

“Putting a Face and Name with God”

Acts 17:22-31

We’re all searching for God. How would you know if you had found God? . . .

There was a woman named Sylvia who was going to visit her friend in the hospital. But Sylvia harbored a deep dread of life-support machines—the needles, the tubes, those beeping chrome machines. So when Sylvia was walking down the disinfected corridors she avoided looking into the windows to see those machines. But her fear got the best of her and she ran for the elevator, stabbed the down button and waited. A hospital attendant came up next to her. And to Sylvia’s dismay, she saw out of the corner of her eye the gleaming chrome machine, the tubes, the dials. She hesitated to get on the elevator, but swallowed and got on when it came. But while she was inside, she finally blurted out, “I would HATE to be attached to one of those machines.” The hospital attendant looked down at the machine, looked up at Sylvia, and said, “I would too. This is a rug cleaner.”¹

For many of us perception is reality. Some philosophers say this, too. How would we know if we found God? The real God? How would we know it’s not just another illusion?

When I was in India a few years ago, I was on a search. A spiritual quest. Here I was in one of the most religious places on the planet. I saw gods and temples everywhere. I saw holy men dressed in bright orange abandoning everything to devote their lives to worshipping God. I saw Hindu worship services that were absolutely beautiful. I was even in the holiest of cities, Varanasi, where people would come from all over just to dip in the holy river Ganges.

I continued my quest and my spiritual longing actually led me to DaySpring the week after I returned from India. I went straight to a lectionary breakfast and began sharing my experiences.

My journey continued with DaySpring, and I gained confidence in my pastoral identity, and I was ordained here last year. And, soon I will be married in this very same place.

¹ Story taken from Chris Blake’s book entitled, *Searching For a God To Love*. Page 11.

Today my journey leads me back here, standing before you to proclaim this good Gospel that you helped take root. And, though it's not quite the same as Paul standing in front of the Areopagus, the finest and brightest minds of Athens, it is close. I mean, I'm looking out at here at Dr. York, and Dr. Kruschwitz. . . .

See, Paul had come to Athens as a stop in his second missionary journey. He was sent there because he had stirred up enough trouble in Thessalonica and Beroea, and the believers were trying to get him out to safety, so they sent him as far as possible—to Athens. Oh Athens, that intellectually charged city—a university town, you know. Paul did his usual thing as he went around the city—spreading the Gospel in the synagogues and in the marketplace. Some people took notice of him and were curious of his “new teaching.” So he made some observations to these religious and philosophical elite. He told them he noticed how extremely religious they were, as he had seen many objects of worship. But to this one particular he found of interest. He had stumbled upon an alter with the inscription, “To an Unknown God.”

The Greeks were careful not to offend any god, and just in case there was one they didn't know about, they were going to make an alter to it. Perhaps their religious quest was similar to ours. Sometimes we think if we hit them all, at least one will respond back. Let's see who really is out there and will respond. However, in serving the general, we miss knowing the personal.

And yet when I first read this story, I thought this was the oddest thing—to have an alter to an unknown God. Imagine the prayer: “I don't know your name, who you are, or what you do, but if you're there will you. . .protect my loved ones, provide food for the family” And then I realized, this sounds pretty familiar. Though it's completely impersonal, it can be easier for us to pray this way, to worship this way. If our God is unknown, can't we fashion him in our image? For don't we prefer a God not that we can serve, but that will serve us?

But Paul makes a bold and exclusive statement. “What you have worshipped as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.”

Paul comes to these prominent thinkers and ultimately says your quest can end here. For Paul puts a name and a face to this unknown God. He tells them that this God is personal and that this God without boundaries places boundaries on us.

This is where I came into some problems in college, which was the beginning of my spiritual quest, which I affectionately named the “God Funk.” For a time, I

went through a stage where I decided to look into all religions, study them each, and determine which one was objectively true. But the problem was I could never stand grounded in one long enough to really give it true consideration. It was just an abstract idea, I didn't give my heart to it—my life. I let it be impersonal. I then never worshiped anything.

