

Scripture Reading:

Acts 17:22 “Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, 'Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; 23 for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you: 24 God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. 25 Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. 26 And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, 27 so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; 28 for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.' 29 Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising. 30 Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, 31 because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.'”

'Understanding Our Times'

Well, I certainly have an impressive sermon title for this morning!

There have been thousand page books written on such subjects, so it could be quite a challenge for one sermon! As we do each year, when the anniversary of the evil Roe v. Wade decision is remembered, we not only focus on the grave sin of abortion, but lift up some of the imprecatory Psalms as we pray for the repentance in our Nation...

- A nation whose people began as colonies in covenant with God!

Thus in our history we come under both covenant blessings and curses! [see Deuteronomy 27 & 28 for the details]

- When Roe v. Wade was decided there was almost no visible opposition from the Church outside of some Roman Catholics.

Protestant voices of opposition have been raised in recent years, but I suspect our Lord is not pleased with the fact that the rate of abortion is not much different in many churches than the rate we see in the world. We are facing a grave situation today and we need to understand that we will bear the responsibility as covenant people in even the judgments sent from God. We learn this from the Scriptural examples that God has given us if we have ears to hear and eyes to see. Perhaps we see it most clearly in the Old Testament reign of King Manasseh, the King held responsible for bringing the practice of child sacrifice to Jerusalem.

In II Chronicles we are told that King Manasseh, “led Judah & the inhabitants of Jerusalem astray, to do more evil than the nations whom the Jehovah destroyed before the people of Israel.” They were more open with what they were doing, as were the Romans when Paul preached our morning text, but the reasons were the same...

- Personal peace & affluence! [*explain & contrast Moloch, Roman fathers & abortion*]

King Manasseh was judged individually when captured and led off to Babylon where he repented and was restored, which gives us great hope!

- There is NO individual sin that is beyond the reach of God's grace!

- America needs the Gospel and the forgiveness found there.

However, we must remember that the nation was still held responsible by God: Many years later when it came time for the judgment of Judah, we read in II Kings 23 & 24 these chilling words:

“2 Still Jehovah did not turn from the burning of His great wrath, by which his anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked Him.”

24:3 “Surely at the commandment of Jehovah this came upon Judah, to remove them from His sight because of the sins of Manasseh, according to all that he had done, 4and also because of the innocent blood that he had shed; for he had filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, which Jehovah would not pardon.”

We should also note how rapidly God’s people can move from faithfulness to such depravity...

- From the golden age of King Solomon to the Babylonian exile was less than four hundred years!
- About the time that has elapsed since the Mayflower Compact!

With the troubling year 2020 behind us and an uncharted future before us, I thought I would broaden our concerns this year, as if we don’t have enough on our minds!

As serious Christians we should see three major concerns today where we must have understanding of our times:

- The taking of innocent life!
- Oppression of BIG government!
- Modern Idols of Science & Technology!

We should be troubled by all of these which is why I chose Paul’s address on Mars Hill as our morning text.

- So just how relevant is this sermon for us today?

Luke tells us that Paul confronted the Epicureans and Stoics... The philosophers of that day.

They were very similar to the evolutionary humanists of our day who say there is no God, thinking that material is eternal and the eastern mystics who believe that God is in everything:

- Two sides of the same godless coin that rejects the living God.
- Luke tells us that Paul was provoked by what he saw there in Athens: A city full of idols.

Did anybody pass by any idols on the way to Church this morning?

I doubt it, and yet the idolatry of today can be clearly seen in the three areas of concern I mentioned about our times...

- Idolatry of self.
- Idolatry of power.
- Certainly, the idolatry of science!

And 2020 saw a crescendo of all three!

- Now it is important to remember that Paul was NOT troubled by all these idols because he thought God would be threatened.

He knew the Scriptures well and knew that idols were worthless and foolish:

NONE of the idols that filled Athens could speak or hear or even move, something the Prophet Isaiah taught the people of God years before...

