

## WHO IS GOD?

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Grace Church in New York  
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St. Paul declared: *“The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.”* (Acts 17:24-25)

Not long ago the Waring family decided to have another go with tropical fish. James had acquired a small tank for his college dorm room and kept a beta fish in it. When he brought it home for Christmas break we all enjoyed it so much that we thought having one of our own might be just the way to jumpstart the fun into our otherwise dull evenings. So we set up a 2.5 gallon tank and brought home from the pet store not a beta fish – because they are hateful, angry creatures (like the fish version of Chihuahua) – but three happy little neon tetras. Also, to increase the joy we added two snails into the mix of our new ecosystem.

The thing about snails is that it’s often hard to tell whether they are alive or dead. They will hibernate for days at a time without moving at all. Thus it was this week with one of our snails. Even when we reached a kitchen utensil into the tank and poked it around, we could detect no sign of life. The problem was, if the snail had really died, it would be decomposing and poisoning the water for the other fish. So I went to my computer in search for a reliable method to test the state of an aquarium snail. I was going to type in, “Is my snail dead?” but I only reached the “s” of the word snail when the whole question appeared. Apparently, lots of people are asking the same thing about their snails.

What I learned is a foolproof way to determine whether your snail is alive or dead. You take it out of the tank, hold it right up to your nose, and smell it. If it smells awful, it’s dead. If it smells just a little fishy, it’s fine. The good news for our snail: it did not smell bad so back into the tank it went. Now it’s moving around again. It lives. It is risen. Even better news for the snail: you could search every page of the ECW cookbook and not find a single recipe for escargot.

The saga of our snail brings me to today’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles. At one point in his missionary travels St. Paul had a few free days to enjoy in the city of Athens while he waited for Silas and Timothy to join him. What would he do? Well, if you read the passage just prior to what we heard today, at first it appears that Paul played the tourist. He poked around the city and took in the Acropolis and other architectural wonders. But eventually something began to gall him. Everywhere he looked was a glorious temple to yet another god from the pantheon of Greek mythology. It was said in those days that Athens was so full of idols that it was easier to meet a god than it was a person. Today we look at the ruins of these temples as interesting examples of architecture and culture. But Paul saw them in full use, with people bowing down and offering sacrifices to statues, praying to gold, silver, and stone idols that they had made with their own hands.

The sight sickened Paul. At every idol his nose detected the aroma of decay. So what he did was argue with anyone who would give him a hearing: devout Jews in the synagogues, pagans in the marketplace, and even the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who came out to investigate the newly arrived “babbler” of “foreign divinities,” as they called him. Apparently the philosophers were intrigued by what they heard, so they invited Paul to come back with them and address the Areopagus. In the time of Paul, the Areopagus, or Mars Hill, was a place as well as a council of city leaders and thinkers. What they believed specifically about God is a topic too large for our purposes today. In a nutshell, it is unlikely that any of them took seriously the gods and goddesses of Mt. Olympus. The

Epicureans were essentially deists. If the gods existed at all they were far away, somewhere over the rainbow, and had nothing to do with human affairs. The Stoics were pantheists who believed that God and nature were inseparable. The creation was merely an extension of God, not a different thing altogether. God wasn't over the rainbow, God was the rainbow. God was the stars, the earth, the rock, the blueberry. God was everything.

In any case, Paul proved himself adept at conversing with all the belief systems at the same time. What we heard today is most likely a digest of a much longer address. He opened by talking about his poking around the city, and said that of all the objects of worship and temples he saw, only one of them met the test of life. The rest were dead. Paul had found an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god." He went on to say, "*What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.*" From there Paul spoke of the God who made the world but is not the world, who needs nothing from his creatures but gives everything to them, including life and breath. Where the philosophers were right he affirmed them. Where they were in error he challenged them. What is more, Paul declared that God's leniency with their ignorance was coming to an end. God wants to be known, and therefore raised Jesus from the dead to catch the world's attention. I recently read a definition of God that caught my attention: *God is whoever raised Jesus from the dead, having before raised Israel from Egypt.*<sup>1</sup> (When life gets back to normal, try out this definition of God on your unsaved loved ones at your next family gathering after they've had a few too many. Show them that you haven't wasted your time in quarantine. Now you have a ready defense for the hope that is in you!) This is the God Paul proclaimed to the Areopagus. If we read just beyond today's passage we learn the effect that Paul's preaching had on the philosophers: some sneered, some wanted to hear more later on, and some went with him.

