

On Mars Hill
Acts 17:16-34

What kinds of things make you angry? What really gets you riled up? Governments abusing their power? Innocent people becoming the victims of criminals? Well, verse 16 says that Paul's spirit was stirred within him, that he was provoked when he saw all the people in Athens worshipping things other than God. And so he just couldn't keep quiet, either in the synagogues or in the marketplace. He just had to let people know about Jesus.

Now, I doubt many of us know people who bow down before statues. But that doesn't mean there are no more idol-worshippers. No, the things in which people place their trust, the things to which people look for meaning in life are just as numerous today as they were in Ancient Greece. In fact, you might say that although modern people give them different names, they are actually worshipping the same kinds of idols that Paul saw being worshipped in Athens.

For example, the Ancient Greeks worshipped images of Aphrodite, the goddess of pleasure and love – and don't so many people still think that just the right romance will make their lives complete? Dionysius was the god of parties and drunkenness. Are these things any less popular today than they were in Ancient Greece? From where Paul preached on Mars Hill, he could see the temple to Hephaistos, the god of blacksmiths, artisans, and craftsmen – do we place any less confidence in the innovations of our modern engineers? On the highest hill of Athens, the Acropolis, stood the magnificent Parthenon, the temple of Athena, the goddess of wisdom and military victory. Are we any less trusting in the wisdom of our scientists? Are we any less reliant upon the abilities of our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines to win our battles and keep us safe?

So, how do we share the good news of Jesus with those who, far from being aware of their brokenness, are still looking to pleasure or love, to technology or science to find meaning in their lives? How do we help people see that true safety doesn't come from the barrel of a gun or the deck of an aircraft carrier, but only from surrendering to the Lordship of Christ? How do we preach the gospel in an increasingly idolatrous culture?

Well, Paul didn't shrink from such a challenge. Instead, he came to the Areopagus, which in English we would call "Mars Hill." If Athens was the seat of learning in the Ancient World, Mars Hill was the place within Athens where the philosophers would come to debate and discuss important questions. When Paul spoke on Mars Hill, he was thus proclaiming the gospel to the most educated men of his time – in modern terms, it would be like going into the faculty lounge at a prestigious university and trying to call the professors' faith in learning and science into question.

Okay, so how did Paul tell these college-professor-types about Jesus? Well, as we look at verse 22, we might think he started out by insulting them – the King James version says he called these Athenian philosophers superstitious. But because this word is perhaps better translated as "religious," we can see that Paul was actually trying to find a point of common contact with his listeners, something that he and the philosophers could agree on: the need to worship that which is divine.

Now, of course these Athenians did not worship the one true God. And Paul wasn't saying that any of their gods were real, much less endorsing the idea of worshipping any of them. But he was taking advantage of the fact that his listeners understood the basic concept of worship. They understood the

idea of a god, a supernatural being of great power. And they also realized the need to give such gods the honor and respect due to them. So, that's where Paul began his discussion.

But how to point these very religious people in the right direction? Well, Paul found another bridge, another connection to their worldview he could make: they had a statue to an unknown god. Such a statue acknowledged that the Ancient Greeks were at least honest enough to admit that they didn't know everything about the supernatural world. Precisely because they believed in all sorts of different gods, they were willing to admit that there might be one of which they hadn't yet heard. And so, Paul seized the opportunity to tell them about one God that they didn't yet worship – the One Who happens to be the only true God.

In sum, Paul began his evangelistic efforts by listening to the people around him, by taking the time to learn enough about their culture and their beliefs so he could make points of contact between what they already believed and what they needed to understand about God.

And that's a great model for our evangelistic efforts today: we need to start not by speaking but by listening, not just to people's stories of their brokenness, but to what they already think about spiritual and religious matters. So if the topic comes up in conversation, ask them what they believe happens after we die. Ask them what evidence or proof they have of what they believe to be true – to what source of religious knowledge do they appeal? Just like Paul, you might find some points of contact, some common ground from which you can begin to explain the good news.

For that is, after all, the second step. Yes, Paul did listen well. In fact, he demonstrated his knowledge of and his respect for Greek culture by quoting the poets Epimenides and Aratus in verse 28. But he didn't stop there. Instead, he began to tell his listeners something about a God that they admitted was unknown to them. And once again, he began with a concept that they already understood: the idea of creation.

And that makes sense, doesn't it? After all, as we read responsively this morning, David says that the creation, the Sun and the stars proclaim the glory of God, not just to Christians, but through all the earth, to the end of the world. Because God created the world, many truths about God are thus obvious even to our non-Christian friends. Of course, the Ancient Greeks had their own myths about how this creation came into being, but in verse 24 Paul told his listeners that it was the Unknown God who actually made the heavens and the earth.

And given this fact, Paul then drew a very logical conclusion: a God Who could create such a world could not possibly need a temple to live in – even such a magnificent one as the Parthenon in Athens. In fact, given that God created everything, there is no way that He would need human beings to offer up animal sacrifices to Him, like the Ancient Greeks were constantly doing for their gods.

