

Sermon: An Unknown God  
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For those of us familiar with the story of Stephen, the first recorded martyr of the church, we see his legacy in the Scriptures here in our reading this morning. Saul turned Paul is carrying the gospel far and wide proving the seemingly unsuccessful ministry of Stephen was not in vain. Despite the strong opposition that Steven received, here stood the witness of Paul, with the living embodiment of grace where there was no grace. God being made known where there was no initial sign of God.

This all knowing, Sovereign Creator, whom we worship and proclaim; as unknown and foreign as some inscribed altar in Athens. The very one whom we live, and move, and have our being in, our Creator, yet no sign of this God seemingly in this context. And here stands Paul, alone in Athens, driven out of multiple places. A solitary witness trying to be faithful in a very complex situation.

Have you been in places where you could not recognize God? Moments where God seems so far off and so very foreign to you and your experience? Have you looked for God and not found Him? And yet, somehow She breathes all around us.

Still, Paul is a living witness to this. Paul is trusting that God can be found deep within anywhere, a truth many of our Christian missionaries in the past failed to realize in ministry work. God was already there, moving and working, even when unknown.

If we take our cue from Paul, we will learn to listen carefully to the culture around us, paying attention to the details. If for work or for ministry you have had to learn programs like Zoom or Google Hangout or Messenger or house party, you know how important details can be. If you miss one number of the pin or code, or if you forget to copy that link correctly, or download what you need to see each other in the first place in this time where we all learn to be creative during social distancing... We know that details matter.

We must be careful not to bypass the culture when we bear witness to the story of Jesus wherever we are and Paul was an example to us in the way he demonstrates intellectual and spiritual hospitality here. Even in the way he introduces his own story of Christ's resurrection. Paul not only notices this particular altar in the story, but what is inscribed there.

Christian subculture was a huge part of my growing up. Christian bands like DC talk, Newsboys, even Christian rap groups out of Tennessee called Cross Movement. T-shirts that would say, instead of "got milk?" They would say "got Jesus?" on them.

It could only be Christian art if it had Jesus or a cross or a word of scripture on it. Now there was a time when this approach of Christian subculture appealed to many, including myself, as a very effective way to witness. But since then, we have learned of the abuses and arrogance of always assuming that our current brand of religion was "at war" with anything and everyone else for who could be the most cool.

Perhaps one best witness to ask this question along with us this morning, is the 90s pop song made famous by Joan Osborne, "What if God were one of us?" Yet Paul finds this unknown God right there in the center of many ideologies and beliefs and allows the witness of the Holy Spirit, active from creation to demonstrate the very mission of Jesus. And that mission statement is: God is with us and has been with us all along.

I can think of no more important text perhaps to take with you when you're entering a new world like college, Seniors. We especially think of our senior class of 2020 right now because this is your very big challenge ahead: to take the stories and symbols learned here in the Presbyterian Church and community and learn to find them all over again in the unfamiliar places.

Seniors, we mourn the loss of your Spring and the many sentimental moments that come with those last things. But remember from this 2020, your year has called you maybe more than any other, to find more in less. To see beyond the present reality. To find hope in darkness. And to witness when your foundation feels unknown.

Many of the places you are going in the years ahead and the months ahead that are coming so soon will feel so unknown compared to your previous experience as a church and community. But may you go with the witness of Paul and proclaim the unknown.

Finding the hints of Her along the way because Mother Spirit is always with you. May you know your witness is not a shouting match for your religious view, but your ability to find God even in the places of unknown and to show kindness as your witness.

So go, go, go! Gabrielle, Libby, Johnny, Alex, Sarah, Jackson, Bryan, and Drew!

May you follow God with this witness knowing it's not the cross around your neck, but the witness of the Holy Spirit within your heart and life and creation that speaks to your unknown God and makes Him known to all. Make much of Jesus in your academic effort. Make much of Jesus in the way you treat other people. In the way you listen. In the way you pay attention to the God in all of us.

And parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, aunts, and uncles: college will test your faith and your worry levels as well. But don't worry so much about if they go to church every Sunday. Instead, worry if the church is going to them with encouraging phone-calls and cards, financial support, prayer, and check ins from the church family. Support and community must accompany them so they remember they are not alone in their witness. It's how much of the church goes outside its' doors that matters here. We are learning this at this point in time maybe more than ever.

Paul saw that and demonstrated that today in our story, a witness to the ultimate commandment taught in our John passage today as well: loving one another is the commandment that shows our real devotion to God. I know sometimes I wish it was winning an argument that showed my devotion to God or being proved right or having my current theology become "law of the land." But instead in our passage today in John, we are told, "if you love me, listen first. Don't tell others how to feel. Pay attention to details. Don't minimize pain. Notice someone for who they are, not what you think they should be. Let cultures speak for themselves. And that hard lesson that most folks need a hand held and a compassionate word, and for us to leave the truth to Jesus.

This is all part of the definition of love. That's our witness. That's the message. That's when the unknown becomes known. Amen.