

Meditation – September 6, 2020

Exodus 1:8-22 (2:1-10)

On the screen you will see a picture of one of the oldest **wooden** buildings in the world, it was built in 670. The beautiful lines of the five story pagoda, is located in Nara Japan. This pagoda is part of the Buddhist temple complex. These buildings have survived fires, typhoons, earthquakes, wars, and the eroding power of time. The **wooden** buildings of this temple complex are old; the curve of the roof and the **wooden** carvings remind people of the trade routes that connected Japan with ancient Greece - these buildings amaze and dazzle visitors, while providing a place for quiet contemplation for them.

The age of the **wooden** buildings of the Horyuji Temple do not compare to the buildings that other cultures have built using stone as the foundation for the construction.

This temple complex is not the only building that people would want to add to their bucket list of places to visit: whether they are man-made like the pyramids of Egypt to those in Central America; from the ruins of old Zimbabwe to Angkor Wat in Cambodia; from the temple in Jerusalem to the grand cathedrals of Europe or some of the natural occurring places; whether it's the blue water of Moraine Lake in Banff or the flamingos of Lake Nakura in Kenya; from the water cascading in South America over Angel Falls or Victoria Falls in Africa; from the natural occurring rock formation in Norway called Pulpit Rock or the Areopagus in Athens. These are places people place on bucket lists to visit and wonder.

Which brings me to Paul and one location that was on his bucket list, the Areopagus in Athens. Now, in classical times, the Areopagus was the location of a court, that tried cases of deliberate homicide, wounding and religious matters, as well as cases involving arson or olive trees. Now I know that Paul had no intention of taking anyone to this court over any olive tree, because it was here that Paul wanted to encounter the Athenians; he didn't want to condemn anyone, he wanted to evangelize them.

As any good teacher, Paul begins with a complement: by telling the Athenians that they are an extremely religious people. And indeed, they are religious, with all their alters to all the gods they have begged, borrowed, and stolen from their many neighbours. So, instead of blasting the Athenians for worshipping practically anything that moves, Paul searches for and finds an angle that can help him reach them with the truth: "As I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'an unknown god.' what therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (v.23).

As genuine enthusiasts of knowledge, the wise people gathered there could hardly resist the invitation to discover more. Paul then artfully claims that this is the altar to the creator of all that exists; therefore, the only true God. He even flatters the Athenians by referring to their own poets who have spoken of such a God, "for we too are his offspring" (v.28). Paul is not an arrogant missionary, toppling idols and shattering taboos. Here in Athens he seeks to titillate, not infuriate. His genius is annoying and then offering these seekers what they are looking for. But greater than his genius is his empathy. He, too, was once prospecting for the treasure that lay beneath his very nose. He respects their blindness and rejoices in the opportunity he has to help them to see.

Evangelism is not only shunned by most of our tribe today because of our natural and politically correct shyness – it is a neglected ministry because we have a hard time relating to people who do not look to the church for answers. Evangelism is not wasted effort; it can breathe new life into a stagnant ministry and it is a faithful thing to do. But the truth is, that any church is only attractive to people who are looking for a church. There is no special

gravitational pull that a church can exert to draw people in, who are out of that orbit, looking everywhere else.

These people, however, are not hard to find. They are hanging out on the Areopagus, checking out all the other gods and inventing new ones if they can't find the one, they are looking for. These 'searchers' are in our schools, in our offices, on the soccer fields (just look to the west, the next time you drive on Kensington Ave. in Burnaby), at the mall, even in our homes – they are looking everywhere but the church for the answer to the big question: Who the heck is this unknown god? Programs won't reach them. Strategies will startle them. Falsely making friends with them to gain their trust will just creep them out. No. If we want to reach out to them, we need to follow that master evangelist Paul as he works his stuff in the least hospitable place for Christianity in the old world, Athens. Fortunately, Paul's routine is fairly simple to diagram. Unfortunately, it takes some serious chops to pull it off.

First, we must get in touch with our inner seeker, if we are ever to reach the seekers around us. The problem with most Christians today, is that they sing this line from Amazing Grace too loudly, *I once was lost but now I'm found*. Seekers are more likely to sing in a thready voice, *I once was found but now I'm lost*. If we want to meet them, we need to remember what it felt like to be lost. That shouldn't be too hard since for most of us it is a daily occurrence! Being lost doesn't necessarily mean you are going to join, the author, John Newton, in the slave trade. For Paul, all he had to do was look back to that day when the men who stoned Stephen laid their cloaks and blame at his feet to recall what it means to be lost. I only have think back to this morning; I was walking the seawall, when I yelled a derogatory comment at the bicyclist riding the walking path. Rack your brains to find one time where you had absolutely no answers, no direction, no strength, or no hope. That is where you will meet and understand your neighbour.

Now, we are in a place to know what won't reach us with the healing words of life. And what will. What won't reach us is judgment. We are looking for someone we can trust enough to accept their judgement and forgiveness, direction and healing. What won't reach us are gimmicks. I'm thinking of a recent BMO tv ad, that had a man trying to put his wallet into his tight pants and he falls over. Did the ad work? No, it didn't register with me!

What will reach our ears? Let's bypass the ears and go for the eyes. Is he a good neighbour? Is she a considerate boss? Is he a helpful colleague? Does her creed have any effect on the way she shows her face to the world? I am certain that people who love their neighbours with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength can evangelize the whole world. People will be asking them, "Where do you get that love?"

Finally, Paul addresses the unbeliever's greatest need: to have something hopeful to believe in. Paul offers them a view of the future where the formerly "unknown god" will be known, will bring the world to a conclusion of God's own good choosing, and that they can be part of that plan. What's more, the proof that the horizon looks rosy, is that God's own Son died and rose as evidence.

Does Paul make a sale? We should not be so impatient. Here is Paul's and our hope in this encounter: "Some scuffed; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this'" (v.32). That's how the lost get found.