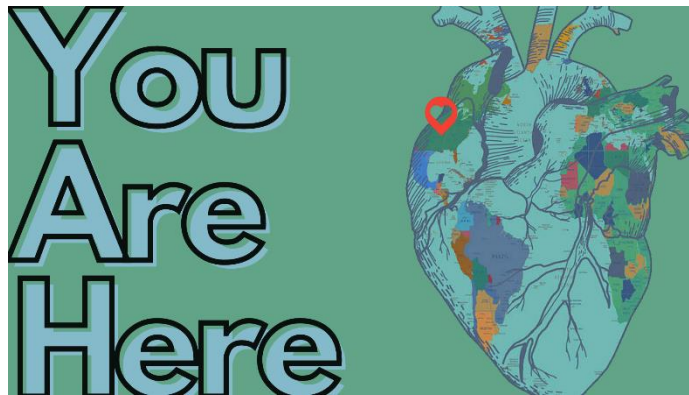


Columbia, Missouri
The Worship of God • September 11, 2022



THE SCRIPTURE
Acts 17:22-31

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “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.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The 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, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From 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, so 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. For ‘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.’ Since 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. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because 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.”

THE MESSAGE
“You Are Here: Lost”
Mark Briley

Have you ever been lost? I mean like really lost. Everybody’s got a story – from getting lost in the produce section at the grocery store as a kid to driving endlessly in circles unclear of which way is what. And those of you 15 or younger are asking, “*Why didn’t you just use your GPS?*” Would you believe there was a time when we didn’t have those things? You couldn’t just say, “*Siri, how do I get home from here?*” You had to look at the position of the moon or follow some breadcrumbs or something. Different times.



My wife, Carrie, has run her share of marathons, but the first was one of the most memorable for multiple reasons. Our kids were little, and her mom and my sister and nephew were all there, and we were cheering her through the exhaustion of 26.2 miles. When she crosses the finish line, we all erupt and rejoice and celebrate her and every fiber and muscle of her body and her emotional and mental exhaustion all hits, and she’s pretty much toast. Somehow in the midst of celebrating, little Hayeser, who was about three-and-a half, had slipped away and was nowhere to be found – he’s not with Grandma or Aunt Krissy or with the bigger kids, and we’re turning over every hat in sight. It’s

getting a little tense at this point. Carrie can hardly stand, and we’re like, “*Carrie, will you just run around and find him?*” Just kidding. And she did though. I grabbed the mic of the announcer who was calling every name who crossed the finish line and we put out the alert. After who knows how long – it felt like forever – here comes Hayes walking hand in hand with a stranger, who found him out roaming around. It was such a terrible feeling. Being lost is at worst, dangerous and fearful, and at best, frustrating and disorienting. Lost. You know what I’m saying?

