



New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

GOD AMONG THE GODS

*Jeff Peabody
New Day Church
Federal Way, WA
August 10th, 2008*

Did you catch the opening ceremonies of the Olympics on Friday? Absolutely spectacular. Fifteen thousand performers. One of the reporters asked the director why he would try to work with that many and he said matter-of-factly, “Well, we have the people.”

As you know, it’s a very historic summer games, because this is the first time that the Olympics have ever been held in China. The country that has been closed for so long has opened itself up to the world.

Because this is such a new thing, the media has been trying to prepare tourists for what to expect if they travel to Beijing. Language. Food. Dealing with a communist government. The long lines in a country with a billion people. Since China has isolated for so long, many of the customs that seem natural to residents there are a bit unsettling to foreigners.

Take spitting, for example. In Beijing, apparently it’s fairly common practice for young and old alike to hawk a loogie right in the street and think nothing of it. It’s just part of the culture. When I was in college, I heard someone give a report on her first trip to China, and she was freaked out by all the flying saliva. She hadn’t been prepared for it. So to help the situation, the government has put up all these “no spitting” posters around town to remind the locals to be conscious of sensitive foreigners.

Big cities have always had the ability to shock and amaze tourists, with or without spitting. Athens was no exception. Thousands of years ago, it was the pinnacle of Greek civilization. By the time the book of Acts was written, it was past its glory days, but still an impressive place. You would think someone like the Apostle Paul had traveled enough to not be unsettled by anything. But when he got to Athens, even he was taken aback by what he found. But rather than getting offended and turned off by the experience, Paul used it as a powerful opportunity to talk to the people of Athens about Jesus.

Acts 17:14-34

The brothers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. The men who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbling trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

"Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."

When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." At that, Paul left the Council. A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

This is one of my personal favorite stories in the book of Acts. I love reading how Paul jumped in and started this dialogue.

Imagine what it was like to be him. Here he was, all alone in Athens. His friends had left him to go get Silas and Timothy. So Paul decides to do the tourist thing and do some sight seeing. He starts walking through town. Over there he sees the massive Parthenon. In the middle of it stands the huge statue of Athena, with its gleaming gold spear that was said to be visible from 40 miles away. On his right he sees the bronze figure of Poseidon

and over there is a statue of Venus. Off in the distance he can see the start of a temple to Zeus. Busts of Hermes are everywhere. Carvings of Apollo, Diana and the whole collection of Greek gods. It goes on and on, mile after mile, with literally thousands of them. Luke says it was overgrown with idols like an endless forest. The Roman author Petronius joked that it was easier to find a god than a person in Athens.

And here's Paul. One man alone in this big city. All this religion and spiritual chatter around him, and not one mention of Christ. There's no cross anywhere or church with a steeple. As far as Athens is concerned, Jesus isn't even a blip on the radar. He's completely irrelevant to their discussions of life's big questions. How could Paul possibly believe or convince others to believe that Jesus is the only way to God when there are so many other options out there? Is there any room left?

Do you ever feel that way? It's easy to believe in Jesus when you're in church, but you get out there in life and suddenly you're surrounded by a society that's crowded full of other belief systems. There might not be literal idols, but not many people out there are asking themselves, "What would Jesus do?" when they think about big decisions. I was talking with my brother-in-law this past week who is a surgeon at a university hospital in Michigan, and he commented that he doesn't know anybody on staff who's a Christian. Many of us work in similar settings, where we're alone in our opinions about who Jesus is and what difference he makes.

How do we take Jesus with us? I think it's significant that Paul was all by himself as he worked his way through this, because that's how life is. This is an issue that each Christian has to wrestle with individually. Nobody can figure out how Christ relates to your job or your school or your family but you. We each have to engage the culture for ourselves. How do we present Jesus to a world that has an endless forest of other choices, a world where Christ is seen as irrelevant in the discussions of life's big questions? Does he matter?

I need answers to this question not just for how I talk to other people about Christ – I need answers for me. Because if there is no place for Christ in postmodern America -- if he really is irrelevant in current thinking -- then that means I'm trying to believe in some out-dated idea that doesn't work. I'm just deluding myself. And that's a pathetic way to live. Understanding how Paul addressed the philosophies of his day is vital to having a healthy faith in our day.

Paul was genuinely troubled over what was going on in Athens. Luke uses a Greek word that's the word we get "paroxysm" from. That's a strong feeling word that means a convulsion or spasm. It's a way of saying Paul was tied up in knots over the idolatry in the city. It really, really bothered him.

