

# God's Big Story

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Acts 17:22-31

Sermon Series:  
God's Big Story

*...churches are not as friendly as they think they are.*

It's a joy to be back with you. Honest! I reached several milestones this summer. None was more momentous than becoming a grandfather to Luke Andrew James. It's an indescribable thrill to see our son and daughter-in-law with a son.

I took a sabbatical after 30 years in this church. I devoted each day to a regimen of reading and writing. I also experienced what it's like to have evenings and weekends free. Not bad, not bad at all. Chris and I treasured our time together.

It was my first foray into the exhilarating and maddening world of writing. I've sent my writing to editors and publishers, so we'll see what comes of it. I've thought long and hard about the relationship between church and culture. Today's culture is virtually unrecognizable from 1979, the year I came to this church. How can we proclaim a timeless, ancient message to a rapidly changing, modern culture? I identified eight challenges and obstacles facing the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I'll return to these themes in the coming months.

I made it a Sabbath practice to worship at various churches. I worshipped with African American Congregationalists, Catholics, Disciples of Christ, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, Presby-

terians and several non-denominational churches. Did I miss anyone?

One church I attended held a raffle on Father's Day. The winning dad was awarded a seat on a Lazy-boy recliner, complete with remote. I'm not sure the purpose of the remote. Maybe it was used to switch channels if the sermon wasn't to his liking. I was never so glad not to win a raffle.

It was instructive to be a church visitor for a change. Apart from the people assigned as greeters, churches are not as friendly as they think they are. Of the dozen churches I visited, only one person bothered to learn my name. The church must rediscover the Biblical practice of hospitality.

I have one overriding impression of worship after a summer's worth of visiting. Churches spend inordinate amounts of time in worship making announcements, promoting programs and taking care of their tribe, and not near enough time worshipping God. We must keep the main thing the main thing. God is the object and subject of our worship.

In our Scripture lesson in Acts 17, Paul visits the legendary city of Athens, a city "full of idols" (17:16). There are as many idols as residents in the city. Every level of Athenian society is permeated with Greek gods and goddesses.

***How can the good news of Jesus Christ address the deepest longings in people's hearts?***

Athens was the intellectual capital of the ancient world. Not only was it the birthplace of Plato and Socrates, but intellectuals the world over gathered at Areopagus (Mars Hill) to discuss the latest ideas. The Greeks loved new philosophies, so Paul's claim of a new Messiah creates quite a sensation.

Luke singles out two philosophical schools in the audience that day—Epicureans and Stoics (17:18). Epicureans believed the gods were too remote to be taken seriously, so they adopted an “eat, drink and be merry” outlook. Stoics believed in the existence of gods but not as personal deities.

Paul begins, “I see how religious you are in every way” (17:23). Whether he intends to flatter them or speak with irony is hard to read. He recognizes their impulse to worship as right, even if their object of worship is wrong.

“As I went through the city and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god’” (17:23). This altar was likely erected to any gods who might have been overlooked. They wanted to cover their bases and not offend any deities with the slight. While most people would be dazzled with ornate Greek sculptures, Paul challenges all this idol-making. This unknown god whom they have unknowingly worshipped will now be made known through Paul's preaching.

The digest of Paul's sermon in verses 24-31 is hard to follow, so

let me read from Eugene Peterson's translation, *The Message*:

“This God made the world and everything in it. This Master of sky and land doesn't live in custom-made shrines or need the human race to run errands for him....He makes the creatures; the creatures don't make him. Starting from scratch, He made the entire human race and made the earth hospitable, with plenty of time and space for living, so we could seek after God and not just grope around in the dark but actually find Him. He doesn't play hide-and-seek with us. He's not remote; He's near, ‘for in Him we live and move and have our being’ (the Greek philosopher Epimenides). One of your poets said it well, ‘We are God's offspring’ (the Greek poet Aratus).”

As one who spent the summer reflecting on culture, I find Paul's method of citing Greek philosophers and poets instructive. Paul doesn't quote Scripture to people who have no acquaintance with it. Rather, he seeks points of contact with his listeners to communicate the message. Listen to the music people enjoy and what they watch on TV. How can the good news of Jesus Christ address the deepest longings in people's hearts?

