

INTO THE UNKNOWN

Order of Service (bulletin)

<https://www.spiritofhope.ca/news-and-events>

Video (recorded live stream)

<https://www.youtube.com/@spiritofhopeunitedchurch791>

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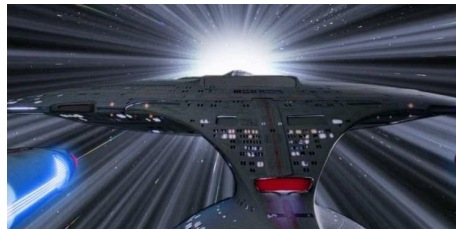
Easter 6

Acts 17:22-31

Then Paul stood up before the council of the Areopagus and delivered this address: “Citizens of Athens, I note that in every respect you are scrupulously religious. As I walked about looking at your shrines, I even discovered an altar inscribed, “To an Unknown God.” Now, what are you worshipping in ignorance I intend to make known to you. For the God who made the world and all that is in it, the Sovereign of heaven and earth, doesn't live in sanctuaries made by humans hands, and isn't served by humans, as if in need of anything. No! God is the One who gives everyone life, breath - everything. From one person, God created all of humankind to inhabit the entire earth, and set the time for each nation to exist and the exact place where each nation should dwell. God did this so that human beings would seek, reach out for, and perhaps find the One who is not really far from any of us - the One in whom we live and move and have our being. As one of your poets has put it, “We too are God's children.” If we are, in fact, children of God, then it's inexcusable to think that the Divine Nature is like an image of gold, silver or stone - an image formed by the art and thought of mortals. God, who overlooked such ignorance in the past, now commands all people everywhere to reform their lives. For a day has been set when the whole world will be judged with justice. And this judge, who is a human being, has already been appointed. God has given proof of all of this by raising this judge from the dead.”

1st Peter 3:13-18

Who is going to harm you if your goal is to do what is right? But even if you do suffer for what is right, count it a blessing. Don't fear what they fear. Don't be afraid, and don't worry. In your hearts, set Jesus apart as holy and sovereign. Should anyone ask you the reason for this hope of yours, be ever ready to reply, speak gently and respectfully. Keep your conscience clear so that, whenever you are defamed, those who slander your way of life in Christ may be shamed. If it should be God's will that you suffer, and it's better to do so for good deeds for evil ones. The reason Christ died for sins once for everyone – the just for the sake of the unjust - was in order to lead you to God. Jesus was put to death in the flesh but was given life in the Spirit.



Our ongoing mission is to boldly go where no one has gone before. Now, that may seem a little out of place given that last Monday was the unofficial Star Wars day. May the fourth be with you. And it might be sacrilege in some corners of the geekdom sphere to use a Star Trek image on the week that Star Wars was highlighted, but I'm a fan of both franchises, so I'm good with it.

Last week, I mentioned that I would be attending a very conservative Christian conference on May the 4th,

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featuring Alberta's premier as the keynote speaker. The force was with me. No one challenged me or was rude to me. No one tried to kick me out. The response was worse. People avoided eye contact. No one wanted to talk to me. So my engagement was limited to my table group. We were organized at tables of eight and in the meal lines and around the various group displays. This wasn't really a case of me going into the unknown because it was pretty much what I expected. Broadview magazine has published an op-ed that I wrote about my experience which people can read if you want to see my reflections on that day. And I did put a few hard copies out on the welcome desk for anyone who maybe doesn't have internet access and you'd still be interested in that.

One thing I will say is that that room of very conservative Christians who are also very conservative politically had an aura of fear. Fear that others are outplaying that version of Christianity politically and socially. Now, they had lots of labels for those who were opposing them. Liberals, the left, Marxists, those Christians who don't really measure up to what faith should be. Theologically, my reflection was that they felt they were losing the soul of the nation and they were afraid.

First Peter, the letter today, invites us not to be afraid, not to worry: instead we are trust in Jesus' holiness, in Jesus sovereignty. That when we're slandered, when we're defamed, don't make that slander true by giving into the fear that encircles it.

Fear is simply a response to a situation with some measure of unknown. I don't know what's going to happen next or what's around the next corner or I don't know which one of the 10 possible outcomes it will be and so I'm afraid. It's not enough to know. And so Peter says, "We can't know it all, but don't be afraid anyway. Don't worry anyway."

The Apostle Paul's visit to Athens is a really interesting passage of scripture to me. In one of Paul's letters, Paul admits that he's not a very dynamic speaker, especially when compared to others like Apollus, who apparently was an amazing orator. But I have to say this speech in Athens... Paul is pretty good. It's not bad. He uses, like Jesus did, local relatable references to draw people in before sharing his message. I hear it as a first century version of Spinal Tap going "hello Cleveland", or Dire Straits in 1992 when I saw them at the then Northlands Coliseum coming out for the Encore wearing Oiler jerseys. Not quite as successfully done by Rascal Flats when I saw them in concert, when they were singing one of their songs and they made reference to Calgary twice.

