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Acts 17:22-31, John 14:15-21
Not Calmness, but Conversion

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text is from this morning's First Lesson. It speaks of the God who "made the world and everything in it." St. Paul gives this testimony to the Athenians:

²⁴The 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, (Acts 17:24, NRSV)

This is a sermon about those great talkers¹, the Athenians, we read about in this morning's First Lesson. I want to bring a sense of urgency to their calm discussion with St. Paul by comparing it to the storm-tossed dialogue between Jonah and the seafarers.

In both conversations - the calm one with the Athenians and the tempest-tossed one with the seafarers - the topic is the Maker of heaven and earth. We are not talking about local gods, but about the God above all gods. The ancient world made a distinction between the one high God and the various tribal or national gods who served as means of devotion of the one high God.² But neither Paul nor Jonah is talking about those lesser gods, but rather the Creator of all that is. Interestingly, neither Paul nor Jonah condemns or mocks those lesser gods. They simply are not interested in them. They are after bigger fish.

Five hundred years before St. Paul's sermon on the Areopagus, one of my favorite people was born. I mean Socrates (469 BC–399 BC), one of the chief founders of Western Philosophy. I first began reading Plato's *Dialogues* when I was in high school. Those *Dialogues* record the elegant, probing conversations of Socrates with the people of Athens. Socrates would gently examine the everyday notions of people about justice, morality, beauty, and reality. He would enter into conversation with them and shepherd them along toward the truth.

For five hundred years, the Athenians have been talking, thinking, examining. This is the context for this morning's apostolic testimony.

¹ "Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new." (Acts 17:21, RSV)

² "The one high God stood at the pinnacle of a host of deities who ruled the world with him...When a person worshipped these lesser gods, it was assumed that he or she was also worshipping the one high god. Such worship did not detract from the honor shown the highest god, nor did it, in the view of the ancients, threaten the belief that God was one." (Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 1984)

So, Paul stands amidst the Athenians on Mars' hill. He credits them with being very religious, notes the abundance of their altars, but then shifts his speech to the true God -- the one who "does not live in shrines made by human hands," but is the Maker of all that is:

²⁴The 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, (Acts 17:24, NRSV)

The apostle then connects this God who made the world and everything in it with Jesus of Nazareth. He preaches the resurrection of Jesus and calls upon the Athenians to repent and to ready themselves for Christ:

³⁰While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because 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." (Acts 17:30-31, NRSV)

Now, the interesting thing is how calmly the Athenians receive this news about Jesus. And why should they not be calm? They are a philosophical people accustomed to discourse about weighty matters. Over the years, they have heard many new ideas, some of them lovely to their ears, some of them strange. They have learned to take everything with a grain of salt. They have developed the intellectual habit of distance and restraint. They do not rush into new ideas. They do not give their hearts away easily to the latest notion. The earth is reliable and solid beneath them. They figure they can politely listen to Paul, and perhaps listened to him again later if they are of a mind to do so. But for now, they feel no urgency to repent and turn toward Jesus. And so we read of this outcome to St. Paul's testimony:

³²When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, "We will hear you again about this." (Acts 17:32, NRSV)

St. Paul is speaking about them! He is trying to turn them toward the truth -- toward "the way, and the truth, and the life," to use the good phrase from last Sunday's Gospel Lesson (John 14:6). What the apostle has to say is *relevant* to the Athenians, but they feel no urgency to take his words seriously.

But things are very different for the seafarers in the Jonah story. When they finally hear Jonah speak of his God, they are appalled and terrified to think that they might have offended this God, for Jonah speaks not of a local or national god, but of the God who holds everything, including *them*, in his hands:

⁸Then they said to him, “Tell us, on whose account this evil has come upon us? What is your occupation? And whence do you come? What is your country? And of what people are you?” ⁹And he said to them, “I am a Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, *who made the sea and the dry land.*” ¹⁰Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and said to him, “What is this that you have done!” (Jonah 1:8-10, RSV)

Suddenly it dawns on these poor seafarers that they have to do with the very Maker of the sea upon which they are about to be shipwreck. One of the old commentators, Matthew Henry, spoke of this sea, about its wildness and immensity. He noted that it was fitting and natural for the seafarers in the Jonah story to cry out to their gods when they found themselves so entirely storm-tossed. They were at the limits of their skills and of their wits, and so they cried out. As Matthew Henry put it:

...he that would learn to pray, let him go to sea.

Here those sailors were, tossed around on the mighty sea. All that separated them from a watery death was this human contrivance of wood and rope and sailing cloth. The sea is so very deep, the shores are so very distant, the waves and the wind are so very powerful. They can as little resist the strength of this storm as a butterfly can hold its own course before a hurricane. They are overmatched. They have lightened their load, tossing their merchandise into the sea. They have rowed with all their might. They have redoubled their efforts. Now nothing remains to them but for each sailor to cry out to his god, until at last they discover the inner meaning of their disaster³: they discover that the one sleeping in the depths of the boat, Jonah, happens to be fleeing for the one true God, the Maker of “the sea and of the dry land.” He is fleeing from the One who made what is and evermore will be an alien home for them: the sea. They are not fish, they have no gills. If they can survive on the sea, it is by God’s grace, and so they are appalled to discover that they have in their midst one who is fleeing this Maker of the sea.

You can well imagine that they are interested in Jonah’s testimony. St. Paul can speak of the One who “made the world and everything in it” and the Athenians can remain calm and unchanged, with their stable earth still beneath them. But for the seafarers, it is an urgent matter, this business of the God of land and sea. So, at the end of this chapter of Jonah’s story, we do not find the seafarers calmly going on with business as usual, rather we find them crying unto Jonah’s God. These noble pagans do all they can to save Jonah. When Jonah tells them to toss him into the sea, they try with all their might to avoid that step. But in the end, they fall upon their knees and appeal to Jonah’s God, the true Maker of heaven and earth:

³ See the splendid recent Brazos theological commentary on Jonah by Phillip Cary.

