

Acts 17: 21-28

²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.²² Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³ 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.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶ From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷ so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is 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 too are his offspring.’

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“There’s a God for That”

Intro: Take a walk with St. Paul through Athens. Maybe we imagine ourselves on a virtual tour. Athens, the City of Innovation and new ideas. Like Winston-Salem, it’s a college town full of intellectuals hungry for knowledge. Except notice there are idols everywhere. Move through the marketplace and see Demeter—the goddess of agriculture—with fresh produce tucked all around her. Pass the beauty shop, there’s Aphrodite—goddess of beauty—striking a pose at us through the glass window. Head through the columns of the Parthenon—the temple of the gods. See towering Athena in the center—goddess of war—protecting the city with her spear. Surrounding her are rows and rows of idols to worship. There’s Zeus—ruler of the sky. Next to him is Poseidon with his trident to guard the sea. Below them are gods of wine, fertility, sex. Tour Athens with Paul. You name it, there’s a god for that.

Move 1: As we start, we admit: we have always had a propensity towards idols. Toward some tangible image we can shape and control. Especially during times of uncertainty, we turn to whatever works to keep us above water like a life raft. Like when Israel wandered forty years through the wasteland toward an uncertain future, they lifted up questions: “Will God let us starve?” “At least we ate meat and potatoes in Egypt!” Then as Moses scales the mountain to receive God’s requirements, what do the people do? They mold jewelry into a god that will function—a quick fix idol who will save them. It’s interesting: as soon as God starts making demands of the people, they turn to idol. Perhaps it is what all of us do when following God becomes too difficult: form a god who is all promise and no demands. Surely God wouldn’t ask me to love or forgive my enemies. Jesus wouldn’t dare demand I cash out my life savings, or lose my life to find it, would he? When the god gets tough, the tough god gets going. We all do it. It’s why John Calvin said, the human mind is a “perpetual factory for idols.” In the factory of

our minds, we construct an alternative god that fits our convenience and serves our needs. One with less demands while providing us with the same benefits. Especially in times of uncertainty and fear, we turn to whatever idol we hope will save us.

Move 2: Now imagine St. Paul strolling around our countryside. Perhaps we experience our culture through St. Paul's eyes. Imagine him coming in on the boat, seeing our Lady Liberty—the monument promising freedom. Maybe he strolls through Hollywood's hills or catches a glimpse of *American Idol* on the tube—ah, the gods of entertainment. In the south, he finds a Confederate soldier solidifying an ideology of a Pollyanna period. All can become idols which make promises they can't keep. Just watch as St. Paul even meanders into our local Food Lion. There he finds a big poster board of the Jolly Green Giant holding a can of green beans—the god of veggies promising nutrition and health. Then in the checkout isle he finds a *Cosmopolitan* magazine, where some goddess of beauty is striking a pose promising how, "You can get the body of your dreams in five easy steps." Then of course he sees everyone worshipping the god of technology—wondering why everyone's heads are always bowed down in worship to their handheld devices as they walk, eat dinner and drive! So St. Paul wanders into a church, hoping to find a bit of relief, but there he listens to bible centered preachers claiming they teach, "Only the bible." Or he sees our nation's flag flying adjacent to the cross. Then, of course, I always wondered what he'd make of our image of a blond haired, blue eyed Jesus; or a buddy Jesus, or even shotgun slinging NRA Jesus! Oh, how easy it is to turn an idea about God into an ideology which gets chiseled in the mind and worshiped. Might wonder what Parthenon of idols St. Paul would find if traveling in our time. Whatever our need, there is a god for that.

Move 3: So what does Paul do? He pays attention to the open spot on the wall of statues. An inscription etched into the stone: "Unknown god," it says. Like any good preacher he borrows images of culture to point to the God of heaven and earth. And note: rather than condemning culture he offers them a compliment. "I see you are very religious people. So many gods for so many things. You are full of desire, so let me tell you about the god you worship as 'unknown.'" This is the God who hung the Big Dipper in the sky. The God who made the snowcaps and the sea foam. And us, too. Named it all good, good, very good! The desire to keep searching for more, God gave you that too. And realize: this God is never too far from you and me—actually this God is as close as our next breath. But here's the thing: this God cannot be contained in marble or limestone or 14k gold. Cannot even be held in the wonder of our imaginations. Why? Because God's image isn't found in an object or an idea, but in you—and well beyond you too. Can you see what Paul is doing? He's using the gift of their cultural context—an unknown god, a phrase from a local poet—to tell the story of God. Telling them about the God who named creation good, good, very good. Telling them about the God whose image is revealed in us and yet, still cannot ever be contained.

Move 4: So now step back and ask a question: why spend all summer reading through the *Book of Acts*? Our answer: because it is the story of what it means to be the Spirit-filled church. So we traced how the Spirit's wind blew through the early church and how the Spirit is leading us today. But maybe the Spirit is more than a guide, but is 'in whom we live and move and have our being.' Like seasons we are being carried in the womb of the Spirit. Summer turns to fall. Kids once again set alarm clocks to catch the school bus. Sweet tea gets swapped for pumpkin spiced lattes. Like seasons that move through the canvas of time, we are moving in the womb of God's Spirit. We go to jobs, embrace retirement, battle illness, raise children and grandchildren, inch closer to the shorelines of death, all while being carried by the Spirit in whom we live and move and have our being. We go to church. We stand up for justice. Speak out against racism and resist fear. All because of in whom we live and move and have our being. And how we do our work and who we are as a church must move with the seasons as well. Because if we don't, we can easily turn church into an idol that we believe we've created, rather than about the Spirit that keeps faithfully creating us. God's wind not only nudges us onward, but is like a womb that carries us through the highs and lows of life. From our first breath at birth, throughout school years, into adulthood, parenthood, and yes, even death. It's how a Spirit-filled church lives and moves and has its being.

Conclusion: At the end of Paul's sermon, some scoff at the story; others turn away from their idols and follow him. It is just the way it is with the gospel, some scoff and others follow. If we are looking for a predictable deity who is all promise with little demands, trust me, there is a god for that. But if we're looking for the God of creation, the God who created all of us in the image of love, the God of the cross and empty tomb, then there is a God for that too. A God as wild as the wind, and yet, always as close and as ordinary as our very next breath.