

Searching for the Unknown God

By
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from the pulpit of
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Psalm 115

¹Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness. ²Why should the nations say, “Where is their God?” ³Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases. ⁴Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. ⁵They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. ⁶They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. ⁷They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; they make no sound in their throats. ⁸Those who make them are like them; so are all who trust in them. ⁹O Israel, trust in the LORD! He is their help and their shield. ¹⁰O house of Aaron, trust in the LORD! He is their help and their shield. ¹¹You who fear the LORD, trust in the LORD! He is their help and their shield. ¹²The LORD has been mindful of us; he will bless us; he will bless the house of Israel; he will bless the house of Aaron; ¹³he will bless those who fear the LORD, both small and great. ¹⁴May the LORD give you increase, both you and your children. ¹⁵May you be blessed by the LORD, who made heaven and earth. ¹⁶The heavens are the Lord’s heavens, but the earth he has given to human beings. ¹⁷The dead do not praise the LORD, nor do any that go down into silence. ¹⁸But we will bless the LORD from this time on and forevermore. Praise the LORD!

Acts of the Apostles 17: 22-31

²²Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For 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. ²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸For ‘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.’ ²⁹Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Last summer when our Sanctuary Choir and friends traveled to the Middle East, we ended our two-week trip visiting the ancient site of Petra. The area where Petra is located in Jordan has a rich and diverse ancient lineage, and for the longest stretch of time was the home of the Nabateans people who were renowned merchants and traders in a place that was at the crossroads of the Near East. They eventually integrating into their culture, architecture and religion, Greek, Roman and Arab traditions.

If you have only ever seen one image from Petra, it is likely that of the facade called the Treasury, featured in the final scenes of the 1989 movie, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, standing in for an imagined ancient temple protecting the Holy Grail.

To reach the Treasury, one walks down the entrance to the city called the Siq, a path that is 3/4 of a mile long, but only about ten yards wide, surrounded on both sides by stone mountains about 100 yards tall. On the walk into the site, our guide pointed out smallish niches carved into those high walls where we were told a Nabatean god idol would have sat so that travelers could make offerings to them as they entered the city. Of course, the idol itself was no longer in its place, and I guess I am not exactly sure what I imagined that statue would have looked like.

We also visited the museum next to the site, where a lot of those ancient relics are on display. When I eventually found a Nabatean god idol, it took my breath away and not on account of its beauty. It can best be described as a stone rectangle, with some rather lovely decorative carving around the edges, but then a flat center where it looks like someone might have just glued on two eyes, a rudimentary nose, and a mouth. It is what I would myself have been able to craft had you simply given me a slab of clay and the parts from a Mr. Potato Head toy. Flat is the only way to describe it in both its form and its effect.

I wonder if it wasn't gods just like this that the Psalmist criticizes in our first reading from this morning - idols with mouths that do not speak, eyes that do not see and ears that do not hear. They were noting in comparison to the God of Israel who dwells in the heavens, steadfast in love and faithfulness, active

and powerful. The Psalmist goes so far as to compare the one-dimensional nature of the idol to the faulty character and faith of the idol makers.

Of course, these Nabatean gods are nothing compared to the statues and idols Paul encountered in his visit to and walk around Athens, another religiously and intellectually diverse meeting place of the ancient world. Idols so renowned in their beauty that thousands of years later, they have some of the places of highest honor in our museums. But it is a more simple and unassuming idol that Paul wants to speak to the Athenians about in our text this morning.

Just prior to our reading for today, we learn that Paul was not taken with the beauty of the Greek gods and in fact is distressed at how many of them he encounters. In response he spends most of his time in debate with both the faithful and the agnostic, the willing and the unwilling, sharing with them the good news of salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Athenians, exhausted by his babbling (as they described it to one another) ask him to come to the center of the city - to the Areopagus - where people would gather to discuss new ideas, to better explain to them what in the world he was going on about.

Once Paul is in this honored public forum, he tries a completely different approach. He praises their religiosity, references their own faithfulness to the unknown God, and then goes on to speak of the expansiveness and authority of the creator of the universe. He reminds them that each of them - all human beings - are created to yearn for and to experience and know God. He then offers to the Athenians, what for him has become a profound and life transforming way to know this unknown God - the knowledge of and experience of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

New Testament scholar Bridget Green has reflected on Paul's shift in his evangelistic tenor in this moment.

“Paul's approach in proclaiming the gospel to the Athenians is a testament to God's expansive plan. With an ethnographer's curiosity, he strives to connect with the community he visits, even in spaces of discomfort. Without condescension or berating, he uses a rhetorical strategy that resonates with

his audience and respects their culture. Despite disagreeing with what he observes, he is neither dismissive nor patronizing.

In his observation of something that was foreign to him, Paul discovers a purpose in the alter to an unknown god that enriches his anthropology and his theology. He is open to the transforming power of God to work in and through him while he labors in planting a Word. Paul demonstrates God's generosity in the gifts of the gospel and the Holy Spirit. These gifts are accessible to all who seek God and the teachings of Jesus. They are for those who encounter the good news through the testimony and lived examples of believers."¹

Paul invites the Athenians to contemplate their own experiences of the divine - varied as they likely were - and invites them to consider his own personal testimony - his own personal experience of God through Jesus of Nazareth. Yes, Paul preaches about the "unknown" God, but his primary message is that this very same God longs to be known and is inherently knowable by his creation.

We don't tend to talk all that much about our own varied and diverse experiences of the divine. It is often so much easier to talk about how we live out our faith through our actions than to talk about how exactly we found our faith. It takes a level of vulnerability to share the stories of our own experiences of God's divine presence, to open up about the moments when the creator of the universe became fully known to each of us.

