

GOOD NEWS IN THE NEW WORLD**Scripture Readings:** Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:8-20; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21**Texts:** 1 Peter 3:14-16a; Acts 17:23

The passage from Acts contains part of the gospel writer of Luke's account of Paul's second mission trip. During this trip, Paul and his entourage finally come to Europe and they travel through Greece. Prior to the reading today, Paul had been chased out of Beroea. Silas and Timothy had remained behind while a group from the church accompanied Paul to Athens. Once in Athens, they returned home and left Paul to his own devices.

Paul is not your typical tourist, he doesn't go about the city to enjoy to the arts or the culture; instead he goes about the city growing more and more irritated by all the temples dedicated to 'idols.' When Paul finally shows up at the synagogue in Athens, he is so cranky that he gets into arguments instead of trying to share his faith story. The talks in the agora don't go any better; in fact, the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers dismiss Paul as a babbler. When Paul tries to tell others of Jesus and the resurrection, they think he is talking about foreign gods—which, I'm sure, pleased Paul to no end. The confusion seems to suggest that Paul's Greek pronunciation was no better than mine.

However, there was a group of people who liked to learn about new things so they invite Paul up to the Areopagus, the site where the upper chamber of the city government resided. Once they arrive, Paul puts aside his ill humor and delivers an interesting talk—almost a TED talk. Paul doesn't use any unique religious language, he connects to things he has seen in Athens, and he even quotes from a Platonic philosopher and a Stoic philosopher. In his wrap up, he speaks of the God of all creation who will call all people to judgment based on righteousness. Yet, even in this most sectarian part of his speech, Paul doesn't refer to the name Jesus. His speech meets the people in Athens where they are.

The speech is not an unqualified success. The talk of the resurrection causes some of the people to scoff while others want to know more. Paul walks away, apparently his crankiness has reasserted itself. Even so, the gospel writer reports that some people follow him and become believers.

For me, the story is instructive because we now live in Paul's world.

On any given weekend in the United States, fewer than 40% of the people participate in any kind of worship (and that includes Jews and Muslims) and our country is regarded as a very religious country. In the last decade, the number of people who do not claim any religious affiliation has doubled to over a quarter of the population in the United States. At Christmas and Easter worship services, we preachers cannot assume that everyone in the congregation will understand religious references or theological language, so we have to change what we say to more secular references. Even those who do participate regularly in worship may not be well versed in the Bible or church history. I remember one GA moderator (who shall remain nameless for his own protection) coming to a presbytery meeting and talking about his travels around the country. One church he visited told him with great pride that they had gotten to know the Bible better and had purchased pew Bibles for the first time. During the worship that followed the tour he asked the congregation to turn to John 12 and as a group they raised their hands and said, “Wait, what page is that?” You Sunday School teachers have your work cut out for you.

Tony Robinson has written about the Post Christendom age and Diana Butler Bass called one of her books, Christianity After Religion. What we have discovered is that where we work, live, or go to school means that, like Paul, we cannot assume that the people we meet or make friends with know anything about our faith and what we believe. Despite the rants of some wags, there is no “war” on Christmas, it’s just that many people simply don’t know or care about the meaning behind the holiday; for these folks it’s a holiday about Santa, gift-giving, and holiday meals.

Also like Paul in Athens, we are also surrounded by people who are into new things whether we are talking about computers, electronics, food, cars, or clothes. So many people who looking for something to give meaning or value to their lives and they feel that the newest thing or gadget might be the way.

Like Paul and the writer of 1 Peter, we have to ask ourselves how we can deal with our faith in a new world. What does it mean to be a community of faith in the Risen Christ in this post Christendom age? What does it mean to us as individuals that we believe that God loves the world in this way: that God sent Christ to save us, that we responded to this gift with violence and fear, and that God raised Christ so that we might learn to connect to victims instead of dispose of them; and in the process of connecting to the victims, we learn to participate in love, grace, and forgiveness.

The challenge comes to this simple notion: why are you here in this place with one another? How will you share your reasons with a world that is not savvy to religious jargon or who might have preconceived notions about Christians?

Paul and the writer of 1 Peter remind us that in an indifferent and sometimes hostile world we bear witness to our faith in the love and grace of God with assurance that God is present. God will not desert us; we know that we have been claimed and that we are loved. How do we share that message with the rest of the world?

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