Apr. 29, 2018 Paul’s Sermon at Athens Acts 17:16-31 (John 1:16-18) Liturgical color: White

John 1:16 “From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

17 The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.”

PRAYER OF THE DAY God of the unknown, Your mysteries are astounding. Give us knowledge where you see fit, and let us sit comfortably with that which we can never understand. Amen. HYMNS O Zion, haste ELW 668 He comes to us as one unknown ELW 737 There’s a wideness in God’s mercy ELW 587, 588, H82 469, 470, UMH 121, NCH 23 CHORAL Make my life a living prayer, Aaron David Miller

Announcements

Thank you to the many generations of servants in this congregation who enable St Daniel’s to be at 57 year volunteer at Wernersville State Hospital, celebrated this past Friday!

Summary of Leadership Workshop

About 30 people were here yesterday to pray and dream while working on direction for the long-range planning goals compiled by this congregation over the past 18 months. Thanks to Huey, Jim and Sam and Joel of LRP/MMC for their very dedicated efforts especially with the added component of my resignation. One goal is already partially finished… a suggestion box, handmade by John Henning with the symbols of faith, hope and love.

* Did you know: council notes are on the circle table outside these glass doors?
* There are large print bulletins on the podium by the same table.
* Children’s bags are on the same table?
* Children’s church is available every week during worship?
* There are hearing assist devices on the table inside the glass doors

And prayers, ‘we’ve got problems LORD’; and God knows what to do in these situations… keep us witnessing as the Spirit works in, through and around us to address the prayers.

Prayers

Preparing for baptism (Jackson Koch) and dedication of memorial (eternal flame, Richard Hassler and preparing for confirmation (Gavin, Sarine, Savannah, Lacey, Enzo and later Ben)

Grace Schittler recuperating from surgery last week & Cheryl Moody surgery is this week.

Paul and Silas were in prison when we left-off.

Now Paul is waiting in Athens because he got run out-of-town in Thessalonica (the community receiving the letter to the Thessalonians). Timothy and Silas are en route to meet him. Paul does have a reputation as a rabble rouser, getting thrown in prison… even people like Jason who opened their HOMES to give these apostles (sent-ones) a place to sleep… even they are in trouble with the authorities and had to post bail because they had welcomed Paul and Silas as guests! Hospitality of these witnesses to God’s grace through Jesus Christ. (Acts 17:5-9) was frowned upon by the authorities! So friends of Paul and Silas sent them to Borea that very night… and they went directly to that synagogue, teaching about Jesus the Messiah to Jews and Greeks of many economic strata. The people in Borea became believers; but the people in Thessalonica followed Paul, Silas and Timothy to Borea and stirred-up trouble. SO much trouble that believers in Borea immediately sent Paul to the coast… this is how he got to Athens, running for his life… still… avoiding prison… barely. Was he mad at God for placing him in this prophetic situation? No. Was Paul hiding, anxiously waiting for whatever would come next? Hardly!

Paul WAS deeply distressed, but his distress was not over his situation… he was distressed because the city of Athens was full of idols! Paul was concerned for the spiritual well-being of the people in the city where he, Paul, was a foreigner!

In fact Paul is little known in this city, in Athens Paul’s reputation is much more benign. He’s seen as a babbler, a chatter-box, a harmless, although maybe annoying chattering bird. People came to listen to him only because they liked to hear new ideas, and Paul had some new ideas to share. But do not discount his gift of gab. Paul is gifted at bringing the grace of God in Christ Jesus to people who have never heard of Jesus… in fact in this case Paul brings the good news to those who do not know the entirety of this Triune God. They worship idols of animals, inanimate objects, and Greek dieties with altars all around the city… they are so fearful of these deities and the power that was attributed to these deities … that Paul noticed there was even an altar to an unknown god! (Just in case they forgot one, and yet they didn’t want to offend anything divine.)

