

Sunday, May 17 6th Sunday of Easter Worship
Trinity UMC, Iron Mountain Rev. Geri Hamlen
'What Paul Knows'

Paul was a travelling man. He got around. And this morning we're going to hear about his time in Athens, the great Greek city which was full of Temples and shrines. Imagine, if you can, Athens, a city, a time in history when there were hardly any atheists and agnostics. Everyone had a god or two or 10 because they were pretty humble about the feeling like they needed help to get through life where hard and bad stuff happens. And gods are supposed to help. Paul, friend of Jesus, came to Athens to introduce the people there to our God, the God we already know about.

Holy Scripture Acts 17: 22 – 29 The Message

So Paul took his stand in the open space at the Areopagus and laid it out for them.

"It is plain to see that you Athenians take your religion seriously.

When I arrived here the other day, I was fascinated with all the shrines I came across.

And then I found one inscribed, TO THE GOD NOBODY KNOWS.

I'm here to introduce you to this God so you can worship intelligently,
know who you're dealing with.

"The God who made the world and everything in it, this Master of sky and land,
doesn't live in custom-made shrines or need the human race to run errands for him,
as if God couldn't take care of whatever needed taking care of!

God makes the creatures; the creatures don't make God.

Starting from scratch, God made the entire human race and made the earth hospitable,
with plenty of time and space for living so we could seek after God,
and not just grope around in the dark but actually *find* God.

God doesn't play hide-and-seek with us.

God is not remote; God is *near*.

We live and move in God, can't get away from God!

One of your Greek poets said it well:

'We're the God-created.'

Well, if we are the God-created,

it doesn't make a lot of sense to think we could hire a sculptor
to chisel a god out of stone for *us*, does it?

³⁰⁻³¹ "God overlooks it as long as you don't know any better—but that time is past.

The unknown is now known, and he's calling for a radical life-change.

Words of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Message of Hope--What's Next? *What Paul Knows*

Paul lived a long time ago and was visiting places that most of us have never visited. Yes, Athens, then and now is a completely different city from ours. With a different political system. It was, at that time, a city with a whole lot of religious stuff going on that is very different from what we know about here in the UP.

That is true of all of Paul's letters. He wrote letters to the cities of Ephesus and Thessalonica and the province of Galatia and even his letter to the Romans...Paul is speaking to each group based on their issues, their context and their way of life. The challenge in reading Paul is finding the things that we have in common with his writings and then struggling with the stuff that doesn't fit at all with our current circumstances.

In pondering this passage, I felt that kinship, that common bond with Paul when he said:
I noticed there was a shrine inscribed, TO THE GOD NOBODY KNOWS.

I suspect that we all know someone who is not sure about God. And whether or not God exists. And if God exists, is God really knowable. I remember a friend of mine. He was born in Germany but his family moved to England before WWII broke out. His parents died in an airplane crash when he was pretty young and he wound up living in the Detroit area during the time I was there. He was an atheist, cynical, sarcastic and really, really funny. Cracked me up with his humor but he couldn't believe that I was going to become a Methodist minister. He said to me:

You're way too smart to go off and devote yourself to your imaginary friend.

He would have had a hard time with the Children's Sermon this a.m. when I talked about how Paul and Jesus became such good friends.

I feel an even stronger connection with Paul, when he went on to say:

I'm here to introduce you to this God so you can worship intelligently,

And know who and what you're dealing with

That's what I try to do every Sunday...with worship, with prayers, with this Sermon.

I'm here to introduce you, or remind you, or point you to God.

To the Creator, the Redeemer, the Sustainer God to whom we turn for strength and hope and encouragement...

I speak of this every week so that we can all worship intelligently, and grow in our knowing of who and what we are dealing with.

Of course, when Paul talks about: *"The God who made the world and everything in it, this Master of sky and land,* our understanding of science is very different from that of the Athenians.

Many of us, especially after getting through high school and just wait, you graduates, until you go to college...We overlay this concept of God as the Ultimate Creator with what we know about biology and botany and sociology and anthropology and psychology, not to mention astronomy and genetics. And that 21st century overlay of Paul's 1st century words is OK. Because Paul's intention and God's purposes are NOT to explain to us all about the mechanics of how the world was made.

