride Night; and then in June we have Pride Month coming up. What might we have in common with those who celebrate Pride Month? One reason Pride Month is even a thing is because of how those who identify as gay have been treated through the years. We have many differences, but one thing we have in common is the belief that all people need to be treated with the utmost of love and respect. And we’ve taught our kids that from the very beginning. As you head out into the world, you will meet people who do not believe like we do, but as God’s people we are not to be those who insult or abuse others, for any reason. That is not who we are. I’ve put an article on this in the cubbyholes this morning, but the author makes the point that “...every one of those people with pride flags has an intrinsic worth that is greater than the world and everything on it.” We start there; we start by looking for connections.

II. As we continue, let's notice that Paul starts with what he has in common with these people, but then (in verses 24-29) he URNS THE CONVERSATION TOWARD GOD.

And we cannot skip this step! If we just start with what we have in common, and if we focus on that exclusively and leave it at that, then we have not done what Paul does here. Yep, we love the Packers, too; yep, it sure is cold out there today; yep, gay people sure have been mistreated for many years and that's terrible; yep, I see you worship idols, and it's great you're so religious; if we leave it there without turning the conversation toward God, then we have not done what Paul does here.

And we don't have time to look at this in great detail, but Paul takes this opportunity to introduce these people to God.

- First of all (in verse 24), God made the world and everything in it. He is not just a God of the Jews, but he is Lord over all creation.
- Secondly (also in verse 24), the God of heaven does not dwell in temples made with hands. Unlike the Greek and Roman gods, God doesn't need a place to live.
- Paul explains (in verse 23) that God doesn't need us (we need him); he is not served by human hands; he doesn't really need what we have to offer.
- In fact (in verse 24), He gives to all people life and breath and all things. So, not only is God not a taker, but he is a giver, and he has given us everything!
- In verse 26, Paul explains that God created all people from one man and governs where we live. This was a slap in the face to the Greek idea that they were better than everybody else in the world, that they were preferred by the gods. And as a result, the Greeks, of course, described those who didn't speak Greek as "Barbarians." Do you remember the word "onomatopoeia" from when you were back in school? Onomatopoeia is what happens when a word sounds like what it describes. The Greeks would make fun of non-Greek speakers by mocking them; when foreigners spoke, it sounded like, "bar, bar, bar, bar, bar." They were "barbarians," and Greeks were superior. Not so, Paul says. God made all people from one man and he governs where we live.
- In verse 27, God is a God who wants to be found; in fact, he is near to each and every one of us (even in Athens). Unlike those idols made of wood and stone, God wants to be close to us; he wants to have a relationship with us. This is one of the most exciting parts of this, in my opinion. Paul is speaking to these pagan philosophers, and we may look at them as being pretty far away from God, but Paul is saying: God is right there in front of you. You are so close. And what a contrast with so many of the Greek and Roman gods. They were far away. If you wanted to get to them, you had to go on a journey up Mount Olympus; you had to go on a quest. Not so with God. If you will just reach out, God is there! And this reminds us that we as Christians have no right to be arrogant or to look down on those who have not yet obeyed the gospel. We are not saying, "Ha! Ha! We found God and you didn't!" No, God wants to find all people.
- And in verse 28, Paul quotes Epimenides of Crete and says that ***"In him we live and move and exist."*** Paul, then, doesn't quote scripture in this sermon, but he does quote a pagan author, because that author spoke the truth. Truth is truth, no matter where it comes from.
- And then (also in verse 28), he quotes Aratus, another pagan philosopher, and says that ***"We also are his children."***
- And finally (in verse 29), since we are his children (as one of your own poets have said), then God is obviously not an idol of gold or silver or stone, because rocks do not have children.

And as he makes these arguments, as he introduces these people to the one true and living God, again, Paul does not quote a single passage of scripture! And he avoids scripture here, because these people have no

respect for scripture. It does no good to quote Acts 2:38 and tell our friends they need to be baptized if they don't even believe in God in the first place. We may need to back up a little bit. In the same way, Paul starts, then, where they are, but he turns the conversation to God. And what an example for us today! We start with something we have in common, and then we move toward God.

III. As we come to verses 30-31, we now learn that as we preach Jesus to the world around us, we eventually get to the point where we CALL FOR ACTION.

In this case, Paul calls for repentance. To *"repent"* is to have a change of mind that results in a change of direction, a change in the way we're living. To *"repent"* is to make a spiritual U-turn. We are going in one direction, we realize we are not doing what God wants us to do (or we realize we are doing what God does NOT want us to do), and we change. Why? What's our motivation here? Because God *"...has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom he has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising him from the dead."* We repent, because judgment is coming! And this day of judgment has been *"fixed."* It's an appointment that cannot be put off or avoided. And it's a judgment that'll be based not on God's love or mercy, but according to God's *"righteousness,"* Paul says. That's a high standard.

