

Altars to the Unknown God

(And “How the Church Changes the World,” part 1)

Acts 17:16-31

Pastor Peter Hiatt

December 3, 2006

[The worship band plays “Hole Hearted”]

“Hole Hearted”

Words and Music by Nuno Bettencourt/Gary Cherone

Life's ambition occupies my time
Priorities confuse the mind
Happiness one step behind
This inner peace I've yet to find

Rivers flow into the sea
Yet even the sea is not so full of me
If I'm not blind why can't I see
That a circle can't fit where a square should be

CHORUS

There's a hole in my heart
That can only be filled by you
And this hole in my heart
Can't be filled with the things I do
Hole hearted

This heart of stone is where I hide
These feet of clay kept warm inside
Day by day less satisfied
Not fade away before I die

REPEAT SECOND VERSE

REPEAT CHORUS

There's a hole in my heart
That can only be filled by you
Should have known from the start
I'd fall short with the things I do
Hole hearted (x6)
Yeah

This message comes from Acts 17. It's central to our philosophy of ministry here at Lookout. It helps explain the central part of our vision statement in your bulletin: “How the Church Changes the World.” How do we interact with the world?

There is an old Jewish story told by Elie Wiesel. A just man enters Sodom where he's shocked by the idolatry and evil. He pickets. He preaches in the street and the market place. He shouts, “Repent. Repent. Judgment is coming.” But people only laugh.

He goes on shouting until one day a child stops him. “Poor stranger, don't you see it's useless.”

“Yes,” the just man replies.

“Then why do you go on?” the child asks.

“In the beginning,” he says, “I was convinced that I would change them. Now I go on shouting because I don’t want them to change me.”

How much shouting do you do?

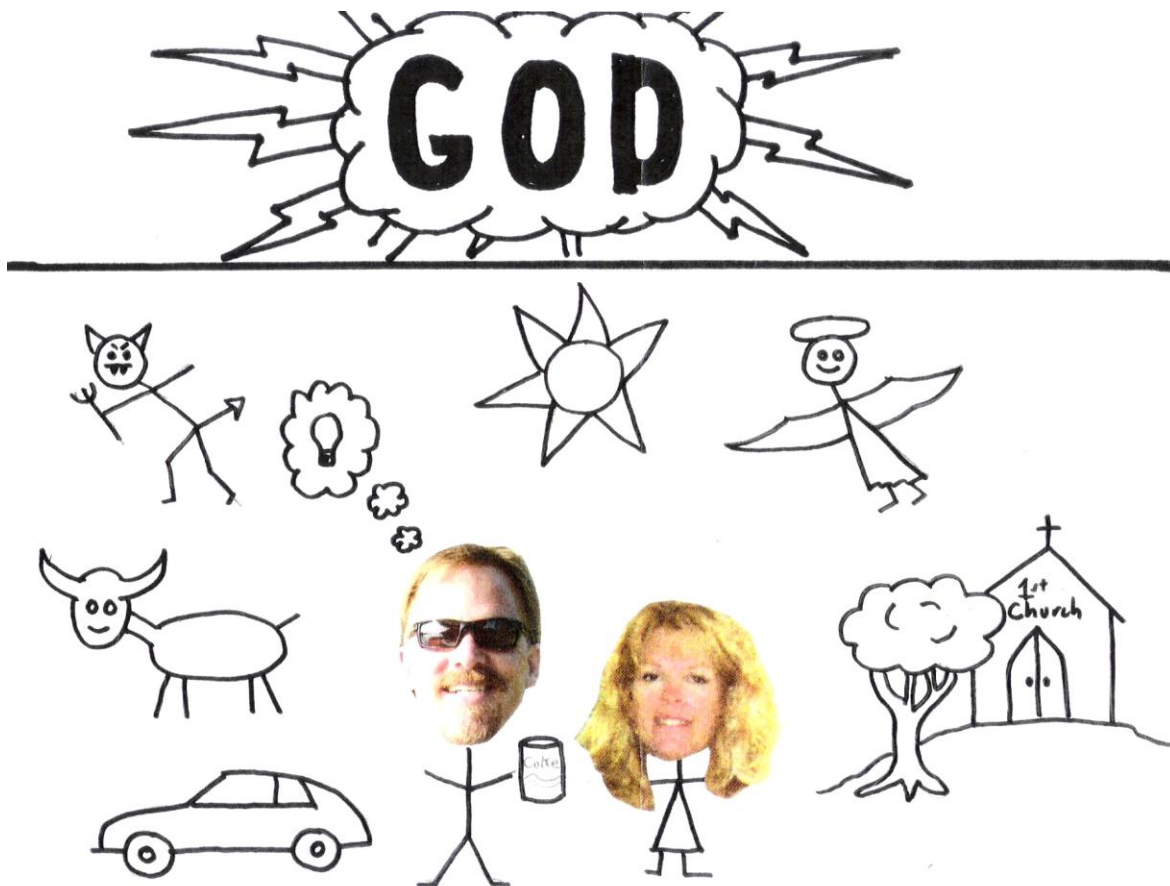
Acts 17, the apostle Paul enters Athens.

