**Easter 2013**

VBC

Pastor John Johnson

Acts 17:22-31

March 30-31, 2013

**“God is Closer Than You Think”**

There was a day when your jeans wore out and you simply bought another pair—but it is more complex now

-but here’s how one consumer recently described his experience at The Gap

-he thought it was a rather simple task, until the salesperson started asking questions—

-do you want slim fit, easy fit, relaxed fit, baggy, or extra baggy? Um, relaxed fit,

-boot cut, straight cut? Straight

-button fly, zipper fly? Zipper

-faded or regular? Regular

-stonewashed, acid washed, or distressed? Distressed!

All of us can relate to this story—it’s part of living in a consumer culture bulging with choices

-did you know there are 85 different kinds of crackers at stores like Winco?

-230 soup offerings, 64 kinds of BBQ sauces, and forty options for toothpaste?

It’s sort of like a story in Acts 17—Paul faced a similar world—only it wasn’t the 61 varieties of suntan oils and sunblock—but the endless varieties of gods available—*read verse 16*

-Paul was making his way into first century Europe, beginning with Greece—and beyond the impressive architecture…

-walking down the streets of first century, Athens was sort of like walking down the cereal aisle of Safeway

-they had gods of every flavor—packaged as a product

-designer gods to fit every need—conform to man’s specs—sea gods, wine gods, harvest gods—Aphrodite, Ares, Artemis, Athena, Zeus, Apollo, Poseidon, etc.

*-godlike images “with all the God taken out of them”—Peterson*

-the irony was that Athens was also a university town where learning was its main industry

-the world Paul stepped into was also a sophisticated, intellectual environment

-it was the home of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle—where discourse was the main activity—but Paul was not afraid to enter the fray and submit to their insults—*read verses 17-21*

-Paul confronted two main philosophies

1. The Epicureans—who were the materialists of the day—who worked out a philosophy that we are a chance combination of atoms

-if there is a God—he is too preoccupied to notice

-which encouraged a hedonistic, narcissistic lifestyle

1. The Stoics—who were only interested in the soul

-one day, the soul will be free, once the body dies —but until then—stoically persevere

-the text tells us they looked down their long academic noses at Paul

-they likened him to birds after scraps, dogs rummaging through the garbage for something to satisfy their base appetites

-but he came with something new—and because they wanted to stay current—keep their options open

-they invited Paul to Mars Hill and gave him his allotted six minutes—*read verses 22-23*

-of all the gods—Paul was drawn to an altar dedicated to the god of the unknown—the god of anonymity

-the Greeks had built this altar overlooking Athens in order to assure that no god was left out—that every god was appeased

-in our day—you could call him—“*the god of whatever*”

-it was a little like walking in a house with a manger scene on the coffee table, Hanukkah lights in the entry way, a winter solstice flag draping the couch, a statue of Buddha near the fireplace, and an image of the storm god Thor gracing the wall

-the god of “whatever” was a safety precaution

-a way of hedging their bets—keeping their options open

A week ago I sat amidst the ruins of ancient Athens and thought about how much it and Portland are the same

-we too have our academies and our intellectuals—some who too dismiss Christianity today as simplistic or pre-scientific or naïve—and refer to pastors as idle babblers

-we too have our materialists and hedonists and those who live stoically

-we too have our own gods that preoccupy, take residence in the heart—only they are not made of silver and gold and stand in impressive temples

-they are much more subtle—the gods of beauty, money, achievement

-we may not think of them as idols—but some kneel at the altars of homes, cars, sex, technology, sports

-they have taken on disproportionate size, godlike proportion—become ultimate things—IDOLS

*-and idolatries of the heart are as bad as idolatries of the hand*

-and maybe it is fair to say we have this same nameless, “whatever god” overlooking our city as well

-who has become our current god of preference

-a god for those who want to cover all the possibilities—hedge their bets

-the “god of open options”—according to Barry Cooper in his article “Imprisoned By”

-those who worship at this altar are naturally driven by non-commitment

-respond to an invitation with maybe

-always keep their smart phones on in case of a better conversation

-keep Facebook and email open in one of the browser tabs half hoping to be interrupted

-have you noticed how many are his worshippers?

