

Jesus is risen, indeed!

6th Sunday of Easter

May 29, 2011

Prince of Peace Lutheran Church

Hecla, SD

Text: Acts 17:22-31 *Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you: God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.' Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising. Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead."*

Theme: THE "UNKNOWN GOD" WHO WANTS TO BE KNOWN

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ Jesus,

In our text we find the Apostle Paul in the midst of his second missionary journey. On this journey, Paul had parted ways with Barnabas, and taken along Silas, Timothy and Luke. In the weeks leading up to his time in Athens, Paul and Silas had been imprisoned in Philippi for preaching that Jesus was the only way of salvation and casting a demon out of a girl in Jesus' name. As depressing as it might have been to be thrown into prison for preaching Christ, Paul and Silas spent the night in that Philippian jail singing hymns and praying to God. And it was this imprisonment that God used Paul and Silas to reach a heathen jail keeper with the Gospel. The result was that very night the jailer of Philippi and his household were brought to faith and baptized in Jesus name.

From Philippi, they journeyed to Thessalonica and were able to start a church. But here again, they met opposition. Unbelieving Jews and some wicked men of the city stirred up the whole city and drove Paul and his missionary helpers from the city.

From Thessalonica they journeyed to the city of Berea. It was in Berea that they encountered some very noble spirits. Luke reports that the Bereans received the word with **"all readiness"** and would search the Scriptures daily to see if the things Paul was telling them were true. Yet the rabble-rousers from Thessalonica learned that Paul was in Berea, they came

and tried to turn the city against them. Because of the persecution in Berea, the brethren in Berea sent Paul away to the great Greek city of Athens, where he was to wait for Silas and Timothy, who were to meet up with him later.

While Paul was waiting in Athens, he began to tour the city and as he did, the Holy Spirit reports that ***“his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols.”*** (Acts 17:16) Greek culture is well known for its many mythological gods. It seemed there was a god for every occasion under the sun. Zeus was the king of all Greek gods. He was the god of the sky, weather, and fate. All Greeks wanted Zeus on their side. If you were a fisherman or going to travel on the sea, then you would want to make sure you were good with the Greek god Posiedon and probably Hermes, the god of travel. If you and your wife were childless, then you would offer sacrifices to Hera, the Queen of marriage, and maybe also Aphrodites, the goddess of beauty and love. Our farmers would have wanted the favor of Demeter, the goddess of agriculture and harvest.

But among their many gods, Paul saw that the Athenians realized something wasn't quite right. They feared that among them they may have missed a god and did not want to offend him. Therefore they had an altar with this inscription: ἄΓΝΩΣΤῸ ΘΕῶ - “To the Unknown God.” Paul sees this as an opening to testify to the learned people of Athens about the God they did not know about. The one true God of heaven and earth. It is this God, that Paul wants to make known to the Athenians. Therefore, let us consider this morning, the Unknown God who wants to be known. May the Holy Spirit bless our meditation of His holy Word.

“The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” So writes King David in the opening verse of Psalm 14. We know we are not supposed to call anyone a fool, because it is such an unloving term, but David uses the term “fool” in a correct way. A fool is someone who denies everything he sees before him. Only a fool would say that the sun is not bright. Only a fool would say that fire is not hot. Only a fool would look at the world around him, the stars in the heavens, and his own body and say “There is no God.”

The Greeks seemed to go overboard in the other direction. They knew there was something bigger than themselves out there, so they began to worship all sorts of different deities. And their deities were only as big as their imagination. They had imperfections, so they imagined the gods had imperfections. They lusted after women, so they imagined that the gods lusted after the women of the world. They fought with one another, so they imagined that the gods fought with one another. They couldn't imagine one god being able to control all aspects of the world around them, so there were different gods that ruled over different aspects of their life.

As Paul toured the city of Athens he saw that they were quite dedicated to their religious ways of life. ***“Men of Athens,”*** he said, ***“I perceive that in all things you are very religious.”*** The Athenians weren't fools. They were aware there was something out there bigger than themselves, but they didn't know who that God was. Until Paul came to visit. ***“I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.”*** The Athenians knew in their heart of hearts that there was a God out there greater than their folly-filled Greek gods. A God they did not know. A God they did not want to offend by ignoring Him, so they set up an altar and called Him the “Unknown God.”