Paul celebrated their philosophers, Paul celebrated their religious fervor, Paul even quoted their own poets… Paul went to the people. Paul used their language. Paul used their slang. Paul was on their territory… and THIS is how his proclamation of the good news of Christ Jesus thrived. Paul was running for his life, he was not working in a comfortable situation. He was in a time of transition… and even in this upheaval in his life… he shared his witness… he was wrong, he was a murderer, he was corrected in a blind-to-sight-kind-of-way! With all that truth on the table… Paul spoke from his weakness, with the full passion and conviction of a person full of a new chance at a new life… and nothing would stop this proclamation!

This unknown God… well… this unknown one has an identity! This one attributed powers beyond all others. And this God is really different than all others… this God comes to abide and live among in the world of humanity! Paul witnessed to this unbelievable mysterious truth: This God died, for us… and this Godin Christ Jesus came back from the dead, resurrected not as a ghost, but as a bread and fish eating, living, breathing, touchable wounded savior. Yes this is a God who gave himself over to be wounded, so that our wounds from sin could be healed. This same divine one who created the heavens and the earth; this same one who brings joy and life from death and darkness… this is the God you are missing people of Athens. The unknown God has a name… people of Robesonia, we know this God as the great I AM.

And this Great I AM is still here today, in a land where people are not so intent on worshipping the divine. Sure there are idols all around, people gathered ritually on sidelines and in front of screens… sure plenty of witnesses to the grace of God are distressed by what’s all around in the culture.

Now again in a pastoral transition, people may feel angry, or hurt, or betrayed or anxious… people might just want to go hide from the hard work ahead until a future time when a new pastoral relationship is in place… that is NOT what these scriptures testify to.

Today’s scriptures testify to the fact that people of Athens believed the good news about the Jesus they did not know… because they heard this witness in their streets. The people of Athens first encountered God from a man whose life was in complete disarray! From a man who did not have a place to life, a man who had to rely on others for every meal. The people of Athens who were Jewish argued with Paul in the synagogue and in the marketplace every day! But they also wanted to hear the message Paul preached; they wanted to understand… they just could not understand.

I mean really… it is easier to understand death, grief and mourning (which we all get plenty of practice with)… it is MUCH more difficult to understand resurrection and new life from death… this does not make sense, it is not rational, it is not expected… like Mary at the tomb, often we do not even recognize the miracle of new life given by God in our midst. People of St Daniel’s… as Sam Thomas pointed-out yesterday, this is a Good Friday-like moment in the life of St Daniel’s. And although in our life-times we have lots of practice with death, and grief… there is an Easter coming. There is new life, there is resurrection… because that’s how God works! This is not an unknown God. We worship the one who came and lived among us, we worship the one who gave himself for us. We worship the one who was arrested, died, was buried AND rose from the dead. We worship the one who commands us to be baptizing into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to teach and obey all that has been laid-out for us by the one who is the resurrection and the life. Like Paul… now, in the upheaval of life at St Daniel’s IS exactly the time to witness to the grace and mercy of God in Christ Jesus. Now is exactly the time to say, yes, we’ve got problems LORD, and welcome other people with problems into a relationship with the One God who adopts people with problems and imperfections as children of the Most High God. Even as we name the problems that need to die and address what needs to be weeded-out… even as we embrace the dreams God is calling into life… inside and especially outside of this building as we witness to this amazing God who entrusts us to be the body of Christ in the world and makes us inheritors of the kingdom of God. Now is exactly the time to proclaim that we are Easter people, children of God… now is the time to be like Paul; Now is exactly the time to proclaim that we are built on a rock!

{at a meeting on Thursday: Rev. Sonja Ware pointed-out that like the woman at the tomb - people know HOW to grieve. But the witness about the unknown goes unsaid. Like the resurrection beyond the imagination of any human being, they didn’t know what to say.}

As the body of Christ we are also to abide in the world, on humanity’s turf. Speaking the local language, using the language and fabric of current culture to reach-out intentionally to people who do NOT yet know God and the good news in Christ Jesus.