- Here is how Isaiah describes a foolish man making an idol out of some wood that he cultivated:

Isaiah 44:16 “He burns half of it in the fire; With this half he eats meat; He roasts a roast, and is satisfied. He even warms himself and says, "Ah! I am warm, I have seen the fire." 17 And the rest of it he makes into a god, His carved image. He falls down before it and worships it, Prays to it and says, "Deliver me, for you are my god!" "

- This surely gives us a stunning picture of why Paul would be provoked by what he saw and moved to share the Good News that can deliver those in Athens from their foolishness and despair, as we should be in our modern age.
- To understand the real need for the Gospel we must see how similar things are today:

In the time of King Solomon, God used craftsmen to build His Temple and to serve Him down through the years. Their talents brought glory to God and fulfillment in their hearts.

- But having rejected God in the time of Isaiah, these same skills lead them to create false gods that were of no help and an abomination to Jehovah, the one true God they should have served.
- We need to understand that it is much the same with big government, science and technology today:

When Christians used their minds to discover, to explore, & to master the mysteries of God’s creation it brought glory to God and many great blessings that we enjoy in our modern times.

Today we have not only turned our back on God in these areas, but demanded that He have NO role to play whatsoever in science, technology, government, or even history.

Just like Isaiah’s sad craftsman who warmed himself with some of the wood he cut, we now have all of our creature comforts coming from the material world through the wonders of our science and technologies.

- At the same time we have taken those very same discoveries and declared them to be our gods!
- There is no longer any need for the Living God because science and technology can give us all we need.
- But you see when it comes to the real issues of life, they are as silent as the half of the tree the craftsman fashioned into an idol & worshipped.

Man claims to have conquered nature & now bows to nature giving her thanks and praying to mother earth.

- The result however, is what C.S. Lewis rightly calls the abolition of man.

-- Science can tell us more and more about how the unborn child develops in a mother’s womb but cannot tell us why they have value. So sadly a third of our children are lost to the violence of abortion.

-- Science can tell us more and more about how our sexual organs work, but cannot tell us why marriage is of value. So sadly half of our marriages end in divorce and many people now choose to never marry in the first place.

-- Science can show us how to work more productively and produce more and more material goods, but they cannot tell us how to be content with these abundant goods. So sadly, we see record growth in visits to psychiatrists and drug use in the midst of all these creature comforts.

-- Science can tell us more and more about how the universe works, but they cannot give us a clue about how or why it came into being. And they have no way to place value on human life, so sadly this growing knowledge brings growing despair.

And finally, science can certainly tell us when a man or woman has died, but they cannot tell us where their soul has gone or even if they really had one.

- I hope you can see that while it might be easy for us to chuckle at the poor man who bowed down to the left-over wood, our world is really no better off today.
- People no longer believe that man is made in the image of God... He or she is part of the machine with no ultimate purpose or value.
- Yes, there are few idols adorning the streets of our state, and yet we should be just as provoked by what we see around us!

OK, so I am provoked, especially after these elections with all the “wrong” people in power: What am I or any of us supposed to do about the killing of the unborn, the explosive growth of government and the worship of secular science???

- The simple and profound answer is to trust and obey!

We must trust God because what is impossible for man is certainly possible for him [subject of my next message] We demonstrate our trust by turning to Him in prayer and then we obey!

- In a moment we will pray that our nation turn from the sin of abortion as we lift up the Great Prayer using Psalm 10, a psalm that you will see is VERY relevant to our day!
- And we came to this message with the hearty singing of Psalm 2, again calling our nation, and all the other nations to repentance: Just as Paul did there on Mars Hill long ago.

There the Psalmist declared that God has given the nations of the earth to His Son: 8 “Ask of Me, and I will give You The nations for Your inheritance, & the ends of the earth for Your possession.”

When we look from God’s perspective we begin to realize how the Imprecatory prayers not only call down God’s judgment but also give us peace as we remember that He is in control.

- However, calling down judgment makes modern folks nervous because they think it is mean: Soon they could even be considered hate speech!

