“Into the Unknown”

Acts 17: 22-31

The Rev. Katie Day

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“Into the unknown!” (Lopez, Into the Unknown).

This is the chorus of a song from the Disney movie *Frozen II,* which is a favorite story of Elijah’s these days – so much so that we listen to the soundtrack multiple times a day, multiple, multiple times. So many times. These songs, these words sung by Elsa are now imprinted upon my soul. So naturally, this is where my mind went when I began looking at worship for this week.

*“Into the unknown!”*

This is a story about Paul. Thanks to his dramatic conversion experience on the Damascus Road, he is no longer Saul, the Pharisee who persecutes Christians, but Paul, a follower of Christ and Christ’s teachings which were revealed to him directly, after Jesus’s death and resurrection.

After his conversion, Paul has been traveling, preaching, mostly arguing with Jewish folks in the local synagogues, riling people up so much so that, again and again, he is forced to leave town, accompanied by helpful believers who see him to safety.

In this manner, Paul winds up in Athens, wandering the town while waiting to meet up with his colleagues Silas and Timothy. He discovers widespread idolatry there – Athens was just filled with temples and altars of every god imaginable, and, Damascus Road conversion to Christianity aside, remember that Paul had been a faithful Jew for most of his life, and had a lot of opinions on idolatry – Jews were the original monotheists.

We are told he went to the synagogue to argue with the Athenian Jews, and he debated the Greek philosophers in the marketplace –

the Stoics and Epicureans – and in the midst of all this he begins to preach about Jesus.

Some thought he was just crazy – but some accused him of “proclaiming foreign divinities,” which is exactly what the people of Athens accused the philosopher Socrates of, four hundred years ago, and he was brought to the Areopagus, this high stone court, tried and put to death (Rothschild). That’s where these Athenians bring Paul – same accusation, same location.

The Athenians are polite about it – “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.” (*“So we can decide if we are going to execute you”* is the implied next line.)

But the truth is, they really wanted to know. Athens was a place of knowledge, a place of seeking, a place of critical thinking. These people are not brutes, fearful of new ideas. They love reason, and a good argument.

Paul begins, somewhat uncharacteristically for someone so argumentative, very gently: “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.’”

Paul, in that moment, knew just what to say. And you can bet he said more than the maybe two minutes that Luke summarized here; you don’t put a long-winded preacher in the Areopagus on trial for his life and go home after 2 minutes. But the gist of what he said as recorded here? It’s great. He shared what he knew, what he knew the Athenians didn’t know. And it was, and is good news:

God created the world, and all that is in it – including all of us. So we already belong to God and don’t have to earn our way in. God doesn’t live in a building, and God doesn’t need anything from us. So, no more sacrifices are needed.

God created us to seek, to search, to reach - God wants to be found by us. So, no need to fear, like we fear disturbing those other gods who want to be left alone. We are God’s offspring – God’s children.

So we are freed from thinking of God as something to own, claim, or control. And, God has appointed someone to set all that is wrong with the world right – this would be Jesus – and God raised him from the dead – thus setting right his wrongful betrayal, torture, and execution. So that gives us hope for the days to come, right?

Good news, every last piece. And in that moment, God – our God – who was previously unknown in Athens became known in a small but real way – not known in terms of detailed facts, history, and a codified theological system, but revealed through the thoughtfulness, understanding, respect, and humility of the teacher.

If I’d kept reading this morning, you’d have heard the end of the story.

Verses 32-34 say, “When [the Athenians] heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, “We will hear you again about this.” At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers.”

So, good for Paul. He went into the unknown courageously, gently, respectfully, and not only walked away with his own life, but led others into their unknown, as well – resulting in new life for *them*.

So Paul has me thinking, now. What “unknown” is calling to me, inviting me to new knowledge, to new life?

You know, I almost don’t want to answer this question. So much in our world is unknown these days. I feel like I go into the unknown every time I go online, or check out the news. I’m tired of the unknown. I’m tired of mystery, of feeling fearful, of having to take things one day at a time.

