

6th Sunday of Eastertide
Sermon 5.10.26

Acts 17:22-31

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely spiritual you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all peoples to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps fumble about for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we, too, are his offspring.’ “Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

John 14:15-21

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him because he abides with you, and he will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me, and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” (442)

You get to a point in life where you have a lot to look back on, more in any case than ever before.

That’s how time works, of course, this mystery we can only barely plumb: time. We live in its midst as if it were linear and only going one way, even though it folds back on itself, or finds a beginning in an end and thereby seems like a circle.

And so, as when a line, everyday you have more to look back on than ever before, and eventually (if you're lucky) you get to a point in life where what you have to look back on seems far away and is often blurred when it comes to details. But there are these moments of fixity, clarity. Snapshots of memory. Or these comments that stay with you and lie in the path of your past like little slips of paper, little inserts from fortune cookies imprinted with things people have said to you that may or may not have been true but stick around nonetheless. These voices of accidental authority in your memory that continue to speak.

I had a parishioner early in my ministry who referred once to the unknowable God. She was a woman of sure knowledge otherwise, almost haughty. She was confident in what she knew, an historian, a teacher. And she was in the orbit of the congregation I served then, but never really involved, present in Sunday worship very infrequently, only enough to assert herself in steering the larger course of things. She wasn't always easy to have in that orbit, but most congregations have people like this, the Statler and Waldorf of congregational life. (Muppet reference: if you know, you know.)

An unknowable God, she claimed to know about God. And it seemed true enough to me, young as I was and new to this whole unnerving task of speaking for God or about God, or speaking to God on behalf of others. It's no light thing to assume this strange task. It's not a task I take lightly anyway.

It seemed true enough, partly because of *who* had said it; but it also didn't seem true, which is probably why it's stuck with me. God isn't unknowable—or perhaps better to say isn't *entirely* unknowable. I mean, God isn't so known as to be casually kept, like someone sent to affirm your every choice, someone come near that I might slip him into my back pocket and pull him out when I need a little boost in my self-esteem or crutch for my authority.

But God is yet to be known. Scripture attests, anyway, that God longs to be known, and moreover goes to great pains to be known: the pain of the cross, the lesser but still real pain of incarnation, the occasional pain involved in endurance, enduring with us, through history, through our sin, through contingency and chance and luck, good and bad, its slings and arrows, its cushions and tuffets.

Jesus is leaving us.

This is where we are in the Gospel of John as heard this morning, just as this is where we are in the season of Easter. Six weeks in, we've got after this but one week left of this seven-week season that would have Jesus out and about. The Risen Christ on the loose in the world. In the city, in the outskirts. In Jerusalem, on the road to Emmaus, a town so inconsequential it's not otherwise known either to scripture or history. In the upper room, out on a beach by the Galilean lake. He was lots of places, more itinerant even than when he was when fully incarnate, a wandering man though keeping to a six-mile radius, and walking a path, not fully popping up here and then there and even at the very same moments. But he also wasn't yet everywhere all the time, as he would be soon. Ascended so the Holy Spirit might come down and run wild, everywhere all the time, if not yet the all in all.

(Someday though. So goes the promise)

Between this Sunday and next will come Ascension Day, the fortieth day after Easter when Jesus is remembered as being taken up. From the top of the Mount of Olives (not that that's saying much: it is to the Berkshire Mountains what the Berkshire Mountains are to the Rockies): from the top of the Mount of Olives onto a cloud and thereby taken up to heaven, out of sight. And then comes the fiftieth day after Easter, the Sunday after Eastertide ends, Pentecost, when the spirit's remembered to have come down in a most unmistakable way.

For now, Jesus is leaving us. This is where we are in the Gospel of John this morning, gathered with the other disciples in the upper room, having finished supper, having held the feast. Now comes to hearing what Jesus had to say, which according to the Gospel of John was a lot. The word of God made flesh, the *logos* of God, the very logic that makes a creation that coheres and is intelligible in its own mysterious and ever unfolding way. Here is the Word, and now it shall speak.

The Farewell Discourse, scholarship has come to call it, a three-chapter evocation of God's abiding presence and also opening for Jesus' leaving and the Holy Spirit's promised coming. The Advocate, Jesus introduces the Spirit, called the "Advocate," which itself means "call," *ad-vocare*, to call to or to call for, to speak to or to speak for.

An advocate is also a more formal thing, the name for someone serving a more formal purpose in a more formal role. It's to be found in court, an advocate being a lawyer

arguing a case, a term we still use in reference to the Judge Advocate General, the “JAG” corps of lawyers who also serve as officers in the military and thereby argue legal cases in military matters. It’s this sort of advocacy meant to be called forth here, in Jesus’ understanding the aspect of God yet to come as an advocate, the aspect of God yet to come as Jesus departs.

An advocate would have been a most welcome aspect of God for the community for which and from which this gospel narrative was written. The so-called Johannine Community was a tight one even in comparison to the wider early church. The congregations that had gathered of people converted to the Jesus way were all (I’d guess) tight communities, but most practiced their new set of barely-there practices in a larger context of village, town, or city. The Johannine Community, by contrast, had set themselves apart, had verily fled from their homes and villages, had been forced into an exile even more isolating than the larger exile of most 1st century Jews.

Rome’s crackdown in the second half of the first century had decimated all Jewry, and had sent those yet surviving out of the city and into the hinterlands, into the hills—which was all the more the case for those of the Johannine Community. They’d been sent into exile double-much, due to Rome and due to the fact that their coming to follow in the Jesus way made them an impossible fit among their original communities now on the run. They had to seek out one another, and came to build a gathering unto itself.

