

Pastor's Message – 5/14/23  
Acts 17:22-31

Why are there “so many songs about rainbows?” Do you ever feel like there is something missing? Surrounded by all the things in the world, good and bad, ugly and beautiful... still. A blank space. An unnamable space. A space that sometimes keeps you awake at night, trying to put your finger on what exactly it is.

That’s not the only song about rainbows. My recorder group is playing another classic song about rainbows at our program next week. You all know it, the song written by Harold Arlen and sung by Judy Garland:

Somewhere over the rainbow  
Way up high  
There's a land that I heard of  
Once in a lullaby  
Somewhere over the rainbow  
Skies are blue  
And the dreams that you dare to dream  
Really do come true

I’m sure these aren’t the only songs about rainbows—not the only stories about rainbows. We can go back further to another rainbow story—in the Book of Genesis. After the flood, God puts a rainbow in the heavens as a reminder that He will never destroy the earth in such a way. And yet, the world seems to be under the deluge of a continuing flood of disasters: mass shootings, war, divisions between people, uncertainties, job losses, disease . . .

You might not know that those aren’t the first words of the song, “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.” The song actually begins:

*When all the world is a hopeless jumble  
And the raindrops tumble all around,  
Heaven opens a magic lane.  
When all the clouds darken up the skyway  
There's a rainbow highway to be found,  
Leading from your window pane  
To a place behind the sun,  
Just a step beyond the rain.*

I doubt, I wonder sometimes, but I still continue to believe that “There

is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every [person] which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God the Creator, made known through Jesus Christ." That's just a paraphrase. Blaise Pascal, French mathematician, philosopher, theologian, actually wrote, "What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words, by God himself."

So many people seem to try to fill that God-shaped gap with things that end up causing them to feel even more lost and unfulfilled. The gods and goddesses of the ancient world are still around.

Perhaps it's money or retirement or our homes or hobbies. Perhaps it's busyness or romance. Maybe it's children or grandchildren and all their myriad of activities. Maybe it's food or technology or politics. Maybe it's sports. Wisconsin sports aren't alone I'm sure, but sometimes it seems to me that Vince Lombardi is god and Green Bay Packer football is Wisconsin's religion. In other parts of the world some people live and die by their soccer teams.

Religion seems to be dying off. We seem to be living in a post-Christian world and the number of people who declare themselves to be religious "nones" (people who claim no religious faith) is on the rise. "Nones" represent 23.1 percent of the U.S. population in 2019, up from 21.6 percent in 2016. That means that "nones" are statistically tied with Roman Catholics as the largest religious — or non-religious — groups in the country. I'm worried that that the percentage of "nones" has only increased.

In our Bible reading for today, we heard Paul speak to an audience like this in Athens. Just as in his context, the religiously non-affiliated have their own altars before which they bow. As modern theologian Paul Tillich once said, "we all have an ultimate concern, and what concerns you ultimately is your god. For some that ultimate concern (what concerns you the most or orients your life) is money, success, or family. That is your god. And then the question is whether these gods stand a chance against the God who loves and cares for us."

How strangely beautiful that these Athenians who were such great thinkers, so well-read, so highly educated, so thoroughly schooled in all of the arts and sciences, so sure of themselves in so many ways, should place an altar like this in their city. This one altar bore witness to the fact that the Athenians were willing to leave a door open to the unknown. They were

willing to admit that they might not have all of the answers, that their theology might be incomplete.

They were still open to new ideas, to new insights, to new lessons.

They were still, in a word, SEEKING.

Paul's address to the Athenians is both courageous and courteous. He begins by acknowledging their religiosity, even though Paul knows that their gods are no gods at all. "I notice that you are very religious in every way," says Paul (v. 23). That's quite a different approach than decrying the trend toward atheism or agnosticism, which is what we Christians tend to do. Paul doesn't see the Athenians *as far from God but as on the way to God*; that their good religious impulses only need rebranding.

Paul is speaking to unbelievers. We can point fingers at the "nones," but here's a question for us: Do you *believe* God has the "whole world in his hands"? Some might reply, "Well, of course I do. Why else would I be here in church this day?" But others might respond, "Yes, I'm here, but sometimes I'm not so sure. There's so much trouble and pain in the world, including in my corner of it. Sometimes it seems as if *nobody* has the world in his hands."

Even believers can sometimes have trouble seeking and finding God. How often do our prayers sound like: "Lord, money's a little tight this month. Help me." "O God, please let my uncle Joe be all right through this surgery." "God, I know I don't talk to you much, but I know you're always there, and right now, I could really use your help...." "God, why did this have to happen to *me*? Where were you? Why did you let this happen?"

Is it wrong to seek Jesus for what we get out of it? Is it wrong to seek Jesus for something to fill our needs, to feed our emptiness, to promise us heaven when we die? If such selfish motives get people to Jesus, it can't be all bad, can it?

In this sense, religion is striving for God, while Christianity is the event of God striving for us. For really the only answer Jesus gives is that he gives himself, and that is our example.

We might say we believe; we might say that we trust in God. *But there's no proof.* Nothing whatsoever in the way of scientific proof one way or the other. Can't prove or disprove the proposition that "he's got the whole world in his hands."

*What we know, we know by faith.* The affirmation that God has "the whole world in his hands" is a conclusion reached by faith, not by incontrovertible data as science understands data and evidence.

*Trusting God is a choice.* What it comes down to is that trusting God is a choice. Mature faith is not so much a feeling as it is a decision. We'll

always have enough evidence to make a leap of faith as well as to *not* make that leap. One way or the other, it's a choice.

*The fourth thing to consider is that it's not about overcoming doubt or having all questions answered. It's about knowing or having a conviction that the ultimate answers to life are known by God -- and only by God. Yes, we can know a lot. We can understand, we can come to terms with, we can accept -- a lot. But ultimate, full, all-comprehending knowledge is beyond our pay grade. We live on a "need to know" basis, and we've got to be comfortable with that. Some things are for God and God alone to know.*

I think that believers and non-believers alike need to come together in trust and hope. Hope is what makes the human condition survivable. We are called to live in a world of diverse hopes and dreams and invited to share the hope that we have been given, rooted in ancient stories and promises well kept. We are invited to offer our words of hope, our testimonies. And we are reminded that our mission is not to teach others to parrot our hope, but rather to invite the hopes and dreams of our neighbors to take root in the fertile soil of the gospel. As churches, we are meant to be the space and the communities where that rooting can happen. Being good news is about solidifying others' hope and hoping alongside them, inviting each other into a diversity of rainbow songs and stories in which God has loved and been faithful to God's people.

Believers can share their story of Jesus.

Identify the places in your own life where you've relied on the gods of culture for your "enoughness" instead of relying on God.

Tell the stories of how Christ has impacted your life and the lives of others. Demonstrate how Jesus has provided you with "enough."

Like Paul, meet people where they are rather than where you want them to be. Get to know their dreams and hopes and longings. Demonstrate the difference Christ has made in your life as you deepen your relationship.

Tell of the God in whom you "live and move and exist." Tell how you sense the love of God and how you feel as a child of God.

People may hear God calling their name. People may long for a connection with the God in whom they and the world can place their hopes and dreams. For those of you, and I hope that includes all of you, who still seek and reach, that you will continue to find the hopes and dreams of all the years met in the risen Christ who offers salvation for the world. May God's love and God's good news be the world in which you live, move, and exist day by day and moment by moment.