

“Not Far from Each One of Us”
Acts 17:22-31; John 14:15-21; Psalm 115
Easter 6

John 14:15-21

Jesus said to the disciples,

¹⁵‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever.

¹⁷This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

¹⁸‘I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.’

Acts 17:22-31

²²Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said,

‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For 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.

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, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.

²⁶From one ancestor he made all nations 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 grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us.

²⁸For “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.”

²⁹Since 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.

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.’

The Sermon

I have always thought of clothes shopping with about the level of excitement that I have for reading the 14 pages of fine print to sign up for the warranty for a new toaster.

The act of going clothes shopping lasts, for me, about as long as it takes to look at one shirt and recognize it as such. At that moment, as far as I’m concerned, details like cost, fit, color, style and appropriateness can all be sorted out later.

The other day I was sorting some laundry and I suddenly thought, “I should go get a new shirt.” Instantaneously—like when a pet runs out as soon as you open the door—the thought came to me: how great it would be to go to the mall and look for a shirt. In that nanosecond, I was super

excited by the idea of getting in the car and heading out into the great mass of humanity to engage in commerce in the public arena.

Immediately, I came to my senses and remembered our circumstances.

But if the idea of going shopping for an item of clothing suddenly has, for me, a fairy-tale level of excitement about it, I know something is out of kilter.

And for most people, this is vastly more, and immeasurably harder, than just a matter of whether they get to go out and enjoy themselves.

Combined with the things that always lurk in our psyches, like fragility and impatience, the isolating aspects of our circumstances, can, if we are not mindful, become disorienting.

And even the most faithful among us can find themselves searching, like thirsty travelers in the desert, for sources of strength that will allow them to keep being the best versions of themselves that they can be: faithful to God, and to each other, and to ourselves and the promise that God has invested in every one of us.

For people of God, that source of strength, generation after generation, century after century, has been the knowledge that God is not far from each one of us.

We can have our minds expanded and spirits elevated when we contemplate the incalculable vastness of a God who encompasses all eternity, and all the universe, and all other imaginable universes, in realms beyond human comprehension.

But our comfort is in knowing that that same uncontainable, uncontrollable, Most High and Most Holy God

is also right here, close enough to hear our muttered, inarticulate prayers, close enough to whisper or nudge, intimate enough to know and understand each of us better and more graciously and with greater mercy than we can know or regard ourselves.

Academically, we know who God is, and that can give us some strength.

But our true comfort is in knowing God—personally, individually, intimately.

Let us know, O God, that you are near.

I thought again recently of a passage from a book called *What Is the What*, which is the true story of a Sudanese (now American) man named Valentino Achak Deng, one of the tens of thousands of “Lost Children of Sudan” who fled the carnage of the Second Sudanese Civil War back in the 1980s and 90s and beyond.

The story is told in first person, and follows Achak from a prosperous family in an idyllic African village to an epic and terrifying trek through a landscape made hellish by human brutality: first to Ethiopia, then a decade at a refugee camp in Kenya, and finally, his first few years in America, which were not always much easier.

But what I specifically thought about was a passage that I have shared before, from the early days when he was running for his life as a young teenage boy - his village destroyed, with no idea whether any of his family members are still alive.

He caught up and fell in with a large group of boys who were also running; they would walk in the daytimes and sleep in a circle at night.

In his own voice, Achak says,

“Whenever I woke in the dark hours I saw other eyes open, mouths whispering prayers. I tried to forget these sounds and faces and I closed my eyes and thought of home. I had to bring forth my favorite memories and piece together the best of days. This was a method [that had been] taught to me [by someone] who knew that we boys would walk better, would complain less and require less maintenance if we had slept properly.

“Imagine your favorite morning! he yelled to us...

“Now your favorite lunch! Your favorite afternoon!

“Your favorite game of soccer, your favorite evening, the girl you love most!

“Now create in your mind the best of days, and memorize these details, place this day center in your mind, and when you are the most frightened, bring forth this day and place yourself within it.

“Run through this day and I assure you that before you are finished with your dream-breakfast, you will be asleep.

And Achak says to the reader, “As unconvincing as it sounds...I tell you, this method works. It slows your breathing, it focuses your mind.