This is what we refer to as the “Natural Knowledge of God.” It is what man can surmise about God from looking at nature around him - the planet, his body, and the universe. By nature all men know there is something out there, something greater than themselves. It is the fool that has to convince himself that there is nothing greater than himself in the universe. Many devise different gods to worship - like the Greeks did.

Paul had a different kind of knowledge. He had a “revealed knowledge of God.” Paul knew who the true God was. And Paul knew that this God did not want to remain unknown. **“Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you: God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands.”** The God Paul proclaimed is not weak like the factitious gods of the Greeks. The God Paul proclaimed is Almighty. He is the maker of the world and everything in it. He is the Lord or Master of heaven and earth. He is not weak and puny like the Greek gods who were said to be living in the temples made by the hands of men. As Isaiah writes of the one true God, **“Heaven is My throne, And earth is My footstool.”** (Is 66:1)

The one true God is not needy like the Greek gods were, who would get angry if they did not get what they wanted. **“Nor is He worshiped with men’s hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath and all things.”** God doesn’t need anything, rather He gives all things. He gives us our lives, He gives us our breath, and He gives us all our possessions. If we give our lives or our possessions to Him, we are merely giving to Him those things that are already His.

The maker of heaven and earth is also the God of history. **“He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation.”** Greeks, Romans, Jews, Indians, Chinese, European, were all made by God from one blood, that is Adam. And this God is not abstract and uninvolved in His creation. He has “determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation.” Think of it! In world history we read of nations rising and falling. Some, like the mighty Babylonian empire, seemed to fall over night. This was God’s plan and will for the Babylonians. The Greeks existed because it was God’s plan. The United States of America exists today because it is God’s will and this nation will fall some day, in accordance with God’s plan.

God’s purpose in determining the pre-appointed times and boundaries of habitation of men on the face of the earth is one - **“so that they should seek the Lord, in hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us.”** Like a man in the pitch black of night groping for a light switch that he knows is there somewhere, so too God wants man to grope for Him. His purpose in guiding and directing history is that man might search for Him and find Him. We have seen this in our Bible Class series on the book of Daniel, haven’t we. As amazed as we are about the accounts of the 3 men in the fiery furnace and the hand writing on the wall, we are even more amazed to read how God, through Daniel, was reaching out to the heathen kings Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, and Darius.

This is true of every nation that has ever existed. God allows them to exist for His divine purpose. And His ultimate purpose is that they might know Him the only true God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent. Paul was in Athens, speaking to the Greeks for this very purpose! Ascension Day being this Thursday, we are reminded of what Jesus commissioned His disciples to do. **“Go therefore and make disciples of ALL nations.”** (Mt 28:19) And to **“Go into ALL the**

world and preach the Gospel to EVERY creature.” (Mk 16:15)

The “Unknown God” wants to be known. He has always made Himself known, if man would only search Him out. He has left His fingerprint on creation. But this knowledge is only a limited knowledge. By it man can know of ***“His eternal power and Godhead.” (Rom 1:20)*** They can know He is powerful and wise. God intends this that men will further grope for Him and find Him. In Old Testament days, those searching would have found out about Him from the Children of Israel. In our New Testament era God calls on us to go out and tell the world about Him. Tell how He has ***“no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live.” (Ez 33:11)*** Tell how He was so determined to save the wicked that He gave His own beloved Son into death for sins. How He punished His one and only Son for the sins that we had committed. And how He raised His Son to life. And it is His risen Son who will come again one day to judge the living and the dead in righteousness.

God wants to be known. He directs history in the hope that men might look to Him and find Him. That is why He formed a nation called the United States, states called North and South Dakota, and a city called Hecla - so that men might know Him. So that His Gospel would be preached. So that men would be called to repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved. That is why God has you going to school where you are going and working in the job you are working. So that you can be the light of the world to those who are in darkness groping for this “Unknown God” that wants to be known.

It is amazing to consider the workings of almighty God and how He guides and directs the history of the world. Did Paul consider the reason he was forced from Berea, was that he might make known the one true God to the idolatrous people of Athens? Maybe it wasn't Paul's plan, but it certainly was God's. Because God wants to be known. He ***“desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (1 Tim 2:4)*** He gave His Son into death for the sin of ALL men, because He wants ALL men to be saved. May the Lord of heaven and earth use us even as He used Paul to make His name known wherever we go! Praise be to the one true God! Amen.