

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

²⁴ “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. ²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. ²⁶ From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. ²⁷ God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸ ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’

²⁹ “Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man’s design and skill. ³⁰ In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹ For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17:22-31)

God is Unknown

History is full of all kinds of mysteries. For instance, in 1587, Sir Walter Raleigh sent colonists to Roanoke, North Carolina. By 1590, those colonists had disappeared. There was no evidence of a battle. There were no bodies – just the name of an Indian tribe carved into a tree. To this day, what really happened to over 120 men, women and children is unknown. Another great mystery is Greek fire. Around the year 670, the Byzantine navy developed a kind of flame thrower that sprayed a chemical fire out onto the water and continued to burn. Of course, it destroyed the wooden ships of the enemy. For the next five hundred years, this secret weapon preserved a decaying empire. The formula for Greek fire is unknown today. If you’re interested in history you can find all kinds of mysteries like these – in fact, there’s even a TV show on PBS call *The History Detectives*. With so many mysteries in the world we live in, is it any surprise that there’s a great deal that we don’t know about God? It shouldn’t be, but somehow, we human beings have gotten the idea that we can shrink God down to a knowable size. We can’t know what happened to the Roanoke colonists, people believe they can know in their hearts what God is thinking. People believe that they can find God in events that touch them emotionally. But God is far beyond anything we can imagine. By ourselves, we humans could not know anything about him at all. To our tiny, limited brains, **God is unknown.**

I.

But God himself was not satisfied with that situation because God is love. So he changed it. **God is unknown. But he gives us hints so that we seek him.** St. Paul talks about that reality today. This morning, we find Paul in Athens waiting for some of his companions to join him. While he waited, Paul preached the gospel. After a time, he was invited to a meeting of a group known as the Areopagus. This was a group of thinkers and debaters. The people of Athens had a rich cultural heritage. Many of the most important Greek philosophers had lived and worked in Athens and so, by the time Paul visited, it was fashionable to gather and debate the latest ideas. Paul seemed to be advocating something new and different, so he was invited to come and speak to this assembly of thinkers.

Paul said, **“Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious.”** The apostle had had a few days to wander through the city and he had noticed that Athens was full of altars and temples. To this day, people travel there to see the Parthenon, which was a temple – and which was perhaps in view over Paul’s shoulder as he spoke. He had seen an altar with the inscription “TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.” Now, to the Athenians, this was probably just a way of playing it safe. Why risk offending somebody’s God? But all these symbols of worship indicated just how interested the Athenians were in worshipping the gods.

So Paul said, **“Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.”** Don’t misunderstand Paul’s point. He’s not saying that they were really worshipping Jesus when they offered sacrifices on this altar. Rather, he’s using their superstition to try to move them to a true and clear

understanding of who God is. Pastors do that all the time. We point to something you understand and try to use it to help you understand something far more important.

Paul proclaimed God **“who made the world and everything in it.”** To Greek people, that was a striking statement because they tended to believe that there was one supreme God who was the source of the universe. But they also believed that he was so far removed from us that we can never really know anything about him and that he has no interest in us whatsoever. But Paul proclaimed **“the Lord of heaven and earth”** and he told them that he doesn’t live in a temple like their carved idols did. He wasn’t served by human sacrifices. In the pagan world, the people imagined that what they offered to their gods were things the gods needed or wanted. But the true God made everything. He doesn’t need us to give him anything.

This one true God is in control of all things. Paul says, **“From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.”** You and I are here today because this is the set time and place God made for us. The Athenians were there talking to Paul on that day because that was the time and place God set for them. God has been doing that since the days of Adam and Eve. The almighty Lord of all the earth has been controlling the world he made for thousands of years.

God did all that for a very simple reason: **“so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.”** By our own powers and abilities, we humans can know nothing about God. But he wants us to know him. So he gave us incredibly big and obvious hints about himself: everything we see around us! All those temples and altars to all those false gods scattered throughout Athens show us just how hard God was hinting about himself. God keeps trying to get people to ask about him, to recognize that there is something higher and greater than themselves.

We needed him to do that. Luther said that you’d have to preach to a donkey for a very long time before you converted it. But God built into us the awareness of his presence. God made a world that is stunning in its beauty and glory so that we would ask ourselves about its Creator. Every year I tell the catechism class about an article I once read in *National Geographic*. Down at the bottom of the ocean where the water is so cold that it should freeze, but it doesn’t because the pressure of the water on top of it keeps it liquid, there are cracks in the earth’s crust. Lava flows out of these cracks. The lava is boiling hot. The sea is ice cold. But there is narrow strip between the two where the temperature can support life. And there is life there. There are these tubular creatures that grow nowhere else on earth but along those cracks in the sea floor.

