

Bring Your Story

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, October 14, 2018, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Acts 17:16-31](#) and [Matthew 28:1-10](#)

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Paul was on the run. Well, maybe not on the run, but he was at least on the walk. Paul was basically “hiding out” in Athens. In the prior chapters, he has attempted to share the Gospel in Thessalonica and Berea and – well, things did not go well. Basically, Paul was on the lam. He was hiding out.

And he couldn’t keep his mouth shut.

We come into the story in the midst of one of his evangelical journeys, traveling around the Mediterranean world, starting new churches and encouraging the converts to this new way, this new religion of Jesus-followers. Silas and Timothy have stayed behind at their last stop and Paul has gone on ahead to Athens. Paul had some time waiting for the others to catch up, and, in his wanderings around Athens, he got upset. He noticed that the city was full of idols, and as a good Jew, this was upsetting. Upsetting enough that Paul *had* to say something.

So every day, he would go somewhere where there were people – the synagogue, the marketplace – and he would talk about God and Jesus and the resurrection. He got into arguments with Epicureans, who believed that the gods did not intervene in daily life.¹ He got into arguments with Stoics, who suppressed passions and focused on behavior over beliefs.² Based on who he argued with, it appears that Paul thought that what you believed mattered, that you should believe in one God (Yahweh) who is active in daily life, and that there are reasons to be passionate.

Some of the people who he got into discussion with took Paul out to the Areopagus, known as Mars Hill by the Romans, for further discussion. In classical times, the Areopagus was the seat of the Athenian court of appeals, a place of justice and judgment.³ By this time, the author of Acts seems to say that it had become a place of much more common conversation: “the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new,” is how the *New Revised Standard Version* translates the description.⁴ The more vernacular paraphrase, *The Message*, translates the description, “There were always people hanging around, natives and tourists alike, waiting for the latest tidbit on most anything.”⁵

Paul used this as another opportunity to share his story. “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”⁶

In his travels around Athens, Paul not only found the upsetting altars and idols, he also found an altar to “an unknown god.” I guess the Athenians were

covering all the bases. Paul found the opening he needed to share his story. He used this “unknown god” as a vehicle to tell his story about Yahweh and Jesus (though, interestingly, Paul doesn’t specifically name Jesus).

Paul tells them that the uncontainable God is the creator of the universe and gives us life. “From one ancestor,” Paul says, “[Yahweh] made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and ... allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for ... and find [God] – though indeed [God] is not far from each one of us.”⁷

Paul makes an interesting assumption here – one that I agree with: Human beings long for a connection with the intimately transcendent, with holy-ness, with the ultimate within which we live and move and have our being. Human beings long for God. And since God made us, we can’t make God. This God we long for can’t be limited to altars and shrines and idols.

Paul’s “doxology about the wonder of creation turns into a summons to repent. Only late in the paragraph of Paul’s speech in Acts is Jesus mentioned, and this only by allusion to ‘a man whom [God] has appointed’ (Acts 17: 31). The speech culminates with reference to Jesus about whom Paul makes this affirmation: First, Jesus is raised from the dead. Second, his resurrection is a promise that all will be judged in righteousness.”⁸ The One who made us calls us to repent from our ignorance and from our unrighteousness.

When I saw that this as one of the scripture readings recommended for this year’s pledge campaign, I thought, “We’ve got to use it.” I love how Paul can’t keep his mouth shut. He has a story to tell. He wants to tell it. And he is wise enough to find his opening.

I imagine Paul wandering the streets of Athens, Noticing the altar to an unknown God, and thinking, “I can use that. I was looking for an opening and there it is. That’s my door to sharing my story.”

As I studied this scripture more carefully I noticed that Paul had more than his story and this opening. Looking carefully at the story, I see he had five things.

First, he had his story to share. Paul was an upholder of the purity of Judaism when he had an experience, an encounter with the resurrected Christ. His life was transformed. He had a whole new purpose – letting people know about what God was doing in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. That’s what he knew in his life and it’s what he had to share.

Second, he had a reason for sharing it. He probably had reasons (plural) for sharing it. Here in Athens, we read that his reason was how upset he was by seeing all the altars to false gods and idols. The people of the city didn’t even know who the real God was, let alone anything about Jesus.

Third, he had people to share it with. People gathered in the synagogue and in the market place. They liked to talk, to gossip. They liked to argue philosophy.

Fourth, he had an opening – the altar to an unknown god.

And fifth, he had the persistence to keep sharing it until someone started to listen. He went to the synagogue. He went to the market place. He went to that Areopagus. And eventually, some people listened and were convinced and joined this movement of Jesus-followers.