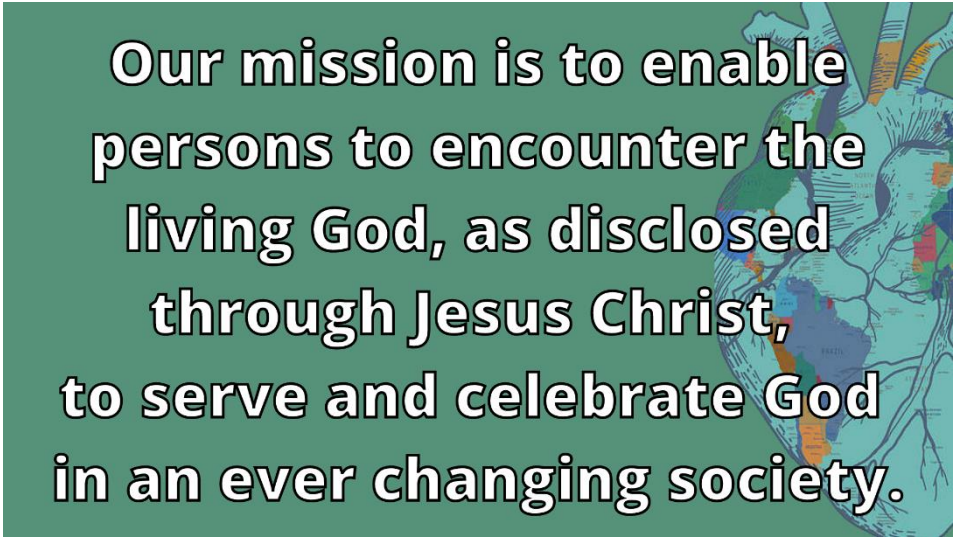


Beyond physically not knowing where you are, we know being lost also finds us in the mental, emotional, and spiritual realms as well. A loved one dies, or a relationship ends. You know what that kind of lost feels like. You move. Start a new job. You experience trauma of some kind. 9/11 hits home. The Queen of 70 years joins the resurrection. Shift. Change. *Lost.*

You may feel some of this right now on a more global perspective. I feel like we lost a good 20 years of gradual and natural shifting as a society given the pandemic. Some of us may be numb to it. We don't want to believe things have shifted in significant ways. We keep to our routines and our comforts and just hope that if we pretend it's not a different world out there, we'll stay safe and secure in a comfortable era of a time gone by. There's a part of this that I am so drawn to.

I'm an old soul in many ways. I can find myself retreating into that safety of all that I've known and loved for so long. But we're time travelers now. When I say we've been shoved forward 20 years in the last two, I'm saying everyone's world was upended – not just an individual here or there – everyone's. The pandemic pause halted everything – it changed work patterns, church patterns, school patterns. And for all the good and bad that we can reflectively claim from this season, there's no doubt that the world is different.

I'm wondering how we reclaim our bearings as a people of faith and as a church in our ever-changing society. Did you know that's been part of Broadway's mission statement for a long while? Our board chair, Mary Cunningham, has asked the Board to memorize and recite it this year:



**Our mission is to enable
persons to encounter the
living God, as disclosed
through Jesus Christ,
to serve and celebrate God
in an ever changing society.**

That ever changing society part? Sure – the world changes fast – we've always said that. But seldom does it get slammed forward decades at a time. What now? What are we called to do as a church in this *ever-changing society*? How will we ensure we're all loved and cared for even as we innovate for the future to ensure rising generations connect with a transformative faith?

In this new, four-week sermon series we're calling, "*You are Here*," I'm hoping we can re-orient ourselves in this new, frontier world and imagine what it all means for us individually and as a church family. I'm hoping, in some ways, coming to worship these

four weeks will be a bit like walking into the Columbia Mall and going immediately to the directory map; finding that big red sticker on the map that says, “*You Are Here.*” Until we get our bearings and acknowledge where we are, it’s hard to get to where we’re trying to go. We’re going to need a lot of grace for one another as we wade into this frontier future.

We invite the Apostle Paul into this orienteering experience today. Talk about feeling lost. He’d been shutting down church potlucks and crushing worship leader’s guitars; whatever he could to bully and end the spread of all the Jesus nonsense. Then he has a blinding and disorienting faith experience that makes him rethink everything and ultimately becomes as zealous for the Jesus message as he was in crushing it before. He’s gone through all the inward lost-ness stuff. It was really headline worthy.

It’s a story you hear once in a while. “*Wall Street CEO sees the light and becomes Nun,*” or “*Woman sells it all and starts orphanage – gives Jesus credit for idea.*” Paul takes a 180 from his persecution-of-Christians-world-tour and becomes their greatest advocate. You can see why this stirs up some interest... and some controversy. Just ask any political candidate who has changed their view on issues over time. The old stuff always comes back up. So... Paul is on his missionary tour proclaiming Jesus, his resurrection, and his message of radical grace. Honestly, Paul’s been run out of the last few towns when he lands in Athens. He’s shoved on ahead of his team who is yet to join him. Because the going has been a little hostile, I’m guessing Paul’s handlers told him, “*Go on to Athens... you’ll blend in there... take some time for yourself.*”

Athens wasn’t the place of action it once was, but it was still the greatest university town in the world, drawing people from all over who were eager to have philosophical conversations or explore innovative ideas.

There were some notable groups of thinkers like the Epicureans who believed everything happened by chance and that pleasure was the point of life. The Stoics were another contingent.¹ They believed everything was god (or had gods) and that within everything was a spark of the Divine. They believed nothing happened by chance. There were other sects, of course, but you get a sense of the plurality of the city. They were edgy. Athens City Limits and Wild Goose festivals.