And so we can see that, although Paul began with listening, he moved on to speaking the truth. Yes, he started with the few things on which he and his listeners could agree, such as the existence of powerful supernatural beings and the obvious fact of creation. But then, in a very respectful, even subtle way, he began to tell his listeners things that undermined everything they had previously thought about their gods and about the way they had conducted worship. Paul thus made it very clear that their religion, centered as it was around sacrifices that were designed to curry favor with gods so that the worshippers could get what they want – such religion just didn't make any sense, even on its own terms.

And you may have the opportunity to do the same thing, pointing out the weaknesses, the logical inconsistencies in your non-Christian friends' thinking. Perhaps, for example, your friend is

focused on making lots of money. If that's so, you can gently point out that no one can take any material things with him to the grave. Or perhaps your friend is just interested in having fun and experiencing as much pleasure as possible. Well, you can always point out some of the long-term consequences of such behavior. Or you could appeal to the example of those who also tried to find meaning from such things, only to find pain and emptiness instead.

Or maybe your friend has some sort of vague belief in the afterlife but refuses to embrace any sort of organized religion. You might want to question the authority he has for his beliefs, and contrast his vague notions with the clear revelation we find in Scripture. The point is not to be a know-it-all or a jerk, but simply to contrast his confusion with what makes real sense.

So, what did Paul do next? Having studied his audience's culture to find points of contact, and having undermined some of the things in that culture that just didn't make sense, Paul then went on to tell about his own faith, to explain what worship of the true God entails. In the same way, in Psalm 19, David moves from the glory that God displays in the creation, to the Word of God which explains His will for us. For although everyone can see God's glory in the General Revelation of the created world around us, we must always then turn to the Special Revelation of His written Word to gain more precise knowledge about Him.

And so Paul turns to the most basic question of human existence, one which the Greek philosophers had debated for centuries: why are we here? What is the purpose for which we were created? Paul says in verse 26 that God made all human beings so that we should seek God, so that we might live in relationship with our creator. And since God made us to seek Him, Paul argued that it doesn't make any sense for us to turn around and make images of gods that look like us. No, we are the creatures. God is the Creator. Our job is not to re-create God in our image. Our job as creatures is instead to worship the One Who created us in His image.

Ah, but how are we to worship this Creator God? Notice that towards the end of his speech, Paul begins to discuss the central truths of the Christian faith. In verse 30 he underscores what the Greeks had already been willing to admit - that they were, at least in some way ignorant, that they didn't know everything about the gods, so there might be a god unknown to them. Well, Paul says that this unknown God Who created people in His own image to worship Him, also commands them to turn away from their ignorance, to turn away from anything that would conflict with His good and perfect will. In short, God commands all the people He created to repent of their sin.

And why is such repentance necessary? Because just as God created the world, Paul reminds us in verse 31 that God will judge the world. In fact, Paul says that God has fixed a Day at the end of history on which this judgment will take place. And on that day, one Man will be appointed to act as judge over all the rest of us.

And who is this Man? Who is this judge? Paul had to end his speech before he could mention His name. But Paul did get the chance to give the incontrovertible proof that this Man will actually reign as ruler over all the earth: this Man has been raised from the dead. This is the Man we know as Jesus.

So, you see, when you are telling people the good news, there is simply no getting around Jesus Himself. Of course you begin wherever you find your listeners, with whatever they believe. Of course you find the points of contact between their beliefs and the truth. But you always move people away from General Revelation toward Special Revelation, away from ignorance toward the true knowledge of God and His Word. You always encourage people to move away from their sin and brokenness and

toward the cross. Your goal has to be to help people see that, no matter what their opinions or desires might be, their real need is to worship the God Who created them, to bow before the Lord of Lords Who died to save sinners, the One Who will come in glory to judge the world.

So, what sort of result did Paul have from his lecture to the college professors of his day? Some of them rejected the idea that anyone could be raised from the dead. And maybe some of your friends will have the same reaction, saying that there's no way Jesus walked out of His tomb.

But some of Paul's listeners did have ears to hear. Verse 34 says that Dionysius was an Areopagite, one of the philosophers to whom Paul had been speaking. Damaris was one of the women in Athens, and there were some others as well – perhaps not enough to start a church right then, and perhaps not enough to make an immediate difference in Athenian culture as a whole. But there were some whose lives were changed by hearing the truth about Jesus. There were some who were saved.

And maybe our little church won't be able to make a big change in our culture, either. But we can stay focused on the people around us, our friends and neighbors who need to know Christ or to know Him better. We can listen carefully to what they believe, even as we gently point out some of the problems with their thinking. We can sympathize with their brokenness, sharing the gospel of repentance and salvation with them. We can take the name of Jesus with us wherever we go, pointing everyone to the only One Who is able to make a tremendous difference in anyone's life. And as we do that, let's trust Him to bring all of us to greater repentance.