



The Search for God

Acts 17:16-34

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Isn't modern technology amazing? I'm finding new uses for it all the time. You would think that someone my age would be somewhat befuddled by the pace of technological change, but it is precisely in the area of befuddlement that I find technology most useful. For example, when I come out of a big box store and am totally befuddled about where I parked my wheels, I just pull out my key fob, press the unlock feature and watch for the lights to come on. Presto! There it is.

Every now and again I lose my increasingly essential smart phone. Where did it go? I just had it. I look in my study, I look upstairs, I check my truck, I think about when I last used it. It should be somewhere near. I know, I'll go online and use the "Find My iPhone" feature. A map pops up and, low and behold, it is somewhere at my street address. But I still can't find it. Then I press the "Sound Alert" feature. I hear the audible alert and follow the sound to my apron hanging on a hook. That's right; I put it in the pocket of my man-apron.

Wouldn't it be neat if there was some sure-fire way to find God when we need him? So often we wonder where he is, especially in our hours of need. We offer our prayers, but we hear no reply. What we need is an appliance like Google Home that recognizes our voice. When we say, "Ok Google, what is the capital of Texas," and it replies: "The capital of Texas is Austin." Only this new appliance would go straight to the Almighty. "Ok God, should I marry Nancy Lamneck?" And it replies: "Yes, you should. And no, she shouldn't."

The title of our message today is "The Search for God." What does the Bible teach us about searching for God? Are there any prescribed ways to seek his will and ways? Is there any guarantee he will speak to us? If so, is there a trick to hear his voice among the many other voices competing for our attention? We are going to search for answers to those questions today, as we always do, by searching in his Holy Word. Maybe in our searching we will learn something about spiritual searching and seeking in the process.

Our text begins: *While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols* (Verse 16). Paul is waiting for his companions, Silas and Timothy, to join him. He had been in Thessalonica preaching the Gospel when he

incurred the ire of some jealous Jews who ran him out of town. He went to Berea and was having better luck with the Bereans when the Thessalonica troublemakers showed up and agitated the crowds so he had to flee there as well. Paul fled to Athens and there he waited for his companions.

Athens was the center of the ancient Greek civilization. The city, while long past its prime, was still home to amazing architecture and public works. There were also many statues to a plethora of local gods. This offended Paul's natural Jewish aversion to graven images and the corresponding idol worship they evoked. Under the circumstances it would probably been the better part of prudence to keep his mouth shut and lay low, but Paul was on fire for the Gospel.

So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there (Verse 17). On the Sabbath he went to the synagogue as was his custom, and there he proclaimed the Gospel in its courtyards. The rest of the time he proclaimed the Gospel at the Agora, which was a marketplace where Greek philosophers gathered with the public to expound upon the great and lofty ideas for which they have always been known. And how they loved to debate.

A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection (Verse 18). In other words, Jesus was the latest rage among those given to thoughtful discourse about things philosophical and religious, and here was Paul making the case for, what, a new god? They decided to hear him out at a special venue for debating such things.

Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas). Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious (Verses 19-22).

Kill 'em with kindness, especially after you have been run out of the last two towns where you have incited the powers-that-be. Well, the Athenians are very religious to tell by all the statues and gods they worship. Paul even comes across an altar *To an Unknown God*. I suppose it is like our monument to the Unknown Soldier, but Paul uses it as a stepping off point in his discourse. *Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you (Verse 23).* The point being that God reveals himself to those who search for him. And what he reveals is more expansive than the temples (and philosophical systems) we build to contain him.

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. God is bigger than us. We don't create and sustain him. He creates and sustains us. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live (Verse 26).

God creates us. He creates us in the beginning—at the moment of conception—with all sorts of innate potentialities that become our physical, mental and other natural endowments. But God also continues to create us through environmental and experiential variables unique to each life. We are works in progress. Beyond that, God determines when and where we are going to exist. It is either that, or we are just some cosmic accident. If we believe the latter, we are not going to search for God and the meaning and purpose of our existence. We are just a fluke. End of story.