“I still remember the day I made, the best of days, stitched together from so many... It is my day, not yours. It is the day I memorized and the day I still feel [most] vividly.”ⁱ

What are the pieces that you would stitch together to make your perfect day?

In some ways that’s a question about what you miss, and what you need, and what you enjoy, and what you love. Or *whom* you miss or need or enjoy or love.

And maybe, ultimately, it's a question about who you are, who you understand yourself to be, and what you believe about your life, and what you believe about the one who has given it to you.

False gods, human-made idols, are abundantly available, at least as many as were available to the Athenians at the Areopagus. Like the idols from the millennium before Jesus was born, they may have eyes and ears and mouths and hands and feet,

but unlike God, they don't see you. They don't hear your prayers. They don't speak the Word to you. They don't hold you. They don't walk to you or walk with you or beside you or behind you or above you or around you or beneath you.

They make no sound in their throats. You cannot hear them breathing. But the breath of God, the *ruah*, the wind, the Spirit, moves over the deep waters and breathes life into the church, and the wind blows wherever it will but don't get to see it, you can't track it or contain it; you don't know where it comes from or where it goes.

Paul said to the Athenians,

I see how extremely religious you are in every way. In fact, I was going through the city and looking closely at the objects of your worship, and I saw one that said, "To an unknown god."

So I'm here to proclaim to you what you worship as "unknown."

The God who made the world and everything in it and everything above it, the Lord of the universe, doesn't live in shrines made by human hands.

Nor is God served by our hands, as though needing anything from us. It's the other way around.

God has put us where we are, has given us all our days, perfect or imperfect, or rotten or pleasant or terrifying or not as full and unrestricted as we wish they were,

so that we would search for God and maybe even grope around and find God in the darkness.

But as a matter of fact, that same God of mystery and vastness and holiness is so close to each one of us.

We can rightly wonder what the daily concerns of those people in Athens were—probably not too different from the concerns we carry around with us:

They worried about their parents and their children and their spouses and their friends;

they wondered if their employment would hold out, and if not, what would happen to them and their families;

they dealt with the physical realities of getting sick, or breaking down, or getting older;

they were distracted by the states of their various relationships with friends and enemies, love interests and co-workers and competitors.

And sometimes, they wrestled with the darkness, the darkness that comes when people feel alone, or uncomfortable with themselves, or frustrated at their circumstances; when they wonder what in the world they are even doing anymore.

I came across an anonymous piece of writing a few years ago that said,

God works specifically in the places where we feel like we are falling apart, where we are “discovering the limits of [our] power instead of its possibilities. [That] means that God is always involved with people and situations exactly as they currently are, instead of as they could be or might be or used to be.”ⁱⁱ

Regardless of our circumstances, God is not far from each one of us.

Maybe just that time when we’re searching and groping around in the dark is the ideal time to celebrate the Resurrection, when our Holy Week was weird, and Easter Sunday was about live streaming and clicking on links where we were used to big choir anthems and mountains of lilies.

But no matter where we are or how we communicate, we share with the world the same message that Paul proclaimed in front of the Areopagus:

that God may be Holy Mystery, but is anything but unknown;

that *you* don’t have to *make God* in order for God to be there, all you have to do is allow yourself to be created by the one who makes all of creation;

that when you reach out into the darkness, our intimately knowable God is there, with arms of love to catch you and hold you and never desert you,

there in the darkness, there in the details, there in the diagnosis,

there in the quarantine, there in the impatience,

there in the uncertain economic future,

there even in the silence, whether a silence of aching loneliness or wondering awe.

As he began his long goodbye to the disciples who had gone with him all the way to Jerusalem, Jesus reminded them, “If you love me, you *will* keep my commandments.”

We do know him, and have seen him.

And when we love Jesus, we can’t help but keep his commandments: to love one another, and the world, and ourselves, and our enemies, and all humankind, and all creation.

What are the components of your perfect day?

And when you reach out into the darkness, what do you hope to find?

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ⁱ Eggers, Dave. What Is the What (p. 33). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ Author unidentified, “Theology of the Cross,” Mockingbird, www.mbird.com/glossary/theology-of-the-cross/ (Retrieved May 20, 2017 10:00 A.M.)