

Date: 10 May 2026 (6th Sunday of Easter, series A)

Text: Acts 17:16-31

Title: “Don’t Miss The Boat!”

¹⁶While Paul was waiting for Silas and Timothy in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the market-place day by day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, ‘What is this babbler trying to say?’ Others remarked, ‘He seems to be advocating foreign gods.’ They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

¹⁹Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, ‘May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?’ ²⁰You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.’ ²¹(All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

²²Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: ‘People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship – and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

²⁴‘The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. ²⁵And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. ²⁶From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. ²⁷God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸For in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, “We are his offspring.”

²⁹‘Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by human design and skill. ³⁰In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.’

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Brenda and I didn’t spend a lot of time on shore, during the cruise we just finished enjoying over the last 2 weeks. The main part of that cruise was a long voyage from “the Big Island” of Hawaii back to Vancouver. *On* Hawaii, though, we did make two, half-day trips on shore.

- One day we rode the bus down to a beach near the town of Kona, and enjoyed some swimming in the surf.
- Another day we rented a car in the town of Hilo, and drove down to the middle part of the island to do some hiking around the volcano of Kilauea.

But here’s the thing. As much as we enjoyed both of those excursions, we didn’t dawdle on either of them. We didn’t want to run any risk at all, of missing the ship! The onus, you see, is always on the passenger to get back to the ship on time. The crew tells you when you *have* to be back, and from that point on, it’s up to you! If you miss the last tender back from the shore (when the ship is anchored)—you’re out of luck. If you find yourself still on the dock (when the gangway is raised)—you’re out of luck. The ship *will* sail without you.

That’s kind of what our first reading today (from Acts 17) is telling us too. There, Paul found himself “ashore” in the great city of Athens. And one of the things that really bothered Paul there, was how “**full**” of “**idols**” that city was. (v.16) The Athenians, in fact, were famous for being sort of a

magnet for teachers (and teachings) from all over. In fact, as we heard, **“All the Athenians—and [all] the foreigners who lived there—spent their time ‘doing nothing’ but talking about, or listening to, ‘something new!’”** (v.21)

And for Paul, that approach to life was really “missing the boat.” He saw through the shallowness of those peoples’ *empty* and *endless* searching—always seeking but never finding; always inquiring but never being satisfied. In our day too, there’s a similar kind of emptiness, I think, in much of our zipping around from place to place (here, there, and everywhere)—as if variety (and novelty) have any real connection at all with *meaning*. That’s the tragedy of *our* time, right?—whether we’re scrolling through our phones... shopping ‘til we drop... or ticking off all of the boxes on our “bucket list.” We may not be gathering-in all the latest *religious* ideas, the way those Athenians did, but we too are people who tend to *see* a lot, but “take in” only just a little. As St. Paul says (with such insight) about those Athenians, we also tend to be **“ignorant of the very things we find ourselves worshipping.”** (v.23)

What a gift that Paul was giving them, then (and us too!) when he decided to *speak into* that situation. **“I do not want you to be content anymore with such a shallow understanding,”** Paul is basically saying. **“Instead, I encourage you to impress deeply on your minds and hearts, what God expects—so you don’t end up ‘missing the boat’.”**

And from that point on, Paul’s message to those Athenians (and to us!) is pretty simple.

- In many of Paul’s speeches, he centres his message on some particular passage or teaching from the Old Testament. He doesn’t do that here at all.
- Other times, Paul passes along something Jesus said or taught, and applies it to the life of his hearers. He doesn’t do that here, either.
- Almost always, we hear Paul focusing his message on Christ’s death and resurrection for the forgiveness of our sins, and the birth of the life of faith. But even that vital and beating heart of the Gospel is missing here in this little speech.