-they shop only at stores with a guaranteed return policy because they always return things—got to keep your options open

-hold back from making a marital vow, joining a church because a better possibility may surface

-he is the god of choice for those who use online dating as a way of looking for the next opportunity—until a better hit comes along

*-who are looking always for the elusive rabbit*

-who prefer living together rather than entering a lifelong, marital commitment

-he is behind a hook up culture—so prevalent on campuses today—where one engages in unemotional and unattached sex

-sex without the bonds of relationships

-sex that keeps one’s option open—for the next encounter

-like this altar in Athens—he is the god of the “whateverists”—the ambivalent—the god for those who refuse to commit

-but this god—like every other idol—does not deliver what he promises—he does not satisfy—he breaks your hearts

-for he loves to exhaust and confuse you—pulling towards—then pushing away

-make a choice—than change your mind

-obey his demands—and he will make you phlegmatic—i.e. FLAKE!

-he promises you can have everyone and everything—but in the end—you have nothing and no one

-for he robs you of the joy of committing oneself to one thing, one people, one person

-and leaves you feeling used and abused and empty

It is to this Paul spoke a centering word—one filled with passion

-for there is nothing God hates more than idolatry

-so Paul took on their paganistic claims

-AW Tozer once said—“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us”

-so what should we think?

1. HE IS IN A CLASS ALL HIS OWN
   1. HE ALONE IS THE MAKER AND SUSTAINER*—read verse 24*

-He is not simply another option—another statue to build a temple for

-looking at the Parthenon, one of the architectural wonders of the world, encasing its goddess, Athena

-Paul declared—you cannot fit, enclose, confine, reduce, domesticate Him to man-made temples

-in one statement Paul swept away the whole tradition of temples and images

-exposed them as a bunch of shams—unreal gods who enslave but have no power to save

-as gods that begin with man and reason upwards—rather than begin with God and accept His revelation

-He is the one absolute Creator, infinitely transcendent, infinitely immeasurable, incalculable

-whose center is everywhere and circumference is nowhere

-you cannot equate Him with creation—reduce Him to this present world—He made it all

*-in fact—He would still be God if there was no creation*

-hence—He alone has the authority over the entire universe!!

* 1. HE ALONE IS SELF SUFFICIENT*—read verses 25-26*

-unlike these gods in Athens who lived through the statues—statues that needed constant care—needed to be carved, plated, transported, carried, bathed, clothed

-the One who sustains life does not need anything from us

-neither our worship, our gifts, or our sacrifices

*-the only sacrifice He is impressed with is the one His Son offered on the Cross—His life for our lives*

-He does not need to be sustained by us

-it is actually the reverse—we are desperate for Him—helpless without Him

-our very next breath—the whole of our lives are totally dependent upon Him

-we look to Him to set our times—establish our boundaries

-where we will live—how long we will stay—has all been sorted out in eternity past

* 1. *HE ALONE IS CLOSER TO US THAN WE ARE TO OURSELVES—read verses 27-29*

-the one true God is not remote, absent, uninvolved—like so many of your gods who are far away on Mt Olympus with a “Do not Disturb” sign

-He is near—nearer than you think

-the reason there is an incurable religiosity is that He has placed something of Himself in our hearts

-there is something of eternity in us—we were made to pursue Him—Ecc 3:11

-we do not rise to Him—He stoops to our capacity, our needs, accommodating His speech to our understanding—His life for our lives

-He is the God who declares—draw near to Me—and I will draw near to you

1. HE WANTS ALL OF US*—read verses 30-31*

-because He is who He is—He requires our best energies—our deepest devotion—our exclusive commitment, our life long vows

-there was a time to claim ignorance—be indifferent—but these times are over

-the days of excuses are past—God has given you all the information you need

-it is time to turn from whatever to One

-repent of images that obscure His glory—that are an insult to His character

-entertaining thoughts unworthy of God

-time to make a decision—become single-minded

-for the day is coming God will judge all of us by the highest court in the land, the universe—the living and the dead, the high and the low

-the Judge will be a perfect man—His name is Jesus

-He alone has the credentials

-He alone has risen from the grave!

-Paul always comes back to this—the cross and the resurrection are the center of our faith

-this is what we celebrate this weekend!

THE RESPONSE—read verses 32-34

-much like today—some were unwilling to make the decision

-preferred to keep their options open

-some committed—which are you?

CONCLUSION

-illustration—lost passport—no show—go to embassy—free to travel—go to consulate

-proceed and you will be like Tom Hanks in The Terminal— living in an airport forever in SF

-and then—there they were—turns out Homeland Security just happened to have two agents—“We’re here to get you home”

-the resurrection is God’s way of saying—I alone am God

*-and I am here to get you home*