It was called the City of Gods for there were statues of the gods everywhere... more in the city than in the rest of the Greek world combined. It was said to be easier to meet a god in Athens than another person. So here is Paul; bruised and battered from his

¹ Exegetical information gleaned from William Barclay’s “The Acts of the Apostles.” The Westminster Press. Philadelphia. 1975. Biblical translations opened different tones of Paul’s encounter in Athens. The tone of Eugene Petersen’s “The Message” inspired my direction most for this particular sermon.

journey of frequent opposition entering this city of the gods. Paul's agent has taken away his smart phone as a protective measure and instructed him to *"Cool off a bit and we'll catch up with you in a few days. Don't start any fires. Just lay low and we'll join you soon."*

But Paul hasn't laid low a day in his life. And the statues of gods must have fascinated him to no end. Fascinated may not be a strong enough word. Irritated may not even be a strong enough word. He found Athens to be a *"junkyard of idols"* one version says. Paul lands in Town Square and it's happy hour so he joins the locals. With a frosty mug in his hand he says, *"How 'bout them statues?"* *"You like 'em, eh? First time in Athens?"* *"Well... just sort of startling,"* he replies. *"They're everywhere."* *"Yep. That's how we do... everything's got a god and you don't want to tick off the gods so, 'BOOM' another statue."* Statues pop up like potholes on Broadway in a Columbia winter. *"Okay,"* Paul says, *"But what about the one out front that says, 'To the God nobody knows?'"* An Epicurean chimes in as his glass is now empty – *"That's the Stoics for you. Take no chances."* *"Huh,"* Paul responds. *"I know a God."*

Paul, being Paul, starts to share about the God he *knows* personally. He's no longer lost at all but re-energized to the purpose he knows is his in this life. He shares the Jesus story, and these newfound Epicurean and Stoic buddies he meets in his early days in Athens become fascinated. The buzz has begun. *"Have you heard this Paul guy? He's got a new slant on the gods. Says God became human, blew people's minds with this notion he calls grace... the Romans killed him, and then he rose from dead."* *"Say what?"*

But it's on now. Paul is dropping Gospel beats like Dre and the locals are saying, *"We've got to get this guy an audience with the big shots."* It's arranged because in this university town, the latest idea *needed* to be shared, discussed, dissected, and tested. The setup is at Areopagus –biggest stage for criminal and moral debates in the city. No laying low for Paul. He would go anywhere, so long as it was forward.

Moving forward is courageous. Paul had made a mark already. He had done much for the cause of Christ. He could have stepped back and said, *"I'm done. I'm out."* Or even, *"I'll rest on what I've already accomplished."*

But when your heart is in tune with the Spirit of God... the mission *must* move forward. It is always first. We experience this on a personal level, *and* we experience it as a church, too. We can say, *"Look at what we've done. We've built buildings and grew our community... it's time to coast."*

What Spirit-tuned churches discover is that when they've moved faithfully, with vision and purpose, and they reach a place they may have never thought they could... a new

challenge is revealed. We can step back from it and lay low, or we can courageously proclaim the Gospel *into* that challenge. In a growing society that is less and less affiliated with religion all the time, the Gospel of old needs to be presented in new way. What's going to invite our unchurched neighbors to ask, "*What's happening there? Do they have a new slant on the gods?*" Curiosity is an opening place for conversation and influence. But if there's no buzz, nothing new under the sun, no different reach that the community comes to know, we'll just blend into the scenery around us until the last one of us turns out the lights.

I'm praying over our most recent visioning process and our Master Narrative. I'm reading the latest about what's happening with religion in America and seeking innovative partnerships and ways in which we could sacrifice some of our own comfort so the Broadway Spirit might connect with a whole new generation. It can be a little scary because change is hard. But the conversations you are starting to bring our way seem to sense this, too. Some of you have hesitated to say so out of fear that we may be thinking church-as-usual is the path forward. We know something new is called for. Join me in this prayerful discernment, would you?