And the proof of this coming judgment is that God raised Jesus from the dead. Now we're back to the resurrection that Paul was preaching in the marketplace (up in verse 18). The resurrection changes everything, and the resurrection is basically a summary of the gospel. Without the death and burial there would be no resurrection. So, Paul concludes here with a message of judgment (in this call for repentance), but it's also a message of hope. The God who made the world and everything in it wants to have a relationship, and he has sent his only Son to make this relationship possible. Your role in this is to *"repent,"* to turn away from sin to serve the living God.

It's not enough to make connections. It's not enough to talk about God. These are both necessary, but at some point we have to get to repentance. At some point, the good news actually has to make an impact. And this may be the hardest thing for us to discuss with people (what this means practically), but this is also the most difficult step in God's plan. Change is hard. This affects relationships. This affects how we worship. This makes demands of our time and attention. As Josh read for us earlier, repentance had a huge impact just up the road a few days earlier in Thessalonica, which is why Paul wrote them a few weeks later and praised them for how they *"...turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come"* (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10). Repentance is an entirely new way of thinking, a way of thinking that causes us to see sin for what it really is, a way of thinking that causes us to make a change in the way we are living. And calling for repentance is an absolute necessity in preaching the gospel. So, in preaching Jesus to a culture not like ours, we must still call for repentance.

IV. As we come to the end, I'd like to very briefly point out (from verses 32-34) that we must ultimately TRUST GOD WITH THE RESULTS.

In other words, we can do the best we can, we can plant, we can water, but ultimately, God is the one who causes the increase. Just because we follow Paul's pattern here doesn't mean that we will always be successful. But really, I suppose we may need to revisit our definition of success. We succeed when we preach the word of God faithfully. After all, this is Paul here! Share the gospel (all of it), and trust God with the results. We judge the success of preaching not by whether the person is still friends with us when we're done, not by how many obey the gospel, but by how faithfully we represent the Lord and his word.

And notice the responses here. First of all, some began to *“sneer.”* As soon as these philosophers hear about the resurrection, “Nope! This guy has lost his mind.” When some people hear some new information they refuse to accept, they will sometimes turn to ridicule. Some, then, reject the message completely and they actually turn against the Christian faith; they make fun of it. Secondly, though, there were others who were curious, but not quite ready to make a commitment, *“We shall hear you again concerning this.”* They procrastinate. They put it off. And that’s on them. Maybe they truly need more information, and if they’re willing to study, let’s study. Others may be struggling with a sin they’re not quite ready to give up. We can continue to teach and encourage, but again, that’s on them. I think about Jesus’ interaction with the Rich Young Ruler. Remember: That man talked face to face with the Lord Jesus Christ and decided to walk away. And what always amazes me is that Jesus let’s him go. Jesus does not chase him down and beg and plead, but Jesus tells him what he needs to do and allows him to walk away. So also in Athens. But finally, there were others who joined with Paul and believed. And we have two names here, starting with *“Dionysius the Areopagite.”* Apparently, this guy was associated with the Areopagus, perhaps a leader of some kind, perhaps a caretaker of this sacred place. And then we also have a woman named *“Damaris,”* along with several others. I love how Luke specifically includes a woman here. There were women listening to Paul on the Areopagus, and Luke is known for including women in his writing as he does here.

Beyond this, this is about all we know about the church in Athens. It seems to be rather small. We have no books of 1-2 Athens in the New Testament. There is, however, an active congregation of the Lord’s people in Athens today. The Athens church of Christ, in fact, has done some amazing work with the refugees in that part of the world, showing the love of Jesus by providing food, and clothing, and housing.

We learn, then, to preach Jesus faithfully and to trust God with the results. We don’t need to get discouraged. We certainly don’t need to get mad at people, but if we preach the word faithfully, we trust God with the outcome.

Conclusion:

As we think about what we’ve learned from Paul’s approach in Athens, I hope we notice how simple this is. Last week, we looked at the rationale behind this: Think souls, take the message to the people, expect opposition, realizing that culture always changes. This week, we’ve taken some lessons from what Paul actually says: We look for connections, we turn the conversation toward God, we call for action, and we trust God with the results. This is not hard, is it? Paul walks into this strange city all alone, he’s invited to speak, and the whole thing took us about 30 seconds to read. I don’t know whether this is a transcript or a summary, but Paul keeps it simple, doesn’t he? What we read here is something a 3rd grader could understand: There is a God, this is who he is, and this is what you need to do about it. We respond by obeying this ourselves and by taking this message to the world. We make a connection, we turn it toward the Lord, we explain how to respond, and we leave the rest to God.

In just a moment, Josh will lead us in a song, but before we sing, let’s go to God in prayer.

Our Father in Heaven,

You are the Great I Am, the God in whom we live, and move, and exist. This morning, we come to you in prayer, asking for your help. As we connect with the people around us, we pray for the wisdom to include you in our conversations. We pray for the courage to call this world to repentance, starting with ourselves. Thank you, Father, for your promise of eternal life. As we

return to school and work, we pray that you will lead us to men and women like Dionysius and Damaris.

We pray that you will continue to be with the Schmudlach family this week. We look forward to an awesome reunion some day. Keep us close to you until that day comes.

We love you, Father, and we come to you today through Jesus. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: furlakeschurch@gmail.com