Maybe it is hard because we incorrectly assume that Paul himself has set the standard for what it meant to experience the presence of Christ that day on the Road to Damascus. Or maybe it's because we lack the vocabulary to really articulate what it is like to know and be known in the presence of God.

Essayist, Ben Birnbaum, tells the story of experiencing the divine as a six-year-old while on a family vacation north of New York city standing in a meadow outside of their hotel:

¹ Bridget A. Green, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship. Year A, Vol. 2.* Westminster/John Knox. 2019.

“It was a kosher and Sabbath observant hotel, which I don’t offer to explain why God was loitering nearby, but to signal that I came of a devout family and that I was well aware, even at that age of who God was and what he had done to date.

What happened is difficult to explain. The world became radiant, though not the kind of radiant that makes you blink or close your eyes. In fact, it was not the light that radiated (though it seemed light), but something more complex, something like a tone as it swells on the back of a chord that is being sounded by a full orchestra. As human perception goes, in fact, it might be most accurate to say that I felt as though something had called out and I had heard. And hearing, I felt freed, rooted, floated, flooded, ablaze, remote, close, certain, joyous, and absolutely calm. In the cavern of my chest, in the thin arms at my sides, inside the Keds that lightly pressed the soil, blood pulsed at a solid sixty-two beats per minute.

Given what I had been taught, I should not have thought this was God - something wonderful certainly, but not God. The God I knew, and even loved, commanded us, reproved us, made us attentive and busy. He was a Hebrew speaker, of course, but above all a speaker. Sound and light shows, tricks of transcendence, were not his racket, nor was he known to spend a lot of time in the American woods, but I knew that this was God that I had seen or who had seen me, and I did not at the time think this remarkable, and for some reason still don’t. It wasn’t as if, for example, I had seen a bear, or a deer come out of the woods and cross the meadow. That is something I would have related to my mother. About God I said nothing.”²

About God, most of us say nothing.

Maybe we say nothing because our experiences of God are rarely isolated from the rest of our complicated lives. To share about our experience of the divine or our yearning for the divine we also have to share about the messy experience of being human.

² Birnbaum, Ben. “Why I Pray”, *God is Love: Essays from Portland Magazine*, ed. Brian Doyle. Augsburg Books. 2003.

This month, Judy's Blume's bestselling and often banned 1970 young adult novel, *Are You There God, It's Me Margaret?* was released as a new film in theaters. The movie and the book tell the fictional story of 11-year-old Margaret who is navigating a move from New York to New Jersey, the pitfalls of finding, making, and keeping friends, the tensions between her Jewish grandmother and her Christian grandparents, the inevitable conflict this creates between her parents, and her own internal changes as she enters puberty.

In the midst of all of these confusing changes, despite having never been introduced to religious practice by her parents who have chosen to all together avoid the topic telling Margaret that religion is something that she can work out on her own when she is an adult, Margaret turns to God in prayer, and she puts herself on her own journey of discovery of God amongst the diverse expressions of religion that have touchpoint in her life.

Starting each prayer in the same way:

*Are you there God, it's me Margaret. I'm going to temple today, with Grandma. It's a holiday. I guess you know that. Well, my father thinks it's a mistake and my mother thinks the whole idea is crazy, but I am going anyway. I am sure this will help me decide what to be. I've never been inside a temple or church. I'll look for you God.*³

The new movie's writer-director, Kelly Fremon Craig has shared that she got the jitters when it came time to write an adaptation of the beloved book. In an interview with the New York Times, she said: "I felt like I was in the room with a bazillion Judy Blume fans, Judy Blume, my 12-year-old self — every single one of them warning me, 'Don't screw it up,' She took particular care with Margaret's spiritual quest. It was the most the most delicate part of the story, she said: reaching, at a young, tumultuous age, "for something greater, beyond yourself, in an effort to figure out if somebody is making sure you're OK." she went on "I actually think I was that age when I started to ask those larger existential questions, and I feel like I still ask those questions every day."⁴

³ Judy Blume, *Are You There God, It's Me Margaret?*, Bradbury Press. 1970.

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/20/movies/are-you-there-god-its-me-margaret-film.html>

The lesson from Paul's sermon in Athens isn't just that we can be too easily distracted by the tangible and intangible idols that often stand in for an experience of the divine, but that by our very nature, we have been created in the image of a God who longs to know us; crafted within our DNA a desire to know God.

For each of us, that journey, or that groping as Paul characterizes it, looks different. But when we share those experiences in community our understanding of who God is and how God dwells and acts in the world expands and expands our faith. We sometimes encounter a mirror that helps to reflect, validate and helps us better articulate our own experiences; and sometimes another person's experience of the divine carves out in front of us a window that helps us to see and know God in a completely new way.

In our diverse and global world, we daily experience interactions that make us all feel like we live at a crossroads of cultures and religious expression, experiences that give us new language and perspectives on the divine. As Christians, as disciples of Jesus Christ, we recognize the truth that for the people he encountered, the people he loved, and the people he challenged, Jesus of Nazareth was for some a mirror, for the first time showing them that they had a home in the heart of God, and for some a window helping them to see and experience God in a radical new way, just like he did with the Apostle Paul.

May the God in whom we live and move and have our being, may Jesus Christ who sought us out so intentionally that he came to live among us; may the Holy Spirit who gives us the courage to recognize and share our experiences of the divine with one another, continue to support us in this life, be known to us in community, and dwell in our hearts forever.

Amen.