

In our first lesson today we hear the story of the apostle Paul sharing our hope in Christ Jesus in Athens in Greece. This was not typical behavior for Paul. Usually he liked to visit the synagogue wherever he went and ram Jesus down their throats. But this was early in Paul's career as an apostle, or witness for Christ.



So far, Paul had been to Thessalonica, where they had run him and his missionary companions out of town. So they had gone to Beroea in Macedonia (modern day Aleppo), where things had gone much better, at least until Jews from Thessalonica had followed him there and made trouble for him. So Paul had gone to Athens alone, where he was in our lesson today.

A few verses before today's reading we learn that "while Paul was waiting for [his missionary companions] to join him in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the [Judaizers], and also in the market place every day with those who happened to be there." (Acts 17:16-17)

We also read there that Paul debated with the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers there while he waited. Very generally speaking, Epicureans thought that we should grab all the pleasures that life has to offer, while Stoics thought that a good life involves abstinence. In fact, Paul used Stoicism to refute Epicureanism, and Epicureanism to refute Stoicism. From this we understand that Paul was quite an accomplished debater.

So Paul was hauled off to the Areopagus, the hill west of the Acropolis, to explain HIS philosophy of life. This site was both where the Areopagus Court met and where philosophical exchange occurred. Therefore we can't tell from what Acts says whether Paul was hauled off to explain himself to the court or taken there to philosophize on a larger stage just because Athenians loved philosophy and debate.

Let's pause right here a moment. Our SECOND reading today, from the First letter of Peter, tells us to "always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence."

This is exactly what Paul did. Because here is the hope that was within Paul: **Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.** (Sound familiar?) This is a good hope, a positive expectation, because when Christ Jesus comes again he will take those who believe in him to be with him forever

If Paul had been in the synagogue in Athens, he could have proclaimed his hope in this way and all would have understood him exactly, even if they disagreed that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the Messiah, and even if they ran him out of THIS town, also!

But there on that hill in Athens, Paul was surrounded by a people whose culture and world view and way of life was vastly alien to his. Paul was surrounded by people who didn't even know about the one-true-living God, much less about his son Jesus the Christ. Paul had to figure out on the spot how to translate the hope that was in him to reach a people so deficient of hope they didn't even know they were bankrupt.

Have you ever met someone like that? I call this people who are "looking for God in all the wrong places." You know, those who spend their lives chasing money, or fogging their brains with drugs or alcohol or food, or trying to stave off the ravages of time through physical fitness, not to mention those who seek power or perfection or fame ... merely shop themselves into oblivion. Where do you place your hope?



The Athenians had a temple to every conceivable God, except the one true living God. They had a temple for the moon god, the sun god, the fertility god, the ... you get the idea. Except Paul astutely noticed they even had a temple dedicated to "the unknown god" because they didn't want to inadvertently, through their ignorance, leave any deity out.

So Paul appropriated that unknown God. He revealed God's identity to the Athenians and told them about the God who created heaven and earth, about the God who so loved the world that he sent his only son to be one with us.

The results of Paul's evangelism are immaterial. Results are up to God, not us. We are only responsible for giving an accounting of the hope that is in us, with gentleness and reverence. We are NOT responsible for how our sharing is received. But if you must know, some who heard Paul speak became Christ-followers, including a man named Dionysius, and a woman named Damaris.

Two early Church sources say that ONE of the thirty members of the Areopagus Court, Dionysius, became the bishop of the Athenian church, and that his wife was Damaris, although there is no solid evidence supporting these claims. However, what happened in Athens that day

was all God at work—Holy Spirit in action; results are not up to us. We just have to be ready to give an account of the hope that is within us, with gentleness and reverence.

You do have hope in God, don't you, hope in Christ Jesus? Our hope doesn't come from church. God is stripping that away from us. We can't stay inside waiting for God-seekers to wander in. This is OUR refueling station, where we top off on hope and learn how to share our hope out there in the world in a way that those out there can understand.

Make no mistake; people always seek God, even if they don't come to church to do so. As Saint Augustine said of God and of humankind, "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

We are all searching for our source, in one way or another, the place from where we came so that we might find ultimate rest there. Because you come here to church, I'm assuming that you get something you need here, that you get something vital. But we are not selling church! The hope that is in us is Christ Jesus. And not a dead Jesus who happened to be a great teacher, either. The hope that is in us is this: **Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.**

As Christians, as the church, in every age our task is to clearly share that we know the one who is being sought.

We have a ministry to those in our community who are hungry. When people come here seeking physical food we know how to tell them about receiving the food we have to satisfy their physical hunger.

People all around us are spiritually hungry also. And we have a great supply of spiritual food. How shall we share our hope?