
To an Unknown God

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
The Fifth Sunday of Easter
Acts 17: 16-31

Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. To an Unknown God.

Acts 17.22-23

A man came knocking on the door of his doctor's office one evening. He was flapping his arms and jumping up and down. "Doctor, Doctor," he cried out, "you've got to help me." "Well," the doctor said, "What seems to be the problem?"

"Doctor, doctor, I think I'm a moth."

"A moth! You don't need me; you need to see a psychiatrist."

"Yes, doctor, I was on my way to see him; but when I walked by, your light was on."

"To an Unknown God."

That might have been the title of St. Paul's sermon to the Athenians that day. He was walking through Athens long ago. We know the story, because it is told to us in the Book of Acts today. St. Paul was walking on an ancient hill called The Areopagus, and he didn't see any lights on. He saw great monuments and beautiful idols, but he saw no lights.

He read great words, and he admired great poems. But he saw no lights, until he came across this curious stone. On that stone, he read these words: "To an Unknown God."

St. Paul was searching for some way to speak to those Greeks. Paul was searching for some meeting point, some intersection, between Greek culture and his saving experience of Jesus Christ. And he found that intersection by speaking of the unknown.

Paul was at a place Areopagus, a high hill where political councils met, where religious decisions were made, where the important people of society gathered. Paul noticed something, as he walked along this foreign country.

Paul noticed that this land was full of idols. There were monuments to this, and adulation of that. The land was full of idols.

St. Paul was at a place just like where we are today, today in the United States, in Atlanta. Look around us today. Watch the television ads. Listen to the radio talk shows. Watch the pundits on television.

We are full of too many other gods, gods who consume our time and money, and who then consume our hearts.

Who are the gods who consume our time and our money? They are legion. The idol of materialism: "I've just got to own that product, that car, that house." The idol of individualism: "my or no way." The idol of selfishness: "just let me take care of my own." The idol of style: "I've sure got the best looks today." The idol of social prestige: "If only the prestigious people would look my way." The idol of busy self-importance: "I must be here, I must be there; I must be everywhere."

Religion is what we give our heart to. Religion is what we give our money and time to. To the neutral observer, our culture appears very religious indeed. We see products that promise to satisfy our every need, from digestion to sex. We fantasize about the good life: an escape from society to some new resort development miles away.

These are religious impulses. These are entities to which we give money and time, hoping for some satisfaction. The place where we give money and time is our god. Let there be no question about it.

Who is your God? Your God is the place where you give money and time. If you give money and time to luxury and pleasure, then luxury and pleasure are your gods. If you give money and time to escapist entertainment, there you have your God.

St. Paul noticed in the ancient city of Athens that there were idols everywhere. But then he said a curious thing, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way." (Acts 17:22)

Paul knew that, somewhere in that Greek searching, God was present. As full of idols as that culture was, the living God was somehow present, too. Even if God was unknown, God was present.

The living God is yet present in our own time. Amidst the clutter and frantic pace and outright selfishness of our own time, the living God is present. God is present, even when we do not know God is present.

Do you have the unknown God in your life? On your hill of judgment, with a thousand idols, can you see a small shrine to the unknown god?

Maybe it's a Bible in your bookcase that you've never opened. Maybe it's a cross your mother gave you long ago. What does that cross mean? Do you ever wear it? Maybe you have an old Sunday School memento. Maybe you have an old church bulletin, an old acknowledgement of something holy.

Maybe you have a dramatic memory, a memory of God's presence long ago.

Maybe you pass a church each week that is nothing but a monument to you. There it sits, along Peachtree Road, beautiful and unknown. You do not know what occurs in there.

Yes, amidst all the modern idols which litter our lives today, there are also some monuments to the God who is living, but who can never be totally known.

"To an Unknown God," said this monument in Athens. It is as if the Athenians knew there was something else, but they did not know how to express it. We all have realized that: There is something more!

What have you lost? Where is the God you once knew? You knew that God as a child, perhaps, or when you were a teenager. Perhaps you knew that God when you got married, or when you had your first child.

That God is here. But time and knowledge have marched on. God has revealed himself in more ways now. God has revealed himself in different ways now.

Many of you remember the old saying, "If God seems far away, guess who moved?" The implication of that saying is that we have moved. We have strayed like lost sheep. That is often true. We need to return. We need to repent, in order to find God.

But it is also true that God moves; God continues revealing more identity. If God seems far away, it may be that we have not traveled with God. It may be that we have some catching up to do.

If God seems far away, if God seems unknown now, we need to follow where he has moved.

Oh, God is still the same God as we knew when we were four years old. But now we are thirty-four years old. Now we are forty-four. Now we are sixty-four, and God expects us to have grown in knowledge of him, too.

How do we grow in the knowledge of God?

We grow in the Spirit. This is the reason God sends the Holy Spirit, the spirit of truth. (John 14.16-17). This truth can be provocative indeed. This truth can be mysterious indeed. We need a Holy Spirit who leads us into that truth.

Last week, I mentioned that all religions, even the best of them, are deficient in some way. But the reverse is also true. Most religions are also effective in some way. There are many religions who contain an element of truth.

St. Paul was able to use the wisdom of the Greek religions to lead others to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Notice what Paul is quoting here, right here in the Bible. "To an unknown God." "For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.'" (Acts 17.28). These are sayings from the old Greek philosophers. Paul is quoting the Greek religions!

Paul found elements of truth in the religions that were supposed to be his antagonists!

That is the attitude God welcomes today: an attitude of openness to wherever God might show up. God can be worshipped and adored and loved, but God can never be completely known. Much of God will always be unknown; that is how God can keep showing up in unexpected places!

God might even be somewhere in this frantic culture which surrounds us. After all, we claim that God is here, at the Cathedral of St. Philip, right here in the middle of stylish Buckhead!

The man in the joke, who thought he was a moth, simply wanted to follow the light.

That is why our lights are on in this sacred space, on this holy hill. The light is shining here. The unknown God of eternal light is here; God can be loved here. Turn in today, no matter who you think you are.

We will not learn everything about God. Perhaps we will learn only a small part. But that small knowledge will be enough. Forgiveness and new life are here. Grace and resurrection are here, in Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN.

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