

“He Doesn’t Live In Temples Made With Human Hands”

Acts 17.16-34

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

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A number of you have been asking me how my trip was, the two-week excursion to Europe that my extended family took earlier this month. It was amazing and wonderful and tiring and overwhelming, all at once. Four days in Rome, three days in Greece, one day in Malta, one day at Pompeii and Mount Vesuvius – we packed in a *lot*, in a short amount of time. One of you asked me if I feel like a changed man, if I had a significant spiritual renewal in those historic places, and for the most part I would have to say *no*. To be honest, I felt more like a tourist than a pilgrim. I’m not sure that I’m dramatically different than I was three weeks ago, and part of me is a little amazed that I actually *was* in all those places and *did* see all those things. Did it really happen, or was it just a dream?

The pictures we took seem to suggest it really did happen. Here we are in Athens, at the beginning of a whirlwind five-hour tour of the most historic sites. I gotta say, five hours is not *nearly* enough time to appreciate all the history and architecture in that 2,500-year-old city. I would have liked time to just wander around on my own for a while, stop, sit down, take it all in, *slowly*, both in the daytime and again in the evening, when the buildings would be illuminated, but our schedule did not allow for that. We did the best we could in a short amount of time. We started here, at what remains of the Temple of Olympian Zeus. Construction began on this massive temple around the year 520 BC. When it was completed, it featured 104 columns, each 55 feet high and 6.5 feet wide, as well as a massive statue of the Greek god Zeus. Today, only 16 columns remain. When Paul visited Athens in about the year AD 50, the temple was roughly halfway completed. (There had been some long delays!)

In the background of this photograph you can see the massive Acropolis, a huge flat-topped rock formation overlooking the city of Athens. People were living and building things on this massive hunk of stone thousands of years before Christ. In the fifth century BC, the Athenians built two temples to the goddess Athena here, the Temple of Athena Nike (Athena the Victor), and the Parthenon (the Temple of Athena the Virgin) – and, by the way, *parthenon* is the same word that is used in the Greek version of the book of the prophet Isaiah to refer to Mary, the mother of Jesus: “the virgin (*parthenos*) shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall name him Emmanuel” (Isaiah 7.14). Also in the fifth century, the Athenians built on this mount the Erechtheion, which was dedicated both to Athena Polias (Athena the Goddess of the City) and to Poseidon, the Greek god of the sea. All three of those buildings have survived, for the most part, to this day. Smaller temples and statues dedicated to a number of other gods and goddesses, like Artemis, were also built here, fragments of which remain today. Nestled onto

the side of the Acropolis, in the fourth century BC, the Athenians built a large theatre, dedicated to the Greek god Dionysus. We saw *all* of that. When Paul was here, nearly two thousand years ago, he also saw it all – but he didn't have a tour guide, and all those temples and statues and monuments weren't historic relics but living, active places of *worship*. There would be animal sacrifices going on at these temples, and then people would eat the meat that had been sacrificed to the gods. So, Luke tells us, when Paul arrived in Athens and was waiting for his companions Silas and Timothy to join him, he “was deeply distressed to find that the city was flooded with idols.” (Acts 17.16) We have no way of knowing precisely *how many* temples and monuments and statues there were in AD 50, but it was a *lot*.

Down at the base of the Acropolis, on the northwest side, lies the ancient *agora* of Athens, the center of Athenian commercial, political, civic, and religious life. Merchants and artisans, politicians and statesmen, philosophers and poets – all could be found here, doing their business and discussing matters of importance; Luke says that “all Athenians as well as the foreigners who live in Athens used to spend their time doing nothing but talking about or listening to the newest thing.” (Acts 17.21) So when Paul was here he “addressed whoever happened to be in the marketplace each day” (Acts 17.17), “preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.” (Acts 17.18) Surrounded by all these temples and monuments to various gods and goddesses, Paul was effectively telling the citizens of Athens: *these gods you're worshiping aren't gods at all*. That was not a message many of the Athenians wanted to hear. If you're going to be a Christian, there are times when you have to take a stand that's different from the world around you. Paul was arrested, and “brought to the council on Mars Hill,” that is, the Areopagus, this substantial hill overlooking the agora, practically right next to the Acropolis. This is where the council of the city elders met; this was where important trials were held; by the time Paul arrived here, the council had been deciding important matters here for *five hundred years*. Legend had it that before that, the Greek god Ares was tried here by the gods for the murder of Poseidon's son. If you were brought to trial in the city of Athens, *this* was where you would be tried. The elders asked Paul: “What is this new teaching?” They gave him an opportunity to speak. They asked: “Can you tell us what you are talking about? You've told us some strange things and we want to know what they mean.” (Acts 17.19-20) So, seizing the opportunity, Paul offered his testimony.