Now while Paul was waiting [This happens while Paul is waiting. You know, like in line at the movie or on a coffee break. It’s not planned.] *for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked* [“paroxonomai” where we get our word, “paroxysm”] *within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.*

Idols... like Sodom, Athens was full of idols. An idol is a violation of the first commandment and great commandment, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me,” for “thou shalt love the lord thy God with all thy heart, mind, soul, and strength.”

Idolatry is sin. Let me show you.

[Peter puts a picture up on the overhead.]



This is a picture of all things (I drew it myself). This is your average “Normal Guy.”

According to scripture, he’s been made to “seek after God in the hope of finding Him” for God has put “eternity in his heart.”

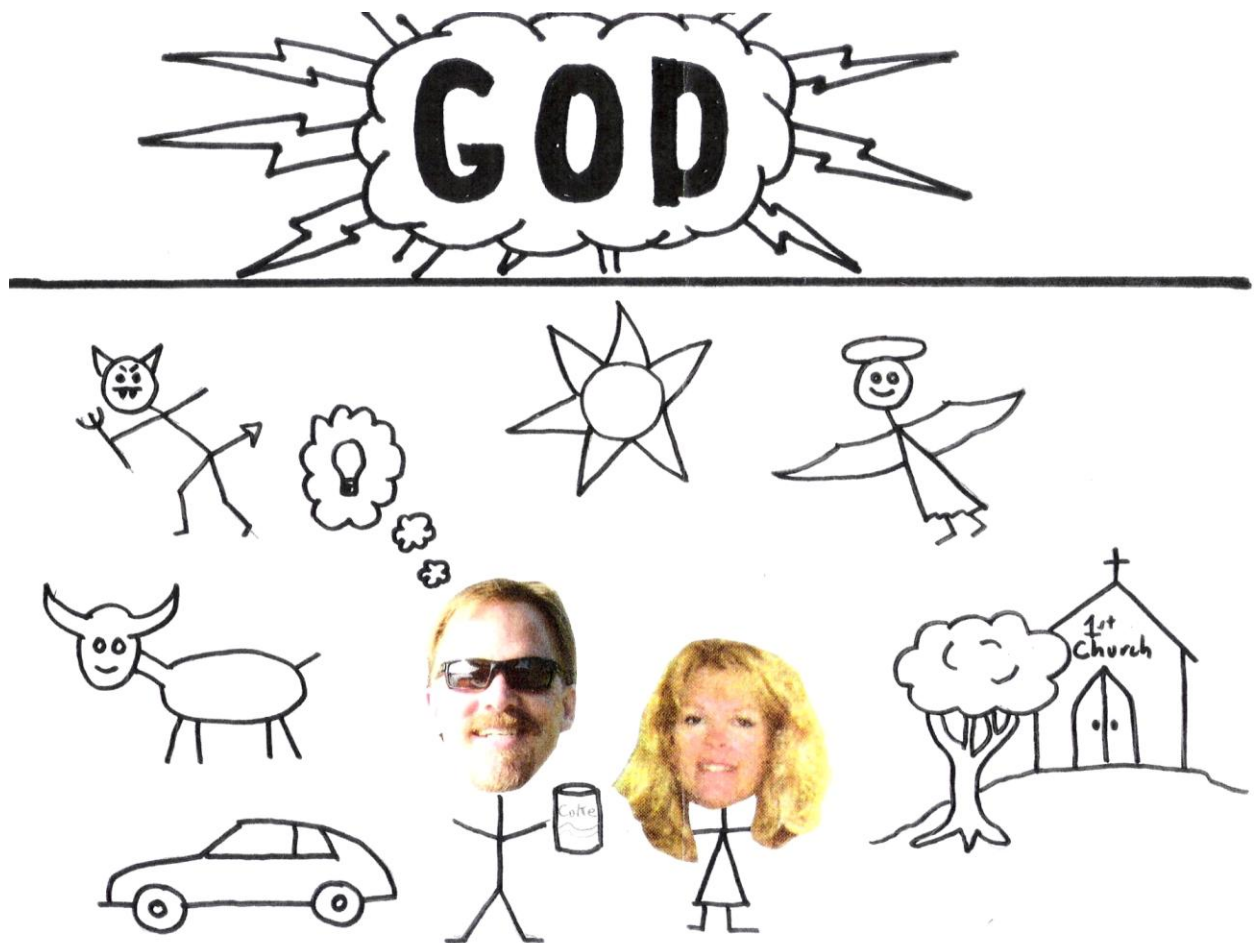
As Blaise Pascal wrote, “There is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing but only by God.”