Even still, Paul's audacity in preaching to the Athenian philosophers might raise questions in your mind, if not objections. First we might wonder about the God he proclaimed. Is the God of Israel really capable of jealousy? In other words, does God turn a deaf ear to the sincere Athenian praying to Zeus, yet welcome the petitions of those calling out to Yahweh? Does it actually anger God when religions and cultures settle for ideas that are not true to the divine nature? I mean, who did Paul think he was: going into Athens full of judgment, even to the point of declaring their idols to be empty and dead? Speaking of judgment, Paul promised an immanent day when the risen Jesus will judge the world in righteousness. To many it seems that we are no closer to such a day now than Paul was then. They wonder what Paul would have thought had he known we'd still be waiting in the year 2020? So much for the urgency of his call to repentance. Therefore, say the cynics, all of religion is just a matter of arguing over whose imaginary friend is bigger and better than whose. Tolerance and cultural appreciation are the better way to go. Paul should have just enjoyed touring Athens, taking in the art and architecture, and keeping his mouth shut.

What was driving the urgency of Paul's message? Why was he insistent that they repent of their idolatry, be those idols things made with hands or ideas cooked up in their minds? The answer is that we tend to become what we worship. I recall something I read by one of my predecessors, Walter Russell Bowie, who was the Rector of Grace Church from 1923 to 1939. Earlier in his ministry, during World War One, Bowie had taken a leave from his parish in Richmond, VA, to be a Red Cross chaplain at a field hospital in France. He had heard the message that this would be "the war to end all wars," and "the war to make the world safe for democracy." He wanted to do his part, as did many of his generation. But once there the death and destruction he witnessed caused him to conclude that war brought only that: death and destruction. He determined that never again would he speak a positive word about war. It was a dead, death-dealing philosophy.

In a sermon<sup>2</sup> he preached from this pulpit in 1932, Bowie took aim at a monument here in New York City: the great statue of General William Tecumseh Sherman near the Plaza Hotel. First, he praised the artistic merits of the piece by the sculptor, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, calling it "one of the most superb things on this continent." But then he went on to condemn what the statue

symbolized. It “illustrates the false enslavement of our imagination from which we must be delivered,” he said. Bowie thought that the statue, depicting an angel of God leading Sherman on his march to the sea, glorified war, when Sherman himself had said, “War is hell.” He was concerned that if we glorify war we become warriors. In other words, we become what we worship.

My point here is not to debate war and peace and monuments in New York City. Rather it is to illustrate a truth about worship and human nature. We do what we do because we worship what and whom we worship. We become what we worship. What upset Bowie about the statue of Sherman is why Paul felt the urgency to rail against the Athenian idols. The shell might be beautiful, but inside is death and decay. Idols do not deliver the light and life that God wants to share with all people. You heard that right: far from being content to remain unknown, far from leaving us to stumble around in the darkness, God wants to share his divine life with all people, in all times and in all places. The author of today’s Epistle, 1<sup>st</sup> Peter (3:13-22), even alludes to Christ’s going to the spirits of those from times long past, so that they too could be brought to God. But when we worship what is not God – when our greatest passion is for something that is not God – we veer from our created destiny, which is to live completely into the image of God. What does Jesus have to do with all this? He is the image of the invisible God. We worship him because we believe that in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. We worship Jesus in order to grow into the full stature of Christ. As Jesus himself said to his disciples, *“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth.”*

At the Areopagus, St. Paul challenged all of his listeners to apply the test of life to their idols and philosophies. His challenge would be the same for us. It is to examine our lives for those things, those ideas, those passions that we idolize, that we love more than God. You know the usual suspects: money, lifestyle, prestige. But the sad truth is, we can make an idol out of anything. Even good and potentially holy causes can begin to compete for first place in our lives, and deafen our ears to the one who stands at the door and knocks. Thus the urgent call to answer the door, repent of our idols, and get the worship right. When we crown Jesus with all renown, then Spirit of truth comes in to merge with our spirits. Then we might have life, and have it abundantly. C.S. Lewis wrote this about the surprising experience of encountering the true and living God:

You have had a shock like that before, in connection with smaller matters – when the line pulls at your hand, when something breathes beside you in the darkness. So here; the shock comes at the precise moment when the thrill of life is communicated to us along the clue we have been following. It is always shocking to meet life where we thought we were alone. “Look out!” we cry, “it’s alive.” ... There comes a moment when the children who have been playing at burglars hush suddenly: was that a real footstep in the hall? There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found Him? We never meant it to come to that! Worse still, supposing He had found us?<sup>3</sup>

St. Paul declared to the Athenians that it really has come to that. *“The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth ... who gives to all mortals life and breath and all things,”* – this God has indeed found us. Remember: God is whoever raised Jesus from the dead, having before raised Israel from Egypt. This is the hope within us. This I proclaim to you.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology: The Triune God*. Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Russell Bowie, “Our Changing Conception of War,” May 29, 1932.

<sup>3</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Miracles*. Macmillan, 1965, p. 96-97.