

Speaking for Ourselves (Acts 17.22-31)
Jeremy Rutledge, Covenant Church,
May 4, 2008

Climbing to the lectern every week with notes in hand is a strange exercise. Turning to the first page and looking out at the sanctuary to see the faces looking back, one trusts that the process is somehow beyond the preacher, something greater than the sum of a single person's week of wading through ancient texts, asking current questions, and trying to put them together somehow for public presentation. The preacher never knows how the words will be heard, he knows only what he meant, she knows only what was stirring inside that she tried to name. And it is my view that every preacher worth his salt is really only speaking to himself, every preacher worth getting out of bed to hear is really only speaking for herself. But then again preachers by trade are speaking to a roomful of other selves, selves who have come to hear something different than the things they've been hearing all week. It's a strange business and with time it's good for one's sense of humor.

I remember a sermon that I preached just last fall. It was a sermon that I wrote with some excitement on a subject that I took very personally. I told some stories and detailed an ethical choice that had become a sort of spiritual practice for me. I thought that perhaps I was making myself vulnerable, inviting others to join me, and pushing our theology into a wonderful new direction. When I delivered the sermon, however, I felt that it was a bit lacking in poetry and worried that I hadn't really done it justice. At any rate, I knew that I had tried and that sometimes the sermon doesn't quite do what I had hoped. Other times, of course, sermons do much more than I imagine so it seems to me that things basically balance out over time. This particular Sunday, however, I received

two very strong comments about the sermon. The first comment was from someone who told me that my remarks were so dreadful that they made her question why she came to church at all. As long as she came to Covenant, she said, she would hope never to hear anything like that again. “Really?” I asked. The next equally strong comment came a day later from someone on the e-mail sermon list. This man wrote to me to say that he thought I had written the best sermon he had ever read. He urged me to have it published at once, saying that a message so beautiful and relevant must be widely distributed, that there were many people who desperately needed to hear such words. “Really?” I asked. I might add that in both cases I smiled because I didn’t particularly agree with either perspective, though I had a great fondness for each of the people offering the opinions. I just wondered if maybe the sermon hadn’t been as dull as I had first supposed. And that made me happy. But happiness with sermons doesn’t last because it is always time to write a new one. Sunday mornings come, as my father used to say, “with alarming regularity,” and a preacher’s life seems ever on the cusp of another amble up toward the lectern to look out at all the faces once again.

I couldn’t help but reflect on preaching this week as I read and reread our text from the Book of Acts. In that narrative we are offered not so much as story as a sermon from Paul on a visit he made to the city of Athens. It was a learned city, an eclectic crowd, and we know that, among others, he was addressing Jews, Epicureans, and Stoics. People of many different philosophies made up his audience and Paul might have expected any number of challenges and questions from the Athenians when he spoke to them. Some surely would have hated what he had to say while others may have warmed to it a bit more than he might have expected. In that respect, perhaps the story of any preacher is

similar to another. But what may be more important than the crowd's response is the preacher's own identification with his words. What is telling about a sermon is what it says about the speaker. For only authentic words have a chance of doing their hearers much good.

We won't go through Paul's entire sermon here, but we will just note that he begins by offering a few observations from the perspective of a visitor. Paul tells the Athenians that he has walked around their city, looking carefully at their objects of worship. Perhaps while he walked he reflected on the history of Greek culture. Perhaps he imagined greats like Pericles or Socrates strolling through the markets. Perhaps he tried some of the local food and found that it excited his taste buds. Whatever Paul did on his walk, it seems to have ultimately led him to a certain altar that perplexed and intrigued him. He came upon a shrine bearing the inscription, "To an unknown god." If Paul was like any other preacher, then he was always looking for a story. And what better story than this? What more clever device than the altar to the unknown? Surely the wheels started turning then. "This will be a brilliant opening for my address at the Areopagus." So Paul uses this illustration as he speaks to the learned audience of philosophers. "I saw your altar to the unknown god," Paul begins, "and I can see that you are religious enough to acknowledge deep mystery." "I have come to tell you what I have learned of the mystery."

Afterwards, Paul weaves Greek poetry and philosophy together with a sort of natural theology, offering his perspective that the divine is not an image that can be made by human hands and known in that way. Rather, the divine has given to all mortals life and breath and can be known in that way. And perhaps for Paul to know God was not to stand in front of an altar erected to mystery, as lovely an experience as that might be. For

Paul, knowing God may have been a bit more akin to standing on his soapbox in the company of others and letting that breath that ran through him declare that there was a certain message to be heeded and certain actions to be taken by those who would befriend the divine. For Paul, knowing God was related to the need to repent, to turn from one way and go another. Paul's God required a choice. As he stood there and spoke to the people of Athens he said to them rather boldly that, though they were surrounded by many philosophies and multiple mysteries, they would still need to choose the way they would follow. And their God would be known to them in the choice. Paul's remarks are just plucky enough and his audience just cultured enough that I am reminded of another favorite sermon given by an equally audacious preacher. Like Paul, this preacher was really having a conversation with himself. But unlike Paul, his conversation had led him to the decision that he was going to get out of the preaching business.

