

Too Good Not to Be True

Acts 17:16-34

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost/ 11th August 2019

Go to the heart of old Athens today—climb up to the Acropolis to the Parthenon or walk around its base, through the ancient agora or market-place—and you’ll have a pretty good sense what Paul saw when he arrived in this ancient city of philosophy and wisdom. Even today, you can see the glory of the temple to the goddess Athena, you get a glimpse of what the temples to Zeus and Hephaistos and Apollo and the Altar to the Twelve Gods might have looked like, along with smaller temples situated around the agora, with countless statues to the gods, surrounded by porticos of learning. Just above the agora is the Areopagus, the Hill of Aries, or as the Romans called it, Mars Hill. You can still climb it today. I’ve climbed it twice. It was the place for debate and civic trials. From it you have a tremendous view up to the Parthenon to the east and north down into the agora. It would have been a sight to behold in its time—and all of it irritated Paul to no end! It made him uneasy as a Jew. It was disturbing. He was definitely out of his comfort zone. Being there stirred up his spirit, the Greek text says, for the city was full of idols, a forest of idols, the text suggests. And Paul being Paul, well, he couldn’t be silent about it, so he engaged in dialog with worshippers in the synagogue and other religious people in the market place. Every day, we’re told, he debated with whomever happened to show up in the market place.

One day philosophers from the school of Epicurios and from the Stoic school started to debate with him. They didn’t have a lot of respect for Paul. They called him a “babbler,” who didn’t make any sense. They accused him of being a proclaimer of foreign divinities, because he was talking with them about Jesus and the resurrection. So they invited him to go to the Areopagus to engage him further. “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting. It sounds rather strange to us” (Acts 17:19-20). Paul was sharing a new story about the God of Israel and what God did and is doing through Jesus. The philosophers didn’t know this God. And as for the concept of the “resurrection of the dead,” well that was unsettling for them. Since at least the time of Plato (b. 429 BCE), many Greeks believed in the immortality of the soul, but the resurrection of the body—that was a strange and bizarre concept for them.

Now, there’s a lot going on in this text. We could move in any number of directions. We could look at how the church exists in urban settings; the city of Athens is larger than life in our imaginations, both then and now. Or we could talk about Epicurean and Stoic philosophy’s engagement with the Christian message. (That probably sounds boring for a Sunday morning.) We could talk about apologetics, that is, how Christians engage with secular culture or how the Christian message takes root in alien or foreign lands, how we defend the truth of the Christian message in a hostile environment. In fact, should the church even engage in apologetics? Have we reduced the Christian life into a philosophy of ideas and beliefs that need to be argued, debated, proved, defended? The early theologian Tertullian (155-220) famously asked, “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?” What does Greek philosophy have to do with the God of Abraham and Sarah and Jesus Christ? What does philosophy have to do with theology? This question is still being debated in seminaries, universities, and communities of faith. There are any number of directions we could go.

But look at Paul. Remember, Paul is on a mission, sent by God to proclaim the good news of the crucified and resurrected Lord. Paul is not really debating in Athens, he's proclaiming, bearing witness to something, something that happened, something that happened to him, something that is happening to the world around him, still happening, whether one knows it or not. The Risen Christ confronted him, called him, sent him, commissioned him to bear witness to what the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Israel is up to in the world (Acts 9). The message, this amazing story of good news of grace and new life and reconciliation is not only for the heirs of Abraham and Sarah, it has and is being unleashed upon the wider world, to the nations, to Gentiles—who, from a Jewish perspective, means *everyone else*.

This is what strikes me about Paul's time in Athens. We can get lost in the philosophical considerations and fail to see that here we have Paul, a faithful Jew grossed out by the sight of all those idols, and yet refuses to turn away from touching the unclean thing, who refuses to turn away from Gentiles. That's Paul's mission, to reach Gentiles, everyone else, with the gospel. This theme runs through the entire Book of Acts. In Acts 10, for example, it's the Holy Spirit who presses Peter to join the Gentiles, to eat with them, he's commanded by the Spirit to eat unclean things (Acts 10:13-15), and then extend the gospel to Cornelius the Centurion of the Italian Cohort in Jerusalem. Here in Athens, Paul "extends himself into a Gentile world to offer a way into God's beautiful new world."¹

Consider this: here is Paul, a serious Jew, a student of Torah, rightly disturbed by the idolatry all around him, but then he does something absolutely stunning and marvelously productive with his outrage. He doesn't turn away from idolaters, but turns *toward* them.² He leans in. This is what the gospel does and it's what the gospel always demands of us—a reaching toward and a reaching out to the point of touching and holding.

Paul reaches out to these Gentiles who could not be more removed from his world and invites them into the story of God's salvation, to share in the power of resurrection to renew and restore a broken, fallen world! God desires even idolaters to take up a new role in the narrative of God's love, this new thing God is doing in the world through Christ. Now, even Gentiles are grafted into the family tree, included in the story. Can you sense the graciousness of Paul? Just consider the enormous psychological and spiritual transformation that had to occur within Paul to allow him to extend such graciousness, inclusion, and welcome to the Gentile world. Can you sense the graciousness of God?

