



No Substitute
Easter 6A 5/17/20
The Rev. Nick Morris-Kliment
Christ Church, Needham, MA

Oh Lord: take our minds and think through them; take our mouths and speak through them; take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.

Four summers ago, I went with Jamie and our two kids to Greece.

We were privileged to tag along while Jamie and one of her teaching colleagues showed their high school classics students some of the highlights of the Classical world.

Among other places, we visited Olympus and Delphi and Mycenae and the Acropolis. We ate mountains of lamb and chicken kabobs and French fries. The Greek people are warm and friendly and generous with their hospitality.

One of the highlights of the trip was visiting the ancient agora, or marketplace, in the port of Corinth.

From that spot, the Apostle Paul addressed the inhabitants of that lively and significant city.

Some of Paul's correspondence with the troublesome and loveable parish located there comes to us in the New Testament as Paul's Letters to the Corinthians.

We also spent time in Athens.

And especially exciting was an excursion to the Areopagus, a rocky hill in the shadow of the Acropolis, the Acropolis being where the iconic Parthenon stands.

Literally translated from the Greek, Areopagus means "big piece of rock honoring Ares," the Greek god of war.

In Paul's time, Areopagus also referred to the gathering of elders who investigated and deliberated philosophical and spiritual ideas, settled disputes, and judged certain matters that were brought before them.

So, the Areopagus referred to an important place *where* weighty matters were discussed, and *to* the august body of people who heard them.

If you wanted a hearing from the influencers and changemakers in the Greek world, you needed to get face time at the Areopagus, or more accurately, in *front* of it, and them.

And sure enough, we found a big bronze tablet memorializing the speech that the Apostle Paul gives in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles that Emilie shared with us a moment ago.



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It is a dramatic spot. Surely Athens was a smaller place in the middle of the first century after Jesus than it is now, but the bright blue Greek sky, and the breathtaking beauty of the Parthenon, would still have made it a memorable platform for Paul to address the gathered throng.//
Now this speech has a backstory.

You may recall the story of Paul's dramatic conversion.

He had been a powerful religious leader among the Jewish people, and Saul had been his given name. He was a vigorous and murderous opponent of the Jesus movement. He presided over the stoning of Steven, which we heard about in last week's passage from the Acts of the Apostles.

But on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus one day— to punish the new followers of the Jesus way—he is knocked to the ground in a life-shattering and world-altering encounter with the living Christ.

After a period of discernment lasting some years, Saul—now re-named Paul— became a missionary of God's love, seeking to share with all the world— with his fellow Jews first but then with the whole world—the love-drenching, life-renewing, history-shaping, action of the God who raised Jesus from the dead.

When we meet him this morning in Athens, Paul has arrived there, after crisscrossing the Mediterranean world, establishing churches, preaching and arguing with anyone who would listen to his testimony and the way his life was changed.

His message: The God who created the universe has sent Jesus to bring humanity back into a renewed and righteous relationship with the Creator.

Paul tells them then, and reminds us now, that "We are God's offspring!"

This God forgives sins and loves with a love powerful enough to overcome any obstacle, even death.

This God is real and can be known! And this God wants all people to feel to depths of our hearts and in the marrow of our bones that we are seen, known, and loved by this God! That's Paul's message.//

When Paul arrived in Athens, he was alarmed and terrified at the idols and altars to various deities he saw everywhere.



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Athenians were known to be an argumentative and curious lot, fascinated by the latest philosophies and religions of all kinds, though of course they were expected to have their ultimate allegiance to the Roman emperor.

Paul spent long days arguing in the synagogue first, then in the Agora—the marketplace in Athens—with philosophers and thinkers and all comers who were curious and wanted to know more about what he had to say.//

The marketplace in the Athens of Paul's time is not much different than the public square in our modern world.

We all have our idols to some degree—some are harmless; some are devastating.

We wander in the marketplace of social media and the internet and television, where the latest ideas and practices, trinkets and gizmos—the latest shiny things—they vie for our attention and money and our even our very hearts.

We're enticed by philosophies and ideologies that promise victory to the virtuous, and death and defeat to the deplorables.

Some of us cling to our hates as idols; as the writer James Baldwin once put it, "I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain." (The Fire Next Time; from a postcard published by Mission Institute of the Diocese of Massachusetts)

But what all of these idols promise—explicitly or implicitly, to a greater or lesser extent—is to take away our pain, our loneliness, to give us purpose and meaning and love.

But ultimately, they fail.

Because, as the philosopher Blaise Pascal once wrote,

"What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are,

though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words, by God himself."

(Blaise Pascals *Pensées* (New York; Penguin Books, 1966) p. 75, found at

<https://itsjustme.wordpress.com/2011/04/19/the-correct-quote-of-blaise-pascal/> I had thought it was from CS Lewis.)



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Only the God who created us can ultimately satisfy us.

On some level, we know that— as Paul says this morning, “We search for God, we grope for God.”

But none of these things, which we mistake for God or put in the place of God, touch us where we most deeply need it.

The One in whom we live and move and have our being has formed us to run on the love and compassion that come from God.//

We have been given a golden time—in these months, which will turn into more months, and perhaps even into years—to reexamine those things in our lives which may have become idols for us.

We have been given a golden time...

to relinquish our stranglehold on false gods,

to face the restlessness that scurries through our hearts,

to remember that God is real, and that God can be known!

That this God wants us all to feel and know in our bones that we are seen, known, and loved.

Julian of Norwich, the 14th century mystic and saint whose holy day we Anglicans marked last week on May 8, puts it this way:

“The place which Jesus takes in our soul he will nevermore vacate, for in us is his home of homes, and it is the greatest delight for him to dwell there.”

Amen.