As the rock band Extreme sings, “There’s a hole in my heart that can only be filled by you.”

But as the Rolling Stones sing, “I can’t get no satisfaction.”

And why is that?

Well, to put all this in theological terms, Normal Guy was made to worship... to glorify, trust, and serve God. He was made for this.



And yet his worship was frustrated and cut off. That's what the story of the fall is all about.

And yet Normal Guy still is a worshiper. He still has a hole in his heart. And in the absence of the only One worthy of his worship, in the absence of the only One that will satisfy, Normal Guy will still worship something.

Maybe it's this:

[a line from Normal Guy to the sun] Is the sun good? Of course, but if I worship the sun it becomes an idol.

Maybe it's this:

[Peter draws a line from Normal Guy to the cow.]

Paul writes, "Man worshiped and served the creature rather than the creator." He also says that "what pagans sacrifice to idols, they offer to demons."

Maybe it's this: [Peter draws a line from Normal Guy to the demon.]

Maybe it's this: [Peter draws a line from Normal Guy to Susan.]

Is this good? Oh, yeah. But if I worship her before God, she becomes an idol. Whatever we turn into an idol we destroy even as we destroy ourselves.

All sin is idolatry. It's faith in something or someone else before God. So disobedience to God reveals the idolatry of something else that I'm following something else, trusting something else instead of God.

Maybe it's this:

[Peter draws a line from Normal Guy to the light bulb, representing knowledge.]

Adam and Eve fell because they wanted their own knowledge of the good rather than to be known by the good who is God.

Maybe it's this:

[Peter draws a line from Normal Guy back to him self.] Maybe all idolatry is this.

Well, all idolatry is misdirected worship.

So anyway, Paul entered Athens and saw their idolatry. He went to the synagogue.

Religion easily becomes idolatry.

[a line to the church]

He went to the marketplace.

That so easily becomes idolatry.

[a line to the car, the Coke can, and the ring on Susan's finger]

He met Epicureans and Stoics.

Pagan philosophers.

Epicureans believed we should maximize pleasure, not simply physical pleasures but happiness. They were utilitarians and often materialists. They were very American in their idolatry.

The Stoics put a lot of emphasis on reason and on will power. They made great conservative talk show hosts.

Athens was also the home of Plato and Aristotle, the home of the intellectual elite. Perhaps no city has ever had as much influence on Denver, Colorado as Athens, Greece... except perhaps Jerusalem.

And one more thing... outside of Rome there was no city that Paul had been taught to hate more than Athens. Before Rome invaded, Greece invaded, and even more than conquering the city, they conquered the culture. The New Testament is written in Greek, not Hebrew, because of Athens.

Paul is entering the heart of enemy territory: Think Baghdad or Tehran... screaming bombs, gunfire, and war.

Paul sees idolatry and injustice. He has a paroxysm. His adrenal gland fires, his pulse accelerates, his blood pressure goes up. He himself begins to feel the very wrath of God.

You, yourself, live in a city full of idols, Epicurean and Stoic philosophers...

Where fornication and adultery are considered the norm,
Where homosexual behavior is a badge of honor,
Where the number of babies aborted vies with the number born,
A city where it's illegal for teachers to talk about Jesus, and yet they can talk about
Krishna, Buddha, and Mohammed, and they can teach creation created itself. They can
teach violent competition is the author of life.
And we all seem to believe aggression and war is the way, that we're saved by law and
by power.
A city where people worship cars and houses, sacrificing income, lives, and even children
to get them while children die of AIDS in Africa by the tens of millions.
You drink idolatry for entertainment. Your TV preaches,
 "A diamond is forever."
 "Coke is the real thing."
 "Volvo can save your soul."
 That's blatant idolatry.

You live in the marketplace in Athens... in Sodom. And unless all of this idolatry
fires something of a paroxysm in you, you must ask yourself, "Do I love God at all?"

Well, Paul sees the idolatry. He has a paroxysm (he's provoked) like the just man
in Sodom. He marches to the marketplace, and he begins to shout,

Men of Athens, I've seen your idolatry, your prostitution, and lechery.
I've heard your empty philosophy, spawn of Satan. The Bible says,
"Repent!" The fires of hell await you. Turn or burn. Ash in a flash. Start

anew or barbecue. Crack, pop, and sizzle...

Actually, Paul didn't say that. We expect that, which is strange since Paul never preached like that, especially to pagans. Paul didn't do that. He didn't legislate, gesticulate, or pontificate. What did he do?

Verse 17, he "dialogued" (reasoned, argued, dialogued). That was his practice.

He dialogued.

Not monologued; dialogued.

Not preached first; dialogued first.

You preach when you know stuff; you dialogue to learn stuff.

Why dialogue? We've got the truth. We've got Jesus who is the Truth. What could Paul learn from these Athenian idolaters? What was he looking for?