And notice how Paul talks with them. It's a dialog. It's reasoned, respectful, thoughtful engagement, with careful listening. Notice that Paul never tries to prove them wrong. He doesn't say their gods are stupid, but appeals to the thought that there could be, for them, a still unknown God. Paul proclaims the message of that God, the God of Jesus and his resurrection. Notice how he never quotes the scripture—that's because at time that there's no such thing as the New Testament. The Gospels had yet to be written. All Paul had was the authority of his personal experience and the stories passed down to him. What Paul does cite is not one but two contemporary pagan poets.³ Paul makes the case for Christ, and he does this by building upon their religious sensibilities and then he pushes them forward. More than anything else, Paul wants the Gentile world to know the ever-expanding reach of God's love and their inclusion in

the story of resurrection. We saw this, too, several weeks ago in the story of Philip's engagement with the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. You can sense God's desire to draw the circle of inclusion ever wider and wider. It's the story of God's radically inclusive and expansive love, extending welcome, acceptance, and granting full participation in the narrative of God's salvation. That's because: *God wants to be near us*. And even death doesn't have the power to separate us from God's desire to be close to us, in the flesh (Romans 8:31-39).

That's what resurrection means—God desires to be present. In the flesh—and that's what disturbed the Greeks the most. It was too much for them. And so they laughed, scoffed at the thought of resurrection; some did say they were intrigued and wanted to hear more (Acts 17:32). Still, it's around resurrection where the story becomes too much, maybe too good, too good to be true. Anything too good simply can't be true—or so we've been conditioned to think in our cynical age. Is it too much for us, too good to be true? How do we respond to the stories of God's grace that astound and amaze us? Are we skeptics? Cynics? Suspicious? Maybe—for good reasons.

There is much about the Christian story that doesn't seem to fit with the world as we know it. It sounds too outlandish, too bizarre this grace, this mercy, this acceptance, of good Samaritans and prodigals given lavish feasts and new beginnings; this love, this joy, this story of a dead man walking—it's all too good to be true.⁴ J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973), a faithful Christian, coined a new word to capture the Christian story: *eucaastrophe*.⁵ *Eu*-meaning "good" + *catastrophe*. A *eucaastrophe* is when the light of deliverance breaks through the darkness of despair. It's the unexpected turn of events, like resurrection. And joy breaks through. It might only be for an instant, but that instant, that moment, like the blink of an eye, is enough to change your life forever. It's "a fleeting glimpse of Joy," Tolkien said. "Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief."⁶

It's no wonder that cynics and skeptics and countless others who live with a constant hermeneutic of suspicion about everything and everyone don't know what to do with a story such as ours. Yes, there's a place for doubt—doubt is necessary for faith. (see John 20:26-29). But do you ever wonder why God didn't just get the good news across in a straightforward fashion more in keeping with common sense? Why did it have to be "too good to be true"? Why did it have "to be so good"? Or to use biblical language, why did the first witnesses to resurrection have to "disbelieve for joy" (Luke 24:41)?

Why does it have to be so unbelievably good? James Loder (1931-2001), my mentor at Princeton Seminary, proposed one reason. We need to remember, he said, "that there are those here and around the world who experience life not as ordinary but as too profoundly agonizing for words. There are those whose hurt is so great or whose emptiness is so vast and silent that they want nothing more than to find a way to get out of life, to drop the course with dignity, if possible—a simple 'withdraw' stamped on their cosmic transcript. Such agony," Loder said, "may not ultimately have anything to do with political oppression, social status, education or the lack thereof, or living conditions. For such persons the silence behind the silence is too deep for words..." We can relate to this as we all share the brokenness of the human condition. And it's not just people, but all creation, this entire cosmic order and disorder, that is groaning and in travail (Romans 8), searching for meaning, hungering for purpose and love and connection and

hope. “Perhaps,” says Loder, “[this] is at least one reason why it had to be too good to be true: there had to be a Word spoken from the other side of a situation that was too wretched for words. From the other side of the silence.”⁷

The gospel has to be so good, truly good, because only then will it have the power to compensate for the pain and tragic suffering of God’s people. And then, by grace, our personal stories can be grafted into, integrated into, absorbed by *the* story of God’s desire to be near to us. Yes, the story of the gospel, of God’s ever-expanding love and grace and acceptance, is too good not to be true, so good that it must be true—and we get to be part of it. And it’s the story that we, like Paul, get to tell. *Amen*.

¹ Willie James Jennings, *Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 176.

² Jennings, 176.

³ “In him we live and move and have our being,” is from a poem by Epimenides (7th-6th century BCE) And, “For we too are his offspring,” is attributed to Aratus (b. 310 BCE).

⁴ See Luke 10:29-37, Luke 15:25-32, 2 Corinthians 5:17.

⁵ Tolkien developed this idea in “Fairy Stories,” the Andrew Lang Lecture given at the University of St. Andrews, St. Andrews, Scotland, 8 March 1939. It was later published “On Fairy-Stories,” in 1947. Tolkien calls the incarnation of Christ the eucatastrophe of human history and the resurrection the eucatastrophe of the incarnation.

⁶ Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories” (1947).

⁷ James E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989), 215. For more on Loder, see Kenneth E. Kovacs, *The Relational Theology of James E. Loder: Encounter and Conviction* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).