Paul concludes his sermon in verses 30-31 (*The Message*):

“God overlooks it [this idolatry] as long as you don't know any better—but that time is past. The unknown is now known, and He's calling for a radical life-change. He has set a day when the entire human race will be judged and everything

***An idol is anything that takes the place of God.***

set right. And He has already appointed the judge, confirming him before everyone by raising him from the dead.”

When the Stoics and Epicureans hear Paul speak about raising Jesus from the dead, it strikes a nerve. Some of them sneer. Some want to hear more. And a few of them come to faith in Jesus Christ.

Well, so what? So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Martin Luther asked a similar question when he preached in the 1500s. He implored his congregation to ask, “So what is that to me?”

Let’s go back to this city full of idols. When I hear the word “idol,” I’m transported back in time to 7th grade Confirmation Class. Confirmation was rigorous in those days—two hours every Saturday morning for two years. I didn’t retain much, but I was curious why people had such a fascination with idols. Every time Moses turned around, people were making an idol out of something. And I’m thinking, what was their problem?

Since my family didn’t pay homage to household idols, I checked idolatry off the list. If you had asked me in those years what is a Christian, I would have mumbled something about being a good person. I regarded Christianity as a type of moral improvement plan. If you are obedient, God will love you.

When I became a follower of Jesus Christ, I came face-to-face with my idol-making. If truth be told, I wasn’t all that interested in

God. I was captivated by a far more compelling topic—me! My interests, my hobbies and my pleasure-seeking consumed me. An idol is anything that takes the place of God. Martin Luther said, “An idol is anything you run to for refuge in your time of need.” We can make an idol out of anything—eating, exercising, shopping, sleeping, work, sex, recreation, people,—you name it!

John Newton, author of the hymn *Amazing Grace* and a pastor, used to counsel couples preparing for marriage: “You are afraid of a bad marriage—every bit as dangerous to you is having a good marriage.” The danger of a really good marriage is looking to your spouse for what only God can supply. We look to our spouse to bring us fulfillment or make us happy. No one can bear the weight of this much expectation. That may explain why people get so bent out of shape by the shortcomings of their spouse; because they are looking to their spouse to satisfy them. Single people run the same risk of looking for Mr. Right or Miss Perfect to make them happy.

Barbara Brown Taylor said 99 percent of us are addicted to something. That means one percent of us aren’t addicted to anything. If you fall into this one percent category, you’re free to leave now. Gerald May, who wrote the book on addiction, entitled *Addiction and Grace*, said, “We are all addicted in every sense of the word.” John Calvin said, “The human heart is a relentless factory for producing

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idols.” We worship little gods of our own making.

Idolatry is not necessarily worshipping evil, sinister things. Idolatry is making good things into ultimate things. I love books. There’s nothing wrong with books; indeed, we ought to read more of them. But if I love books too much, I can idolize them. I can spend too much money on books, hoard books and clutter my life with them. My wife, Chris, was in my office yesterday and said to me, “No more books!” How can I tell her I just bought two more?

Idolatry is giving ultimate value to things of relative importance. St. Augustine spoke of it as “disordered loves.”

I’m urging you to make God a higher priority than you have in the past. I’m inviting you, right here and right now, to open your life to what God wants to do in you this fall. I plead with you not to put this decision off another day.

Let me make a few suggestions:

Begin a practice of daily reading and prayer. We have assembled a booklet to guide you through Acts called *Acts of a Disciple: From the Pew to the World*, as a sequel to the booklet used this summer. I followed our reading this summer in Acts and meditated on one Psalm each day this summer. I took an inventory of our bookstore and compiled a list of devotional books to help you get started. Most of these books are also found in our library. I left this book list in the lobby. If you don’t know the first thing about

prayer and the Bible, contact someone on staff to coach you.

Take a CenterPoint class or enroll in a Bible study. The CenterPoint classes listed in your bulletin are first-rate. Each instructor is eager to help you begin or deepen your Christian life.

Join a small group. Some of you are leery about small groups, afraid they are too “touchy-feely.” Let’s review the ground rules of small groups. You are free to be yourself, to share as much or as little of yourself as you want. You are not required to pray out loud or sing a solo.

Why not take Jesus up on his offer, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:28-30).