So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, "What does this babbler wish to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities"-because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And they took hold of him and brought him to the Areopagus [that means "Mars Hill" named after Areos or Mars (the god of war). It was a hill and also referred to the Athenian council.], saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean." Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

They were hearing something new, and Paul was also hearing something new.

He was learning about Epicureans looking for joy. He was learning about Stoics and what they called the "world soul" or "reason." The Greek term was "logos"-word.

He was probably learning about Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle who on that spot postulated an uncreated creator they called "Theos." (That's a Greek word, not Hebrew.)

Paul also learned about a Cretan poet named Epimenides who had written about a legend that Cretans had buried Zeus, the high god. He wrote, "Thou are not dead, thou art risen and alive forever for in thee we live and move and have our being." Wow! Where would an old pagan get an idea like that?

Well, Paul dialogued, and it seems very clear that he heard at least one ancient Athenian legend about a man named Epimenides.

According to Diogenes Laertius (a third century Greek historian) and some references to Plato, Aristotle, and others, a great plague fell like a curse upon the city of Athens sometime along about 600 B.C. Horrified at the devastation, the council on Mars Hill sent a man named Nicias on a desperate journey to the Pythian oracle where a pagan priestess informed Nicias that Athens was being punished for the sins of her former king.

The oracle didn't know the name of the god that was punishing Athens, but the priestess told Nicias that there was a man on the island of Crete who would know how to make atonement to this god. The man's name was Epimenides.

A short time later, Nicias and Epimenides walked into Athens. Like Paul, Epimenides must have been shocked at the idols. People said, "There are more gods in Athens than men."

One morning Epimenides gathered the council on Mars Hill. He had instructed several to bring a flock of sheep or lambs. It appears that Epimenides addressed the council with something like the following proposition, "Athenians, you've already sacrificed to every god you know. So I propose that there is at least one god you don't know. And that this god is great enough and good enough to forgive your crimes and stop this plague if you'd only seek his favor."

And so Epimenides commanded servants to release the lambs praying, "Unknown god, choose your atonement." Wherever a lamb laid down on the grass rather than feeding on the grass, Epimenides instructed artisans to build an altar, and there they sacrificed that lamb as an atonement to the unknown god. As they did that, the plague began to lift.

Ancient authors wrote of these altars to the unknown god scattered throughout Athens. Obviously, many fell into disrepair, but sometime over the ensuing 600 years, one of these altars was maintained and preserved apparently with the hope that one day the unknown god would be revealed and that if and when he was revealed, the Athenians would remember that he was no stranger to their city but that with lamb's blood once before, he had redeemed them from a curse.

In the third century AD, Diogenes recorded the legend but implied that gods (plural) were appeased. More ancient sources speak of altars to *one* unknown god. The most reliable of these ancient sources wrote 200 years before Diogenes. His name was Luke. He wrote Acts.

Six hundred years later, Paul has a paroxysm. Paul dialogues. Then Paul preaches. Acts 17...

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. [I think that's a compliment.] For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god' [the unknown "Theos"]. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God [the "Theos," uncreated creator] who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man [one blood] every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for 'In him we live and move and have our being' [Paul isn't quoting the Bible, he's quoting Epimenides. And now the words of Epimenides are the Bible-Word of

God]; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring.' [And now Paul quotes the Greek poet, Aratus, who says, "We... we (Jew and Greek) are his offspring."] *Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.*"

Amazing! Paul's anger turns to dialogue, which turns to Gospel preached, based on the conviction that God had somehow arrived in Athens long before Paul. Indeed, God Himself was somehow responsible for that altar on Mars Hill. Indeed, God Himself was somehow responsible for an altar in every human heart for every heart was made to seek after Him in the hope of finding Him.

And so now Paul simply had to find the altar and fill in the blank saying, "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. His name is Jesus."

Fill in the blank evangelism.

It gives me chills, and yet lots of Bible types say Paul blew it on Mars Hill that, in fact, Luke records this as a bad example for surely God wasn't working in Athens like that.

You know, maybe we'd just rather leave Athens and Sodom alone. And if we do anything,

it's easier to scream at Sodom than redeem Sodom,
easier to bomb Sodom than preach to Sodom,
scream at Sodom than redeem Sodom.

And now, this is astounding, but according to Ezekiel 16:55, Sodom gets redeemed just like her sister, Jerusalem. Though both get destroyed in wrath, both get redeemed. I think that means somewhere, somehow in someway in Sheol or antiquity, someone preached and at least some folks listened.

How could that be? How could Epimenides be? I'm not sure, but remember how father Abraham met two Canaanite kings in Genesis 14? The king of Sodom and the king of Salem (that is, Jeru-salem). That king's name was Melchizedek. Abraham tithes to him for this Canaanite king is called "priest of the most high God."