What we are actually doing is asking God to protect us! For example, the early Church had two fierce enemies in Saul of Tarsus and King Herod:

Both were persecuting and even killing the Saints so I am sure some of the very imprecatory prayers we are praying today were lifted up against both men.

AND in BOTH cases God answered those prayers by slaying the wicked... Saul of Tarsus was slain before the Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus!

And King Herod fell before lowly worms. BOTH ceased to be enemies of God’s Church: One went to hell & the other went on to serve the King of Kings:

- Both were answers to the prayers of God’s people.

This is how we are to understand the judgment of the Son in Psalm 2, and the other imprecatory Psalms:

“9 You shall break them with a rod of iron; You shall dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel.' ”
Some nations will be utterly destroyed and others converted, both dashed to pieces from a human perspective!

- Then the Psalmist calls on the nations to choose wisely:

10 “Now therefore, be wise, O kings; Be instructed, you judges of the earth. 11 Serve the Lord with fear, And rejoice with trembling.” 12 “Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, And you perish in the way, When His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him.”

- Such is our prayer this morning for America, trusting God in how He chooses to answer such prayers!

So that covers trust, but what is the obedience we need to have?

- You know it will be simple!

And yes, it is what the next series of messages I give from the Book of Ephesians will cover in more detail.

What is important for us to see this morning is how the same basic commands given to the Saints in exile via a letter from Jeremiah, delivered by the way via a wicked King, are applicable to us today!

- Imagine getting such a note from President Biden next month telling us what to do in the coming years!

We see in Jeremiah's instructions how God expects us to walk in His ways no matter where we find ourselves in God's plan... with instructions delivered to those who will be captives in the nation the Prophet Habakkuk said was too evil for God to even look at!

6 5 "Build houses and dwell in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit."

- God's people are not supposed to sit around sulking and they are not to take short-cuts: They are going to be there for 70 years... So they need houses and gardens!

6 "Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters--that you may be increased there, and not diminished."

- They are to marry in the Lord and bear Him children. These children are to marry and bear more children unto the Lord!
- Again they are not to be discouraged but planning for the future God has in store for them!

7 "And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to Jehovah for it; for in its peace you will have peace."

Here is the great test of whether we are viewing all that is happening in our nation from God's perspective or from our flesh's perspective! God had great plans for His people: All of their sins were NOT going to frustrate His great plan of salvation. God was also going to use His people to be a blessing even to their captives.

These instructions from God are very simple and very basic: We are to build Christian homes and gardens. We are to have lots of Christian kids and if God's people could do this EVEN in the midst of wicked Babylon, surely we can do the same in a post-Christian America!

- Paraphrasing one of our favorite sayings in this light you might say that WE should focus on doing the dishes and let God worry about saving the world!

We as Christians are not here to assimilate into the culture of the world's city, but rather to bring peace to the city and evangelize the lost, bringing forth the new city... the Heavenly Jerusalem!

Most of you know me well enough to know that I am not saying that the results of elections are not important or that we do not have a role to play at the gates of the city. What I am saying here this morning is that we must NEVER allow the 'bad news of the day' to divert our attention away from the tasks that God has given His people.

We as Christians have an obligation to see and understand the despair that surrounds us today: To be provoked as Paul was and to be ready to be those beautiful feet that bring Good News.

And as we properly confront the world we must remember that we can never allow them to take away that trust and foundation that we have in Jesus:

Paul warns the Saints at Colossi with these words...

8 “Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. 9 For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily;10 and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.”

- **The Spirit knows His job and He knows where history is going...**
- **Our job is to believe and serve!**

As we face the challenges of 2021, we can find our calling and our confidence in the final words of the Apostle Paul at Athens in our morning text: “30 Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, 31 because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained.

He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.””

Communion Meditation: Isaiah 55:

“ "Ho! Everyone who thirsts, Come to the waters; And you who have no money, Come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk Without money and without price.

2 Why do you spend money for what is not bread, And your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, And let your soul delight itself in abundance.

3 Incline your ear, and come to Me.

**Hear, and your soul shall live; And I will make an everlasting covenant with you--
The sure mercies of David.”**