God put those creatures there. Why? You can’t eat them. They don’t do anything. They’re isolated so they don’t affect any other part of the creation. They were unknown until we could send submersibles down two miles below the ocean’s surface. But God made them to show us he is God. The more we study the universe, the more we Christians have to marvel at what God has done.

What can we know about God from the universe around us? Could you or I think of those creatures along the cracks of the sea floor? Could you or I set up an ecosystem that sustains and renews itself like nature does? Could you or I invent physics? Could we design atoms and molecules? No. We’re just not smart enough. We’re lucky if we can drive our cars and talk on our cell phones at the same time. But God did all that. We can tell that he’s powerful because he made the universe come into being and he controls the destinies of nations. He runs it all.

II.

Every religion that has ever existed recognizes the power and wisdom of God. But that is not nearly enough. God wants us to find him, but it takes more than just worshipping a god of power and creation. It takes more than inventing stories about gods on Mt. Olympus or in Mecca. We need to know the true God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And we need to know how to get right with him. Nature can never tell us that. **God is unknown. But he reveals himself so that we know him.**

It’s not enough just to believe that a god exists. We have to know the true God. We have to hear what he has done and trust in that, or we’re not going to make it to heaven. The Greek poets understood that God is real. Paul quotes one of them as saying, **“For in him we live and move and have our being.”** But that wasn’t enough. They had to get rid of all the false ideas they had about God and understand what faith really means. They had to have the message that we get only through the Bible.

The first idea they had to get rid of was the notion that idols were anything. If we live and move and have our being in God, then clearly he cannot live in manmade temples. Then Paul says that in the past, God

overlooked such ignorance. Now, he's not saying that they got a free pass. God never just lets idol worshippers into heaven. But God did not confront them over their sin. For 1500 years, God had focused his attention on Israel. That time is now over. Since the day of Pentecost, God has been confronting the world with its sin. God has been calling all people everywhere to repent – which mean to acknowledge our sin and trust in Jesus.

Paul says, **“For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.”** Why do we need to repent of our idol worship? Because Jesus is going to judge the world. There's only one way to avoid being condemned on that day: to trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins. Now, maybe this doesn't sound like something that applies to you and me. After all, we aren't idol worshippers. We belong to the Christian church. So, this is really an opportunity for us to point our finger at the people we see outside these windows – all those people driving by right now, all those people that we watch run past our windows on Sunday morning. They need to repent.

My friends, there's more than one kind of idolatry. Not many Americans bow down to carved idols today. But there are other kinds of false gods. Your god is whatever is most important to you. Your god is whatever you trust in to take care of you and to solve your problems. Your god is the thing that guides and rules your life. To be really crass, a drunk's god is the bottle. A drug addict's god is cocaine or meth or whatever he uses.

And a sinner's god is whatever sin runs our lives. Some people worship money. They think that if they have enough of it, they'll be safe. They'll have a place to live and food on the table. They'll have good medical care and a lawyer if they need one. Some people worship the lifestyle money makes possible. Other people make more wholesome things their god. Family is more important than church. Sunday is the only day we have together, so we don't want to waste half of it coming here. The kids' sports are on Sunday, so we can't come to church til the season is over. Some people spend enormous amounts of their hard earned money on their children because they feel guilty if they don't. They neglect supporting the work of the church because those video games and cell phones cost so much. And you have to pay big money for cable and the internet. Some people enslave themselves to giving their children all the things they never had. In the process, they elevate those children, those precious gifts of God into false gods.

Are we guilty of idolatry? I think we all have to admit that we are. God calls all people everywhere to repent – to recognize that we have sinned when we put other things in God's place. That sin deserves hell. When Judgment Day comes, Jesus should condemn us. But he won't. Jesus died to pay for all that sin that we are guilty of. He took the place of every idol worshipper who's ever lived and he died for us – for you and for me. He suffered for all that we're guilty of and then he rose from the dead. That resurrection is proof of our forgiveness. It's proof that Jesus is the Son of God. When he comes on Judgment Day, there will be nothing for us to fear. He will set us free. We will live with him forever.

Jesus' resurrection is the climax of everything God has given us. In that resurrection, God reveals something that we could never know on our own: his mercy. We can look at the world and see God's power. We can see God's wisdom and his intelligence. We can look at all that God has made and all that God has managed, and recognize that he is supreme over everything and he can do whatever he pleases. But until we see Jesus, seeing that Creator and Ruler can only strike terror into our hearts, because we have to admit that we don't know what would please him. Again and again, our own consciences condemn us before him. But in Christ, God tells us a different story. Christ tells us the one thing that we can never learn from looking around us. He paid for our sin and God forgave us. That is the message of the Bible. Knowing that message means that we truly know God, because God is love. Give thanks to God for that message because in it, God solves all the mysteries of heaven and hell. God tells us what we truly need to know about him. Amen.