

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
Easter 6  
May 17, 2020  
Sermon by Pastor Justin Gran  
**Theme: *Beyond our imagination***

—Acts 17:22-31

Today's sermon text picks up where we left off last week. The Apostle Paul had just been in Berea where the people eagerly searched the Scriptures and believed the gospel. Then he was chased out of town by an angry mob from Thessalonica. He was then escorted to Athens. As he took a look around, **"He was greatly distressed that the city was full of idols."** A group of philosophers began to dispute with him because he was preaching the good news about Jesus Christ and the resurrection. So they took him to a meeting the Areopagus, a type of court where religions and philosophies were heard and evaluated. So in that setting, Paul was asked, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?" And Paul seizes the opportunity to proclaim the true God, a God beyond our imagination.

He starts by saying, **"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."** We encounter people that have all sorts of different ideas about God. Some may openly worship a false god through a formal religion. Others may claim to not be religious but they still have a religious framework. They still have a system by which they live and try to satisfy their conscience. They imagine a god that smiles upon that system and way of life. Others claim as the Athenians who had an altar to the unknown God. The word used in Greek on the inscription of the **"UNKNOWN GOD"** is where we get our word agnostic. That's someone who doesn't know if there is a god or who that god is, and in some cases in might be a polite way to say, I don't care if there is a god."

We may be tempted to balk at the false ideas and idolatry we encounter, at least privately and say things like, "How can anyone believe that!" We may be tempted to figuratively smash someone's idol right in front of them by seeking only to win an argument. It's easy to point out someone else's idol, but don't miss the idols we secretly fashion in our hearts. The people in Athens had a natural tendency to shape and fashion a gods of the their own design and sadly, so do we by nature. Whenever we conveniently disregard a portion of God's Word so that *our* religion better suits us, that's idolatry. Anytime we try to rationalize sin thinking God will understand or by coming up with our own definition of what is right and wrong, it's like we're taking a chisel and hammer to God, crafting him into a God of our own design. In our sinful hearts we try to design a god that is convenient for our schedules. We conceive a god that's more like a good luck charm—If I appease God maybe, just maybe, he'll give me what I want. It's really not that different from carving a little figure out of wood and placing it on a shelf and saying this is my God.

It's foolish is for someone to carve an idol out of wood, something they make with there own hands because, as Paul pointed out, **"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.** God does not exist in our own imaginations. We don't determine who God is. His existence does not depend upon what I personally think. It's the other way around. We exist because God created us and all that exists. He has determined the time and places in which we live, he even determines when we die and face his judgment. Paul said, **"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."**

It's not a god of our creation that is one day going to judge us; it's the God who created us. It's more comforting to us if a god of our own imagination is going to judge us, a god who is ok with this or that. A god who overlooks my sin, a god who fits my life and my preferences. But the one true God the Lord of heaven and earth, the God who created me is the one going to judge me. He is going to judge you. Not according to you own parameters or by any standard that you have imagined, but by his holy standard. It's going to happen. And in order to prove that he is real, not a figment of your imagination, to prove that we are accountable to a real, living, personal God, God raised Jesus from the dead!

That same Jesus whom God raised from the dead was not only appointed to one day judge the world. He was appointed to save the world; to save you from your idolatry and sin. No God of our own imagination could ever save us from sin. But God, the true God, is a God beyond our imagination. He exists independently of our thoughts and perceptions. He's so vast that he can't be grasped by our limited minds. He's not some abstract

deity that has been formed by custom or culture; he's the one that has formed the entire universe and everything in it. And yet, he revealed himself to us.

The infinite God who is bigger than the universe revealed himself in the flesh just like ours. Jesus Christ is true God, beyond our imagination, yet also true man. He is real man whom many people saw and touched, but at the very same time and in the very same person he is true God from eternity. He's not a god that came dwell in manmade a temple or to be served by human hands. Idols depend on the works of human hands—they don't move one inch unless they are carried. But Jesus Christ true God, beyond our imagination. He took on human hands and he God carried to the cross your sins of idolatry, and all other sins that separate you from God. God is not a god that is appeased by our measly sacrifices and works. He is appeased only by the innocent suffering and death of his own Son, Jesus Christ. In that way, beyond all human imagination, God made satisfaction for the sins of all human beings. And he proved it by raising Jesus from the dead. You don't have to imagine that you are right with God. You don't have to wonder or speculate. God proclaims that you are forgiven and he proved it by raising Jesus from the dead. Believe it.

What an excellent opportunity that Paul had that day in Athens to proclaim the true God beyond all human imagination. What an opportunity we have before us. The religious market of our day is chock-full of gods that have been fashioned by human imagination. People love to listen to the latest ideas about spirituality because maybe they'll find something that fits them. Learn from Paul. Don't just shrug your shoulders and arrogantly balk, saying, "how could you ever believe that?!" Remember, we have not intuitively figured out the one true God on our own and we should not expect others to intuitively figure it out either as though it were so simple. The God who made us and the God who saved us had to be made known to us, and he has to be made known to them.

Paul started with what they did know and he revealed to them what they didn't know. The people in Athens knew there had to be a god, in fact they had so many of them just to have all their bases covered. When you have an opportunity to reveal the good news about Jesus to someone, don't just assume what they know or don't know. Talk to them, or better yet listen to them. Remember everyone has a religious framework; they have a natural knowledge about God. Take the time to listen to them and find out what kind of god or system they imagine. Then maybe they will show you the same courtesy and you can share with them the God who is infinitely beyond our imagination.

You don't have to abruptly smash their idols or ideas. Simply proclaim the true God. Proclaim Jesus Christ as he has been proclaimed to you and those idols topple over on their own. Proclaim the God who doesn't string people along with fear, but rather the God who welcomes sinners with free love and forgiveness. Show them the God who doesn't kick back high up in heaven somewhere waiting to be served, but rather the God who came down from heaven to serve and even to die for you, and the God who now lives for you.

It might not seem like it but people are seeking God because that's how we are wired. Especially, now as our entire world is grappling with fear and uncertainty. If people didn't think about mortality and the meaning of life and the after life before this pandemic, maybe they are now. Maybe you are joining us online today because you are searching for answers to those very questions. If you are or if you know someone who is, let me tell you this: God is not far away. He's not found in our imaginations or in some abstract philosophy. He is found in his Word, written in our simple human language so that we can know him as he makes himself known. He can be found in the waters of baptism where he saves us, washing all our sins away and connecting us to Jesus Christ. Today's the day of God's grace. Today is the day to seek God where he may be found.