

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor
“The One in Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being”
Acts 17:16-34
Seventh Sunday of Easter
May 16, 2010

Paul’s usual practice when he arrived in a new town was to locate the nearest newspaper dispenser, insert a couple of drachmas into the coin slot, extract the latest issue of the *Thessalonica Times* or *Beroea Bugle*, and riffle through its pages to the Saturday religion page listing of the church’s synagogues and churches. Having found the information for which he was looking, he would then make a beeline for the nearest synagogue with the hope that he might be invited to fill the pulpit for the vacationing rabbi. (Well, maybe he didn’t do exactly that ... but something like that!)

In today’s Scripture lesson, Paul arrives in Athens, and he first goes to the synagogue, as was his custom. However, he then makes an unorthodox detour into the center of the city. The Athens of Paul’s day was a city well past the prime of its glory days of Socrates and Plato. However, there were still a lot of smart people around, sipping their lattes and discussing the various philosophical ideas which were in vogue at the time, “telling or hearing something new,” as Luke puts it in Acts 17. Paul isn’t intimidated by their erudition. He wades into this pool of Athenian intellectuality without hesitation and proceeds to preach a sermon.

One scholar, writing about Paul’s speech in Athens, has observed that one could pour it “straight out of the bottle” onto contemporary audiences. (1)

“It is easier to find a god than a man in Athens,” (2) the ancients are reported to have said, and, indeed, this seemed true. There were images of gods all over town. Images of gods that were made from gold. Images of gods that were crafted from silver. Images of gods that were fashioned from stone.

There were images of gods all over Athens...and there are images of gods all over our towns too. To be sure, the idolatrous images of god that exert power over folks in our contemporary culture can’t often be seen or touched or held like those of first-century Athens. But that doesn’t mean that they aren’t there. It doesn’t mean that they aren’t incredibly powerful. Indeed, perhaps it is the case that some of our psychic and mental representations of god, that is, those that are inside of us, are ever so much stronger than the silver and gold figures that the ancients could touch and see.

The images of god which are inside of us can be strong indeed. They can lodge deep within our souls. Stuffed inside us like cotton batting into a rag doll, they may hold sway over us by shaping, not only the way that we view God, but also the way that we view the world, other people, ourselves, as well.

May I tell you about some of the images of God that have been shared with me in fairly recent days as I sat and sipped a latte and listened and talked with another? These conversations are composites, in some sense, not directly traceable to one particular person, but they are reasonably accurate accounts of what I have heard.

“I really want to believe in God,” she told me, “but God scares me. If you had grown up in my house you’d understand. I remember flying through the front door after school, clutching the B-plus paper I had written for my first Advanced Placement class, only to have my parents say, ‘Uh, honey. A B-plus is okay, but next time, you’ll work harder and get an A, right?’ I was never good enough at anything. I remember being called dumb, lazy, clumsy. Once I tripped and lost my balance and fell against a chair and broke it. My mother arched her eyebrows and without raising her voice but with her eyes shooting daggers at me, said, ‘What have you done now? Is God punishing you for something?’ I couldn’t think of anything I had done, but somewhere I got the idea that she must be right. And so now, even at my age, when I close my eyes and try to picture God, what I see is a great big Eye who sees everything and knows everything and is just sitting on his haunches waiting for me to slip up and do something wrong so that this huge darkness can pounce on me and obliterate me. I want to believe in God, a good God, I really do, but I am terrified.”

Another conversation. “I’ve struggled to find God all my life, but God is so detached, so far away. My mother died when I was very young. My father did the best that he could, but he was always working so hard, and he just didn’t seem to be there, if you know what I mean. I guess I’ve just figured that God is something like that, not all that interested in me or the world really, not really capable of making any difference in the way that things turn out in life.”

Yet another conversation. “I have some friends who are Christians, not many, but a few. They go to church every week, and they are not nuts, as far as I can tell. In fact, they are really smart! I have great conversations with them about books and politics and science, but when they starting using words like *grace* and *resurrection*, they lose me. I don’t have the slightest idea what they are talking about. I’d never set foot in a church in my life until I was old enough to attend the occasional wedding or funeral. Church feels very “foreign” to me when I go there from time to time, but every now and then I will have these twinges of, what, I don’t know, “transcendence” or “meaning,” I guess you might call them. I’ll be walking on the beach and see a sand crab scuttle across the sand toward the water and feel this sense of incredible wonder. Or I’ll be at my kids’ soccer game and suddenly have a feeling that somehow I am connected to all the other human beings who are there too. I have a feeling that this all has something to do with God, but I just don’t have the language to attach to this whatever it is that I am feeling.”

Perhaps you yourself have heard some of these things. Perhaps you yourself have felt or said some of these things. If you have, then you are, as I am, sister or brother to the Stoics and Epicureans of Paul’s day. And Paul, as we read, had a great deal of room in his heart for those who were held in the clutches of the false gods of Athens. In contrast to their false images of god, he offered them an alternative image of God, an image that was primal, intimate, powerful, and profoundly true when he said, “in God, we live and move and have our being.”

“In God, we live and move and have our being.” Scholars who know about such things say that this alternative image of God comes from a quotation from the sixth-century B.C.E. writer Epimenides of Crete. That is what the scholars say, but I can’t help thinking that this is an image that goes back much further. It is an image which reaches back to the most primal experience that any of us know, a time that precedes whatever conscious and unconscious lessons about God childhood heaps upon us, the only time in our existence when we live and move and have our being entirely within another person.

When Paul says, “in God we live and move and have our being,” he offers us a sonogram of our gracious God who bathes us in the warm, nourishing, protecting amniotic fluid of a divine womb, a God whose very nature is to delight in us, to give birth to life in us in order that we might grow and flourish.

“In God, we live and move and have our being.” It is such a powerful image that when you think about it, it almost takes your breath away. It is such a mystery that it defies expression in words, even words as elegant and well-reasoned as Paul’s. Words simply aren’t enough.

It takes a person, a person who was conceived and born as a human being, a person who was drenched in the womb-like, baptismal waters of the Jordan, a person who healed people in body and in spirit and set them free from false religion and every other thing which bound them and kept them from being the free people God created them to be, a person who in the baptism of his own death and resurrection joins us in every manifestation of our suffering and our sin and our death, frees us from it, and opens the way to eternal life.

It is in Jesus Christ that we live and move and have our being. It is his love which sends the false images of a harsh, critical god, or a distant, uninterested god, scurrying for cover. It is Jesus Christ who puts flesh on an “unknown god” in order that we see him and follow him and live in hope and in joy.

Let us pray.

Gracious God, wherever there is someone here or elsewhere struggling with a feeling that you are a gigantic, judgmental God balancing on your haunches waiting to pounce in punishing judgment, wherever there is someone here or elsewhere feeling empty or abandoned, wherever there is someone here or elsewhere experiencing wonder and meaning beneath the surface of things, make yourself known more fully in your Son Jesus Christ. Make yourself known more fully to each and every one of us, gracing us daily with purpose and a willingness to live in you and serve you in word and deed. Amen.

1. Jana Childers in *Lectionary Homiletics*, Vol. X, No. 6, May 1999, 13.
2. Note on p. 1147, *The New Student Bible, New Revised Standard Version* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1996).