

Groping for the Unknown God  
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I learned a new word last week, or to be more accurate, a new phrase. I heard it on the radio, and it is “*jingshen kongxu*”, Mandarin Chinese for “the spiritual void.” Evan Osnos has just written a book based on his observations of living for 8 years in Beijing. He noted that in addition to physical, economic and cultural changes, China is going through a spiritual revival comparable to America’s Great Awakening in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A couple of generations ago, the Communist Revolution engaged in an all-out destruction of religious life in China. But they also deified Mao. As testaments to devotion, men and women collected Mao badges to wear over their hearts that hailed him as “Messiah of the Working People” and the “Great Savior.” People confessed their sins at the foot of his statues. This state-sponsored cult came to an end. The Cultural Revolution destroyed China’s old belief systems, but other revolutions could not rebuild them. People who had learned to believe in a force larger than themselves were left to search and perhaps grope for and find a faith to fill the void.

Almost 10 years ago, Pope John Paul II wrote an apostolic letter - "On the rapid development of technology in the area of media" – which identified the current situation of the church in the world with Paul’s experience at the Areopagus in Athens. The Pope made an analogy between the Areopagus and the modern world of communications, which is capable of unifying humanity and transforming it into a global village. He wrote: “The communications media have acquired such importance as to be the principal means of guidance and inspiration for many people on their personal, familial, and social behavior.” Maybe Pope John Paul was prophetic: he wrote these words a full year before Facebook was available to a general public audience. Today, one in ten clicks on the internet is on Facebook.

Well that’s the news for today. Now let’s turn the clock back almost 2000 years and try to understand our Scriptures. The book of Acts can be a bit elusive for all of us. We can feel, or imagine, that we know the story of Jesus’ life from the Gospels, but, after that, it gets more confusing. The Acts of the Apostles cover a lot of territory with intricate twists and turns: healings, martyrdoms, traveling shipwrecks, and all those missionary sermons. Peter preaches at Pentecost – 3000 convert and join the Christian community in Jerusalem. He preaches again – 5000 convert. These are amazing numbers. Something powerful was going on. But later in the book, the apostle Paul arrives in Athens, and **he** preaches. In Athens the reception of the Gospel message was decidedly lukewarm. Some convert. Two are named: Dionysius and Damaris. Others ridicule Paul. Others say, “We will hear you again about this.” No commitment there. I feel some sympathy for Paul. It sounds a little like those words one might hear at the end of worship as the parishioners shake the minister’s hand and say, “Nice message,” and then immediately move on to the subject of the weather. He was speaking to the people of Athens in their language, in their idiom, addressing important religious issues. But something got in the way of their hearing his message. What keeps them from hearing the Good News? What keeps **us** from hearing the Good News?

You all know what kind of place Athens was in the first century. It was not a center of political power anymore, but it was still the center of the intellectual world. For hundreds of years,

schools of philosophers had met there, people had gathered to learn and follow the teachings of the Epicureans and the Stoics that are mentioned in this story, along with other systems and ideologies. They were sophisticated people. Art and beauty and physical perfection were highly valued. We would probably feel more at home there than in many other parts of the Empire. They liked to play intellectual games and listen to new ideas. As the story says, there was nothing they would rather do than tell or hear something new. (Today they would be posting it on Facebook.) It was a city where many Gods were worshiped. There was a god and a cult for everything. The people of Athens were almost frantic in their pursuit of knowledge and meaning – in attempts to fill the void. They were going to cover all the bases. There was even an altar to an Unknown God. In their attempt to find the ultimate, they would sacrifice to something or someone they didn't even know.

So, Paul uses this as a hook to his sermon. He says, "You are extremely religious here in Athens." At first glance this might seem like a compliment. If so, it is a double entendre: the word religious here literally means "in dread of or reverent to demons." Everyone, after all, is religious, whether they know it or not. Everyone worships a god or gods or tries to fill the void. The question is: which, and how? Atheism was not considered a possibility in Athens...perhaps it is not a possibility for us either. If we do not believe in a transcendent God, something else will take God's place. The power by which we live, the truth for which we grope, the meaning of our lives and the ground of our being, is in God. The obstacles which we put in the way of that reality are idols.

The Athenians did not only have idols as we usually think of them. Of course there were many of the gold, silver, stone and wooden images and statues which distressed Paul's Jewish sensibilities. People fashioned images of God from their own imaginations and worshiped them. But in this great intellectual metropolis, a university town, if you will, people also constructed intellectual idols. They developed schools of thought which they believed explained everything. They made idols out of ideologies. They lived under the law of the **idea**.

Paul's "Unknown God" sermon draws his listeners in and challenges them at the same time. He begins to give a description, using that wonderful phrase "In him we live and move and have our being," quoting Epimenides, the Greek philosopher from the 6th century BCE. Paul establishes a connection, claiming that humans are hard-wired to search for and grope for God. He is saying that even the Greek traditions, with its idols and altars and shrines and rituals, so different from the Jewish tradition, has a kernel of awareness of the divine. He is engaging in interfaith dialogue in a way we might find surprisingly open-minded. But, from quoting their own poets, he goes on to describe a divine reality bigger than anything worshipped in that city – a creator who calls all people to account. The "completeness," the wholeness of God reveals and challenges the inadequacy of their idols and ideologies.

Paul makes the point that God is very near. He speaks of God as the creator, who created us with the urge to search for him, though at times we seem to be groping in the dark, groping after the unknown. We cannot find a place outside of God, but we can try to. We can imagine one way of escape or another, we can replace God with products of our imaginations, and we do. We throw up smokescreens. We can produce distorted images, and then adore those images. But this God does not wish to remain unknown. Someone was sent to show us that God is very near.

This is where the Athenians have a really hard time. They can follow the discussion of idols and the creator God – not so different from some of their traditions. But when it comes to the particular: to "a man who was appointed," who died in disgrace, who was resurrected, and then will

judge, then they have had enough. They can't take this messy intimacy between God and humanity; this idea that the Creator God would come this close; this idea that the nearness of this God and this man could overcome death. The advantage of idols and ideologies, after all, is that they provide a barrier between us and the overwhelming power and love and compassion of God.

The Christian tradition in the Gospel of John speaks of Christ, the Word or *Logos* made Flesh. A Greek philosopher of the same century wrote, "Don't explain your philosophy. Embody it." Both those teachings were Good News, then and now.

Well, enough of ancient Athens. But the question lingers: what kept them from hearing the Good News? What keeps **us** from hearing the Good News? What would we have to let go of to hear it, and what would we have to accept? We would have to release our attachment to certain gold and silver images, to release God from shrines, and to give up certain systems of thought that helped us explain the world. Acceptance: we would have to accept the fact that life has its source in God, and that it was given to us as a gift. We might have to listen to Jesus' last, dying wish that his disciples live in unity and harmony. We might have to live in a trusting relationship with the one who promised us joy. We might have to accept that God is very close, and we do not need to grope in the dark any more. Amen.