But as soon as I say those words, I think of Paul, and what he taught at the Areopagus: that God is the God of all things, known and unknown,

and while there is much we do not know, God is knowable, and claims us as beloved children.

And I think of the Athenians, how instead of fearing the unknown, they built an altar to it, venerating the very possibility that there might be something or someone beyond the grasp of their knowledge, and thus were open to the possibility of knowing and experiencing the redeeming love of God.

So what if I did that, instead?

What would it look like, were I to create an altar inside myself dedicated to the unknown that God might be inviting me into? A small shrine to my God-given capacity to imagine mystery, to believe there might be more than what we already know?

Paul quoted one of the Athenian poets to the people gathered that day,

and I’ll share one of our national treasures, as well.

Mary Oliver, one of the greatest poets ever, and her poem “The Summer Day” captures this idea of a personal altar to the unknown God, openness to something bigger, better, beyond our own selves:

“Who made the world?

Who made the swan, and the black bear?

Who made the grasshopper?

This grasshopper, I mean-

the one who has flung herself out of the grass,

the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,

who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-

who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.

Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.

Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down

into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,

how to be idle and blessed,

how to stroll through the fields,

which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do

with your one wild and precious life?” (Oliver)

*“I don’t know exactly what a prayer is. I do know how to pay attention.”*

Mary Oliver reveals something about God through the kind of “thoughtfulness, understanding, respect, and humility” that we see today in Paul’s message.

She stands in the field of what she can observe about things by “looking carefully.” She makes herself available enough – interruptible enough –

to notice something intricate and beautiful she might have passed by on the other side had she already made her mind up about what there was to see. That grasshopper beckoned her into questions, rather than answers – but questions that thrill us, that inspire us.

Paul paid attention to the people of Athens; he looked carefully, and was able to see and name that God was already at work in their midst.

The Athenians paid attention to the Paul, and were willing to meet and be met by a loving God – even if the closest they could come to a new affirmation of faith was, “We will hear you again about this.”

I believe God is, this morning, calling us to pay attention, to tune our hearts to the reality that God is present in the unknown.

As I peer into the unknown stretching out before us, preparing to consider with our Session and staff how God may be calling us in this moment, this time and place, I feel anxious, worried for the people of our congregation, and the people we serve locally and across the globe. I feel anxious, worried for the health – physical, mental, spiritual – of our community, our nation. It’s easy to feel overwhelmed.

And so, I am practicing looking carefully, paying attention, so that I can focus less on what is unknown to me, and more on what *is* known: that God is present. This is the heart of the good news that Paul shared in Athens, and it’s the heart of the good news we proclaim as Christians:

God is present.

God is present in creation, was present before creation and will remain after all things have passed away.

God is present in the people, created in God’s own image,

claimed as God’s beloved children.

God is present in suffering.

Jesus showed us that ours is not a God who shies away from pain and heartache, but instead faces it head on, and will not leave us,

 even unto death.

And God is present in the unknown future, reconciling and redeeming, preparing a place for us, inviting us to join the mission to which we are being called even now.

God is present.

And so I look carefully, I pay attention. I listen to your stories on Zoom and over the phone. I hold the history, the joys, the hurts, the hopes, the worries. And I begin to see and hear how God is at work in your lives,

and begin to get a glimpse of how God is finding me in this calling,

beckoning me into this unknown.

It’s exciting, but even this can be overwhelming. So much to work on, to learn, to do, to discern… And so I have to stop, take a breath, and to quote another song from the movie *Frozen II*, constantly on repeat in the Day house: focus on doing simply the next right thing.

Anna sings this song in the movie, and it truly speaks to my heart these days: “I won't look too far ahead / It's too much for me to take /
 But break it down to this next breath, this next step /

So I'll walk through this night / Stumbling blindly toward the light /And do the next right thing” (Lopez, The Next Right Thing).

God is present, always, and is calling us into the unknown. May we look carefully and pay attention, taking this journey of faith one step at a time,

and may we be ever surprised by what new life God will reveal to us along the way.

**Works Cited**

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