Could Epimenides have been a priest after the order of Melchizedek? Whatever the case, the scripture says (like 5 times), "Jesus is a high priest forever (for all time) after the order of Melchizedek." Not Aaron or Levi and not only after 33 A.D. but forever. As if Jesus is way bigger than just our Judeo-Christian history, and He's been doin' stuff in this world long before Christmas, 0 A.D.

And so what's He doin'?

Well, Paul just said, "God made from one man [one blood] every nation of mankind that they should seek God."

Yet how can they seek?

In Romans 3, Paul writes, "No one seeks God." Jesus said, "No one comes to the Father but by me."

How could Melchizedek come to God except through Jesus?

How could Epimenides seek God except through the Spirit of Jesus? Gospel of John, chapter one, verse one:

In the beginning was the Logos (the Word), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made through Him and without Him was not anything made. In Him was life and the life was the light of men. . . . The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. . . . The true light [Listen...] that enlightens every man was coming into the world. . . and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have beheld His glory.

Somehow in all cultures and all time, the Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit of Truth, the Light, the Word... He makes men and women seek. He whispers into their souls, "Before the morning stars sang together, I loved you. Seek me. Long for me. Hope in me-your Maker."

The Spirit of Jesus made them seek in Athens in 600 B.C. And 1,000 miles to the east, Jesus made men seek long before that. All throughout the Old Testament this strange God-man, messenger-angel shows up and makes men seek.

He talks to Abraham at the Oak of Mamre (about a son).

He wrestles with Jacob at the river Jabek until Jacob/Israel seeks His blessing.

He meets Joshua as he enters the promised land and makes him seek the Lord rather than real estate.

He makes mankind seek God.

It's like the entire Old Testament Word is the story of God building an altar, an altar to the wrathful, unknown, holy God, Yahweh.

The altar is made of wood. It's a "skulon." That means tree or scaffold or cross. It's the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It's the law and the knowledge that we're guilty and someone must pay, pay like lambs sacrificed on an altar in the temple. Someone must be sacrificed on this altar as well-the skulon, the tree.

And so, God through His Word prepares an altar
in the hearts of mankind,
and He prepares an altar
on a hill outside Jerusalem.

That's a lot to ponder, but for now I'm just saying, God makes us seek, and God makes us find.

In other words, "We've been saved by grace through faith and this is not our own doing. It's the gift of God not because of works, lest any man should boast."

Some people hear that and say, "Why bother with preaching the Gospel if it's God that seeks, saves, and redeems?" Well, people like that don't understand "the Gospel." It's Gospel. It means "good news."

When the kids were little and Susan was having a bad day (usually because of me), I'd love to grab one of the kids and go get some flowers. When we'd come home I'd say to Jon, Beth, Becky, or Coleman, "Do you want to give the flowers to Mommy?"

They always did, too. They would fight over who got to hand her the flowers. They never said, "Ah, it's too much trouble and besides you'll give 'em to her anyway." They never said, "But Daddy, I might fail. I might drop the flowers, and she might not get the message and then suffer your wrath."

No, they never did that. They knew it was Gospel. So they marched right in and proclaimed good news to a sad Mommy, "Mommy, Mommy, me and Daddy bought you flowers!"

So Paul enters Athens (enters Sodom) 'cause he gets to hand the Bride the flowers. It's Gospel-good news.

You see, Elie Wiesel's story is an Old Covenant story, not a Christian story, and so the heart of God is still unknown. But now "Christ Jesus, from the bosom of the Father, He has made Him known" (John 1:18).

So Paul is angry. He's angry at the darkness. Yet he knows that in the darkness, God in Christ Jesus has been preparing an altar in order that at just the right time in the fullness of time, Paul could find the altar and deliver the message, "What you therefore worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you."

Right now, all over this world God in Christ Jesus is building altars that you might find them and proclaim Gospel to a people yet in darkness.

Tony Campolo tells about something that happened to Billy Graham years ago on a trip to China, visiting a Buddhist monastery. On the way up the mountain, he felt led to share the Gospel with a monk meditating on the side of the road. So with his interpreter, he went over to the monk. He spoke to him, with him, and began to tell him about Jesus. As He did, tears began to run down the monk's cheek.

When Graham finished the monk said, "How can I ever thank you? You see, sir, this Jesus you've described to me... I've always known Him. And even as you were reading from this book, within me He was saying, 'He's speaking of me. He's speaking of me.' And when you said the name, Jesus, He said to me, 'That's my name. That's my name.' And now, sir, I know what He did for me. Now I know who He is."

If you're a believer, you are an evangelist (a good newser), maybe not in China but in Golden on your coffee break, in line at the movies. Go dialogue, looking for altars to the unknown God so you can proclaim, "What you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you."

I believe that wherever there is an idol, there is also an altar to the unknown God.

Why is that? Because every idol is the object of misdirected worship and every idol fails... Every created thing dies. The Volvo rusts, your body fails, the idol no longer satisfies, and then Normal Guy realizes, "This isn't what I'm looking for." And so every idol turns into an altar to the unknown God that sends us seeking because there's a "hole in my heart that can only be filled by you."