What Paul focuses on *here* (instead!) is the need that we all have to repent, *right now in the present*, of all the ignorance we *used-to* live in, in the past. **“Because of God’s mercy,”** Paul says, **“God overlooked all those ‘times of ignorance!’”** (30a)

- In another sermon, in a smaller Greek town, Paul talked (in very similar terms, earlier in his ministry) about God having **“allowed all the nations to ‘walk in their own ways’ in the past.”** (Acts 14:16)
- A little later, when he wrote to the Christians in Rome, Paul came back to this same idea a third time, when he wrote about God **“having decided, with great restraint, to ‘pass over’ all the sins that people committed in the past”**—right up to the time that Jesus paid for all of those sins, all at once, with his death on the cross. (Rom 3:25)

But now that Jesus has done that (Paul says, in all three of those places), it’s time for all of us human beings, everywhere, to *repent!*

- That means turning ourselves around, and heading back to the ship.
- It means turning our backs on **“all the latest”** news, and attractions, and distractions.
- It means paying attention to what really matters in life—and “getting on-board” with *the Lord’s* priorities, before that ship sails away on its long passage into eternity.

Paul’s actual words to those Athenians were these: **“God has ‘set a day’ when he will judge the world, with justice, by the man he has appointed.”** (31a) That **“man”** (as you can probably guess) is Jesus. And the **“day”** that God has **“set”** for him to **“judge”** us on, is The Last Day—whenever that day finally arrives. It might be today... it might be tomorrow... it might be a thousand years from now! The point is not so much the *specific timing* of that day, but the fact that its timing **“has been ‘set.’”** The gangway (into God’s eternal kingdom) *will* be raised, at a certain hour.

Paul goes on to tell us something else here too, that ought to make us all sit up straight and pay attention. **“God has given proof of this to everyone,”** Paul says, **“by raising ‘that man’ [Jesus] from the dead.”** (31b) Usually, you and I are used to thinking about Christ’s resurrection in a different way. We remember his resurrection on Easter Sunday morning as a sure and certain *sign* that the power of death has been broken, not just for Jesus himself but also for us. And we’re not wrong to do that! Absolutely, that is *part* of what Easter is all about! Because Jesus rose, we too will rise! Because he now lives on the other side of the grave, our graves too will open, and spill-us-out into that rich and full life in paradise that has always God’s great promise to his people.

But here, you see, Paul is *cranking* the *completed* aspect of that great Good News into a warning. *Yes*, Christ’s work is finished, Paul says. There’s nothing more for him to do, *until* he comes back again (on The Last Day) **“to judge the world with justice.”** (31)

- In terms of that metaphor I keep going back to: It’s like there are only one or two more mooring-lines tethering the ship to the shore.
- There’s only one boat still running, from *this* little paradise *we* live in, *out* to that ship—the life-boat (I guess you could say the ‘tender’) of the church.

So (*world!*): Don’t get left behind! The clock is ticking! As St. Peter says in our second reading (in very similar terms): **“Christ suffered once, for sins—the righteous for the unrighteous—to bring you to God.”** (1 Peter 3:18) Christ only *needed* to do that once—and ever since he *did* it, his work has basically been finished! Now, Jesus our Saviour has **“gone into heaven”** (as Peter puts it) **“and is [there] at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities, and powers in submission to him.”** (v.22) All of the formalities are complete (you might say). The welcoming-party is ready, and waiting to receive us all on board.

What that *doesn’t* mean, though, is that any of us need to be *anxious!* Ready, yes; worried, no! That’s what Peter wants to assure us about, when he talks (toward the end of our second reading) about *baptism*. **“Baptism,”** Peter says, **“now saves you.”** (1 Peter 3:21) What incredible good news that is!

- Baptism, you see, is a word that simply means “washing”—as Peter says, **“not the removal of dirt from the body,”** but a *spiritual* kind of washing that the Holy Spirit gives us in our baptism **“because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”** (21) The same way that *Christ* died and rose again, so in our baptism you and I also **“die and rise again.”** We die *to sin*, and we rise again *to new life*.
- That is what **“saves us”**—being joined together with Jesus our Saviour, both in his death and in his life. Baptism is the *connecting-point* between us and him.
- And that, you see, is what gives us (what Peter calls) **“the pledge of a clear conscience towards God.”** (21) Think of it, maybe, like having one of those “guest cards” that lets you onto a cruise ship. “No card, no entry!” But you and I *have* the right card, to get us aboard—because of our baptism.
 - We don’t have to worry about being denied entry. We don’t have to fret about any of the “mess” we’ve left behind at home, keeping us “off” the ship.
 - As long as we have this *incredibly powerful* “card” of our baptism (carrying our own name)—no worries! **“Our conscience is clear!”**
 - Our names are right there on the “passenger list!” We are “registered guests” who have every right to come aboard!
 - Our Saviour, Jesus, has paid the full cost of our ticket, 100%!

