

“Jesus, Fulfillment of Human Aspiration”

Acts 17:16-31

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter 2020, May 17, 2020

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

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How many theories about “God” are there? How do we know God?

The Apostle Paul was having an interesting time with this question when he was walking through the streets of Athens, Greece, one day in the first century. He observed that the place was full of idols (Acts 17:16). There were little sanctuaries for worship with idols set up in them all over the place. There were all kinds of gods people worshipped. I suppose that was okay for the people of Athens so long as they were all dedicated to the civil way of life in Athens as the supreme commitment and organizing principle.

Could it also be said that the people of Athens were an “open minded” people? There was debating going on all the time in the market place. There was also debating going on at that famous place called the Areopagus.

Luke, the author of Acts, tells us that Athenians and foreigners who visited there spent their time “In nothing except telling or hearing something new” (Acts 17:21 ESV). They loved to hear new opinions, religions, and philosophies. Sounds like they loved novelty. Maybe it sounds quite pluralistic.

The word Areopagus comes into English from two words that we find in our text, Areios Pagos, hill of Ares or Mars Hill, as the Romans called it. Ares was the god of war in the Greek pantheon, the son of Zeus and Hera. Maybe some of you have been there in Athens and have stood where Paul stood that day, preaching Jesus and the resurrection. The Areopagus was also an important place in the government of Athens. In Roman times, a council met there. One of its functions was supervising education, particularly relating to controlling many lecturers who visited Athens (BAG, Greek-English Lexicon, 105).

Anyway, Paul was debating in the market place with anyone who would listen about who God truly is. He was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

There were some stoic and epicurean philosophers there who heard Paul debating. They found him interesting at first, because he seemed to be preaching foreign gods of some sort. So they took Paul to the Areios Pagos to hear more from him. It might be that they also took Paul there for the council to hear him (BAG).

Paul talked about all the gods and altars he saw in Athens. It struck him that the Athenians were very religious. And amidst the altars to all those various gods, he saw an altar set up to honor “the unknown god.” Paul picks up on that as a point of contact for preaching the true God and Jesus and the resurrection. He says to them, “This God that is not known to you I now proclaim” (Acts 17:23).

With respect to all the idols Paul saw, idols of silver and gold and stone, he taught them that it is not appropriate to think that humans can make an image out of the divine nature by the craft and imagination of human beings. It is God who made us. We cannot make God something by our own hands and powers.

Nevertheless, I have a theory about the tendency of human beings to make idols and worship them. My theory is that human beings need God to take on concrete, tangible form. It is a need to be able to believe that we are grasping God and communing with Him, otherwise He eludes our grasp and is unknown. There is also a need for ritual and to appease God through

sacrifice, because humans of all times and places in the ancient world seemed to be quite aware of sin and the wrath of the gods. That wrath had to be appeased. Sin needed to be covered by sacrificial death.

On the other hand, the stoic and epicurean philosophers represent something else. They represent a need to try to find God, or ultimate meaning and reality, by use of reason. The ultimate could be many different things to human imagining. But there is the urgent need to find the ultimate and try to grasp it through thought, so as to make meaning out of life, to try to understand what the true good is and pursue it. The philosopher thought that the way to do this was through reason.

The stoics and epicureans each had their peculiar philosophy. We won't go into the details of that. They did seem to have one thing in common: they both taught and believed that life in this world is all that there is.

It is an intriguing question to ask why human beings try to capture God concretely or why they try to find God by using reason alone. I suppose there could be many answers. But there is one thing that Scripture tells us that is important.

When God made mankind, He made us in His image. This image was a reflection of God's character as goodness and love. The image of God also meant an unbroken spiritual communion between God and Adam and Eve. This communion was probably facilitated through the Holy Spirit. I say this because of what it says in Genesis 6:3: "My Spirit shall not abide in man forever" (Genesis 6:3 ESV). Thus, when Adam and Eve sinned they broke the natural spiritual communion with God, and the Spirit eventually departed from human beings.

I think that this departure of the Spirit and loss of the image of God has left a haunting. As Paul says, human beings have had a sense of God. Even the Greek poets have said that we humans are God's offspring. And Paul himself affirms that humans have had a sense that they live and move and have their being in God (Acts 17:28). Yet, even among the Greeks, whose poets have said such things, God remained unknown.

But humans have tried to find God, as if groping in the dark. It is a testimony to being God's offspring that they have tried to find God. It is a testimony to sinful corruption that God has remained unknown to human efforts to find Him, and that humans have made images to try to capture God or have tried to find Him or the ultimate through reason. But these efforts failed, for God remained unknown.

