

God of all, may these words humbly offered and the meditations of our hearts, inspire us to follow in the way of Jesus. Amen

Paul is on fire for God! He has experienced a conversion that has left him a believer in the power of Christ and the unwavering love of God. He can't help himself, he has to proclaim it to anyone who is willing to listen ... and even to some who aren't!

After being kicked out of the last few cities he attempted to convert, Paul finds himself in Athens, the center of enlightened thought and philosophy. He wanders around town and sees a multitude of shrines and icons each representing one of the many gods celebrated by the Greeks.

Athena – Goddess of Wisdom

Zeus – God of the earth

Hades – God of the underworld

Poseidon – God of the sea

These are to name just a few.

And then he sees one shrine that he can truly appreciate – the altar to an “unknown” god. But for Paul, this god isn't unknown at all. It is the God of all Gods, the one, the only. And he can't wait to share his wisdom and knowledge with the wisest and most knowledgeable in Athens!

You do have to give him credit for his approach! Butter them up, tell them how religious they obviously are, how much he appreciates their fervor for holiness. Then as they sit back, gloating, patting themselves on the back, he slips them a quick upper cut to the ego and tells them they're actually pretty ignorant, but he, in his wisdom, can set them straight.

It either catches them completely off guard or intrigues them immensely, because they actually let Paul continue with his explanation of this “unknown god”, which, by the way, is exquisite!

Who wouldn't want to know and better understand this God that cannot be contained by our human renderings either of mind or hand? Who could resist leaning into the One who gives life and breath to all the living, the One in whom we live and move and have our being?

Paul's intention, of course, is to introduce people to Christ. He wants to bring the gospel of Jesus to the whole world so he's meeting people where they are and sharing his knowledge and his faith with anyone who will listen.

I'm impressed! It takes more guts than I have to simply step out in faith and proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen! I wish I could. I wish I had that kind of fervor. Not that I'm not passionate about my faith, but I'm just not the type to put myself out there if it's not wanted. So, I say, "Yeah Paul! You go for it!"

But then I take a step back, or perhaps it's a step forward, by 2000 years, and I hear the story a little differently. Instead of the unknown god being one that replaces all the others. I imagine that the unknown god, the One that created all things, breathed life into all the living, that this God doesn't replace the others, but rather all the others are subsumed into this One God.

God, the One God, is also the God of Wisdom, God of the Earth, God of the Seas and yes, even God of the Underworld, the world of the dead. Isn't that what Paul proclaims at the end of the story? God has given proof of his power over the world ... even the underworld by raising Jesus from the dead!

So for me, this is not so much a story of exclusive Christianity, as it is an acknowledgement that all god's, all faiths, lead us to the One true God, the One who created us all, the One in whom we live and move and have our being; whether rich or poor, old or young, no matter our culture, no matter our faith beliefs, or our philosophy. We are all created in the image of God, loved by God and, like Paul, called by God to proclaim this good news.

My question is, how do we best do that? I mean, here we are in one of the most challenging times of our lives, the world is in turmoil and we are being forced to look at life differently, to take an accounting of our own lives and to come to terms with changes we never thought we'd have to deal with.

People are searching, longing for something to give them strength and courage to face an unknown future. How do we reach out to them? How do we find the courage and confidence to speak up and offer to them an understanding of a God that may well be unknown to them?

After all, Proclaiming any religion THE religion has done a whole lot of damage over the centuries. Our history discourages us from speaking up.

And yet it is part of our calling as people of faith; to live and speak that faith; to reach out beyond our comfort zone (at least 6' beyond!) and help people to understand that there is a God who loves them and is present to them even and perhaps especially in the most challenging times of their lives.

Of course, for many of us, our first response is to say, “No, that’s okay. I wish I could. I wish I had that kind of fervor. Not that I’m not passionate about my faith, but I’m just not the type to put myself out there if it’s not wanted. No, I’ll just keep doing what I’m doing. But thanks for the invitation!”

And believe it or not...this desire to say “no” is a good thing as author and theologian, Alexander John Shaia explains in this video from The Work of the People... (video)

So you see, we can keep saying “no”, but God will just keep on knocking; keep on inviting. The question is, are we willing to go to the place of not knowing, the place of discomfort and even a little fear. Are we willing to open ourselves to a wider understanding of our past so that we can live into a new future. Are we willing to be on fire for God, unable to keep ourselves from proclaiming God’s unwavering love to anyone who is willing to listen ... and even to some who aren’t?

Are we willing to turn ourselves over to the power of the Spirit working in our lives, so that others too might find their way to a faith that is right for them, knowing very well that God, the One God, is big enough for all to find what they have been longing for, especially in these most uncertain of times?

Because, my friends, if we can, if we dare to say “yes”, then we can be a powerful force in helping to move this world along as we learn to heal and love as one. May it be so! Amen