¹³Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring it to the land; but they could not: for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous against them.

¹⁴Wherefore they cried unto the LORD, and said, We beseech thee, O LORD, we beseech thee, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not upon us innocent blood: for thou, O LORD, hast done as it pleased thee. (John 1:13-14, KJV)

What am I after in this sermon? I am after you and me, that we should respond to Jesus more like the seafarers than like the Athenians. After all, the Easter story is the most tumultuous news this world has every known. It rocks reality more profoundly than any storm raging on the sea. The resurrection of Jesus is stupendous news worthy of inspiring us and moving us in a holy direction, even in the direction of Christ. Easter is good news for you, for me, and it is not news calculated to be calmly heard and then forgotten.

Let me repeat a passing story I mentioned in a sermon a few years back. It is the story of someone who got it -- someone who grasped that the resurrection of Jesus is full of meaning for time and eternity. It is a story of the pizza man. In today's Epistle Lesson, St. Peter asks us to be ready to give our testimony to Christ:

Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence; (1 Peter 3:15, RSV)

So, I tried to give me testimony to the pizza man. Here is the story:

Late one night, I was in the mood for pizza. (I'm always in the mood for pizza.) It was after an evening meeting here at the church, and then some work in my office after that, so that when I arrived at the pizza shop, I was still in my clergy clothes. The shopkeeper was starting to shut down, clean up, and call it a day. No one else was in the shop, but he let me in, dimmed some lights to signal that I was the last customer, and set about making some pizza for me. We chatted as he worked, and the conversation went something like this:

"I am a Moslem," he said. "I am a Moslem, but also I like Jesus and his mother Mary."⁴

"Me too," I said. "I like Jesus and Mary too."

He gave me a nice salad to go along with the pizza.

⁴ Quite properly too. The Koran denies the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, and therefore denies that Jesus is the Son of God, and yet the Koran speaks well of Jesus and Mary. See, for example, Chapter 4:156-173 (*The Qur'an*, A new translation by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, Oxford World Classics, 2004, reissued 2008.)

“Tell me,” he asked, “Am I going to hell?”

I answered as best I could. I asked him to help me think it out.

“The heart of the Christian faith is Jesus,” I said.

“Yes, I like Jesus.”

“What the Church believes is Easter. We believe that Jesus has conquered death. We believe that Jesus is stronger than death. And so, we believe that in the end, he is the one who matters most in this world. I believe that life is going to work out for humanity in such a way that one day, each of us, one by one, is going to have an important conversation with Jesus, and that our fate will be in his hands.”

“Yes, but am I going to hell?”

“Well, you tell me. What do you think? You have heard some of the stories about Jesus, and there are lots more good stories about him in the Bible. Given what you have heard about Jesus, do you think he is going to send you to hell?”

“Maybe not. He seems to be a good man.”

“Yes, that is why I follow him.”

So, that was that. It was a beginning witness to Jesus. My chief conviction about heaven and hell is that such questions belong to Jesus, and so he is the one I want to walk with and to commend to others.

I liked this man. He did not beat around the bush. He seemed kind. And he was interested in a serious subject. In fact, I wonder how many of us church-going folk have had the nerve recently to ask ourselves the question, “Am I going to hell?”

I have no interest in scaring us into heaven, but I do have a deep interest in drawing us to Christ. Luther speaks of folks who read the Catechism and toss it into the corner, convinced that they have mastered the matter upon one reading. I do not want us to toss Easter into the corner.

In today’s Gospel Lesson, Jesus comforts his disciples. He has gathered with them, he has washed their feet, and he has taught them many things. He knows that soon he is to die. Now, he comforts his disciples in face of that troubling path:

⁸I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you.

We need not doubt our Lord’s promise here. If he says that he will come to his disciples, then come he will. No, we not fear his truthfulness. But perhaps we do

need to worry some about ourselves -- us modern-day disciples. Do we really desire the company of Christ in our lives here in the city? The Easter afternoon disciples on the road to Emmaus welcomed the company of Jesus when he came to them. Not knowing yet that it was Jesus who visited with them, they welcomed him nonetheless, and in his company, they found their hearts strangely warmed. But what of us? Would we rather trudge onwards without his company? We go through life with many ideas and principles, habits and disciplines. But do we want the company of Jesus? If we do, it will mean walking down some paths and avoiding others. There is no way around this. If we would walk with Jesus, there are some paths, some deeds, he just will not do, and if we go with him, we can't do them either.

Ahh, but if we desire his company, then he is willing to send his very Spirit into our spirits. The Athenians heard of Jesus and were left unchanged by what they heard. But if we will, we can open ourselves to the blessed word about Jesus. We can set out on the adventure of walking in his ways and living in his Spirit.

And I believe it is best for us to do so, for our real situation is not so much that of the calm Athenians but of the storm-tossed sailors. Some of you might be able to say Amen! to that right off the bat. The world is in uproar for you and you feel your need of a Saviour. But the truth is, the world is variable and wild for each of us. We are whipped about by temptations and by setbacks. Err long we will be heading down some wrong path if we are not careful. So, let us be more careful. Let us take the good news of Easter evermore to heart. Let us not hear the good news of Christ's resurrection and toss the book off into some corner, but rather, let us seek to be transformed by that good news, to the benefit of ourselves and our neighbors, and to the glory of the Risen One, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.