

TO AN UNKNOWN GOD

The Adventures of Paul: season one, episode 8--Paul goes to Athens.

Christianity is spreading beyond the Jewish realm. The church is growing and starting to take hold in many distant places.

People are suffering and dying for the cause. John's brother, James, has already been killed.

Peter was the spokesperson, and is maintaining a base in Jerusalem, but the spotlight / the focus is all on Paul. Paul is leading the evangelistic thrust.

Was it only Paul doing the trailblazing or was it more that his camp / his group's influence prevailed in the end, and so his journey was the one Canonized?

Either way, Paul was a monumental figure. He was flamboyant, even abrasive at times.

His zeal, to the point of arrogance, often got him in trouble, yet his bulldozer tactics and enthusiasm seemed unstoppable.

~~~~~

Needless to say, he was not your model Mennonite.

He was the "loud in the land".

We might admire his accomplishments, devotion and zest, but we may have had trouble likely him.

Our theology does have a weak Pauline influence.

~~~~~

With that said and since I don't preach many sermons based on Paul, a "Bible Study" approach may be helpful--with background information and more explanations.

In the previous episode, Paul caused a riot while preaching in Thessalonica and got his host, Jason, in serious trouble.

Paul fled with Silas to nearby Beroea, and resumed his standard pattern...which was, go to the synagogue and try to convert the Jews.

At the synagogue, Paul would basically insult the Jews by arguing about scriptural interpretation. He'd tell them they were wrong and that they needed to believe in Jesus.

It makes sense, when planting a church, to first connect with those who have some sort of similar persuasion.

When I planted a church in Ohio, I was advised to seek out any Mennonites living in the area.

Yet, it's mostly counterproductive to alienate those you're trying to win over, but that was how *bull-in-the-China-shop* Paul was behaving.

~~~~~

There is a good lesson to be learned from this.

Berating and condemning someone is rarely an effective method of persuasion. And, it doesn't have to be blatant to be offensive.

Sometimes, the attitude, the presumption or the tone of voice comes across as degrading and judgmental. People don't respond well when they are not respected.

~~~~~

Paul was slow to catch on.

He did have modest success in Beroea; initially, some were convinced by Paul's arguments. But again, the mood of the town changed, and Paul was told to leaveby those who believed in Jesus. The Christians realized Paul was a magnet for trouble.

Paul was sent far away to the city of Athens.

Timothy and Silas would join him, after a bit.

~~~~~

And, this is the point where our text begins.

At first, Paul quietly kept a low profile as he waited for them.

But, the strange culture and all the idols everywhere got to him.

He couldn't contain himself, so as usual, he headed to the local synagogue to vent.

Apparently, that wasn't satisfying enough, so he went to the Agora / the local market place where it is common to debate issues.

The Agora / the market place was much like speakers' corner in Hyde Park, London.

If you've never been there, it's a like a courtyard where people come to proclaim and debate their opinions.

I was 17 years old when I was there at "speaker's corner."

I heard all kinds of strange things. Some people were not speaking kindly about Christianity, and like Paul, I felt I had to set them straight.

That wouldn't be a problem. I was 17, and I knew all the answers.

Boy,..... was I in for a rude awakening.

I was chewed up and spit out. I was so badly mauled that one kind, older gentlemen patted me on the shoulder as I was leaving and whispered to me, "Don't feel badly. You're young; come back, in a few years, when you've learned more."

I think.....he was being kind to me?

~~~~~

Similarly, Paul did not fare well in his debates

The Stoic and Epicurus philosophers called him a babbler, and couldn't make sense of his foreign ideas and logic.

Nevertheless, they were curious about his strange assertions, and took him to the Areopagus. They were curious enough that they wanted to hear more of this new and strange religion that Paul was proposing.

The Areopagus was a judicial assembly. They were the ones who gave permission for "official" public lectures.

Paul was about to audition to see if he could give a formal lecture.

~~~~~

Instead of insulting his hosts, Paul used an entirely different approach. It seems that he was getting wiser. Perhaps, God opened his mind and gave him a better understanding on how to communicate with those who have different views.

~~~~~

The Paul who stood up at the judicial assembly was a changed Paul.