Paul was basically saying, "I've noticed the many religious monuments that you have here in Athens." And these were probably monuments to the various Greek gods where if someone wanted something from the agricultural god, they could go to the agricultural god's temple or shrine. Paul says, "You're clearly a religious people. That's obvious. And that you even have a shrine to an unknown god. And then Paul says, "Let me tell you what I know about God."

Paul's God is the creator who made the world. Now, the Greeks would have understood this. The Greek creation myth is that an early deity, Chaos: who was a dark formless void, is able to create three other deities. Gaia, Earth; Tartarus, the underworld; and Eros, love. Then Chaos and Gaia are able to birth and shape everything known and unknown in the universe. Now, you think that Paul might have naturally leaned into the Genesis 1 Hebrew creation story, which also starts with the same basic raw materials, a formless, chaotic, dark void, out of which comes everything that we know and experience. But Paul actually makes a reference to the Genesis 2 version. *From one person, all humanity was created.* And that's where he makes that claim that because we are all created from the creation of God, God is the one in whom we live and move and have our

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being. And then Paul does another slight pander to the locals and says, "Your own poets agree. They've written "we too are God's children."

Now Paul's God, he says, is not tied to any physical place. And Athens is full of these temples and shrines to particular gods.

I didn't include the gospel reading that the revised common lectionary suggests for today, but it is another passage about God not being limited to one place. In fact, God is able to be experienced wherever we need God to be. The gospel reading would have been part of Jesus' final speech to his disciples before he was arrested saying that *God is going to send you a helper or an advocate or a comforter*. The Greek word is pericletos: one who is called to one's aid. It's the giving of the Spirit to the disciples. The disciples will have the Spirit living with them, abiding with them, journeying with them even when Jesus is gone.

And then Paul eventually gets to his point. He says, "I see all of your shrines to various gods, even that one you admit you don't know, but my God cannot be fully known in art. My God cannot be adequately represented in gold or silver or stone. And Paul repeats Jesus' first sermon which Jesus got from John the Baptist.. *Turn to God. Know God*. If this is your unknown God, begin to know the unknown. Paul wants to make known his God to the Athenians, insinuating that it all fits already within their religious culture. Paul is trying to make known an unknown god.

For Paul, once that unknown becomes a little bit known, then we move on to what we might need to know next. And it's a constant journey from one edge of unknown to the next edge of unknown and the next edge of unknown. We turn now to this known God. That's what Paul is saying. We are made: always to be incomplete. We are created with the ability to always add to what we have right now. What we know at any moment in time is not the sum total of what we can know. It's never full. There is always an unknown to be discovered. It's that ever widening circle. Here's the circle of what we know and we go to the edge and we realize there's something beyond the edge. So we start to discover and learn that and that becomes a little wider circle and then we realize there's a little bit more that we couldn't see before beyond the new unknown and we just keep going and going and going and we never get to the point where there isn't something new to discover.

Discovery can happen on a very personal level in a private setting. You know, I can picture someone sitting in a library with their own little lamp and a pile of books on the table doing their research on their own. The modern thing would be you're sitting in front of your computer with a really strong internet connection. But I think we've all seen stories of how that personal me-myself learning of the unknown can lead us down self-fulfilling rabbit holes and does nothing to expand us beyond what we're willing to look for. Discovery can be more nuanced and it can be more varied when it's combined with community. Someone else's perspective might point me in an area that I wouldn't naturally think about.

Two weeks ago, I spoke about the United Church Creed, how we claim *We are not alone, God is with us*. And I mentioned that the creed's wording evolved from the 1968 creed in 1980 to move from the third person description to a first person description; becoming **we** are not alone. It draws us right in. It's interaction not only with the holy and the divine that we're not alone; we live in God's world; that God is with us. It's also that we are called to be with each other. There's a significant section of that creed I talked about a couple of weeks ago that we are called to be the church and do a whole bunch of stuff together in community.

My knowns and my unknowns may be similar or different to any of yours. And some of my unknowns can be

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discovered through what you've come to know. We learn from each other. We learn together. Sometimes we discover the unknown at the same time. Am I willing to embrace what you embrace? Are you willing to embrace what I embrace?

A real blessing of community is humbly embracing our common unknowns. Community is where we go into the unknown together.

Humility is the key. The Athenians had that. There was this holiness and sacredness that remained unknown and they were willing to acknowledge that.

My main critique of the corner of Christianity that was in the room with the premier on Monday was that there seemed to be a sense of absolute unwavering certainty: that all is already known and any challenge to that *known* is heresy or defined as outsider or something to be opposed to.

Humility begins with admitting there's unknown in our midst. On Monday, I kept thinking to myself about Micah's call to his people. What does God want from us? Justice, kindness, and humility.

Being humble enough to accept that new discovery might evolve what we already know: that we might come to understand something at a different level or a deeper level or maybe in a completely different way altogether.

And so as it says on those windows, learn, change, and grow together

As community, we venture - with each other - into the unknown.

Amen.

#268VU Bring Many Names

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