Now, I don't want you to lose track of all five of these things. I assume you have all five of them as well. But having a reason for sharing your story, having people to share it with, having an opening to share it, and having the persistence to keep sharing it really don't matter if you don't know what your story is.

What is your story?

My story is not early as dramatic as Paul's (though it's worth pointing out that in this situation, here on Mars Hill, Paul doesn't share the dramatic parts of his story). I don't have a blasted off my donkey and blinded conversion experience. My story is one of always being connected with God, though my understanding of what I mean when I say "God" is continually evolving.

Maybe I haven't been knocked off my ass by God, but I've been wowed by God. I've had experiences of the intimately transcendent that have taken me out of myself and into a greater wholeness. And I've discovered that my life has meaning and grounding and direction because of my relationship with God – the God revealed in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. I have come to realize that if I didn't have that relationship I might still have found meaning and grounding and direction – it just would have been in one of the idols of our culture, an idol like accumulation, or greed, or even violence. Instead, I've found meaning, grounding, and direction in Yahweh.

But that's not much of a story, is it? On Mars Hill, this philosophical description might be effective. In most of the rest of life, it's the stories of the incidents moving me from one point to another on this journey that would be compelling.

For someone, my story of coming to terms with my sexuality and coming to terms with the reality of God fully embracing me, sexuality and all, might be the story they need to hear.

For another person, my story of how I came to be so convinced that climate change is the moral issue of our day may be the story I need to share, and for someone else, that story might turn them off.

For someone else, it might be my story of struggling to love people who seem to me to be so hateful that they need to hear.

And for someone else, my story of God's love and power experienced in my journey through grief after my mother died might connect in a way mothering else I might say could.

Regardless, I need to bring my stories.

Someone might need to know that I believe that what you believe is much less important than how you love, though I suspect I would communicate more if I

told my story about struggling when I friend I deeply respected as a progressive Christian told me her story about speaking in tongues.

And someone else might need to know that there are Christians who don't believe in penal substitutionary atonement, though I suspect I would communicate more if I brought my story about my mom blowing my 10-year-old mind when she told me she didn't believe in a literal hell.

And maybe I need to bring my story about how I've learned that without a community that is also basing its life on a relationship with the God revealed in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, my faith journey would founder. Maybe I need to bring my story of needing and discovering a community that welcomes me on my faith journey exactly where I am and encourages me to continue the journey.

Maybe I need to bring my story of how nothing but God has managed to fill the God-shaped hole in my life. Not diversions and lies. Not accolades and power. Not accumulation and possessions. Nothing really fits, nothing really fills it the way God does.

During this pledge campaign, we're asking the question, "What shall we bring?" Last week I suggested that we need to bring our "yes" to God. This week, it's all about our stories.

Imagine if the Marys did what the angel and Jesus told them to do. Imagine they went back to the disciples and said, "Jesus has been raised from the dead and he is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there. Go to Galilee." Nothing more. Just what the angel and Jesus told them to say.

The disciples would have said something like, "Are you nuts?"

Instead, the Marys told their story. The told the disciple something like, "First thing this morning, as the sun was coming up, we went to the tomb where we buried him. And while we were there, an angel appeared, and the earth shook, and the Roman guards collapsed with fright. And the angel told us that Jesus is raised. And sure enough, the tomb was empty. Then the angel told us to tell you that he is raised and was going ahead of us to Galilee.

"We were so overcome with joy, we started running back here - and on the way, Jesus appeared to us. That's right, our Jesus who the Roman's executed and who we buried in a tomb, appeared to us and told us to tell you to go to Galilee and that you would see him there. Let's go!"

Their story - not just their message, but their story - was so compelling, you and I are followers of Jesus.

My friends, bring your story!

Amen.

Questions for contemplation:

1. What is your story? (Do not go on to question 2 until you have answered question 1.)
2. What is/are your reason/s for sharing it?
3. With whom could you share it?
4. What opening might there be to share it?
5. Do you have the persistence to keep sharing it?

¹ “Epicureanism,” *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epicureanism> (24 May 2014).

² “Stoicism,” *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stoicism> (24 May 2014).

³ “Areopagus,” *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Areopagus> (24 May 2014).

⁴ Acts 17:21, NRSV.

⁵ Acts 17:21, *The Message*.

⁶ Acts 17:22b-23, NRSV.

⁷ Acts 17:26-27, NRSV.

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, “A Daring Love,” *Sojourners*, <http://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/daring-love> (24 May 2014).