

“Even in Athens”  
Acts 17:16-34  
6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

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Westminster, Greenville  
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I trust that everyone here, at one time or another, has been to a place that was not on your itinerary?

Do you know what that’s like?  
Your plane is rerouted.  
You’re delayed overnight, in an unfamiliar city.

Or you’re driving, and you take an accidental detour, you get lost...

About a year ago, I was driving home with one of our sons from his baseball practice. And it’s a bit embarrassing after almost four years of living here, but I still use GPS to get around, still need it sometimes to find the quickest route home.

What’s even more embarrassing is that on this occasion, while using the GPS, I still managed to make a wrong turn.

Instead of staying to the right, on what would be 276, I managed to go left and head onto 185 toward Atlanta, the toll road...got home with my son after spending an extra 20 minutes on the highway and paying a toll, and doing this while my phone was telling me to go the other way.

I was NOT in a good mood, when I got home that evening.  
Who gets lost while they use GPS in a city that they’ve already lived in for three years?

Your pastor, that’s who.

But I bring this up, not because of the wrong turn that I took, but because of the turn that Paul takes in our text for today.

You remember where Paul ends up today?

He's in Athens.

Paul is preaching in Athens this morning.

**So I'd like to invite you to come with me this morning to hear the Apostle Paul preach in Athens.**

I think it's going to be an interesting sermon.

Because Athens, you see, was NOT on Paul's itinerary.

Do you know how he got to Athens?

Paul is on the run.

He's just been in Beroea, where he was very successful. But there was opposition to the gospel, people who wanted him dead. So the Christian community is scared, afraid that Paul and Silas and Timothy will be caught and killed.

They send Paul away, and he gets "as far as Athens."

In other words, Paul is not in Athens because he WANTED to be there. He's not there because he planned to start a new church in Athens.

He's there...because it seems like a safe enough layover.

He's waiting for Silas and Timothy to arrive.

What's Paul going to do while he's there?

I know what I would've done, had I been in Paul's shoes.

I would have hunkered down.

Gotten some much needed r & r.

You see, before Paul arrived in Athens, his life was in danger.

Not just in Beroea.

Prior to that, Paul was in Thessalonica.

What happened in Thessalonica?

A mob was searching for him, wanted to kill him.

That's why he went to Beroea.

The text we heard today was Chapter 17.

In Chapter 16, Paul was in Philippi.

He wasn't vacationing in Philippi.

He was being beaten in Philippi.

THROWN IN JAIL in Philippi.

In Chapter 15, Paul had a falling out with his traveling companion, Barnabas.

In Chapter 14, Paul was stoned so badly that some thought he was dead.

In Chapter 13, he was persecuted, and driven out of Antioch.

Do you see a pattern here?

By the time Paul arrives in Athens, you would think this man was ready for some rest.

Take a break in Athens, Paul.

They're not expecting you in Athens.

No one knows who you are in Athens.

Just wander around a bit, Paul, check your email, find something interesting to read on your iPhone.

But Paul decides to do something else.

He decides to preach in Athens.

**So I'd like you to come with me this morning to hear Paul preach.**

I think it might be an interesting sermon, because...well, this really BAFFLES me.

Paul has decided to preach—*in Athens!*

Why would Paul preach in Athens?

He's in a city that's "full of idols."

And you've got competition, Paul. Lots of competition.

This is not preaching to the choir!

You've got Epicurean philosophers, Stoic philosophers, and a whole bunch of foreigners who, according to the book of Acts, "spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new."

The gospel is not a WELCOME idea there.

Not a controversial idea.

*It's just one more idea.*

One more new thought for the day...

As Luke writes, some Athenians heard Paul and muttered:

*"What does this babbling want to say?"*

Why in the world would this babbling, this stranger, this person who's preaching the good news about Jesus and his resurrection, why would he ever want to preach in a place like Athens?