The more important thing to Paul and to God and to me... is that
God made the entire human race and made the earth hospitable,
with plenty of time and space for living so that....

Here's the important part...

so that we could seek after God,
and not just grope around in the dark but actually find God

God wants to be found. God wants us to find God...not just to grope around in the dark, not knowing anything for sure. God made us as human beings, and all of creation actually, to turn towards God and to find the holy, the divine, the grace that God offers us. Just like flowers and plants are made to turn to the sun, there is something in us that is attracted, like a metal to a magnet, attracted towards God.

And we may be too busy. We may be too scared. We may be too skeptical at certain times in our lives to pay attention to that attraction...but God never gives up on us. God never stops wooing us...attracting us with beauty and love and joy. But also, in the darkest and most difficult circumstances of life, God never gives up on providing some kind of something to get our attention. (Please don't misunderstand me...God doesn't cause the bad stuff to happen in life. But when it does...God is totally there.)

There may be people in your life who tell you that God is unknowable, a figment of the human imagination, an opiate of the masses, but remember this: God knows you. What's the old saying: The agnostic (that's a person who isn't sure about the existence of God) cries out, I don't **think** I believe in God. And God answers: That's OK. I **know** I believe in you.

I heard a podcast this week, an Irish Christian poet, Padraig o Tuama, who talked about knowing God. He said, in so many words... Be careful how you think about God because God is NOT just another character in your story. Jesus is not just your imaginary friend, as my friend said. (We use that language with kids, in hopes of planting some seeds of faith that will grow as time goes by.)

God is so much more than the Good Cop/Bad Cop character that we write into the script of our lives. So many people make God the Great Judge in the story of their lives, the one who judges, criticizes and condemns. Other people write God in as some kind of Wizard of Oz behind a curtain, pulling all the strings until little Toto comes barking and pulls away the curtain. Other people give God the starring role in their life story as Santa Claus, or the Easter bunny, bringing gifts on special occasions. And some people cast God in the role of the Big Huge Disappointment who never does what they want God to do. The list goes on and on, the many, infinite and unique ways that we could make God simply another character in the grand or dismal drama that is our lives.

But consider this: Knowing the unknowable God is not about limiting God to our human story telling box.

Knowing the Unknown God has a whole lot more to do with recognizing God as the organizational structure, the creative functioning of life.

God is the Life Energy behind growth and renewal and resistance and transformation.

God is the Living Spirit of kindness and compassion and resilience.

God is the love that surrounds us.

God is the hope that invigorates us.

The faith that keeps us moving ahead...one step at a time. One day at a time. One crisis at a time. One class and paper and exam at a time.

You live long enough and you find out, we can only go so far on our own free will and with our high minded motivations. There are just some days and some situations that require the extra-ordinary assistance of that Power Greater than Ourselves that we call God. Not as a character in our stories. But rather...God is the Force and the Function and the Energy that is trying to get your attention...with every breath you take and every move you make.

God is trying to get your attention:

With every baby that's born. With every flower that blooms.

With every virus that disrupts life as we know it and every political struggle that degrades the human mind and body...

With every environmental disaster and with every incredibly wonderful human achievement, God is there...waving and signaling and waiting for you to notice.

To pay attention. To turn and say wow, really..

God doesn't play hide-and-seek with us.

God is not remote; God is near.

We live and move and have our being in God.

Not matter how often we turn to go in the other direction, we cannot out-run God.

That's the Good News for today. God really does want to walk with us. And run with us. And study with us. And Laugh and play and work and make music with us. God is eager and ready to hear from each and every single one of us. God loves you and so do I and so do the people of this church who really, really do want to Share God's love with all who hunger...to know the unknowable. Let us pray.

Lovin g God, in whom we live and move and have our being, help us to choose life in you, that we may keep the commands of Jesus, follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit, and witness to the hope that is with us sharing Christ's love in the world.

I lift up the prayers of your people here before you...in the name of Jesus who taught us to pray saying....The Lord's Prayer. Amen.

In closing:

May the powerful love of Jesus

Protect you and shield you from the sorrow of sickness.

May God Breathe hope into you and tend to any pain and suffering you may be feeling.

May the Holy breath/wind/Spirit be with you always until we meet again.

Go in peace.

God bless us all. Amen.