

On Mars Hill

Psalm 66:8-20

Acts 17: 22-31

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Psalm 66:8-20

Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard, who has kept us among the living, and has not let our feet slip.

For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried.

You brought us into the net; you laid burdens on our backs; you let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.

I will come into your house with burnt offerings; I will pay you my vows, those that my lips uttered and my mouth promised when I was in trouble.

I will offer to you burnt offerings of fatlings, with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams; I will make an offering of bulls and goats.

Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for me.

I cried aloud to him, and he was extolled with my tongue.

If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.

But truly God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer.

Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me.

Acts 17: 22-31

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “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.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 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, 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.

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, 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. 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.’

Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

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Seeing the Acropolis for the first time is-- as you can imagine-- a truly awe-inspiring, jaw dropping sight! Climbing up the pathway of the very steep and rocky hill we could already feel the ancient history as we walked in footsteps first made in the 5th century BCE. Once a busy, thriving site for religion, philosophy and politics, the Acropolis is the home of what now remains

of several ancient buildings of incredible architectural and historical significance. The most famous building is the Parthenon, the temple dedicated to the goddess Athena, protector and namesake of the city. Looking up at the massive stone walls of the citadel, the rubble of the ancient Doric columns of marble, and what survives of the lavish sculptures; a bit of imagination let us see this in the way that Paul would have seen it intact and thriving in the first century; let us imagine the chaos of voices debating great philosophical questions and the offerings of prayer and sacrifice and hymns to the multitude of gods.

To come to the Acropolis, and then to the Areopagus—the site of his famous sermon—Paul would have entered Athens by the "Double Gate" on the western side of the city. Passing through these ceremonial gates, Paul would have seen the Temple of Demeter with statues of the goddess and her daughter. A little further on he would have passed the statue of Poseidon hurling his trident. Beyond this, he would have seen the statues of Healing Athena, Zeus, Apollo, and Hermes standing near the Sanctuary of Dionysus. As he explored Athens he could have visited The Sanctuary of the Mother of the Gods dedicated to Aphrodite, the goddess of love and pleasure.

In the open air theater of the Acropolis, Paul would have seen that the Athenians had an altar of Mercy, where people sought mercy, pity and compassion from the god Eleos. Not far from there he would have seen the Temple of Olympian Zeus. In Athens, wherever Paul went, wherever Paul looked, he was surrounded by statues, temples, and shrines.

Perhaps Paul was familiar with the proverb that declared that there were more gods in Athens than men, since he was truly seeing that truth. Wherever Paul looked, in temples and on street corners, in niches and on pedestals, were gods and demigods. Busts of Hermes, the soul guide, were on every corner and statues and altars were in the courtyard of every home.

Until now, Paul has been working to reach Jews and Gentiles, now he is in the midst of countless gods for every possible aspect of life. He must have been quite surprised to even discover an altar dedicated to the "unknown god," ensuring that no deity was omitted from worship.

Before his dramatic conversion Paul had been a devout Jew, who from childhood had been taught "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth."ⁱ Now he is an apostle of The Way, preaching Jesus, preaching the good news.

Paul "was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols,"ⁱⁱ while the Athenians were both curious and appalled by the babbling and his foreign, solitary, God.

At the Aeropagus, Mars Hill, at the base of the Acropolis and in the shadow of Athena's Parthenon, Paul spoke to the crowd. At the site where the highest court met, in the same place where Socrates was condemned to death for poisoning the minds of the youth, Paul began a slow and rocky journey to convert Athenians to Christianity.

With the wise approach of common ground, Paul's opening words honored their faith, "I see how extremely religious you are in every way." Finding a gentle way into a world of difference between them, he introduced God—the One God who created everything, who created all of us from a single ancestor. God who does not live in shrines and statues, who created each of us for a particular time and place and purpose, calls us to repent of the ways we stray. With the wisdom of the psalmist, Paul taught with the mindset of, "Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for me."

This much of Paul’s sermon, Paul’s teaching, was received with varying levels of belief and acceptance, but then he spoke of Jesus’ resurrection and judgment, “because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” That was too much for most of the crowd as they could not accept the idea of resurrection.

The time and boundaries of Paul’s truly unique existence helped shape Christianity from its precarious and struggling beginnings, and they are still shaping Christianity even now.

From the vantage point of the time of our own existence, through our own boundaries of places where we are to live and search for the God beside us, the God through whom we live and move and have our being, the infinite number of gods of the ancient Athenians can seem just historical to us, to those of us who affirm, worship, and treasure One God, One Triune God.

But is that really true? Our lives, our culture, our worldview, our daily lives, push and pull us in the ways of modern gods—materialism, self-interest, vanity, judgment, the ego and pride of a career or job over family time, the misuse and abuse of God’s good creation for our own personal advantage, anything that puts itself before God in our lives. We have our own modern ways of worship and sacrifice to the gods of our Parthenon, to our own inner place of power, influence and control. We worship God as Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit, yet we can all too easily bow to the other gods. We sing their praises, we honor their presence, offer them the highest seat in our priorities. These gods are not stone, wood and bronze, but we have still crafted them and value them.

As we finished our group tour of the Acropolis and passed by the Aeropagus, Mars Hill, I’m sure I heard the echo of Paul’s voice and his essential reminder, ‘In him we live and move and have our being.’ Amen.

ⁱ Exodus 20:3-4

ⁱⁱ Acts 17:16