As we celebrate our charter members and Broadway saints along the way, who sacrificed and shifted and innovated in ways that brought us here, now it's our turn to do the same for others. And do you know what those Broadway innovators of old would say about what it took to get us here? They say, "*It was sacrifice, yes. It was change, yes. But we grew in the process, too. We rallied around the effort together and had more fun than we imagined and created more meaning in our own spirit than we ever thought possible.*"

What seemed lost was turned into love and love turned into sacred purpose and nothing unifies a people like a clear and tangible purpose.

In our good intentions to expand our ministries over time, we have programs and worship experiences and service opportunities like a Golden Corral. The rehearsal dinner for my wedding was at a Golden Corral, so I'm speaking as an insider here. We've added more and more, and there was a season in my own life when the smorgasbord approach to ministry was where it was at. The more opportunities the better. But this is shifting.

Carey Nieuwhof and David Kinnamon, in partnership with the Barna Research Group, are analyzing the effectiveness of the church across North America and note this is one of the shifts in effective churches in this new post-pandemic world. With more and more activity and less and less interested in each of the smorgasbord options, people are burning out. "*The church at its best,*" they report, "*has always equipped people to live out their faith in the world. But you have to be in the world to influence the world.*"

*Churches that focus their energies on a few things the church can uniquely do best will emerge as the most effective churches moving forward. Simplified churches will complement people's witness, not compete with people's witness."*²

How do we re-center our energy so we find a unified spirit, doing really well what we do instead of spreading us out so thin that we lose the focused and centralized energy to grow forward again?

Paul brings this energy to Athens where he gets to know the locals pretty well before the moment comes where he speaks into their lives. He started with where they were. He attempted to understand what led them to that place and because he's fostered these relationships, he gets an audience. There is a saying you've likely heard over time. It says, *"People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."*

You all know that person who never asks about you but really enjoys talking about themselves. They may get around to you, but it's usually in the form of, *"But enough about me. Let's talk about you... what do you think about me?"* Paul starts where the people are.

On this most prestigious of stages, he starts in: *"Hello Athens!"* He probably warms them up with a joke about a Christian, Epicurean, and Stoic who meet for happy hour. And then he starts with his understanding of their ideologies. *"Clearly, you take religion seriously. I was fascinated when coming into town to find all these remarkable statues. One of them was dedicated to 'The God Nobody Knows.' And that really tripped my thinker because of how I have come to understand God. I've been talking about my experience with the fine folks of Athens, and now here I am as you've expressed interest in the God that I have come to know. So let me tell you..."*

And he starts in about our Creator. And in so doing, he even quotes one of their own poets. He says, *"One of your poets says it well: We are the God-created."* Paul cares enough to listen and glean from their own perspectives. As different as we all may seem to be, we also are the same at some beautiful, fundamental level. At our most vulnerable level we are seeking. Even if we're too cool to verbalize it or too proud to admit that we are lost, or empty, or tired or discouraged... we all are seeking something. When we look at the mall directories of our soul, we are desperate to find that red sticker that says, *"You are not lost. You are here."* There's much to explore... and it's beyond being found. It's about the finding. I once was lost but now am *finding*... it's an ongoing process, in my estimation, not a once and for all.

² <https://careynieuwhof.com/10-predictions-about-the-future-church-and-shifting-attendance-patterns/>.

Paul says to the court at Areopagus, “*God created us to be finders. God didn’t make us to simply grope around in the dark but designed us with the possibility to actually find God. God’s not remote at all; but it is, in fact. in our very being where we live and move and find our true selves.*”

Donald Miller compliments that, I think, by writing this: “*You are wired like you, and I am wired like me. The more fully we live into ourselves, the more impact we will have. Acting may get us the applause we want but taking a risk on being ourselves is the only path toward true intimacy. And true intimacy, the exchange of affection between two people who are not lying, is transforming.*” To take the risk of saying “*Here I am*” ... “*Here is where I really am*” is step one of taking the risk of finding ourselves, finding God, and finding a way forward.

I want you to pull up your soul directory right now and find that sticker that says, “*Soul – YOU ARE HERE.*” Know it. Claim it. You’ve been around a bit. Been through some stuff. You’ve been hurt and may still be hurting, but you are not lost. You are here. And I am, too. We are home. And *from* here, let’s be courageous and get about the finding. Together, we build forward.

May it be so.

BROAD HEARTS BROAD MINDS BROAD REACH