

Lake Shore Baptist Church Sermon

May 17, 2020 Charlie Fuller

Text: Acts 17:22-31

Title: The Language of Faith

The skies darken and the wind begins to blow. A storm with tornadoes comes rolling across the plains. Inside a small farmhouse is a young girl alone and terrified. The house is raised off the ground and begins to spin. Around and around and around. During the tumult our friend is struck on the head and knocked unconscious.

When she awakes, she finds herself in a land of small people, bright colors, and roads made of yellow brick. By this time, most all of us know I'm talking about Dorothy, the Land of Oz and the Emerald City. Dorothy is dropped into a strange place, stranger than anyone can imagine and has to figure out what to do.

Instead of isolating herself from that world and searching far and wide for people like herself, she engages that world. She interacts with it. She talks to men made of straw and tin comes to love a talking lion. She enters into dialogue with the world in which she finds herself even while she's wishing to go home.

I think Paul is doing a very similar thing today in our text from Acts. Paul, a scholarly Jewish person, has spent most of his life as a Jesus follower engaging with other Jews. His context has been Torah and Temple and synagogue. He's gone to the places where his fellow Jews gather and introduced them to the way of Jesus. He was talking to his people and talking with language they all knew, language that was comfortable both to them and to Paul.

But Paul is not in Kansas anymore. Paul is at the Aeropagus in Athens. The center of Greek culture. While the Romans had ruled the known world for several decades, Greek culture was still in charge and had been for over 300 years. Athens was the hub of intellectual thought and their influence was still great. The Aeropagus was the place where people had once been put on trial, but here Paul's ideas are being prosecuted. He's in a place that is strange to him being called to defend his ideas about Jesus, ideas that are certainly looked down upon by the highly intellectual Greeks.

So, what does Paul do? He adapts to his context. He does his homework. He finds points of common connection to these people and engages them in their most intimidating gathering spot. He acknowledges their many gods. Gods for prosperity, for a good harvest, for protection from this that and the other. And then he acknowledges their "catch all" god, the one to cover anything they've missed. Even the Greeks in all their intellectual arrogance recognized that there was something else out there. They somehow understood that there was a mystery beyond their list of gods, a mystery they couldn't adequately describe in language.

Paul finds a common point of connection. The clue is in his words to the Greeks. He quotes their own teachers who declared that we are the offspring of God. As a good

Jewish scholar he must have heard in his own heart these words from Genesis: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them...”

Paul saw the image of God in each person he met. Not just the Jews, the tribe in which he was born and raised. He saw God’s image in each and every person. It was a radical idea for its time and it’s what led him to Greece and then on to Athens, its intellectual capital. Later it would lead him to Rome and maybe beyond. It was an idea literally changed the world.

Let’s look at *how* Paul went about his engagement with the Athenians. It seems as if Paul sensed that their system of a polyglot of gods was simply not satisfying to the Greeks. It may be that Paul had learned this through conversations he had had since crossing over from Asia Minor. In drilling down into their own system of faith, he found not only a point of common connection, but a way to engage the deepest longings of their hearts. The Greeks seemed to be unfulfilled by the system they had designed.

In verse 28, Paul responds with words that likely came directly from Greek thinkers. He says, “For ‘In God we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’”

Do you feel like you’ve been dropped into a world that looks nothing like the one you were in before? Kind of like Paul may have found himself dropped into a foreign culture? Athens was certainly a strange Emerald City to Paul, a Jewish boy from the town of Tarsus.

Before we can engage the world with the mystery of Jesus, we have to engage ourselves. What was Paul’s message to the Greeks in Athens?

Paul calls out the inadequacy of the Greek idols. He says, “Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals.”

What are your deities of gold or silver or stone? In what ways are your idols those made of human hands? Deities of things, of commercialism, of intellectual prowess, of inordinate confidence in yourself? Deities that will never satisfy. We dare not think that we are that much different from the Greeks. We also boil down our faith into things we can hold, and feel, and count.

We’re bombarded with constant messages that consumerism is the reason for our existence. All we need to be fulfilled is buy this or that. How could that be better illustrated than by those who are saying that we have to open up our economy no matter how many people die from the inevitable spread of coronavirus? That we can’t wait to increase testing and contact tracing. Buying goods vs. saving lives. It’s a stark contrast. I have every sympathy for those who are without jobs during this time. That’s a real and important concern. However, why is it that our government can bail out corporations while letting small businesses go under? Why isn’t our government

working on a massive increase in testing and contact tracing? Why is it that corporate executives continue to draw millions of dollars in salary and other bonuses while the middle class is decimated. Why is it that every time our government bails out the economy, it's the corporations that receive billions upon billions while common people and local governments receive at best a pittance?

Don't tell me that consumerism isn't the idol of America. It has infected **us all**. It is our idol made of human hands. It seems to me that it's no mistake that *green* is the color of the Land of Oz. The green of human envy.

Paul says that it is **God** in which we "live, move, and have our being." It is in this indescribable mystery that we find our best life, our most fulfilled existence, our greatest security in a world gone crazy.

This story teaches us that we dare not boil the gospel down to something we can easily hold in our hands. The mystery of the gospel is too great and too vast to be captured in human language. But the mystery of the gospel is also powerful beyond our language. Powerful enough to engage the greatest thinkers of the day. Powerful enough to spread around the globe. Powerful enough to change the world. Powerful enough to help us get home from the green-with-envy Land of Oz.

May God bring us home.

Amen.