But what I think is so fantastic is how Paul DIDN'T react. He didn't get all angry and start yelling at people. He didn't start picketing the Parthenon. He didn't get defensive or afraid the way Christians sometimes tend to do. And he didn't get intimidated and overwhelmed by how impossible it seemed to introduce Christ in that setting. And he

certainly wasn't afraid that Christ wouldn't hold his own in that setting. He was the picture of confidence and firm conviction. He took Jesus right into the marketplace of ideas. Luke says Paul would strike up a conversation with whoever happened to be there.

My sister Jana joined a gym near her house in Phoenix. There was a new yoga instructor there who was looking for new clients, so my sister decided to take some yoga lessons. One day she got into a deep spiritual conversation with him and found out that although he had been raised in a Christian home, somewhere along the way he had been burned by the church and so had turned away from Christianity completely. But he was still very spiritual and he really wanted to hear what Jana had to say about the Lord.

He was teaching a Sunday class at the time to a group of people who were not only there for the yoga, but also the discussion about life, God and faith from a whole range of perspectives. It was more of a new age, body and mind kind of class. So the instructor asked Jana if she would come and share with the group what she had told him.

But since it was on Sunday mornings, and my sister is really involved in her church, at first it didn't work out. Finally she had a week when she had no responsibilities at church, and she thought, "When else am I going to get the chance to share my faith with a group of people who will never show up at church?" So she skipped church for yoga. It was just like Paul in Athens, where this group had gathered to talk about everything spiritual EXCEPT Jesus. And Jana was able to share the gospel and her faith with them right there in the gym.

When she got done, one of the women in the class came up to her and said, "It's so nice to talk to someone who really knows what they believe. We're just trying to figure it all out."

Listen: No matter how crowded full of alternative ideas the world may feel, there is always room for truth. Do you struggle with that word truth? The Bible says truth sets us free. Today's society says truth is relative: what's true for you isn't necessarily true for me. But living by own version of truth doesn't seem to be very freeing. People are pinned to the ground under the weight of work, relationships, crises and money problems, and they're doing it alone. That's not free. That's why real truth cuts through with such clarity when people are trying to figure it all out like the lady in the yoga class. Sometimes they don't even know they're missing it, but when they hear it, they know it. It sounds different than the other messages out there.

John Stott once wrote that we need Christians who gossip the gospel, and that's just what Paul did. He started a buzz about Christ. He got people talking. Where there had been no interest, Paul managed to put Jesus on the agenda of the top thinkers in Athens.

Paul made the most of his opportunity by zeroing in on a few key truths about God that are as remarkable today as they were then. They give us a great foundation for our own interactions with different ideas and beliefs.

At first, people couldn't figure out what Paul was saying. They were all confused. So they asked him to come give a more formal presentation to the ruling council, called the Areopagus.

"May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean."

Contained in their question was a bit of a sneer. New and foreign gods were viewed with suspicion. In Greek culture, old was better because it had been tried and tested. As much as the Athenians liked to talk about the latest ideas, they didn't place much trust in them. So Paul grounds his speech in the belief that

God is an insider.

He does this in at least three ways. First, he associates God with **Creation**. Paul tells the council,

"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth..."

Paul was not trying to make an argument for intelligent design here. That was already a given. Everybody believed the world had been made by someone. There would be another 1800 years before Darwin would propose his theory of evolution. So for Paul to spend time talking about God as Creator had to have a different purpose. One thing it communicates is that God is not new at all. In fact, if he made everything, he predates everything. You can't look for an earlier first cause than him. If age was valued by the Greeks, then what could be better than knowing that this God was the Ancient of Days? In one sentence Paul eliminates the charge that God is somehow "new."

But there's more to the idea of God being Creator. Because if God made people, then he made the people of Athens, and that means he's no foreigner to them. Nobody could know them better. No god could be more of an insider. The Lord was not just a Jewish deity Paul was trying to introduce – he was God of the universe, which included that city.

Not only did God know the people of Athens as their Creator – he was working in their lives. In spite of the fact that their religious practices didn't acknowledge God, he was involved in Athens.

That's an important distinction to realize. So often, when we're talking to people who don't know Christ, we assume our job is to introduce him like a new idea. It would be much better if we could help them see that he's not new at all, but intimately involved in their lives already.

Claude Boucher is a missionary in Africa, and he once advised other would-be missionaries: "The spirit of God is active before you come...you're not carrying God in your suitcase!"

God is the maker of heaven and earth and everyone who has ever lived. We can have full confidence that he intimately knows and cares about us all, even those who haven't given him the time of day.

Besides creation, Paul also points to the Athenians own **hunger** for God. He said,

I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

I have a question for the husbands in the room. Have any of you ever failed to notice your wife's new hair cut? Maybe even her new hair color? Men tend to not be the best observers. Women not only pick up on the little differences – they assign meaning to them.

