

“Bearing Witness When You’ve Lost Your Bearings”
Acts 17:22-31

Paul’s sermon before the Areopagus in Athens is a magnificent bit of oratory. As a fan of both good preaching and good public speaking, I give it two thumbs up. Paul seizes the attention of his listeners and crafts a sweeping yet succinct narrative that reveals the heart of Christian theology. It begins with creation and ends with resurrection. It captures the essence of God’s nature: transcendent, yet immanent; humanity’s maker, sustainer, and redeemer. With urgency and clarity these words call hearers to faith in the living God. It is one of the Apostle’s sharpest, most enduring sermons.

The only problem is that it never should have been preached in the first place (at least if Paul had it his way). If we retrace the steps of Paul’s journey just a few turns back, we’ll begin to understand the series of misfortunes that eventually led Paul to Athens -- a city he never intended to visit.

Back in the city of Thessalonica (just a few weeks prior), the Apostle and his companions, Silas and Timothy, were enjoying great success in their ministry. Paul had had a vision from God -- a Macedonian man begging someone to come over to his homeland and bring aid to his people. (You couldn’t ask for a clearer road map for a missionary journey than that.) Paul’s vision led him to Thessalonica -- he knew it was exactly where God wanted him to be. After spending some time preaching in that city, he planned to travel throughout the rest of the region of Macedonia, and — who knows? — maybe on to Rome after that.

Close relationships were developed during this brief stay in Thessalonica. Paul’s first letter to this church, written shortly after he would leave Athens, attests to this. That epistle is filled with expressions of familial love and deep affection. Paul describes himself alternatively as a mother nursing her little baby, and a father raising his children to know and do what is right. In just a few weeks, these intimate bonds were formed as people listened to Paul’s teaching in the synagogue and became followers of Jesus.

But when fierce opposition to the Christian message was stirred up in the city, Paul and his companions had to leave quickly — whisked away in the middle of the night. Paul describes this episode in his letter, saying, “we were made orphans by being separated from you” (1 Thess 2:17). Did you catch that? The earlier parental metaphors are reversed. Paul and his companions felt like *helpless children who lost their parents* when they had to leave these new believers in Thessalonica.

With hardly a chance to say goodbye, they were taken to Berea, a smaller town off the beaten path, so they could hide out while things settled down. Unfortunately, the same trouble-makers found them in Berea, and Paul had to flee again -- this time all the way to Athens, some 300 miles from his beloved, fledgling church back in Thessalonica. Paul arrived in Athens alone, as his companions Silas and Timothy could not go with him.

The apostle’s plans had been completely derailed. It’s like you head out from Austin for a nice trip to the coast and you take a wrong turn and next thing you know you’ve ended up in Tulsa and half of your family is stranded at the last gas station you stopped at. (I hope the travel metaphor still lands even though

none of us has been on a trip in what seems like ages.) Paul had been cut off from the people he loved and was left completely alone. His opponents, much like a highly-contagious virus, kept spreading from town to town, infecting would-be believers with fear and suspicion. Paul was left dizzied and disoriented by the trauma he had endured. And, all of his plans having suddenly been altered, he was stuck in a place where he didn't want to be. Surely we can relate just a little bit to these circumstances?

Paul certainly had good reason to feel annoyed about his being in Athens. In fact, upon re-reading his sermon before the Areopagus, you probably won't have trouble recognizing Paul's exasperation at the Athenians' rampant idolatry, and calling out these intellectual elites for their ignorance in matters of faith tells us that the apostle was perhaps feeling a bit snarky.

And yet, in spite of all this, Paul's accidental visit to this city was not wasted. Our narrator tells us that while some scoffed in disbelief and others were left on the fence, several Athenians responded positively to the message and eventually became believers. They joined Paul and became grafted into this new community called the church.

So, brothers and sisters, here is the point: like the apostle Paul, we may find ourselves in a completely undesirable set of circumstances right now. We are cut off and isolated from loved ones. We are annoyed and frustrated by the restrictions placed on our everyday lives. We may be grumpy and tired and likely getting more than a little snarky with our families. This virus has robbed us and disoriented us. Our daily rhythms have been derailed. Our plans have been put on hold. This is not where we want to be. But in the midst of what is seemingly a case of "life gone wrong," God, in love, persists. He is not done with us. God's truth-revealing, idol-exposing, life-creating word continues to go forth, and it will not return empty. It illuminates the path to salvation. It beckons unto renewal, restoration, and resurrection.

Today, through the power of the Spirit, the risen Christ invites us to abide in the love of God, so that we might go forth and bear witness to it. We are in an Athens kind of moment right now, friends, and we have a hearing, an opportunity to say something to the world about the kind of God we worship. That is our task for this moment, and every moment, really: to bear witness to the love of God. And our loving God promises that he will always be with us. As we are reminded in today's gospel reading, Jesus says to the Twelve: "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you." Christ came to Paul, through a blinding vision on a dusty road near Damascus. Christ came to the people of Athens, through a grumpy apostle whose missionary journey had been re-routed. May Christ continue to come to us, in all kinds of circumstances, no matter how bizarre or seemingly hopeless. For "indeed he is not far from each one of us."

Amen.