It is interesting to consider then how the Gospel can relate to both aspirations. Human beings indeed stand under God's judgment for their idols (Romans 1:18ff). But on the other hand, in a wonderfully gracious way, the Gospel accommodates our need to find God concretely. For God in His invisible, omnipotent majesty remains unknown. We have a sense of His existence. But we do not know His name, or His character, His definite will, and His feelings toward us.

But to make Himself concrete and concretely present for us, He did not make Himself an idol of gold or silver or stone. No. He made Himself a human being, like you and me. God could not have done it more wonderfully to make Himself concretely present for us than to make Himself one of us: To speak to us in our human language; to walk with our feet upon this earth; to eat and drink our food and drink just like we do; to sleep and to wake in the morning to marvel at the wonders of creation and go to work; to endorse and bless the institutions of being human that God Himself created. And He gave His being-concretely-present-with-us a Name, the Name of a man; His Name is Jesus.

There is no longer any need for idols. For the one true God is found in this man who also

has the Name of God's concrete presence with us, Immanuel, God with us.

For us here and now, His presence is extended through Word and Sacrament that are about Him and which He fills with Himself. Baptism, for example, connects us to Jesus. Peter said that Baptism now saves you by the appeal of a good conscience toward God, through the resurrection of this Man Jesus from the dead (1 Peter 3:21). This too is tangible, and it concretely connects you to the One who is the tangible presence of God for us.

Now there is no groping in the dark for God. He has stepped out of His darkness in relation to us to find us in the light of His appearing as our brother, Jesus. And in this Brother we have the restoration of communion with the Spirit, the Spirit of truth, whom Jesus speaks about. We have this restoration through faith in Jesus. Though this restoration is now a struggle between the Spirit of truth and the flesh that has been corrupted by sin, it is the beginning, the deposit, the first-fruits of the full and complete restoration of that communion we will have in Jesus when we lay down the baggage of this sinful flesh at the end of our pilgrimage here.

And what about the philosophers and reason? What does the Gospel have to say to that? I think it would be a mistake to suggest that the Gospel provides an irrefutable argument that could satisfy human reason of its truth. Paul doesn't really try to do that, though he does try to meet them where he thought he could proclaim the Gospel.

So he proclaims. He proclaims that God has appointed One man who will be judge of all. This appointing has come about by raising this one man from the dead.

Preaching the resurrection of Jesus got their attention. Some scoffed. Some found it interesting and told Paul they would like to hear him some more. Some also who heard it believed. They had names, like you and I have names. They were Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and other people with them (Acts 17:32-34).

I wonder why they believed the resurrection, when they heard. Luke does not tell us, so we don't know for sure. But there is something we can say.

It appears to me that philosophy and reason are trapped. They are trapped in the possibilities of human effort, and, therefore, the potentials of human failure, corruption, and human calamity. Human reason is also trapped in passions, lusts and desires. Both epicurean and stoic philosophies were attempts to control these things by reason. That is actually a good thing, as far as that goes. But reason cannot provide the spiritual power that is needed for this control.

Human reason is also trapped in death, which means that this life is all there is for reason; this life's potential and glory is all that is meaningful, and then there is nothing. Death is almighty. Death is the only certain thing. There is no potential and possibility beyond it. This is all reason can see. Both philosophies were attempts to cope with this reality.

But there is also something in us humans, another haunting, we could say, that recoils against this. We were not meant to die, yet death is such a dominating feature of reason and our existence. So what does it mean to hear that God raised a man from the dead, whom He has appointed to be judge of the living and the dead, in whom He also gives the hope and promise of resurrection? To modern ears it sounds like a ridiculous thing to say because we know absolutely how the universe works, right? But to other ears, the resurrection opens up a whole new world of potential. Potential to have a hope that death is not Almighty but the living God is, full of grace and truth in the One whom He raised. There is the potential to have a spiritual communion with God in His Spirit through the One whom He raised. And in this communion there is the power of the true and the good. There is now the potential of forgiveness and being regarded by God as righteous before Him in this One, as Paul declares when he unpacks the Good News of Jesus. But this opening up is not provided by reason; it is not found by human effort; it is the work and

gift of God Himself.

Jesus is the fulfillment of the deepest aspirations of human beings; the aspiration to grasp God in concrete reality in a tangible way; the aspiration for potential beyond slavery to sin and death. These things reason does not know. But Jesus is the fulfillment of these things. And He is present with us in His Gospel and Sacrament. God has brought them into our presence to hear and believe and receive in the Gospel of Christ. And through the Gospel He strengthens us through the Spirit. Thanks be to God for this wonderful gift. Amen.