It was in March of 1838 that Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote to his mother and explained to her that he was going to quit his ecclesiastical charge.¹ He had a number of reasons for this, a few of which he explained to his mother, but by all accounts he was frustrated both with himself and with institutional religion. So he had decided to retire from preaching and he had written to tell his mother. A week later, Emerson received a letter from his alma mater, the Harvard Divinity School, asking him to deliver the address to its graduating students that year. Emerson accepted the invitation and began to draft a sermon of sorts to deliver to the young men who were about to enter full-time parish ministry. When commencement day arrived, the small Harvard chapel was filled not only with the handful of graduates, but with a number of esteemed professors, civic

¹ Conrad Wright, *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism: Channing-Emerson-Parker* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1986), 26.

leaders, and prominent local clergymen. It was a very cultured crowd, a kind of American Athens. But most of those gathered were not at all prepared for what Emerson was about to say.

Climbing to the lectern, Emerson began by speaking to himself, speaking for himself, as the Transcendentalist poet that he was becoming. He looked out at the faces looking back and said, “In this refulgent summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life. The grass grows, the buds burst, the meadow is spotted with fire and gold in the tint of flowers. The air is full of birds, and sweet with the breath of pine...”² On and on he went, for a full page and a half, detailing the beauty of nature and its laws until most of his audience must have begun to wonder what he was talking about. This was not the standard New England sermon introduction of the day. Emerson’s introduction, however, wasn’t simply a throw-away or a lead-in. It was actually more the point because what followed was a long critique of the institutional church and its doctrines and a call to his audience that they experience religion for themselves. Emerson, the slightly burned-out preacher with just enough fire still in his eyes for such a fine occasion as Harvard commencement, looked out to the divinity students and said to them that the church they were about to enter had become stale and stagnant and that it was dying for lack of fresh breath.

To the horror of his audience, Emerson described what it was like to sit in the pew and listen to terrible preaching. He said to them, “Now the priest’s Sabbath has lost the splendor of nature; it is unlovely; we are glad when it is done...” He continued, “We

² Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Divinity School Address” in *The American Transcendentalists: Essential Writings*, ed. Lawrence Buell (New York: The Modern Library, 2006), 130.

shrink as soon as the prayers begin... We are fain to wrap our cloaks about us, and secure, as best we can, a solitude that hears not.”³ Emerson described gazing wistfully out the window at the beautiful falling snow while an overly-educated preacher yammered on tirelessly about matters that bore no relation to the real world, its beauty or its challenge. He warned the young divinity students that if they did not choose to be different, then the institution would do the choosing for them and turn them all into the dry and irrelevant orators that had nearly overrun the churches already. Emerson’s words were as hilarious as they were scathing, but there is at least a hint of sadness when we remember that he was probably speaking to himself as much as anyone else.

Near the end of his sermon, Emerson reached a climactic point. And he offered to the aspiring ministers words that we might all do well to hear. “Let me admonish you,” he preached, “first of all, to go alone; to refuse the good models, even those which are sacred in the imagination...and dare to love God without mediator or veil.”⁴ In a thunderous conclusion, Emerson urged all of his hearers to work out their own religion, to have their own first-hand experiences, to make their own choices, and follow their own paths. This was not, for Emerson, a shirking of tradition. It was an enlivening of tradition, a living out of the best of its ideas, and a sublime experience of the divine in the here and now. “God need not be unknown to you,” he was saying. Stray from the well-worn path and you will find the sacred in spades.

Paul went to Athens and said that the unknown God could be known and that all it would take was repentance, the turning toward a different way. That way for Paul was no doubt experiential and transformative. Emerson went to Cambridge and said that the

³ Ibid., 138.

⁴ Ibid., 142.

divine could be known in life and that all it would take was realizing how we ourselves live out the sacred stories and come into contact with their truths a thousand times a day. And so each of these preachers really begs the question, not so much of how they perceived the divine through repentance or through wakefulness, but how we might perceive the divine in our own lives. Which leads me to end the sermon in a way that preachers rarely choose to end, in a way that moves the conversation away from the preacher speaking for himself or with herself and toward the much more relevant conversation of all of us speaking with ourselves and for ourselves. I end the sermon with questions that I am working out on my own. And I invite you to join me in working them out on your own.

How is it this very day that you have experienced something sublime and religious?

What words would you use to describe it? Would they be in traditional language or in your own personal vocabulary?

What, if anything, does your religious understanding ask you to do?

And if you were to climb up to the lectern, in Athens, in Cambridge, or in Houston, and speak for yourself about the things that you call sacred, what would you say?

Friends, a wounded world waits to hear. So let us find our answers. And let us make them with courage and joy. May it be so.