But if God did create us, and continues to create us, specifically for this place and time, then we are going to ask why, and for what purpose. What is the meaning of our part in God's plan? Because God created us, Paul deduces, we search for him. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' By the way, that last statement is in quotes because Paul is quoting one of the Greek poets (Epimenides). And he goes on to quote another (Aratus). *As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'*

Boy, for a fellow who considers himself to be a poor public speaker, Paul is certainly being smooth here. After complementing his hearers on being very religious, he now meets them on their own turf by quoting their poets, again, in very complementary ways. Because we are all creations of the Creator, we are all God's children regardless of differences in our innate abilities or the plusses and minuses of where we happen to live or the challenges of the times in which we live. As Charlie Pride sings: "You know we're all his children, his next of kin. That's the way it began. No matter where you're going or where you've been, you're part of the family of man."

The Creator creates us. We do not create him. We do not chisel a stone idol and, poof, there's a god to worship. God is way bigger than that and way bigger than us. And that gives a hint about how we are to seek for him and search him out. We do not find him by treating him as a cosmic errand boy. "I want this, I don't want that. Here's my laundry list." Sometimes when we pray and get what we wanted we say: "God answered my prayer." When we pray and don't get what we wanted we say: "I've prayed and prayed, but no answer." Well, "no" is an answer, is it not? Sometimes it proves to be the best answer we could have received.

We are created to obey God, not the other way around. If the best we can do is create God in our own image, that's a pretty small god. As it is, God wants to create us in his

image, and that requires us to sacrifice our wills and ways and to submit ourselves completely to his. And here's the kicker. Once we do that, our searching and seeking brings us to him. He was never far from us after all. Like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, she was wearing those ruby slippers all the time and could have been transported back home at any time if only she had known their mystical and miraculous power.

There is a mystical and miraculous power in submitting ourselves to our Creator that enables us to find him when we search for him. Guaranteed. By God. As he promises in the text on the front of our bulletin: You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart (Jeremiah 29:13). When our heart's desire for God is greater than its desire to have our own way--that is when we find him. That is when God begins to guide us in the way we should go—the way of salvation. As was read in our Old Testament lesson: *Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it"* (Isaiah 30:21).

Surrender to God is the key. The first church I served wanted its pastor to extend an invitation after every sermon—an invitation for anyone in the congregation to come forward in response to the Word that was heard. That is how and where I met my future wife. She had been born and raised in that church, but had fallen away as many of us do when we are young and carefree. She had been married for 7 years, and was just divorced after her husband had strayed. How somebody could stray from a gal like her is beyond me, but that is what happened and Nancy was devastated.

Nancy had come from a long line of love, and that is what she had yearned for. She was capable of a committed relationship, and she was more than able to shoulder her share in a marriage partnership. But even a well-integrated person like that cannot single-handedly hold a marriage together with someone else who has decided to check out. She didn't deserve to feel like a failure, but I think she did because that's just how we feel when everything that is important to us falls apart.

As she came down the aisle, she was pretty, of course, but that is not what stood out about her. Tears were streaming down her face and I knew that look. Anyone would know that look who had ever been driven to their knees by circumstances beyond their control. She was a proud and self-assured woman, but having been brought low she was surrendering to God. She was coming forward as a public testimony. She was praying without words. She was promising God that whatever direction he whispered behind her, whether to the right or to the left, she was going to follow that path. Just say the Word.

To put all this into the jargon of radio, submission to God and surrender to his ways is the frequency over which we receive transmissions from God. God did lead Nancy from the moment onward. As I like to put it, he led her to me (which could be considered a curse as much as a blessing, but I digress). But for seekers and searchers after God, the key to finding him is sweet surrender and perfect submission. That's it. You don't need a college degree or an over-privileged pedigree or loads of money or any worldly thing at all. *If you seek him you will find him when you seek him with all your heart.* Or,

again, to echo Paul in our text: *God did this so that we would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.*