**Will you come with me to hear Paul preach today?**

**Because maybe Paul knows best.**

Maybe there will be an EXPLOSION of faith in Athens. Maybe God will do something that you and I can't see at this point, and thousands will turn their hearts to God in Athens.

It will be like Jonah preaching to Ninevah.  
Do you remember this?

Jonah, that reluctant prophet of God, goes to Ninevah—I should say, forced by God to go to Ninevah, after Jonah tries to run away to Tarshish, and God says—you better go to Ninevah...and Jonah, he goes. And he mumbles a few words about repentance, he doesn't really like the Ninevites, they're enemies, after all, and he doesn't really want God to save them...so he half-heartedly tells the Ninevites to repent, and then—do you remember what happens?

The entire city listens to Jonah.  
Obeys Jonah.

And even the animals repent...it was the most successful sermon ever preached in the Bible!

Maybe the same thing will happen in Athens, this city that's "full of idols."

Is that what happens in Athens?  
No...Athens is NOT fertile ground.  
It's dry ground.  
Poor soil.

Some people scoffed, others said, "Ok, Paul, we'll let you speak again a week from Tuesday..."

And, according to Luke, some joined the church—but only some.  
This is...eh, a lukewarm reception at best.

In two weeks, we'll celebrate Pentecost.  
We're going to be in Jerusalem with Peter at Pentecost, the birthday of the Church!

Because of Peter’s sermon at Pentecost, Luke writes “three thousand” people became followers of Christ!

In Jerusalem...3,000!

In Athens...eh, some.

Do you see the point?

Paul’s tired.

He’s on the run.

He needs a break.

Why not skip all this Jesus stuff in Athens?<sup>1</sup>

Can’t there be times when the call of God takes a break?

When circumstances are too difficult,  
when the future is too unpredictable,  
the potential reward...is not worth the risk.

Just take a break, Paul.

After everything you’ve been through, Paul, you—of all people—deserve a break from spreading the gospel, a break from call, a break from faith...

And yet—taking a break is not what Paul does.

Battered and beaten, Paul goes limping into the city square,  
and he trots out the gospel for everyone to hear:  
in the synagogue, in the marketplace,  
in the Areopagus...

**So I hope you’ll come with me to hear Paul preach in Athens, because when he’s done preaching, I want to ask him something.**

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<sup>1</sup> For the exegesis of this text, I am indebted to a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Cleo LaRue, “Why Bother?”, preached on October 12, 2008, at [www.day1.org](http://www.day1.org), found at [Why Bother? | Day 1](#).

I want to ask him WHY.

Why, Paul?

Why were you faithful, even in Athens?

In this difficult, discouraging city where God has planted you, why did you keep preaching?

I have a feeling I know what Paul is going to say.

Paul's going to tell me that he preached the gospel in Athens because proclaiming the gospel was what God called him to do.

And when God asks us to do something, we do it.

God's call holds, regardless of circumstances:

whether we're feeling up, whether we're feeling low,  
whether the wind is at our back or flying in our face...

***God asks us to be faithful in the place where God has planted us.***

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And we all find ourselves in unexpected places from time to time.  
It doesn't have to be a geographical place, right?

I remember the time in a former congregation when, during a sermon, I told the story of Hugh Thompson.

Do you know the story of Hugh Thompson?

Hugh Thompson was a member of the U.S. military in Vietnam.

In March, 1968, he flew his helicopter over the village of My Lai, and what he saw happening on the ground shocked him to his moral core.

So Hugh Thompson landed the copter between the American troops and the unarmed villagers—he got out and confronted Lt. William Caley and told him he was violating all counts of humanity and decency.

Then he loaded as many villagers into his helicopter as he could, called for support, and took the villagers to safety.<sup>2</sup>

It was an act, I thought, of extraordinary bravery,  
of doing the right thing in the midst of terrible evil.

And so I told that story in a sermon.

But one gentleman in the congregation, a veteran, a man I really LIKED—someone who served in Vietnam—he did not like that story.

