



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

Preaching the Word (Homiletics)

Lesson #6

B. Examples of New Testament Sermons

5. The Apostle Paul's Sermon to Pagan Gentiles (Acts 17:16-34)

On his second mission journey the apostle Paul found himself alone for a short time in the famous city of Athens. As usual, he **“reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshippers”** (Acts 17:17), but he also had opportunity to spend some time in the marketplace to talk to the people there about **“Jesus and the resurrection”** (Acts 17:18). Many different religious ideas were current in Athens at that time, but Paul was bringing some new and strange ideas. The philosophers were curious. Luke tells us: **“All the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing”** (Acts 17:21).

Because of their interest, Paul had an opportunity to address a crowd of pagan Gentiles at a place called the Areopagus. Because this time his listeners knew nothing about the Old Testament or God's promises of the Messiah, Paul did not refer to Jewish history, and he did not quote the Old Testament. He started out by referring to one of the religious altars he had seen in the city. This altar had the inscription: **“TO THE UNKNOWN GOD”** (Acts 17:23). Paul told them he wanted to tell them about this God that they knew very little about: the true God.

Yet they did know something about this God, for they had seen the things He created. He **“made the world and everything in it”** (Acts 17:24). They were also recipients of His blessings, **“since He gives to all life, breath, and all things”** (Acts 17:25). Instead of quoting the Old Testament prophets, Paul referred to what some Greek authors had written. One had said: **“For we are also His offspring”** (Acts 17:28). This Greek author acknowledged that there was some kind of Deity who had made human beings in the beginning. The city of Athens was filled with idols. Paul pointed out that **“we ought not to think that the Divine nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising”** (Acts 17:29). Just by observing the world and the things in it, they should have realized that a God who had made them could not be contained in a temple or be put into some kind of animal or human shape.

Notice how Paul proceeded from something they knew (or should have known) to the main point of his message. He wanted to introduce them to Jesus. He did so by telling them that the true God, the Creator and Preserver of all things, would one day **“judge the world in righteousness”** (Acts 17:31). Who would be the Judge? It is **“The Man whom He has ordained”** or appointed for this task. And who is that Man? It would be the Man whom He raised from the dead. It seems they listened with great interest up to this point. **“When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, ‘We will hear you again on this matter’”** (Acts 17:32). The Athenians were so wise in the ways of the world that they could not possibly swallow such an outlandish tale of a man who had been raised from the dead.

Nevertheless, even in Athens there were some who were brought to faith in Christ through Paul's sermon. **“Some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them”** (Acts 17:34). No doubt these few listened to Paul after the crowd dispersed, and Paul was able to finish his sermon and explain that Jesus was this Man who would be the Judge, and that Jesus had died for the sins of all and won forgiveness for all, and that there was salvation and eternal life in Jesus.

Notice that in this address at Athens Paul introduced his message about Jesus Christ differently from the

way he did when he spoke to a Jewish audience. In the same way preachers today need to know who their listeners are, and how they can adapt their sermons to their audience. Old Testament quotations would have meant little or nothing to these pagans. Paul wanted to lead them to the truth about Jesus, so he used a different way. He used the so-called natural knowledge of God that God has given to everyone on earth. Paul wrote about this natural knowledge of God in his letter to the Romans: **“What may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead”** (Romans 1:19-20).

This natural knowledge of God is not enough to save anyone, but it is a point of reference that preachers can use to talk about God and lead them to a better understanding of who God really is and what He has done for the world in Jesus Christ. Again, it is a matter of proceeding from the known to the unknown. It is a matter of beginning with what is familiar to the listener and moving from there to that which is unfamiliar, namely Jesus Christ and what He has done. This is especially important when we speak to persons who know little or nothing about Jesus.

Questions

1. What special opportunity did Paul have in Athens to preach God’s Word?
2. In what way was his audience different from his usual listeners?
3. Why did Paul not quote from the Old Testament in his sermon?
4. What did Paul say about the unknown God?
5. What is meant by the natural knowledge of God?
6. What did Paul say about Jesus to this crowd?
7. What brought a sudden end to his preaching?
8. What difference was there between Paul’s preaching in Antioch of Pisidia and his preaching in Athens?
9. Why is it important that we follow Paul’s example?
10. What does it mean to go from the known to the unknown in our preaching and why is that a good thing to do?

Read Acts 28:16-31