G.K. Chesterton said, "The man who knocks on the brothel door is looking for God." He doesn't know it, but the idol will fail. She won't satisfy his longing. He's looking for his help-mate. He's looking for communion with God.

Among the fornicators, adulterers, and whores there is an altar. So find it and proclaim the Lover of our souls, the story of the Bridegroom and His Bride. Among these homosexual men, there is an altar so say, "What you worship as unknown (the masculine intimate, Father), this I proclaim to you in Jesus." Among the winos and addicts, "What you worship as unknown (perfect death, eternal high), this I proclaim, 'Don't be drunk with wine. You can be filled with the Spirit.'" Among the Stoics looking for logos, reason, "This I proclaim to you, the Logos, Jesus."

Among the Epicureans looking for joy, "This I proclaim to you, 'joy to the world.'" Among the pagans and the new agers looking for mystery, looking for enchantment, looking for wonder and immanence in a culture where the Church has sold out to secularism, "This I proclaim to you, the mystery hidden for ages, Christ in us, in Whom all things hold together, including every rock, every stream, every snowy owl sitting in a redwood tree."

Now, you know, Jesus is so much more than our felt needs, yet He enters through the door of our felt needs. Felt needs tap into real needs, like an altar to the unknown God, where He descends. For He descended into what? Mangers, dirt, failure, sin... our shame. He descended into the place where old idols have turned into altars to the unknown god.

So maybe we should stop yelling at pagans and empty ourselves, enter their world, and dialogue with them, looking for altars to the unknown God, looking for mangers into which the Christ child may be born even through us.

With that thirsty woman at the well,

Jesus dialogued and then said, "I'll give you rivers of Living Water."

To a hungry crowd He said,

"I am the bread of life."

To a frustrated fisherman,

"I'll make you a fisher of men."

To the poor He said,

"Yours is the kingdom."

To the blind,

He is the Light.

To the lost,

He is the Way.

To the deceived,

He is the Truth.

To the dead,

He is the Life.

To the confused,

He is the Reason.
To the lonely,
He is the Comforter.
To the refugee,
He is the Sanctuary.
To the frightened,
the Rock of Ages and Lion of Judah.

He is the Alpha and Omega.
He fills all in all.
All the promises of God find their “yes” in Him.

“The hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight.”

For the intimidated, cowering in fear, hiding in the dark,
He is the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in their own manger.
For the guilty, those deserving of God’s wrath,
He is the “Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.”

And so maybe we should stop shouting at pagans
and start looking for the altars to the unknown God.

And if you say, “Yeah, but what about God’s wrath?”

What about God’s wrath? Did you forget that the greatest exhibition of wrath that this world has ever seen was not a flood, was not the fire that fell upon Sodom... The greatest exhibition of wrath took place on a hill outside Jerusalem. It was the judgment of this world, according to the Gospel of John. The judgment through one righteous man. The judgment...some have come to it, some have yet to come to it, but it was the judgment of this world. The great exhibition of wrath took place on a hill outside of Jerusalem. In fact, Jesus said the people of that day were more wicked than Sodom.

So when Jesus entered Jerusalem,
He entered a city more wicked than Sodom,
more wicked than Athens,
more wicked than Denver.

And yet, the only Just Man didn’t picket, and He didn’t scream. No, he walked to a hill at the edge of the city, and He laid down. He was the Lamb that laid down on the hill of war. And there He was sacrificed on the altar-the skulon, the cross... having been prepared from the dawn of time.

And the wrath of God fell *not on the city, but on the Lamb*. The wrath of God fell on the heart of God-Jesus-for us, for you. And so with the disobedience of an entire fallen world, God had built an altar so on that altar He could reveal His heart.

He built an altar to the unknown holy God of Israel so that on that altar He could proclaim to the whole world His heart, His glory, His mercy... Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

Paul writes, “God consigned all men to disobedience that He may have mercy on all.”

There is an altar built on a hill outside Jerusalem
and there is an altar built in every man’s heart.

God builds the altar out of each man’s disobedience that on that altar He might display His heart, Jesus Christ and Him crucified-mercy, our God is Love.

You see all your idols will turn into altars somehow.

Every idol is a point of disobedience and sin.

Every idol becomes an altar at which you cry for mercy, “Forgive me for this. Forgive me for that. It wasn’t what I was looking for.” Every idol becomes an altar at which you cry for mercy. And at which mercy is revealed-Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

Jesus Christ the Revelation of God.
“He has made Him known.”

Everything is about this, Jesus Christ and Him crucified. [Peter draws a large cross between Normal Guy and God. He then draws little crosses over each idol.]

This is the plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in Him, making peace by the blood of His cross.

