



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 14, 2023

To the Unknown God

Acts 17:16–31

¹⁶ Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babbler wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰ For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

²² So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, ²⁸ for “ ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, “ ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’ ²⁹ Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. ³⁰ The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Beloved, the world confronting the Apostle Paul in today’s reading from the Book of Acts is the world we live in – a world that embraces every form of religious expression . . . except one. Many would deny it, but our society is VERY religious. Like those in Athens, many today are willing to worship anything and everything – except the one true God, the Triune One, who seems utterly unknown to them. But He who is unknown to



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them has been active in you since the day of your baptism and is confessed by you every time you speak the words of the Creed.

Paul startled the Athenians by saying, “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.” And what follows has been the message you’ve heard from this pulpit week after week after week. The One the world does not recognize, who sent His only-begotten Son to the cross and sent another Helper to work in us by Word and Sacrament, this One we have proclaimed to you and you DO know Him and you believe in Him.

By the grace of God in Christ, you have known “the God who made the world and everything in it,” that He is the “Lord of heaven and earth, [who] does not live in temples made by man,” that He is not “served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.” You know Him as the Creator God, who “made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth” and “determined [in advance] [their] allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwellings” so “that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him, [though] he is actually not far from each one of us, for ‘In him we live and move and have our being,’ for we are indeed his offspring.” You have repeatedly heard, my friends, that, since we are “God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God [has] overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by [the] man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

This you have been taught. This you believe. This is what all true Christians believe: God works in the world so that people will repent, that is – they will believe in Jesus Christ, who died to pay for all sins and was raised to life by the Father, and who will come again to judge the living and the dead.

This is the teaching of Christ. How ought we as Christians respond to this? Jesus says in today’s Gospel: “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.” When we have faith in Him, we know that we have His love. This compels us to love Him in return. Isn’t that how it works? Somebody loves you, you almost can’t help loving them in return. And when you love someone, you have a desire to please them, do you not? That’s why Jesus says, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.”

And it’s not like we’re on our own in our efforts to keep His commandments. Jesus says, “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.”

When He said this, Jesus was preparing His disciples for His crucifixion. Soon He would be leaving them. But He was in no way abandoning them. “I will not leave you as



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orphans,” He said. “I will come to you. Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.”

Beloved, listen to Jesus. In this world it sometimes feels as if He has left us on our own. He hasn’t. He is in you and you in Him. Because of this, you love Him and desire to be near Him. This is how it’s meant to be. When you love someone you want to be near them. You want to hear their voice. How can it be otherwise? You who love Jesus, you want to hear His voice. And what a voice it is! The voice of God who loves you dearly, the voice of the One who forgives your sins, who feeds your faith through His Word and Sacraments. In all circumstances you are loved by the Holy Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This world that does not know Him also needs to hear His voice. It needs to hear of His love. People are starving for love. They instinctively know that there is more to life than what they can see with their eyes and reach with their fingertips.

Have you ever considered that you can be God’s voice to the world in which you live? I’m not talking about standing on street corners thumping a Bible. But you have friends. I’ll bet you know people who don’t know that they have a God who loves them.

St. Peter says in our Epistle: “Always [be] prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.” Because Christ has washed your sins away and loved you with an everlasting love, you have hope. In a world that does everything it can to silence hope, the hope we have in Christ is irrepressible. The peace you have, though it often makes no sense, is undeniable. Where does it come from? Why does it exist? Because you have peace with God. Jesus took the punishment you deserved for all your failures and sins. Because of Jesus you have a God who loves you. And your God is a God of hope. You’re never alone when you have this God. No defeat will ever crush you when you have this God.

So, when someone asks you why you have hope in the midst of all the crud that goes on in this world, you can say: “Because Jesus loves me; and He loves you, too.”

Of course, the world may not always react well to that. When you let your Christianity be known, often the world will revile you. Jesus warned us. “The world has hated me,” He said, “so it’ll hate you, too.”

And it will. Remember Noah? Peter reminds us about Noah. Noah built an enormous ark . . . a seagoing vessel . . . on dry land! Oh, how he must have been ridiculed for his faith “while the ark was being prepared.”

Peter says that baptism is just like that ark. Baptism has saved you “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to Him.” Baptism washes



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away sin, but it also brings us into the ark of the Church, in which Christ continues to wash away sin through His Means of Grace. As Noah's ark saved his family from death through the global flood, the ark of the Church shelters you from the flood of sin and death that has contaminated the world since the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden. When the world, the devil, and your sinful nature entice you to sin, you can say with confidence: "I am a baptized child of God, and I do not want to do such things." When you fall into sin and the devil, the world, and your sinful nature accuse you, you can answer with the same confidence: "In baptism God made me His own and the blood of Jesus cleanses me from all sin."

Beloved, what can we say of all this? In the midst of a culture that does not know God, the God who created all that is set you apart to be His own. He has loved you to death and risen again that you may have life everlasting. He made you His own through Holy baptism, He calls you to follow Him, He enables you to hear His voice in the midst of all the noise. He has empowered you to be His voice to the people in your world. Be that voice that they, too, may know Him. Love them as He has loved you. Bring them to the font that He may make them His own, giving them the peace and hope that can only come from Him, the only true God. To Him be glory, honor, and praise, now and forever. Amen