

May 10, 2026

Acts 17:16-31

**“The God Who Will Not Remain Unknown!”**

Pilgrim Lutheran Church  
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In the ancient world, few cities could rival the reputation of Athens. For centuries it stood as the intellectual capital of the Mediterranean. Cicero once wrote that Athens was “the inventor of laws, the teacher of morals, and the nurse of liberal arts.”

So when the apostle Paul arrived in Athens, he did not arrive in some cultural backwater. He entered an amazing city that was thoroughly convinced of its own wisdom. The streets were crowded with temples and shrines, images and statues of gods and goddesses - so many, in fact, that a Roman satirist named Petronius, a contemporary of Paul, once observed that it was easier to find a god in Athens than a man.

Luke writes the following in Acts 17:16, “Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.” Paul was not impressed with Athens. He does not marvel at their artistic brilliance or philosophical sophistication. His spirit is provoked. Paul is stirred, distressed, agitated. Paul sees what others do not see. Beneath the learning and beauty lies the truth: the city is drowning in false worship. People are eternally lost because they do not know Jesus.

That observation should give us pause, because Athens is not nearly as distant from us as we might imagine. Athens was considered astonishing - advanced, cultured, and enlightened. And so we are considered to be. And just like them, we are profoundly religious, even when we insist that we are not. Everyone worships something. As Luther writes in the *Large Catechism*: “That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God.” Indeed. Everyone worships something.

Sinful humanity does not stop believing, it simply redirects belief. “The human heart,” as Luther famously said, “is an idol factory.” We fashion gods that will not contradict us, gods that remain silent about repentance, gods that exist to validate our sinful desires. And often we congratulate ourselves on our enlightenment while bowing before statues no less false than those in Athens.

Paul does not ignore what he sees. Luke tells us, “So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.” That is important. Paul does not retreat into a private faith, but he carefully chooses the appropriate time and place to speak and he does not rant or rage. He reasons. He bears witness. Truth presses on when we are strongly tempted to remain forever silent. Paul knew something that we are tempted to forget: if Christ has truly been raised from the dead, then lies cannot be allowed to stand uncontested - not because we delight in confrontation, but because we love our neighbor. Truth withheld is not kindness.

In 2 Corinthians 4:13, the apostle explains his need to say something. He writes: “Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, ‘I believed, and so I spoke,’ we also believe, and so we also speak.” Faith confesses. What Christ places in the heart by grace cannot remain locked behind our teeth. Soon Paul’s preaching attracts attention - not admiration. Epicurean and Stoic philosophers begin to dispute with him. Luke records: “Some said, ‘What does this babbling wish to say?’ Others said, ‘He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities.’ - because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.”

They called the apostle Paul a “babbling,” a seed-picker - someone scavenging scraps of ideas without depth or reputation. But they are curious about him and their curiosity gets the best of them. They bring Paul to the Areopagus, the ancient council that evaluated new teachings, and they ask him to explain himself. Now we come to the heart of the text: “So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: ‘Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, “To the unknown god.” What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.’”

These words are certainly not flattery. That altar to the unknown god is an admission of failure. For all their gods, their wisdom, and their devotion, they still do not know the truth. Their religion is full of gods and highly philosophical, but blind. Paul proceeds to proclaim the true God: “The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.”

What they worship in ignorance, Paul now proclaims in clarity. Paul declares the living God: the Creator of heaven and earth, who does not dwell in temples made by human hands, who is not served as though he needed anything, since he himself gives life and breath and everything else. This God cannot be contained, crafted, or controlled. He is not an accessory to human culture. He is its judge.

Paul tightens the law further. If we are God’s offspring, then it is absurd to think that the divine nature can be reduced to gold or silver or stone - formed by human imagination. Idolatry is not merely mistaken, it is irrational. It reverses the Creator and the creature. And then Paul delivers the sharpest word of all: “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.”

When Paul says that God “commands” all people everywhere to repent, he is deliberately convicting them by the power of the Word connected to the Holy Spirit to end religious relativism and human excuse making. God is the rightful judge of the world, and judgment is coming. Belief in an unknown God isn’t enough to save you. And this command is not spoken apart from the Gospel, for he says: “... he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” Jesus!

This is where everything turns. The resurrection is God’s public declaration that Jesus Christ is both Judge and Savior of the world. The resurrection means that death does not get the final word. It means that idolatry will be exposed. It means repentance is urgent and forgiveness is real. Athens deserved judgment long before Paul arrived. So do we. God owes no society patience. Yet he sends preachers publicly and Christians in every day life who proclaim both law and gospel. Some mock. Some believe. The results belong to God. Our calling is not to calculate outcomes, but to confess Jesus.

What does this look like for us today? Paul did not manufacture opportunities. He spoke where God had already placed him - among people he encountered in the ordinary everyday places of life. In the synagogue. In the marketplace. In conversation. He noticed the idols around him, and when the moment

came, he spoke not angrily, not arrogantly, but faithfully - concerned for souls. The same is true for us. Most of us will never stand before an Areopagus, but every one of us lives among people who trust in things that cannot save. The question is not whether idolatry exists around us, but whether we see it clearly and love our neighbor enough to speak the truth.

That speaking will usually be simple. It may be answering a question. It may be explaining why Jesus matters to us. It may be gently challenging a lie. It may be simply inviting someone to come and hear. Often it will feel costly. Rarely will it be celebrated. But like Paul, our calling is not to control the results. It is to confess Jesus Christ and the forgiveness of sins wherever God has placed us.

And when we fail, when fright or comfort keeps us silent, we do not turn inward for resolve. Rather, we return to Jesus. He forgives. He strengthens. He sends us again. So we speak - not reluctantly, not angrily, but joyfully out of concern for souls - because the God who was once unknown has made himself known in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, to us for the forgiveness of our sins and for the life of the world!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott