

Make Known the Unknown God
Acts 17:22-31

May 10, 2026 (Eas. 6-A)

St. Paul's Lutheran, North Freedom

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

"Therefore, since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead."
(Acts 17:22-31 NIV)

In the name of the risen Christ, dear fellow worshippers:

Paul was greatly distressed. Upset. Angry. Walking around Athens, the ancient Greek city, he noticed the famous temple of Athena, the altar to Zeus, the shrine to Hermes, and the many other statues, shrines and altars to numerous false gods and goddesses. "How blind, how ignorant these people are," he thought.

Knowing that Athens was the home of philosophy, he began debating with philosophers there as he proclaimed the gospel of Jesus, the resurrection. They invited Paul to give a hearing about these "new-fangled ideas" at the Areopagus, the famous court in Athens. Paul took them up on the offer. He mentioned an inscription on one of the altars he saw in Athens—"TO AN UNKNOWN GOD"—and used that as the springboard of his talk. Paul teaches us as well, when we are speaking to those who don't know or believe in Christ, how to **Make Known the Unknown God**.

In making known the unknown God, we learn from Paul first of all to begin with a point of contact and common ground. Paul remarked how the people of Athens were "very religious" with all these altars and shrines, including the one to the "Unknown God." While he showed respect with that word "religious," it also could mean "superstitious," something the philosophers could agree with. The philosophers emphasized reason, though in different ways: Some were materialists who thought belief in God and life after death was superstition; others thought the world came from god-like forces that animate the world, but it's unknowable if life can go on after death.

In our world, more and more we'll come across those who aren't Christian. They might say, "I'm not religious, but I'm spiritual." That is, they believe in the existence of God-like forces animating the world, but they don't want to be pinned down to any religious system like Christianity. Others will be more materialistic and say religion is superstition, that there is no afterlife, that this world is all there is. Agnosticism, the belief that "we don't know if there's a God or gods or whatever," is on the rise.

But agnosticism is a cop-out, as Paul pointed out. All people have a natural knowledge of God. In making known the unknown God, Paul built on that natural knowledge, that there is a God

“who made the world and everything in it” and obviously does not live in “temples built by human hands.” Paul identified who this unknown God is: “The Lord of heaven and earth.”

In his letter to the Romans Paul wrote how the Creator God makes himself known: “Since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse” (Ro. 1:20). It stands to reason that the world did not originate from a thing or a force, but from a personal being who is eternal and almighty. The vast universe with all the stars; the wide variety of plant and animal life—all of this points to a mighty, living Creator who made all things. God is not a man-made concept; it is us human beings who are God-made, for all life comes from the Creator God.

Because of that natural knowledge of God, there is no excuse for ignorance. Paul made two points in his speech about the “Unknown God”: One, even their Greek poets knew that life has its source from God. He quoted a common saying, attributed to the philosopher Epimenides: “For in him we live and move and have our being,” and from the poet Aratus, “We are his offspring.” Point two: God made human beings as his offspring “so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.” It is foolish to settle on identifying the living divine being, the source of life, as a created object like the sun or a man-made object like a graven image.

Ignorance is no excuse. Not only do we know there’s a god, but we also have a conscience that tells us we must give an account to God. And so Paul went on to say: “In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.” We all need to repent, to have a change of heart over the sins we know by nature anger God who is holy, and to turn to this formerly unknown God who does make himself known.

But the natural knowledge of God can only take a person so far. We’ve learned from creation that God is a living being, the source of all life, eternal and all-powerful; and we hear from our conscience that God is holy and will punish sin. But just who is that God we are to turn to? Paul told the Athenians about him, and how he has been made known: “For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.” Paul started talking about Jesus.

Jesus made known the unknown God to the world. His miracles drew attention and showed God’s power. Jesus’ teaching to the crowds showed his authority as God. His teaching to his disciples led them to see God in Jesus, as he told Philip, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Most of all, Jesus’ rising from the dead proves to us that he is the living Lord God. Jesus is the one we turn to before the day of judgment arrives, for he alone is the Savior, taking our guilt away before God with his death, and giving us life by his resurrection.

To make known the unknown God, start with the point of agreement on religion, spirituality, and build on the natural knowledge of God, but most of all, point them to the Savior. They—and we—can only know the unknown God through the Word he has made himself known in the Bible. And only in Jesus can we know God.

And to whom do we make him known? (Here’s my “Mother’s Day application.”) Maybe someone in your family, or a relative, who refuses to come to church and even says they don’t believe. Maybe you’ve tried and tried and don’t seem to make progress. Don’t give up. Keep praying. Even in philosophy-saturated Athens, some came to faith after Paul’s testimony. Keep praying and keep bringing them the message; let the Holy Spirit do his work. Amen.