That altar on the hill outside of Jerusalem and the altar in your heart... they meet at this table [the communion table] and become one.

For on that night that Jesus was betrayed, He took bread and He broke it saying, “This is my body given to you. Take and eat.” Put it on your altar.

And in the same manner after supper, He took the cup and He said, “This is the New Covenant in my blood, shed for the forgiveness of sins. Drink of it, do it in remembrance of me.”

And so now I know this about you... you’re seeking something. You’re worshiping something. To be human is to worship something. What you therefore worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you, Jesus Christ and Him crucified for the love of you descended into hell, resurrected on the third day. Believe the Gospel, in Jesus’ name, amen.

[The worship band sings...]

“How Deep the Father’s Love”

By David Baroni

Then...

“O Little Town of Bethlehem”

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O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by;
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light:
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.

For Christ is born of Mary,
And gathered all above,
While mortals sleep, the angels keep
Their watch of wondering love.
O morning stars, together
Proclaim the holy birth!
And praises sing to God the King,
And peace to men on earth.

How silently, how silently,
The wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessing of His heaven.
No ear may hear His coming,
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him still,
The dear Christ enters in.

O holy Child of Bethlehem!
Descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin and enter in,
Be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
Our Lord Emmanuel!

Then...

“Alive Forever, Amen”

For in Him was life, and the life was the Light of men, and the Light descended into the darkness. Lord Jesus, You descended into the darkness, and You were strung up on an altar outside of Jerusalem. And there You suffered the pain of this world, there You suffered the sin of this world, there You took our sorrows upon Yourself and You bore them to Gehenna, You bore them to hell where they were consumed, and You rose from the grave alive forevermore.

And now, Lord Jesus, You even descend into our hearts where You are born into our manglers where You hang on our crosses, where You take our old idols and You turn them into altars where we worship You saying, “Thank You for forgiving me for that, and thank You for dying for me in this place. Thank You for descending into this place. Thank You for rescuing me from my shame and my sorrow. And Lord Jesus, You say if

we are joined with You in a death like Yours, we will be joined with You in a resurrection like Yours. And You are already rising within our hearts, and we know that one day You will rise over all things, and one day all things will glorify You and praise the Lamb, the slaughtered Lamb on the throne. And so Lord Jesus, You have done it, and we worship You. We praise You. It's in Your name that we say these things, amen.

And now, by way of benediction, what you therefore worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you, He's what you're looking for. See, even His followers are barely beginning to believe it. We're just barely beginning to believe it. Heaven is an acquired taste, and He's teaching us, He's showing us, "I am what you want." And the more we see it, the more we're gonna talk about it. The more we're gonna preach Gospel. And so you believe the Gospel that what you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you is Jesus. And then, you see, when you believe that, you know what? To the people on the bus, to the people in line at the movie theatre, to the people standing at the water cooler waiting for water, you'll start dialoging with them...

"Hey, you're thirsty. I know a little about that. What you therefore worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you, it's good news. Your Maker adores you. He forgives you, and He wants you to come home."

In Jesus' name, believe the Gospel, preach the Gospel, amen.

If you'd like prayer, there are members of the prayer team down front. They'd love to pray with you.

~~Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.~~

~~~ Acts 17:16~~

~~For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.~~

~~~ Romans 1:18-25~~

~~The city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, "What does this babblers wish to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities", because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And they took hold of him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean." Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new. So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious."~~

~ Acts 17:16b-22

He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

~ Ecclesiastes 3:11

You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.

~ St. Augustine

There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus.

~ Blaise Pascal

There's a hole in my heart that can only be filled by you.

~ The hard rock band Extreme

The man who knocks on the brothel door is looking for God.

~ Attributed to G.K. Chesterton

Shaped from something of earth and something of heaven, we were torn between two worlds. A part of us wanted to hide. A part of us wanted to search. With half-remembered words still legible in our hearts and faintly sketched images still visible in our souls, some of us stepped out of hiding and started our search.

Though we hardly knew where to look.

We painted to see if what was lost was in the picture. We composed to hear if what was lost was in the music. We sculpted to find if what was lost was in the stone. We wrote to discover if what was lost was in the story.

Through art and music and stories we searched for what was missing from our lives.

Though at times we hardly knew it.

Though at times we could hardly keep from knowing it.

~ Ken Gire, Windows of the Soul

These things the beauty, the memory of our own past are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.

~ C.S. Lewis, The Weight of Glory

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.'"

~ Acts 17:22-23a

And when he was recognized he was considered by the Greeks as a person especially beloved by the Gods, on which account when the Athenians were afflicted by a plague, and the priestess at Delphi enjoined them to purify their city, they sent a ship and Nicias the son of Nieceratus to Crete, to invite Epimenides to Athens; and he, coming there in the forty-sixth Olympiad, purified the city and eradicated the plague for that time; he took some black sheep and some white ones and led them up to the Areopagus, and from thence he let them go wherever they chose, having ordered the attendants to follow them, and wherever any one of them lay down they were to sacrifice him to the god who was the patron of the spot, and so the evil was stayed; and owing to this one may even now find in the different boroughs of the Athenian altars without names, which are a sort of memorial of the propitiation of the Gods that then took place.