They also came to write their own gospel narrative, one distinct from other three, the so-called synoptics, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which tell of Jesus’ life in synopsis. The Gospel of John, for its part, holds to another sort of logic, less the chronologic and more the theologic or, better even to say, the Christologic. John’s Gospel aims to make intelligible the nature and purpose of Jesus Christ, which is to tell the story less as one event leading to the next, and more as one revelation making deeper and higher the next—less a line, more a spiral, ever deeper down, ever higher up. They also produced three Letters of John, and perhaps even (though this is very much in dispute) the Revelation to John.

It’s for this being in double-exile, doubly accused and even hunted, that the community of the Gospel of John might have found great comfort and challenge in understanding God as an advocate, one even who gives sound reason for a bad encounter

with the law, the members of the Johannine Community by their very nature breaking the Jewish law.

But even outside this very specific set of circumstances, knowing and relating to God as advocate has its appeal, has its good purpose. It does for me, anyway, and maybe does for you. After all, we all stand accused in this harsh, tacky world. We all suffer accusation as we go about our lives. Some even carry around voices of accusation in their heads—that you're not good enough, that you're not adequate, that you're not effective, that you're not valuable, that you're not smart, you're not powerful, you're not attractive, you're in desperate need of correction, improvement, fixing—even though no fix will ever be enough. Welcome to capitalism, baby. Welcome to the world of commerce. Buy the thing you're a lost cause without, though as soon as you buy it and apply it, you'll discover some other desperate want that you better get on, get it and fix it.

God as Advocate can speak another truth to you: most fundamentally that you *are* and there's nothing you need to do justify that being; and then that you are beloved, that you are of utmost value, that you are of shimmering or blunt beauty, that you are the indwelling of the spirit of God and the outpouring of God's creative intelligence and insistent hope, that you absolutely do stand to reason and you do have argument in defense given the steadfastness of redemption. Nothing you've done is beyond usefulness to God's purpose, and nothing you've failed to do makes impossible God's grace.

It's not infrequently that I get to the end of the day and feel condemned by all I didn't manage to do, which is then met with a defensive voice, "How about I tell of all the things I did do?" It's not never that so many of my efforts come unraveled and so goes the search for some value in the effort itself, some fruit to be found in some accident along the way.

History consists of accidents. Progress is made by happy accidents. And sometimes it's frightening to consider: history as a long series of contingencies. What if Bonhoeffer had succeeded in his attempt to assassinate Hitler? What if Rosa hadn't thought to recruit her pastor, Martin, to be the voice of the Montgomery Bus Boycotts? What if I quit the chaplaincy at the Cambridge Hospital where I felt without purpose and ineffective and hounded by a weird boss but where I met Jesse and my life began anew?

Paul Harvey made a career in exploring such contingencies. His broadcast radio program, “The Rest of the Story,” gave the evermore causes and effects for some historical event that’s so widely known it’s come to feel as inevitable—and his radio program would suggest was very much not inevitable, was rather collective and not entirely conscious and indeed done largely blind for we know not what we do, neither each of us nor all of us together, but in any event wasn’t inevitable. It makes for an entertaining listen, and it also testifies to the grandeur and bafflement of what we’re all involved in here, where we act with some measure of power and free will, but maybe not as much as we might like to think.

Having an advocate when it comes to God’s wisdom and judgement means our story will ever be told and understood as reaching far beyond what any of us can take credit for, or can be blamed for.

God’s justice is grace.

God’s truth is pacifying.

God’s presence is advocacy and encouragement and revealing light, if sometimes painfully revealing light, cellulite under a dressing room’s glare. (Marshall’s reference: if you know you know.)

Indeed, God’s presence is *present*, is very near and is therefore to be known, somewhat to be known.

It’s a curious thing, this altar in Athens built “To an unknown god.” It’s a curious thing—like, why would a people do that? Why would they build such an altar? Why go to the trouble of building such an altar—put in the time and the great effort and the not cheap materials, to hedge your bet that the population on Mount Olympus maybe isn’t settled and known. There might be some god you have yet to meet.

Which maybe why they’d gone to the trouble to build this altar: they were hedging their bet, because what if the yet unknown god were jealous and aggressive? Better get in front of that.

Paul credited the fact of this altar to the Athenians’ deep religiosity, though this might have been to soft-pedal what he actually thought, that they were a superstitious people, and possibly an opportunistic people. And so he would take this as an opportunity also to take them at their word: that there was a god unknown to them, that this was in fact

the God of gods, and that to know this God is to know yourself as one with God, and as one with all humanity, and as one with all creation; and moreover to know this God is to be responsible to this God, responsible in some crucial way that ignorance shields us from ever having to rise to.

It's not for nothing that "agnostic" is such a popular choice in polls about people's religiosity, whether or not God "exists." Agnostic is to say unknowing, and not to know is not to be responsible to and for.

It's not for nothing I avoid many stories in the news, because I know I can't do anything about most of it, and it's too painful to read, too agonizing to consider, crossing my fingers that someone in the position to do something about it is going ahead with doing something about it. Sometimes it's just easier if something isn't known, even can't be known.

Because...

"Know better, do better," the internet tells us in TikTocks and reddit threads, YouTube voices intent on influencing us in this way or that. "Know better, do better," Paul might have taken this altar as an invitation to impress upon the Athenians, these whose high-mindedness was to be admired but not to be made a god unto itself. High-mindedness is best done when serving a humbled and risen Lord, a God made low in human form—a peasant, and a crucified one at that—and then risen to eternal height whence to reign in humble love forevermore. That's worthy of our highest thinking, that and all it implies about how we're to live blindly yet faithful, each of us and all of us together, for now and for all time.

Jesus is leaving us, and the Spirit is coming. History will come to bear and our wisdom is as great and limited as our power to act. But history is itself, along with each of us and all, held in the grander flow of God's grace. This we can know. And thus we have hope.

Thanks be to God.