

<sup>16</sup> While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. <sup>17</sup> So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. <sup>18</sup> Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, ‘What does this babblers want to say?’ Others said, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.’ (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) <sup>19</sup> So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, ‘May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?’ <sup>20</sup> It sounds rather strange to us, so we’d like to know what it means.’ <sup>21</sup> Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new. <sup>22</sup> Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. <sup>23</sup> 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.” Therefore, what you worship as unknown, I proclaim to you. <sup>24</sup> The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, <sup>25</sup> nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. <sup>26</sup> From one ancestor, he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, <sup>27</sup> so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. <sup>28</sup> For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said: “For we too are his offspring. <sup>29</sup> Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. <sup>30</sup> While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup> because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.’ <sup>32</sup> When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’ <sup>33</sup> At that point Paul left them. <sup>34</sup> But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

**Response to the Word**

**L:** This is the Word of God for the people of God

**P: Thanks be to God!**

Acts 17:16-34

05/05/2024 – First United Methodist Church of Saginaw

“A Message from Mars”

Rev. Amy Terhune

I’m going to date myself here. As a child growing up—in a time before there were hundreds and hundreds of channels to choose from or videos or DVDs one could watch on command—everyone with kids pretty much watched the same thing on Saturday morning television. You know what it is, of course, because many of you probably watched it, too. Right? Of course! What is it? It’s Looney Tunes Cartoons. You know: Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Elmer Fudd, Sylvester and Tweedy Bird,

Foghorn Leghorn, Yosemite Sam, the Tasmanian Devil, Pepé Le Pew, and everybody's favorite – the roadrunner and Wyle E. Coyote. But for my money, the close second-favorite was a little outer-space fellow in a Spartan costume named Marvin Martian. You remember him? He always wanted to blow up the earth for the simple reason that it was blocking his view of Venus. Whenever Bugs Bunny thwarted his schemes to blow us up, Marvin Martian would say, "You have made me so very angry."

Around the same time that Marvin Martian made his debut on Looney Tunes, there was sitcom on CBS starring Ray Walston as "My Favorite Martian". Some of you may remember that one, too. The Martian was stranded on earth trying to fix his spaceship. He had retractable antennae that would come up out of his head, and an uncanny ability to use telepathy, make things levitate, speed up work to get things done, go back in time, and store memories in pill form. Instead of "You make me so very angry", his message from Mars: We're smarter than you are. Na na na na na na!

You make me angry. We're smarter than you are. Would you respond positively to either of those statements? I wouldn't.

More recently, genuine scientific inquiry has studied questions of whether water and possible microbes of life existed on the red planet some four million years ago. Was there life on Mars? Is there a message from Mars embedded in the rocks and chemical elements of the planet?

Interesting question: Is there life? That's better than 'you make me angry' and "we're smarter than you are!" But this morning, I'm far more interested in yet another message from Mars—an unknown message to many. It was delivered to earth not quite two thousand years ago from a fellow named Paul as he stood before the Areopagus, better known as 'Mars Hill' in honor of the ancient Greco-Roman God. Paul's message from Mars is life. What you worship as unknown, I will proclaim to you, says Paul. That's a bold statement. Would you have responded positively to that? You might, and others might too, if it was approached the way Paul approached it. Still today, Paul's ancient message from Mars offers keen insight to those of us who seek to make God known in non-threatening, respectful ways in today's similarly pluralistic society.

Let me give a bit of background here. Paul was preaching in Thessalonica, and he really ticked off the powers that be there in the synagogue, especially when he succeeded in gaining some converts from among some of the leadership and some wealthy Greek women. So his foes stirred up a riot in the marketplace and Paul and Silas were forced to flee before they could really get the church firmly established. They go to Beroea, a nearby city, and have some success among the folks there. But the Thessalonians hear about it and send some of their people to Beroea to stir up more trouble. Paul manages to get out with his life, and the faithful there send him to Athens. Silas and Timothy are able to stay in Beroea to start a church, but Paul is shunted to the sidelines to sit on his duff and wait.

So there Paul is, alone in the great city of Athens, having been run out of the last two towns he was in, with no purpose in front of him that he can discern. If I had been Paul, I'd be feeling pretty discouraged at this point. He follows his custom and goes to the synagogue there in Athens. If he wasn't already depressed enough as it was, he finds in the synagogue (from what I can gather) a small enclave of Jews content to stick to themselves, keep their heads in the sand, and make little or no impact on their community. He attempts to proclaim Christ to them, but I don't think he has much success because Paul does what he always does when the Jews aren't receptive—he goes out to preach to the gentiles in the marketplace. When he does this, he is ridiculed and called a "babbler", which is better translated "seed-picker" meaning that he takes a little of this and a little of that and mashes it together into nonsense trying to pass as religion. That's harsh criticism. If I were Paul, I might be inclined to

throw my hands up in the air, barricade myself in my hotel room with a good book, and wait for Silas and Timothy so that I could get out of there and move on.

But Paul doesn't look at any of it that way. What you and I might see as a set-back, he sees as an opportunity. What you and I might find discouraging and deflating, Paul finds energizing. But we could do with a little of his spirit – oh, that we could learn to see opportunity in setbacks and failures.

I'll tell you about my friend Mike, who I met in undergrad. He wanted to be a biomedical engineer. He wanted to design machines that would help athletes train and help doctors keep people healthy. Only problem was: Mike wasn't so great at math. There was a math course that he had to pass to get into the program he wanted to get into. He got a C+. But too many others did better than he did, and Mike didn't get in to his program. As you might imagine, he was devastated. His big dream had just gone up in smoke. The semester ended, it was summer, and he had no idea what he was going to do in the fall because he'd banked on biomedical engineering. To relieve stress and let out a lot of the emotion he was experiencing, Mike began to focus more on running. He had always liked to go for a run in the morning, but now he got more serious. He said it started simply with a desire to let off steam and clear his head for a while. But then an interesting thing happened. Mike got picked up by the Olympic committee in Boulder, