

Searching for God

Acts 17:22-31

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First Presbyterian, Luling

The adage holds true in our house that “something isn’t *really* lost unless Mom can’t find it.” I’ve lost count of the number of things that I’ve found that various other members of the family couldn’t find. I don’t know that I have any sort of special searching skills, just persistence and a little bit of logical thinking. Andy, for instance, tends to put things on high surfaces because he is tall. So there’s no need to look on bottom shelves or cabinets when he has lost something. Rachel is notorious, even still, for losing her lovey. Giraffey is almost always tangled up in her sheets. Anna loses puzzle pieces, but she’s gotten to where she doesn’t mind a missing piece or two as much as she used to. They’re almost always turned upside down on her carpet, which is precisely the color of the back of a puzzle piece. However, if I am the person who has lost something and cannot find it, it means that the help available to me is useless. Completely. I currently am looking for the straps that go around the trees, so that I can fasten the hammock to them. It has been perfect hammock weather. I can find the hammock, easily. Why it is that I didn’t put the straps with the hammock, I cannot explain. I’m still searching for them, and someday I will find them.

Philosophers and theologians have been in agreement for centuries that human beings are searching for something. They disagree significantly on what that “something” is, but they agree that people, universally, are searchers. We are searching for meaning, for security, for certainty, for safety, for purpose. We search for all kinds of things, and the “something” that we’re searching for might remain constant throughout our lives, but it’s more likely that the “something” we’re seeking changes as we grow and mature.

Paul was surrounded by philosophers and theologians and thinkers of various kinds who thought they knew what people were searching for. They thought they had all their bases covered. The city of Athens, according to Acts and other sources, was famous for their intellectual pursuits. They wanted to know everything about every god that someone had thought of. If it was a god they’d never heard of, so much the better. They were known for being inquisitive and curious and worldly, if that’s the right word. Sophisticated. Cosmopolitan. Those are better. They have shrines and temples and buildings and statues of all kinds of

gods. And then, just in case they've missed one, they have a shrine marked "to an unknown god."

They're searching. They're aware that they're searching. They think they know what they're searching for: meaning, new ideas, gods to add to their collection so that it will be complete. But even though they have that catch-all "to an unknown god" for any gods they might have missed, they still feel an incompleteness that leads them to search even more, never to be satisfied fully.

Paul knows exactly what it is they're searching for. It's God, God made known in Jesus Christ, who was raised from the dead. But he can't come out and say that. He's been chatting and philosophizing with them throughout Athens, and they've brought him to the Aeropagus, a place where a council was held to hear cases about moral and cultural order. If Paul starts off with his answer to their searching, they'll stop listening. If he starts with Jesus and resurrection, they won't listen to anything, because resurrection didn't fit into their categories of reasonable theories. But if he can lay out a philosophical path for them, for which Jesus and resurrection is the logical conclusion, maybe he can get them to go along and follow him there.

He starts with God as creator. God made everything, therefore God doesn't need shrines or buildings or anything else that humans can make. So what they are searching for is not found in a building or a statue or a shrine.

In fact, Paul says to the Athenians, God made humans so that they would search for God. It's no surprise that the Athenians have been searching and searching for an unknown God, because the God that Paul knows made human beings to be searchers, to be searching and reaching for God. And searching for God is not a hopeless endeavor, because God is nearer to us than the Athenians might have thought.

So far, so good, pretty much. The Athenians have at least not run him out of town after he expressed these ideas. And then Paul says, the time for searching is over. It's time to repent of chasing after all these other gods, because God has appointed a time and a person for judgment, and it's the person who was raised from the dead. The God you are searching for, he says in essence, is known in Jesus Christ.

Augustine, a theologian of the fourth century, said, "You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." Humans are searching for God, in other words, and can't be satisfied with lesser things. Another preacher, this one in our own lifetime, named Barbara Brown Taylor said something similar. "The simplest definition of an addiction is anything we use to

fill the empty place inside of us that belongs to God alone. That hollowness we sometimes feel is not a sign of something gone wrong. It is the holy of holies inside of us, the uncluttered throne room of the Lord our God. Nothing on earth can fill it, but that does not stop us from trying.”¹

Both of them are saying what Paul was saying to the Athenians. We are all searching. And what we’re searching for is God. And until we can leave that throne room empty for God’s presence to fill, we will be unsatisfied, sure that the thing that will fill us is just around the next corner, in the next book we read, in the next self-help idea that comes across our screens.

We’re learning some hard lessons about searching for God in these days. We’re learning that God is not found, or not only found, in our church building. That’s something we know and have known, but it’s more real now than it has been before. We’re learning that our search for God might have led us astray before—that we had found God in security or certainty or health or community. And God can be found in all those things. But God is not only there. And so we search on.

What Paul does not say explicitly or super clearly, is what is the good news of this passage. God made us to be searchers. God made us restless until we find our rest in God. Because in God we live and move and have our being. God is nearer to us than we think. All that is true. And our search for God is not at all like our search for missing objects in our houses. Because God is searching for us in return. God is not sitting there, unmoved and unmoving, inanimate. By saying that God is made known to us in Jesus Christ who was raised from the dead, Paul is saying that God wants to be found, God is trying to be found, that we are searching for a God who is already and eternally reaching right back for us.

In these days of weirdness and uncertainty and insecurity and fear, God is nearer to us than we think. God created us to search, and God is a searching God, who will reach out to embrace us.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Home by Another Way,” pg. 67.