

Not Too Far

Acts 17

Introduction

- The Perfect Storm
 - A series of negative events all converging at one time
 - Current storm of Pandemic, Social Unrest, Election
 - Also could be a series of ideologies
 - Christianity
 - Islam
 - Secularism
 - Self-interests- Like what to have for dinner
 - Chicken or Steak (in which case I would say, “Why not both?!”)
 - Eating in or Eating out
 - Wendy’s or Redwood
- Biblical Perfect Storms
 - Noah and the Flood
 - Exodus
 - Daniel and Babylon
 - Jesus’ Birth
 - Jesus’ Death
 - *Notice that in each of these perfect storms God moved to bring about redemption*
 - *And yet, in each storm God’s people had to respond in faith*
- Current Sermon Series *Seeking God*
 - Perfect Storms force us to seek God
 - We might consider the story of Jesus and the disciples on the rough seas
 - Jesus falls asleep in the midst of the storm
 - The disciples scramble in fear to awake Jesus of the impending danger
 - Jesus calms the storms- “you of little faith”.
 - The Promise in the midst of the perfect storms is similar to what we find in the Promise of Prayer- “If you seek God, you will find Him”
- Today’s Passage **Acts17**
 - There is a perfect storm
 - Paul on a missionary journey through the cities of Macedonia toward Athens
 - Along his journey he encounters both Jews and Greeks
 - Completely different ideologies
 - Jews had the Hebrew Scriptures (O.T.)

- Greeks had their philosophers- in which people would sit out in the public square and debate philosophies in a desire to grow closer to the truth of life
- All the while Paul is trying to reveal to them the evidence that Jesus is the Messiah- God in human flesh
- So when Paul and his band of Jesus followers come through town with a different ideology it creates a stir
- Acts 17:6-7 (ESV), “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, they are acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.”
- Despite the chaos of the storm, Paul arrives in Athens and his spirit is burdened for the people because he saw a city full of idols (ref. Acts 17:16)
 - Relate to us today
 - Perfect Storm- Pandemic, Social Unrest, Election
 - Our world (including many Christians unfortunately) are scattering around on the ship in the midst of this storm about to lose it like the disciples that were on the ship with Jesus
 - The Storm (noise)
 - To wear a mask or not
 - Black Lives Matter or Blue Lives Matter
 - Trump or Biden
 - In the midst of the storm we have lost the ability to hear the voice of God (including Christians)
 - When our answers become divisive, arrogant, boastful or violent we have not only lost our ability to listen, but our witness for Jesus Christ.
 - What happens through the Apostle Paul in Acts 17 is no different than what we find when Jesus spoke into the storm with his disciples- it seemed to stop everything and grab the attention of the crowds and challenge them to rethink their positions
 - The heart of Paul’s message Acts 17:26-27 (ESV), “And he (God) made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that *they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us.*”
 - Can you hear The Promise of Prayer in Paul’s words?
 - In every moment of our lives, but especially in the midsts of storms- we must seek God
 - In God we find our way which calms the storms, provides clarity and enables us to be the witness that God has called each of us to be.
 - Here is what I want us to capture today

- Notice that in each Biblical perfect storm God moved to bring about redemption
- And yet, in each storm God's people had to respond in faith- specifically by seeking God through prayer.

Do We Know the God We Serve?