~ Diogenes Laertius, The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers

(3rd Century A.D., translated by C.D. Yonge)

Other details in this account concerning the cause of the curse are from an editor's footnote on Aristotle's The Art of Rhetoric, book 3, 1710, found in the Loeb Classical Library, translated by J.H. Freese and published in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The explanation that none other than the Pythian oracle instructed the Athenians to summon Epimenides is found in the previously mentioned reference from Plato's Laws.

Diogenes Laertius himself does not mention that the words agnosto-theo were inscribed upon Epimenides' altars. He states only that "altars may be found in different parts of Attica with no name inscribed upon them, which are memorials of this atonement."

Two other ancient writers, however Pausanias in his Description of Greece (vol.1, 1:4) and Philostratus in his

Appolonius of Tyana—refer to “altars to an unknown god” implying that an inscription to that effect was engraved upon them.

That such an inscription was engraved upon at least one altar in Athens is verified by a first-century historian named Luke.

~ Don Richardson, Eternity in Their Hearts

For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, “To the unknown god.” What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for “In him we live and move and have our being.”

~ Acts 17:23-28a

A Syriac writer called Isho’dad (ninth century) cited a passage in which Minos of Crete addressed his father Zeus and attacked the Cretan belief that Zeus was buried on the island: “They fashioned a tomb for thee, O holy and high the Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, slow bellies! But thou art not dead; thou art risen and alive for ever, for in thee we live and move and have our being.” The second line of this quotation appears in Titus 1:12, and a Christian writer (Clement of Alexandria) ascribes it to Epimenides of Crete.

~ Howard Marshall, Tyndale NT Commentaries: Acts

As even some of your own poets have said,

“For we are indeed his offspring.”

~ Acts 17:28b

As quoted by Paul, they [these words] come from Aratus, but they are also found in a slightly different form in Cleanthes, Hymn to Zeus. Paul thus takes over pagan Greek poems, expressive of Stoic philosophy, and applies them to God. A process of ‘demythologization’ was already under way in that for the Stoics ‘Zeus’ meant not the supreme god in Greek polytheism but the Logos (Reason; cf. verse 18 note). Paul was prepared to take over the glimmerings of truth in pagan philosophy about the nature of God.

~ Howard Marshall,

Tyndale NT Commentaries: Acts

Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

~ Acts 17:29-31

The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

~ Phillip Brooks

How tragic then that Christians in general have been told almost nothing of this worldwide phenomenon of monotheistic presupposition underlying most of the world’s folk religions! Many theologians and even some missionaries whose ministries have been tremendously facilitated by the phenomenon have nervously pushed this mind-expanding evidence into a closet.

Why? If you belong to a tradition which has been teaching Christians for centuries that the rest of the world sits in total darkness and knows zilch about God, it becomes a little embarrassing to have to say, “We have been wrong. In actual fact, more than 90 percent of this world’s folk religions acknowledge at least the existence of God. Some even anticipate His redeeming concern for mankind.”

~ Don Richardson, Eternity in Their Hearts

Finally someone broke the silence with a question. Whether he asked the question out of curiosity or anger, I do not know. I only know it surprised me: “This story of Abraham—does it speak only to the Masai? Or does it speak also to you? Has your tribe found the High God? Have you known him?” . . . I sat there for a long time in silence looking at the Masai people. They called their God Engai. Well, that is no more strange-sounding than our gods. The god invoked by the pope to bless the troops of Mussolini about to embark on the plunder of Ethiopia, and the god invoked by an American cardinal to bless the “soldiers of Christ” in Vietnam, and the god of French glory, and the German god of Hitler were no more the High God of scripture than is “Diana of the Ephesians” or Engai of the Masai of East Africa. . . . I finally spoke out again, and I marveled at how small my voice sounded. I said something I had no intention of saying when I had come to speak to the Masai that morning: “No, we have not found the High God. My tribe has not known him. For us, too, he is the unknown God. But we are searching for him. I have come a long, long distance to invite you

to search for him with us. Let us search for him together. Maybe, together, we will find him." I got up and walked away from the Masai village, to go back to my tent. As I walked, I remembered the shortest summation of the gospel message St. Paul ever made, in his letter to Titus (3:4): "The goodness and kindness of God our Savior has appeared to all men." That is really what I had been trying to say. I hoped I had gotten it across, at least to my friend, the young Masai elder who wanted to put a spear through God.

~ Vincent J. Donovan, Christianity Rediscovered

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it . . . The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. . . . And from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.

~ John 1:1-5, 1:9-14, 1:16-18 (RSV)