

Sermon Text – Sunday, May 10, 2026 – Pastor Paula Kraus

**1st Reading: 1 Peter 3:13-22; 2nd Reading: John 14:15-21
Scripture: Acts 17:22-31 “Just in Case”**

Having a shrine to an “unknown god” is a little like placing a field bet in horse racing or boxing your pick three numbers in the Lottery – I used to do both when I lived in Louisville. I am only reminded of that because the first Saturday in May was Derby Day and I lived just a few blocks from the Downs. A field bet in horse racing is a bet that covers all the horses in a race. It is a type of multiple bets where the punter bets on every horse in a race to win. If any of the horses chosen win, then the punter will collect the winnings. The odds are usually lower than betting on an individual horse, but the chances of winning are higher. Maybe the Athenians felt that this “altar to an unknown god” would cover them when all else failed. The Athenians Paul encounters were hedging their bets with that shrine – worshipping a “just in case” god and possibly to cover the “what ifs.”

I am thinking that most of us know a “what if” person, someone who wants to be prepared for any contingency – having all their bases covered so to speak. I don’t think there is anything wrong with that – we all want to be prepared. I think too that we have built altars in our lives to those unknown gods to prepare ourselves for the what ifs, just in case. Even when we aren’t aware we have set up contingencies to keep our bases covered, to keep us sheltered and protected just in case God isn’t there when needed. Admit it, most of us do not fully commit to making Jesus Lord of our lives, giving him complete power over us, and we might have tucked a little something away in our back pockets, just in case.

I have to admit when I first started on this path to eternity, I did worship the “just in case” god. I can honestly say that although I made a confession of faith in Jesus as my “personal Lord and Savior” I did not truly understand what that meant in my life, but I wanted to be part of that “crowd” just in case. Maybe that is why I so quickly turned away from God when I was in the world, trying to live my “own” life. But there was always that yearning and groping for something that I didn’t yet know until years later was a desire for God’s influence in my life.

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I don't think Paul was criticizing the Athenians when he commented on their altar "to an unknown god." He was proclaiming to them that all their gods, including this "unknown god" were human constructs but that there is one true God, the creator of heaven and earth. The God who does not live in shrines and is not served by human hands. He proclaims to them that the Lord of Heaven is the God they grope for, but God cannot be formed by the imagination of mortals. Paul appeals to the Greek intellect and in a gentle, respectful way Paul proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul's words draw from a Greek poet, probably well-known at the time, and he uses the poet's words to proclaim to those listening that all humans have always had a deep awareness of God and that "we too are his offspring." Paul uses references to art and recognizes that although the Athenians may not be able to fully articulate their search and encounter with the Divine, their art expresses what is not easily known.

It seems that Paul is leading them into a recognition that the power of the one true God of Heaven transcends the human imagination and cannot be confined by persons or buildings but is accessible to all. The last two verses of our scripture reading assure the Greeks of God's plan. "While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." That man is Jesus.

In the readings from 1 Peter and the Gospel of John this morning there is a theme of knowing God. Peter tells us to "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you." John, in his Gospel writing, reminds us that it is Jesus who points us to God when he talks about sending an Advocate – "On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you." The Athenians have an altar to an unknown god, but Paul assures them that the God of Heaven can be known through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. God is present and available; there is no need for a "just in case" god.

Maybe what Paul is really talking about is unity. When you think about the many objects of worship that Paul mentions seeing in the

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city of Athens, you can imagine that there might be some division among those who worshipped the various gods. Paul mentions division in one or two of his other letters. I read in his words an assurance that God is the God of all humanity – “From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth . . . now he commands all people everywhere to repent.” I hear him telling the people of Athens, you don't need to pick and choose which of your gods require your devotion, you don't need to divide your worship among many gods, there is only one true God and that is the Lord of heaven and earth.

Are we getting the message? Do we treat differences in worship as wrong and create divisions? Think about the way Paul approaches evangelism in this Greek city. “Without condescension or berating, he uses a rhetorical strategy that resonates with the audience and respects their culture. While Paul's mission is to introduce the gospel of Jesus and to transform lives, his goal is to persuade. Despite disagreeing with what he observes, he is neither dismissive nor patronizing.”¹ As a matter of fact, I wonder if his encounter with the culture and belief system of the Athenians deepened his own belief and helped give expression to it. I wonder if Paul learned something about the expansiveness of God's generosity and something about the unity of all humanity.

So, the question for this church today is this, are we worshipping God “just in case” or do we know the One True God? Our scripture readings identify God's work in the world through Jesus Christ. Peter tells us how Jesus Christ suffered for our sins and was “put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit” he sits at the right hand of God with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him. Jesus Christ suffered “in order to bring you to God.” His life on earth shows us the one true God. We can be assured that we can know God as we know Jesus, for in him we live and have our being.

As Christians we are witnesses to the truth – there is only one God, one Lord and Savior of all creation. God is the Lord of heaven and earth and the Lord for all people everywhere. As the Psalmist writes, “Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for me” (Ps 66:16). The church proclaims the works of God

¹ Bridgett A. Green. “Acts 17:22-31 – Connecting the Reading with the World.” *Connections, Year A. Vol. 2 Lent through Pentecost*. Eds. Green, Long, Powery, Rigby, & Sharp. WJK. 2019. Print. 274-276.

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just as Jesus proclaimed God's work in his life. Because we are living proof that God exists, we do not have altars built to an unknown god. Because we know God through knowing Jesus as Christ and knowing the "Spirit of Truth" who abides with us as an advocate, we can be confident that the God we worship is the One True God and not a "just in case" god.

That means it is the role of the church to proclaim the existence of the One True God and help people understand, like Paul did for the Athenians, that we don't need to be divided in worship – we all worship one God. We don't need to build altars made of gold and silver to the things of this world that some use as substitute gods. We don't need to look toward other spirits or supernatural omens for our comfort, safety, or security. We don't need "just in case" gods because we know the One True God who is made known to us through Jesus Christ.

That also means that it is not the role of the church to condemn or criticize cultures that do not worship the way we do. We need to be aware that there is only one God although some cultures may call on God using different names. We also must accept the fact that ALL creatures are created in God's image. We must recognize the image of God in everyone we encounter, that is the calling of the church – that is what Jesus called his followers to do. Jesus tells his disciples "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." He also tells them, "Go and make disciples of all nations" he does not say to pick and choose among the nations. We are to recognize Jesus' desire to draw all people to God and realize that is what the church is called to do. Help others set aside their "just in case" gods and worship the One True God. May it be so.