- Acts 17:22-23a (ESV), "So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: 'Men of Athens, I receive 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."'"
- Very religious
 - Revealed that they practiced several disciplines, engaged in thought provoking conversations and even sought a deeper purpose in life- and yet still did not know the god they served!
 - The Wisdom of Prayer- more than a *religious exercise*, but provides substance to our lives- mainly that we converse with God!
 - While we may feel as though we don't connect with the "Men of Athens" the truth is our faith at times may resemble the Athenians more than we would like to admit!
 - This is why this sermon series is so important and also why we should examine our faith during the Perfect Storm we are currently experiencing.
- Altar to unknown god
 - When we think of idols, we probably think of statues, which I'm assuming that the majority of you don't have sitting in your home.
 - However, our idols may not be as easy to identify as what Paul found in Athens
 - Political Party over faith
 - Self Interest over Love of others
 - Fear, Anger, Anxiety
 - *When any of these drive our life over and above our faith it reveals that we really don't know the God we claim to serve!*
- The Invitation of Prayer- to know and serve God
 - When we pray we lay before God all the idols.
 - We quiet our hearts and minds to hear the voice of God
 - We draw closer to God and His will for our lives
- Do you have any "unknown gods" in your life right now?
 - What is driving your life at this very moment?
 - Whatever is driving your life is your god.

There's No Need to Create Our Own gods

- Conversation earlier this week with Bonnie (this is not being critical of Bonnie!)
 - Preparing to decorate for Fall
 - “Should we take down the cross?”
 - The theologian in me said “When should we ever take down the cross?!!!
 - Part of us leaving it up through the summer is that when we had to quarantine in the spring it was right before Easter, so one of the last images that we had in the church was the cross and yet it stood as a symbol of hope and God’s enduring presence when we returned in June.
 - BUT, after a while, how many of us just got used to the cross being there and forget about it?
 - It’s not a judgement against our faith- the point is simply that the cross in some ways has been made an idol of worship in our faith rather than a symbolic reminder to seek the God of the cross.
- Acts 17:24-25 (ESV), “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.”
 - The thing about the cross is that it points to the humanity and the divinity of Jesus Christ
 - It reminds us that Jesus is fully human-suffered, beaten, died- which is the part we can all identify with
 - It reminds us that despite it all, Jesus overcame it all because He is God. And he came to this earth to come near to us in the midst of our sin so that we could know God as our Savior!
 - Anytime that we turn to fear, anxiety, anger, dissension, pride- we are choosing to find comfort and affirmation from human-made gods rather than the God of the cross!
 - I’m preaching to you as much as I am my faith!
 - John Stark, *The Possibility of Prayer: Finding Stillness With God In A Restless World*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2020. pg. 182.
 - “We’ve formed reactionary hearts rather than hearts of rest, driven by something deeper and more eternal than the moment by moment changes in our lives. It’s hard to love others deeply with reactionary hearts. It’s difficult to experience gratitude when we live merely off instinct and impulse. The practice of prayer breaks the cycle of instinct and impulse and teaches us to pay attention to how God has been lovingly present with us all along and how our friends and family need our love and presence.”
 - There’s no need for us to create our own gods. Instead, we need to seek God through prayer!

Time to Know God More Than Ever

- Acts 17:30-31 (ESV), “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because 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.”
- Whatever excuse that we may have for not spending time with God and growing in our faith, we need to give it up.
- *Our Daily Bread*
- The Perfect Storm is a wake up call to pray, to know God and to serve God.
- Judgement will not be whether your church was open or not- the judgement will be whether you sought the God of the Cross or the human-made gods.
- God has revealed his truth. It is our responsibility to respond to the Truth
- It is time that we throw away the gods and the excuses, because it is time to know God now more than ever!

Don't Finish Where You Began

- Acts 17:32-34 (ESV), “Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’ So Paul went out from their midst. But some men and a woman joined him and believed.”
- The thing about God’s Truth whether it was Jesus in the boat with his disciples or Paul here in Athens is that God’s Truth stops the noise and requires a response.
- Some mocked the message, but others responded in faith
- When we pray, we engage the truth of God if we truly seek Him
- We should not finish a prayer where we began
- When we encounter the Living God our faith should be transformed

Conclusion

- Acts 17:26b-27 (ESV), “having determined allowed periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us.”
- Do you know the God you serve?
- There’s no need to create your own gods
- This is the time to know the God of the Cross
- Perfect Storms are an opportunity for God to reveal His Redemption
- In order for us to experience God’s peace in the midst of those storms we must exercise our faith by seeking Him through prayer.