Paul says that this God is personal. This is not a tribal god, one among the many in the pantheon. He tells them that that this God made the world and everything in it. See, the beauty of this personal God is we're connected in a special way. We are able to connect to the One who made us, to figure out what our purpose is, because it's tied to God's purpose. We realize that we are related to something larger than ourselves. We are not lone rangers.

We belong to someone. For some, that's freeing, they've always longed to be known and loved, but for many that's suffocating. This feels infringing, impeding on their independence. For being known by a personal God means all areas of our lives are affected. It affects our daily habits and choices, our lifestyle—every decision. By declaring God as personal, we are now intimately connected to Him—our very breath comes from Him. Paul emphasizes this point by quoting one of their own—their own poets. For he says, “In Him we live, move, and have our being.”

But the other reality that Paul declares is that God is without boundaries. And unlike an idol which has a specific location, he tells them that this God is not limited by place or subject to anyone. Paul describes this God as the maker of all things. “He isn't served by human hands, nor does he need anything.” He doesn't need anything? Not even sacrifices? This is the real headscratcher for these guys because they had seen plenty of offerings being brought to their nearby shrines.

And yet, this God who has no boundaries has created boundaries for us. The text says, “He determined the times set for them and the exact places where they would live.” This limitless God limits us. He allots the time of our existence and places boundaries around us as we live.

And Lord knows we need boundaries—even in worship, we can't worship all things.

One of the best things God did for us was give us boundaries. He began this from day one, prohibiting Adam and Eve from eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He was saying you need to depend on me. He wasn't trying to keep them from all knowledge, but rather showing that He would provide what they needed to know. This was a call for trust and dependence on the Creator,

reminding us that we are the created. But oh how we forget and break these boundaries.

So ultimately Paul is saying, “I’m revealing God to you. You don’t have to call this God unknown any longer. He has a name and a face.”

But in truth God wasn’t found that day. God had already been there all along. Truly, finding God is not a failure of showing himself to us or finding us. God has been revealed among us, but perhaps the God who we “find” is not what we were looking for.

Back when I was in India, I had a powerful conversation with a Hindu Brahmin (of the highest caste) man, most devout. He was so warm and introduced me to his family. And after talking a while, he took me up to see his shrine, and with much pride, he told me how they were waiting for their god to return one day on a white horse to judge the people. I left visiting this shrine and meeting his family, thinking, “We have more in common than I ever realized.” For what I could remember from my rusty knowledge of Revelation, there was also a story telling of a people waiting for the return of their Savior on a white horse.

Maybe it is easier to serve and worship a God who doesn’t have a name or a face. But knowing this God, means knowing a different way of living. He makes demands on us—gives us boundaries. And we live in a culture that believes we can have it all, worship it all. Why would we want to be limited by any one variety of anything? Can’t we buy or at least try all 31 flavors? We try out all kinds of professions, locations, partners. We don’t want limits. And we don’t know what we are looking for, searching for. . . or sometimes that we’ve already found it. The problem is you can’t be committed to any of it well if you try to be devoted to it all.

Paul states that “God did this (provided these boundaries) so that people would seek him and perhaps reach out for him.” And he says that if we do this, we would recognize that God is not far away. This is a word of hope to us: God is near. In fact, maybe this is the problem, maybe the God we wanted to find was far away, not personal. Knowing Jesus, accepting Jesus is an invasive procedure, and we sure don’t like those these days. But we must choose—let us give ourselves to this God who knows us and loves us and let our being be grounded there, affecting our whole life. This is true freedom because it’s finding true rootedness. This is what we are desperately longing for. Finding the home that we don’t have to move from any longer. Yes, we will have to sacrifice some variety, but we will find

wholeness, connectedness to our Creator, and truly know from whom “we live, and move, and have our being.”