

Tell Me about God

When my brother and I were kids, we had a book entitled *Tell Me about God*. This book by Mary Alice Jones still sits in my bookcase. It's about a little boy named Bobby and his family. It starts out like this:

“‘Mother, tell me about God,’ Bobby asked.

‘What do you want to know about God, Bobby?’

‘*All* about God.’

His mother smiled. ‘Nobody knows all about God, Bobby.’

‘Why don’t they?’

‘Some things are so great and so good that we cannot understand them now. Nobody knows *all* about God, Bobby.’

‘Then tell me *some* about God,’ Bobby said.”

And so his mother tells him about God.

That children’s book came to mind when, in the Acts of the Apostles, I read this account of Paul’s visit to Athens and his famous sermon at the Areopagus.

It all happens during Paul’s second journey. He’s been hanging out in Athens, waiting for his traveling companions, Silas

and Timothy. Now you know that Paul is a single-minded kind of person. He's a man on a mission. With not a minute to waste! Paul gets right to work. Scoping out the city. Spending time in the marketplace. Talking with locals. Finding out as much as he can about the culture and religion of this influential urban center of learning and intellectualism. Which is not a Christian community. Paul discovers—much to his dismay—that Athens is chock-full of idols.

First-century Athenians worship many gods. And they are a curious people, with a hunger for every new tidbit of information, every new philosophy, every new smattering of teaching that comes down the pike. So intrigued are they with Paul's talk about the good news of someone named Jesus that they invite Paul to address their council. When it meets at the Areopagus. It's as though they're asking, in so many words: *Tell us about your God. Tell us about God.*

What a marvelous opportunity for Paul! He seizes it. For in his wanderings through this city of many shrines, Paul has come across an altar dedicated and inscribed: *To an unknown god*. In this inscription, *to an unknown god*, Paul finds a way to begin proclaiming the truth to the people of Athens.

To say to them: *This unknown god, this god that you don't know, is the very same God I'm here to tell you about. I'm here to tell you about God.* And then Paul proceeds to do just that. Having done his homework, having gotten to know his audience, he speaks in a way that resonates with them. Paul tells his listeners—and us, his readers—about God.

The first thing Paul emphasizes to his hearers is that God has fashioned the heavens and the earth and all things in them. God is not a part of the created order. God is not a creature. But is both Creator and Lord.

Sovereign Lord. Paul invites us to reflect on God's sovereignty. God's majesty. God's almighty power. Paul reminds us—and reminds his Greek listeners, echoing their own philosophers—that God is not in need of anything from any creature. There's nothing you or I can give God that does not already belong to God. For everything we have and everything we are, we have received from God's hand.

You and I are surrounded by a society that prizes self-reliance. You and I are embedded in a culture that venerates independence. But these stand in conflict with the values of God's

eternal kingdom. For only God is self-sufficient. Each one of us is completely, totally, utterly dependent on God.

For God is the Giver of every good gift. Including the gift of life itself. In Genesis we read that *God...breathed into [the] nostrils [of the first human] the breath of life.*

Paul wants you to understand that it's God and God alone who makes possible every breath you take. Every move you make. You were made to live in God. And you were made to move—to search and to seek and to find and to *know* this God who has created you. Because deep within each human creature is instilled a persistent longing to know the divine One. But sometimes we can forget this longing when the shrill and strident voices of a market-driven society fill our ears and lay claim to our loyalties.

Sometimes we human beings get confused about who or what is worthy of our worship. John Calvin famously observed that the human mind is a factory for idols. And in the world around us, idols abound. Oh, most of them aren't crafted of wood or metal or stone, as they were in biblical times. But they're there, all the same. You can list them as well as I can. Wealth and

possessions and status. Youth and beauty and celebrity and power—to name just a few.

Paul critiques these objects of worship—their hollowness, their falseness—exposing them for what they are in the holy light of God.

Whose own offspring we are, Paul proclaims, quoting the poetry of his hearers' tradition. His words are tailored to the philosophical perspective of his audience. But his words are also grounded in sacred Scripture. When Paul affirms that we are God's offspring, he's already made sure we remember that each one of us is descended from Adam, who the author of Acts calls *son of God*. The first humans—and *all* humans—are children of God, created in God's own image.

So, as one interpreter wonders, how can an object of idolatry, created not by God but by humans, “possibly be anything other than a *distortion* of the image of the one true God?”

This God is not to be understood as merely one of many deities of Athenian worship. Paul makes clear that this is the God who calls all people to repentance.

And repentance means turning—turning to God. This is God's will for you. The God Paul's telling you about loves you so

much that God is a jealous God. The God Paul's telling you about is a God who commands: *You shall have no other gods before me.* The God Paul's telling you about is a God who isn't satisfied with just a part of your devotion. The God Paul's telling you about is a God who wants *all* of you. The God Paul's telling you about is a God who desires to be in intimate communion with you.

This God whose fingers formed the firmament and shaped the earth, this transcendent God of the universe, this same God is very near. This same God is *not far from each one of us.* Easter promises that our risen Lord is the One who brings you and me back to this God of relationship. This God of measureless grace.

Isn't this where we want to be, always and forever? Being with God and in God is a very good place to rest. A very good place to stop.

And you know, I *could* stop preaching right now. But if I did, I'd be failing. Failing to point to the critically important message that the Holy Spirit—through Paul's Areopagus sermon—is bringing to the church today. This message that's all about what the Holy Spirit is leading us who are the twenty-first century church to be and to do.

For little Bobby in that childhood book isn't the only one who has asked, *tell me about God*. You and I aren't the only ones, either. Growing in the knowledge of God is a desired outcome for us. But not for us only. Because we live in a mission field!

That has some similarities to the mission field where Paul preached. This land we call home is no longer predominantly Christian. A couple of generations ago, life in most places centered around mainline churches. Today, in a large number of communities, it no longer does.

Like the residents of Athens, contemporary citizens of Western culture are information-hungry. Accustomed to twenty-four/seven news bytes. Novelty, along with technology, seems to be among the idols that get worshiped.

When many are asked to name their religious affiliation, they respond with one word: *none*. For them, the God you and I worship really *is* an unknown God. But in all of this secular society's idolatry and materialism, there's a shallowness. And aren't people growing weary of this shallowness? People want something deeper. Many don't consider themselves religious, but *do* consider themselves spiritual. I think that in the hearts of at least some of them is a God-shaped hole. And out of that hole, out

of that emptiness, emerges a desire to be filled. To find out more about this God. To say, *tell me more about this God you know*.

Beloved, we are being called to tell them! But they may not come to us inside these walls. We may need to follow Paul's example and go to them where *they* are. We may need to step out of our comfort zones. And we may need to do our homework. We may need to learn more about how they live and about their ways and about what's important to them, just like Paul did with the Athenians.

And when we've done these things, what will we say to them about this God? What will we say to them about God's mighty act of raising Jesus Christ from the dead? Will our words faithfully spread the great good news in all the places we go? Will our words cause people to say: "I want to hear more. Tell me about God"?

Could it be that our words will cause some of them to become believers?

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.