What's remarkable about the speech that Paul gave to the Athenian council on the Areopagus is that it's so unlike all his other speeches. Typically, he would go into the synagogues in the cities he visited, where people were already knew the stories about Abraham and Moses and all the rest, where people believed in *one* God, where people knew the prophecies of folks like Isaiah, prophecies which the early Christians said pointed to Christ. Luke tells us that Paul *did* visit a synagogue here in Athens, but the speech he gives here on the Areopagus was *very* different than what he would have said there. Jews and Christians are both monotheists; the typical Athenian was a polytheist. Jews and Christians both shunned idols; in Athens there were images of the gods *everywhere*. This was going to be a hard sell.

“People of Athens,” he began, “I see that you are very religious in every way.” (Yes, truly!) “As I was walking through town and carefully observing your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: ‘To an unknown god.’” (Acts 17.22-23) *Here* is where Paul hoped to make a connection with the Athenian elders: not by talking about any of those Greek gods, Zeus or Athena or Poseidon or Ares or Artemis or any of the rest, but rather a simple inscription, dedicated to a god whose name was

unknown. Paul had stumbled across this inscription in the midst of all those temples and monuments, and whoever had written it evidently felt that there was some God other than the ones whose images were on all sides. “What you worship as unknown,” Paul says, “I now proclaim to you. God, who made the world and everything in it, is Lord of heaven and earth. He doesn’t live in temples made with human hands.” (Acts 17.23-24) God doesn’t live in the midst of all this religious art and architecture.

You know, we go to these great historic cities like Athens, and we admire the art and the architecture, and we enjoy the wild stories of those all-too-human gods, and there’s nothing wrong with appreciating it all as an important part of human history and culture. But when Paul came to town, he wasn’t there to admire the art and the architecture. He wasn’t there as a tourist, or as a pilgrim. He was there as an apostle. As an *evangelist*. A proclaimer of good news. *The good news*. He came to rescue these people from a religion that, in his mind, was all wrong. Notice that he doesn’t condemn them all to hell. He doesn’t even mention the word. Nor does he mention Jesus by name. He talks about God, in ways that hopefully those Athenians could understand. He looks for points of connection, even drawing a link to Greek poetry: “As some of your own poets said, ‘We are his offspring.’” (Acts 17.28) He works his way around to talking to them about Jesus, but the path he chooses to get there is a path tailored to that particular context, that specific audience. He doesn’t judge them – but he does try to *enlighten* them. “We have no need to imagine that the divine being is like a gold, silver, or stone image made by human skill and thought” (Acts 17.29) – that is, not like anything those Athenians could see around them. Basically, he’s saying: “Guys, there’s something *deeper* and *richer* than all these temples and monuments and statues.” He says: “God overlooks ignorance of these things in times past, but now directs everyone everywhere to change their hearts and lives. This is because God has set a day when he intends to judge the world justly by a man he has appointed” (Acts 17.30-31) – that is, *Jesus*. He finally gets around to the “big J.” “God has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17.31) This is where he loses part of his audience, as he surely knew that he would. When he mentions the resurrection, some of the elders begin to scoff. But enough other elders are intrigued. They let him go, inviting him to come back and talk to them again.

Was he successful? Somewhat. “Some people joined him and came to believe, including Dionysius, a member of the council on Mars Hill, a woman named Damaris, and several others.” (Acts 17.34) Maybe he brought *five* people to believe in Christ. That’s better than none. But it wasn’t enough to establish a church here, not yet. Paul never returned to Athens a second time, and there is no letter in the New Testament addressed to the Athenians, as there is to the Romans. But he did plant some seeds. And he gives us a model for how to approach non-Christians with the good news of the gospel: *you gotta find points of connection*. You gotta meet the people *where they’re at*. There are times when we don’t want to hit people over the head with Jesus – but come around by the back door.

All those temples, all those monuments, all those images of gods and goddesses – they’re beautiful. They’re magnificent. But we don’t worship a God who lives in buildings like that – or even buildings like *this*. “He doesn’t live in temples made with human hands.” Where, then, *does* he live? For those of us who place our faith in Christ, there is only one place: he lives in the temple of your *heart*.

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