

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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May 21, 2017
6th Sunday of Easter
Acts 17:22-31

Finding God in the "Thin Places"

Today is the 6th Sunday in our Easter season of celebration. Ever since Easter Sunday on April 16 this year, we have been celebrating the good news of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. We've taken a closer look at a number of the Bible stories that record various appearances of Jesus after the resurrection. Most of these have been stories of Jesus appearing to his disciples—those who were closest to Jesus and knew him best.

Today, our focus moves farther into the story and chronology of the New Testament. One disciple of Jesus who was not among those who accompanied Jesus over the course of his 3-year ministry but who nevertheless recounts his being called directly by Jesus is a man named Paul. Apart from Jesus himself, Paul is the most oft-quoted and referenced person from all of the New Testament scriptures. One of the reasons Paul is so well known is due to his prolific writing that we have preserved in the pages of the letters that he penned to various Christian churches that he was instrumental in starting across the Roman empire. The letters are known by the names of the people and places to which he sent them—Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, to name some. Perhaps there are some among us this morning who learned the names of the books of the Bible will recognize some of these.

Without going into Paul's biography, there are just a couple of things I want to mention about him this morning. First, Paul is a convert to Christianity. Now, of course, every first-century Christian was a convert. But in Paul's case, he was converting from being a very active Jew. When we first encounter him in the New Testament narrative, he is a devout Jewish man named Saul who was intent on actively opposing the development of this new and emerging Christian religion. He made it his purpose to persecute those who were spreading the news of this man Jesus who had died at the hands of the Romans and who was raised from the dead by God. That all changed when one day on the road to Damascus, Saul encountered the presence of the risen Jesus who dramatically and effectively called Saul from his old life as a persecutor of Christians to a new life as not simply a follower of Jesus but an evangelist for spreading this amazing good news. So dramatic was this conversion of Saul that by the power of God his name was changed to Paul.

So the first thing to say about Paul today is that he is a religious convert to the Christian faith. And what is sometimes said about converts? Have you heard the expression, "There's nothing worse than a convert?" There's nothing worse than a convert because in the experience of having one's mind and perspective changed—so much so that there is a total and complete change—is overwhelming and powerful. And the convert, having seen the light, so to speak, feels compelled to see to it that others also see that same light and become converts themselves. In a nutshell, Paul's conversion was so dramatic that his level of motivation to share this with others is almost off the charts!

The second thing to say about Paul is that not only did he start out as a Jew, he was also a Roman citizen. Now, at face value this may not sound too significant in our day. But in the context of the first century, this was a really big deal. As a Roman citizen, Paul had a legal status that gave him access and standing to a larger segment of the culture. His Roman identity would enable him to speak and be heard by a larger number of people in a larger number of settings.

So Paul's Jewish background and training, as well as his upbringing as a Roman citizen equipped him in a powerful way to be able to speak and witness and influence huge numbers of people in a large variety of settings.

With this background on these 2 particular aspects of Paul, we can gain some insight into what is happening in this speech that Paul delivered in Athens that we read about in the book of Acts. It is a dramatic setting for this speech. The Areopagus was a prominent rock outcropping on a hill in the city of Athens. Speaking from this hill was a way of speaking with authority from an elevated position—somewhat akin to Jesus' sermon on the mount.

In this address, Paul speaks to the citizens of Athens a message that challenges their seeking to find holiness or meaning in things and items and ideas that are merely idols in the face of the one true God.

The city of Athens was a very diverse and cosmopolitan city filled with an educated and sophisticated populace. There were many ideas, institutions, religions and ideologies competing for the Athenians' attention and devotion. Paul had a lot of nerve to enter this place with courage and conviction to challenge the citizens by inviting them to know and come to accept the good news of Jesus and the one true God of the universe. Because of Paul's Roman citizenship he was able to speak in a way that would be heard by the Athenians. And because he was a convert he had the fire in his belly to spread this good news in this challenging place.

Paul was brilliantly adaptive in being able to shape his teaching and preaching in ways that would be effectively heard in whatever context he was ministering.

Many philosophers, social scientists and theologians have made the comparison of the Roman Empire of the first century to the our American context of the late 20th century and the early 21st century. In both situations, the culture has become extremely diverse with many ideas and ideologies competing for attention and devotion.

In our cultural context today, there are many potential idols that are competing for our attention and devotion—idols such as:

- consumerism which makes the false promise that if only we buy the latest and greatest whatever, we will find meaning and happiness, only to find that to be fleeting for as soon as we have that latest and greatest, it is supplanted by the new and even more improved latest and greatest. The idol of consumerism is vicious and addicting.
- Or how about technology itself becoming an idol? In this case we put all of our hopes in the promises that a technological answer will be found for each and every problem we face. While technology is indeed a powerful potential piece of the puzzle, it can trick us into a laziness or slovenliness that prevents us from being responsible stewards of what we have.
- We can also make idols of military power, of sex and an obsession with youth.

Like Paul in front of the Areopagus in Athens, we as God's people today are called to stand up to those idols that draw our attention away from devotion to God and to proclaim the good news of God's love for us in Jesus.

I'd like to suggest this morning that among the attributes that we bring to this task, there are 2 in particular that we possess in this congregation, in our day in this place, that are to be used in this important task.

The first is that we are both Christians and we are residents of this special place. Yes, Christians foremost who have experienced and who know of the love of God in Jesus. And we are fellow residents with all those around us who have not yet discovered or experienced this love of God in Jesus. You and I, we enjoy and participate in many of the activities and commitments of this fastest growing town of its size in the country. We like it as much as the next person that Bozeman is a top-notch latte town with abundant cultural, artistic, social and recreational activities.

It is in the heart of the downtown of this dramatically dynamic town that we stand at the corner of South Willson and West Babcock. We are the one church that is literally within what the city considers to be the historic downtown core. The ministry that we offer here is critically important. The Sunday school classes that we offer here critically important. The worship that we offer here on this corner is critically important. Thanks be to God for the gift of this location!

The second attribute that we bring to this proclamation of this good news is one that we can claim as uniquely special—our critically important Christian witness that we broadcast and proclaim emanating from our Rockhaven Camp and Retreat Center in one of the most heavily traveled tourist, leisure and recreation corridors in all of the northern Rocky Mountains. What an amazing attribute it is that we are the only Christian camp on US Highway 191 between Bozeman and Yellowstone National Park. Rockhaven is an asset that is truly impossible to put a financial value to. We have been entrusted with this spectacular piece of God's creation where literally hundreds of lives of young people as well as some older are changed for the better year after year after year. Thanks be to God for this special place.

Perhaps you have heard the phrase "thin place" before. A thin place is where the demarcation between heaven and earth is less obvious. Thin places are those special places where one experiences a foretaste of the heavenly realm of God. I'd like to suggest that we are the stewards of 2 thin places where God might more easily be found for some people today. Both of them are invaluable and are ours to share as widely as we can.

The first one is pretty obvious in the 10 acres on the Gallatin River at the base of Sheep Rock—the place we know as Rockhaven. The second is this very place in which we are gathered at this moment. This sacred worship space having been here since 1908 is becoming increasingly a place of sacred respite and encounter with the holy in this vibrant and vivacious downtown corridor.

We are finding God in the thin places of Rockhaven Camp in the Gallatin Canyon, and in the sanctuary of First Presbyterian Church at Willson and Babcock. It is your calling and my calling to extend the invitation to come and find God in these sacred thin places.