The key thing is simply this: *Hanging-onto* this **“conscious awareness”** of this *voyage* we’re on, all the back home to heaven. We are surrounded by so many distractions, all the time, here in this lovely place God has given us the joyful privilege of visiting. There’s always one more sight to see... one more place to visit... one more adventure to indulge in. As in Athens, so in Oceanside!

And to some extent, all of that is *just fine!* God *has* surrounded us, everywhere on this sparkling blue planet, with *so many* blessings that He truly does want us to enjoy, to his glory.

BUT: the clock is ticking! The time for our departure *will* come. And *nobody* wants to discover, at the last minute, that “that ship has sailed” without us. **“In the past”** (as Paul told those Athenians), **“God overlooked [all] such ignorance. But now, he commands all people everywhere to repent.”** (Acts 17:30)

We are not just “tourists” on this planet. As Paul insisted to those Athenians, **“God’s intention is that we should seek him, and reach out for him, and find him—though he is not far from any of us!”** (27) Our life with him is our *real* life—the life that really matters the most, both now and forever.

One last thing. Maybe you noticed how interested both Peter *and* Paul are (in both of these readings) in *helping* other people, also, to repent. Peter states the principle very clearly. **“Always be prepared to give an answer”** (Peter says) **“to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.”** (1 Peter 3:15) So: How ready are *you and I*, to do that? If you need some *help* “getting your answer ready,” you are more than welcome to join us here at the church on Wednesday evenings from 6:30 to 7:45, for the next 6 weeks. We’re starting this Wednesday to go through “the Six Chief Parts of the Christian Faith” (as Martin Luther teaches them in his *Small Catechism*). Coming to this class is one specific thing you might consider doing (right now!), *both* to make sure that you yourself are “ready”—and to help you *be* **“prepared to give a good answer, whenever somebody asks you... about the hope that you have.”**

Notice, finally, how good of a job St. Paul did, of *doing* that, that day there in Athens. First, Paul took some initiative on his side by **“preaching in the synagogue... and in the marketplace... about Jesus and the resurrection.”** (Acts 17:17, 18) Whatever he said there really made people curious! **“What is this babbler trying to say?,”** some of them asked; **“He seems to be advocating foreign gods!”** (v.18) So, they ended up taking Paul along to a public meeting, **“where they said to him, ‘May we know what this new teaching is, that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.’”** (vv.19-20) *That* is exactly what led into the speech Paul gave, in the main part of this reading. Just as Peter anticipated, those people there in Athens *were* asking Paul **“to give the reason for the hope that he had.”** Thankfully, Paul was well-prepared to do so—as Peter says, **“with gentleness and respect.”** (1 Peter 1:15)

I know it is not always easy for us to do this in our time today. “Religion” in our culture is usually assumed to be a private and personal matter that polite people never ask about, or are even very willing to talk about. I’m afraid that’s true *even in our families*—even with family members who *used to* share our faith, but now seem to have gone off on some excursion, and gotten distracted, to the point that *they* are in danger of “missing the boat.”

Can you and I talk to them, now, about the power of our baptism, and the clear conscience we have, because of Christ’s death and resurrection?

- On the one hand, no of course we don’t want to “lose” our loved-ones by confronting them, or by bringing any of this up!
- On the other hand: we run the risk of losing them *forever*, if we *don’t* bring it up!

Well: As Peter and Paul tell us, **“it is now that God is commanding all people, everywhere, to repent!”** (Acts 17:30) That’s the strict rule of God’s Law. Thankfully, it is *also* **“now that baptism saves us, by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”** (1 Peter 3:21) That’s the sweet grace of God’s Gospel.

So, brothers and sisters, don’t wait! Do not allow “the ship of God’s grace” to sail off into the distance, leaving us *or* our loved-ones behind. As St. Paul says in one of his letters, **“Now is the time of God’s favour; now is the day of salvation.”** (2 Cor 6:2) Thanks be to God. Amen!