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Nearing the ends of the earth

A sermon in the Spirited Adventure Series by Pastor Rob Hamilton
Delivered on July 22, 2022 on Acts 17:15-34 NRSV

15 Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and, after receiving instructions to have Silas and Timothy join him as soon as possible, they left him. Paul in Athens. 16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. 17 So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. 18 Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, “What does this pretentious babbler want to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.” (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) 19 So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.” 21 Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new. 22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely spiritual you are in every way. 23 For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 24 The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. 26 From one ancestor he made all peoples to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, 27 so that they would search for God and perhaps fumble about for him and find him—though indeed he is 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, too, are his offspring.’ 29 “Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. 30 While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” 32 When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed, but others said, “We will hear you again about this.” 33 At that point Paul left them.



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Prelude

Hi! I'm Rob Hamilton, Senior Pastor at UMCG and thank you for joining us. We are nearing the end of our series on the book of Acts called Spirited Adventures: How the Holy Spirit moves us to the ends of the earth. The last few weeks we have seen how Holy Spirit has been guiding Paul as he starts to come to the literal ends of the known earth to our author Luke as he is conducted to Athens, Greece. If you've missed out on any of the messages check out our YouTube page to help you get caught up.

I want to spend the next 15 minutes or so exploring what it was like as the Holy Spirit moved Paul to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to places it has never really been before. I invite you to pray with me and for me as we ask the same Holy Spirit that worked in Paul's life to work in our lives through this message. Let's pray:

Prayer of Illumination

O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit,
did instruct the hearts of the faithful,
grant us in the same Spirit to be truly wise
and ever to rejoice in His consolation.
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Sermon

Paul has come into his stride. He's on his second missionary tour and while he's had plenty of trials and trouble -that even have gotten him in jailed- he has experienced success by the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul tends to follow the same formula in each town he visits. He first visits the local synagogue - a place where he is very comfortable as a former Pharisee. He starts his preaching there by reinterpreting the scriptures and teachings to show how they point to Jesus as the Messiah, and those who believe in him





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will inherit everlasting life. The Holy Spirit will sometimes move some of Paul's Jewish siblings to new faith in Jesus Christ, but typically Paul is run out of the synagogue and then he starts preaching in the town square to anyone will listen. It is in the town square that Paul seems to really connect with Gentiles.

The Holy Spirit often inspires Paul's preaching in the marketplace to people who do not have a deep connection to the Jewish faith so that it leads people follow Jesus. As we heard last week, the Holy Spirit worked so powerfully that it had negative economic impacts in some places and Paul found the Holy Spirit using his jail sentence as an opportunity to present Jesus to others. So when the Spirit leads Paul to Athens, Greece, that great mecca of philosophy, Paul follows the same formula that has worked for him every time.

The first thing Luke records is Paul's distress over the amount of secularity in Athens as there are idols everywhere. I suspect Paul feels both an urgency to help introduce people to Jesus and some insecurity at the size of the task. Paul visits the synagogue and marketplace and the Spirit puts Paul to preaching every day. Except Paul didn't get a permit to preach. You see since there is such a big marketplace of ideas in Athens, you are supposed to get some type of permit from the intellectual elites before you can pitch any new ideas. Now Paul doesn't think Jesus and resurrection is all that novel, as in his mind the Jewish scriptures all point to Jesus, so I think Paul thought he could use the existing Jewish permit to preach... but the Holy Spirit had other ideas. The Holy Spirit wanted Paul to preach to leading philosophers of the day of which Paul couldn't just rely on Jewish teaching to make his case.

So the Spirit inspired Paul to prepare the gospel message in a whole new way. Instead of relying on Jewish teaching and thought to present Jesus, Paul uses the natural world and socratic method as his language of communication at the Areopagus, also known as Mars Hill.



Now Luke tells us that Paul doesn't really stand a chance at making headway in this crowd as all these intellectuals like to do is debate ideas and never commit to one, but Paul senses something. When Paul realizes there is this altar to the unknown god,



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he realizes that even these intellectuals who aren't motivated by fear of some vengeful deity or evil force still have made sure all their bases are covered by having a place holder for any gods they missed. I think Paul, recognizes that all people to some degree or another have these big lingering questions about the nature of life and death or about why there is suffering in the world. Maybe that's why those philosophers on Mars Hill were always debating ideas because in all of us there is a longing for hope and for the

elites despite their intellectualism they still have a desire for something more than what we see and experience and feel.

The Spirit has put into Paul the message to these elites that answers to such big, lingering questions can be found in the Divine, the unknown god, who is very known to Paul and can be known to all people in Jesus. For it is in Jesus that we can believe and find hope. Jesus shows us how the divine is trying to reach out to us in order to bind up the wounds of our lives and of all of creation.

That's why we believe the church is so vitally important. It's the vehicle, the mechanism, the catalyst for that divine healing. It's the community in which those big questions are held and cherished. It's the community by which the questions we so desperately long to have answered are pursued. It's the people we rely on when we can't find the answers or the question seem too hard to ask. The community of faith (which is the body of Christ) bears with us, gives us hope and connects with each other and the divine - and through which redemption is brought both here and now in real tangible ways and beyond in the ways our soul longs for and not in a philosophical debate on Mars Hill.

The Holy Spirit gave Paul a whole new language to try to reach people who were always receptive to new ideas, but only to the ones that confirmed their bias. Paul was faithful to the Spirit's leading and on Mars Hill the mighty Casey - I mean Paul- kinda struck out. Luke says only a few gathered there were even willing to hear more, but other's scoffed at him and so Paul left Athens and went on his way.

The Holy Spirit still works in these same ways today as it did with Paul. Sending us to places and people that may not be receptive to the message of Jesus.



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First, by sending us to people who need the message -which might be as close as people we live or work with or even a far away place.

Second, the Spirit will give us the kind of message the people we are sent to need to hear. Perhaps using a kind of vernacular one wouldn't find in church circles.

Last, it is up to the Spirit to do the transforming work in people's lives. Some might entertain the idea, few may take to it, but many may say something diminutive about the message. But the point isn't for us to see how many people we can save. The point is for us to respond when the Spirit moves in us.

So where do we start? How can the Spirit use us like Paul in bringing the message of Jesus to the ends of the earth. Maybe it begins with a prayer like the one in your bulletins or on the screen? Please join me in praying this prayer.

This is another day, O Lord.

I know not what it will bring forth, but make me ready, Lord, for whatever it may be.

If I am to stand up, help me to stand bravely.

If I am to sit still, help me to sit quietly.

If I am to lie low, help me to do it patiently.

And if I am to do nothing, help me to do it gallantly.

Make these words more than words, and give me the Spirit of Jesus.

Amen.