The old Paul used to incite riots with his condescending remarks.

This "new and improved Paul" began his presentation by complimenting the Athenians. He demonstrated respect for them when he commended them on being religious because they had so many idols to their gods all over the place.

Paul overcame the very thing that so greatly irritated him, and turned it into a flattering remark. He even quoted one of their Greek poets, Epimenides.

Kindness, sensitivity and respect are good attributes to begin a conversation... that has the potential to be divisive.

Prince Charles' slip about comparing Putin's rhetoric to Hitler's is not conducive to healing or positive results.

Just as President Bush labelling three countries as part of an "Axis of evil" did not encourage reconciliation.

Prejudice, stereotyping and devaluing another's opinion is not the way to have positive communication or relationships.

~~~~~

In contrast, affirming someone's values and finding points of common interest is the path of peacemaking.

~~~~~

Paul's new approach worked; they were engaged in listening to him.

Paul then found an open door to present his theology / to introduce the one God to them.

He noted that they had an altar to an unknown god. The Greeks were covering their bases / they were playing it safe: they didn't want to insult a god they hadn't labelled. It was a "just in case" altar.

This is most interesting. The Athenians were wise enough to honour doubt and ignorance.

Yet,..... maybe this isn't so unusual?

I wonder if we also have our altars to doubt and ignorance, too? ???

Perhaps, we have our sacred places where God is not named?

And, it is likely a very tender and private place, too. ???

~~~~~

To that void / to that emptiness, Paul attempted to fill it with the God of creation / the God of hope and grace / the God of Jesus Christ.

He asked them to consider their unknown god to be Yahweh -- the One God / the eternal God / the true God who can satisfy that unfulfilled yearning.

Paul told them that his God / the One God is not formed by humans.  
God is not constructed by mortals.  
God is not a projection / an overlay of our desires and expectations.  
God is not subject to human fixations and control, but instead this One true God demands that humans submit and change in order to conform to the divine.

~~~~~  
The Athenians were following every word Paul was saying, yet many stumbled when Paul mentioned the resurrection from death.
Apparently, life after death was beyond their reach.

~~~~~  
Our text ended at verse 31. I'm not sure why.

The remaining three verses in the chapter mention the Athenian's skepticism over the resurrection, but it does note that they wanted to hear more from Paul. I suppose Paul was given permission to publically speak. We aren't told about that.

Still, only a few chose to believe / only a few became believers.

So, it seems this wonderful open door to Athens didn't yield great results,.....but I guess that all depends on how we measure success.

In verse 34, Luke felt it was important enough to list two new believers by name.  
Of the small group who responded positively to Paul's presentation, two were named.  
Dionysius who was one of the judges on the review board, and a woman named Damaris.

We don't know who Damaris is, but I imagine she was / became a significant person.

Dionysius later became the first Bishop of Athens.

So, it turns out that Paul's gentle injection / thoughtful invitation was extremely successful.

~~~~~  
We just don't know how things will turn out.
We just can't imagine what God will do when God takes the place of the unknown god.

~~~~~  
And,.....that notion got me thinking.

What if you and I are like Athens.

I wonder, what do our religious avenues look like?

What idols / what images for God line our tidy boulevards of values and principles.

Do we have an idol to the God who is silent until petitioned?

Do we have an idol to the God who defends our country from our enemies?

Do the idols for our God look a lot like ourselves?

Do we have an idol to the God who rewards us for good behaviour?

And, what about the tribute to the God who keeps promises even when we don't?

Does our God have a smile or is our God mean and full of wrath?

And, is there an idol to the God who keeps track of all our sins.

~~~~~

In other words,.....how much of our understanding of God is projection / is our own creation based on what we want and need?

~~~~~

In addition, what about that altar at the dark end of our boulevard?

What do we do with that altar that harbours our doubts and fears?

Is there a place, a personally sacred place where God is unknown.

~~~~~

An unresolved place always yearns to be fulfilled / to be whole.

~~~~~

So, what would happen if we were to invite God into our altar / our place that is unknown to God?

No doubt, we would have to change.

But, if we did.....what would happen?      I wonder?

I wonder about the unknown god.