He came into my office after worship that day and told me I had no business telling a story like that, a story that highlighted an unflattering view of the military.

He was tired of hearing about My Lai, he said.  
He let me have it for a couple of minutes in my office...and then he left.

Well, that was NOT a place I expected to end up that morning...

How could he misunderstand the point I was making?  
I wasn't saying that the military was evil.

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<sup>2</sup> I first heard of Hugh Thompson in a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Tom Long at the Festival of Homiletics conference in 2002. Accounts of this story can be found in a variety of sources on the Internet.



I was saying that what Lt. Caley did was evil.  
And what Hugh Thompson did was humanity at its best.

I was still stewing about all this, a few weeks later, when this same member of the church, he called me up and asked if I wanted to come over to his house and play ping pong.

So I did.  
We didn't talk about the sermon.  
We talked about his family, we talked about my family.

And we played ping pong.  
And then we did it again a month or so later.  
And a few months later we did it again.

And I'll never forget that.

He had been angry with me for what I had said in church, and his immediate response was one of anger...but then he did something else.

He did not give up on the church or on our relationship.  
He prioritized the connection over the conflict.  
He prioritized the relationship over being right.

You know what I think Paul would call that?

Paul would call it being faithful in the place where God has planted you.

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***Have you ever thought about how God's Church  
can be faithful in the place where God has planted us?***

Because I have to admit, there are times when it's tempting to take a break.

When white nationalism rears its evil head, and people who are Black and Brown die because of it...it's tempting to say, ah, there's nothing that I can do, nothing the Church can really do here...I'll pray, but otherwise, I'm going to take a break.

Or when war breaks out on the other side of the ocean, and it starts to drag on and on...what can God's Church on this side of the ocean do?

It's tempting to say there's nothing we can do.  
It's tempting to take a break from faith, a break from call.  
But I wonder what would have happened if Paul had taken a break.

If Paul had shown up in Athens, for example, looked at that very challenging, difficult terrain...and said, eh, nothing I can do.

But Paul decided to preach in Athens.  
Because that's the place where God had planted him.

And so Luke writes, because of what Paul did:

"...some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them."

And you're thinking, what the big deal about that?  
Damaris? Dionysius the Areopagite?  
These are not HEROES of the faith.

But be careful. Be careful now.  
We have no idea how much impact they had.

I'm wondering how many of you can trace your faith back, generation to generation, and point out WHO is responsible for planting seeds of faith in you.

My hunch is that whoever passed along the faith to you...you remember them. And you're grateful to them. And I bet, if you thought about it, you would be grateful to the person who passed the faith along to the person who passed the faith to you.

But the thing is, after a few generations, you and I will probably never know. We'll never know who it was who passed the faith to the person who passed the faith who did the same to the person who did the same...all the way back to the apostles.

Maybe your line of faith began with Peter at Pentecost.  
Or maybe your line faith began with Paul in Corinth, or in Philippi...

Or maybe when Paul was in Thessalonica, or Galatia...  
or maybe it was Athens.

Maybe Damaris is your great, great, great, great...however many it takes, grandmother in the faith.

And if it weren't for her, you would not be here today.  
Do you see what God can do—  
when someone is faithful in the place  
where God has planted her?

Think about it.  
What if, when Paul got to Athens,  
he took the lay of the land, and said:

“Aw, to heck with this!

I'm going to find a coffee shop,  
and spend the weekend drinking mocha frappuccinos!"

I know I've invited you to come with me to hear Paul preach in Athens this morning. And I also know that you've already spent about 20 minutes listening to me.

You probably don't want to spend another 20 minutes listening to a second sermon from Paul. It's not essential that you go to Athens to hear Paul preach this morning.

What is essential is that you and I take an honest look at our own lives right now.

At the difficulties, the fears,  
the hopes, the relationships that are strong,  
the relationships that are fractured...

And ask yourself: at this time in your life, how can you be faithful in the place where God has planted you?

(Amen.)