Karin and I can both come away from the same conversation. She'll make a comment about the way the person looked or something they said, and she'll piece together a whole back story of where they're at. Either they're really struggling with a relationship or going through a crisis or whatever. Later, if Karin follows up on it, nine out of ten times, she was right. Me – I'm still looking at her, trying to figure out what's different about her hair.

Paul seems to have been in touch with his feminine side. He was so perceptive here. When he saw all the religious fervor of the town and their very un-Christian practices, he could have covered his eyes and ears and run away screaming "Blasphemy!" But he looked beyond the surface and pieced together the back story. He could see that the altars and temples were just symptoms of something deeply wrong in Athens. These people were desperate to connect with God. And they didn't have a clue about how to do it. The altar to the unknown God was the sad commentary on where things were at. We don't know who or where you are, but we're reaching out.

Have you ever seen on TV or in the movies when a thief comes into a house looking for something specific and they just ransack the place? Cupboards are left open, drawers pulled out, tables overturned. The mess is a sign that the search didn't produce what they wanted.

Paul could see that the mess in Athens was a sign of a lot of searching without much finding. Their lives were ransacked and they were looking anywhere and everywhere for help. Imagine not knowing which god might be angry with you. Imagine always wondering if you'd done enough to make them happy. Imagine trying to live your life to some standard you weren't even sure about. You'd grab at whatever you could for answers.

Paul looked at that desperation and saw that the search itself was a sign of God.

Ecclesiastes says,

Ecclesiastes 3:11

He has planted eternity in the human heart.

When we have eternity in our hearts and we don't know how to find it, the search comes out all sideways. You see that everyday. People look for love and acceptance in all kinds of bizarre ways. Do we get offended by how outrageous it is, or do we recognize the cry for a relationship with the God who is love? When we see crowds of people screaming in protest over social issues, do we react to the anger or to the deep instinct for justice that can only come from a holy and just God? God is in the searching. He designed us to look for him.

Through creation and hunger, Paul showed the people of Athens that God was an insider. He also did that by pointing to their own **culture**.

'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

Paul knew his stuff. These are quotes from Epimenides and Aratus – two Greek poets who had lived hundreds of years earlier. Neither poem was written with any intention of being about Jesus. But Paul looked at everything in life through the lens of Christ, and that's why he had no trouble reinterpreting it, even being so bold as to say “This is what the authors were trying to get at.”

There is so much freedom in that view. Instead of being intimidated by culture or afraid of it, we can plunge into it like a treasure hunt, looking for the gold nuggets that give glimmers of God's character. Movies and music and books and TV programs can all contain themes of grace and redemption just waiting to point people God's direction.

Criminal mastermind Charles Manson made the song Helter Skelter his theme song. So I loved how Bono introduced the song when U2 played it on tour. He said, “Charles Manson stole this from the Beatles. Now we're stealing it back.”

That's the idea behind taking every thought captive for Christ. Bits of truth have been stolen and misused by culture, and now we're stealing them back for God, showing how God is present. There are pictures of God embedded in every culture, waiting to be rediscovered.

Bruce Olsen was a 19 year old missionary who set off into the jungles of South America to share Christ with a very primitive Indian tribe called the Motilones. He spent time getting to know them and their language, but he hadn't felt like he could talk to them about God because there were so many concepts he didn't know how to explain. They didn't have words for sin or cross or Bible, and he was afraid he would give them a wrong idea about God.

One day, he was walking down a trail with one of the men he called Bobby when they heard a loud wailing. Bobby wanted to ignore it, but Bruce insisted on going to check it out, because it sounded like someone was in trouble.

When they got there, he found a man lying on the ground shouting into a 6 foot deep hole. It was the strangest thing Bruce had ever seen.

He asked Bobby what was going on, so Bobby explained. The man's brother had been bitten by a snake and died far away from home. According to the tribe's tradition, if somebody died that far away, their spirit couldn't get to God. So now the man was yelling, "God, God, come out of the hole!" in the hopes that God would save his brother's soul.

Bruce asked "Why the hole?" and Bobby just said, "It's as good as any other place to look." They didn't know where to find God. They had a legend that someday a prophet would come carrying banana stalks and God would come out of those banana stalks.

Well that made absolutely no sense to Bruce, although it seemed to make perfect sense to the Motilones. So Bobby went over and cut down a banana stalk and said, "See? This is the kind of stalk God comes from."

One of the Motilones swiped at it with his machete and accidentally cut it open. Leaves that were still developing inside the stalk started peeling off and they looked just like pages in a book.

That word book raced through Bruce's mind, and suddenly it all clicked. He grabbed his Bible and started flipping pages and said "This is it! I have God's banana stalk!"

One of the men started tearing out pages and stuffing them in his mouth, thinking that was how he could get God in him. So Bruce had to get creative and grab whatever stories he could from their culture to help them understand who Jesus was.

Bobby started to grasp what Bruce was saying, but he was struggling. He said, "How can I walk Jesus' trail? No Motilone has done it before."

And Bruce thought of another analogy. He said, "Bobby, remember when I was afraid to climb up in the high hammock, because I thought the rope would break? I wanted to keep one foot on the floor." Bobby laughed and said, "Yes I remember. I told you you have to put both feet in. You have to be suspended."

And Bruce said, "That's how it is with Jesus. Nobody can show you how to walk the trail but Jesus. You have to hook your hammock into him. You have to be suspended in God."

Bobby walked away. And the next day, he came back with a smile and said, "I did it. I've tied my hammock strings into Jesus." And Bobby became the first of many in the tribe to put their faith in Christ.

God is an insider, already on the scene, working through creation, hunger and culture to communicate with people. **God is also an invitation.**

Paul had seen that altar to an unknown God. But through Jesus, God is throwing out an invitation to the world to say, "Know me." By entering the human sphere and living a physical life, dying a physical death, God made himself visible, tangible and accessible. His love and judgment were put on display for everyone to see. Christ changed everything.

The entire Greek religious system was built around inanimate objects. Gods weren't known in a personal sense. They were honored and respected. People built them temples and monuments to win their favor. But there was no personal connection with them. Then Paul comes along and says God's purpose was for men to want to get to know him.

An altar to an unknown God can be one of two things. It can be way of saying you're ready to experience and learn something new. You don't know who God is, but you're willing to listen.

But an altar to the unknown can also be a can make a nice rock to hide behind. You can say, "Well, I guess we just don't know," shrug your shoulders and stop looking for God. Calling God unknowable becomes an excuse for not trying to know him.

But God says "No more hiding. I can be known. I sent you my Son to prove it. You can choose to ignore him or reject him, but you can no longer say I'm out of reach, because I'm right here. I've made a way; now it's up to you to decide what to do with it."

After 30 some years as a Christian, there are still a lot of things I don't know. I still have questions about why things happen in the world and I don't have satisfying answers. But you want to know why I can still have faith? Because I know Jesus. He has walked the trail with me. When you relate to God directly person to person, it changes the whole dynamic of the spiritual discussion.

If you're here this morning and you've been somewhat indifferent about God, you might be thinking it sounds absurd that God would show up in a particular way at one point in history and that Christians would claim that is THE person and event on which all of history turns. And you'd be right. It's a scandalous, unthinkable claim. Even Paul said so. He knew it sounded like foolishness to the Greeks.

But that's just it: It's so outrageous and so specific that it has to be addressed by anybody who's serious about finding God. As C.S. Lewis put it, "You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at

his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

Paul’s contention was that God was already inside the world of Athens and that he was inviting them to know him in a way no other god had invited them before. Paul went even further to say **God is an interception**

Ed Reed of the Baltimore Ravens holds the record for the longest interception return in football. Back in 2004, the Cleveland Browns were at the 5 yard line, ready to score. The quarterback threw a pass deep into the end zone. It looked like a sure thing. But Reed stole the ball away. Not only did he intercept it – he ran 106 yards in the opposite direction and scored for Baltimore.

Paul is preaching about a much more dramatic interception than that. He’s saying the God of history has stepped in and changed it forever. It has looked like things are going from bad to worse as the effects of sin spread out into every aspect of the world. But God has turned things around. Jesus’ resurrection was a huge interception that has put things in the opposite direction. N.T. Wright said it well: “It is with the resurrection of Jesus God’s new world has begun...The risen body of Jesus is the one bit of the physical universe that has already been ‘set right.’ Jesus is therefore the one through whom everything else will be ‘set right.’”

I still say that Christianity is the most hopeful belief in the whole world. Who else but Jesus offers such a sure promise of victory over death? He’s done it. Show me another world view that holds out more proof that God is loving AND powerful and actively involved in our lives. That’s why Paul could speak so boldly in that sea of lifeless idols, and it’s why we need to be bold today in sharing Christ with others. The world needs hope.

We have a roomful of people here today who need God’s interception. We all need his restoring touch. We are all searching for help to change, strength to overcome, healing to raise us up, a hand to pull us forward. We ask again and again and again. And guess what? God’s answer is a big fat YES! We can point to the resurrection and find encouragement that the work of reversing sin has already started. And what he did back then he continues to do in my life and in yours.

Who do you know whose life has been ransacked?

Are you ready to hook your hammock into Jesus?

Where do you need God’s interception?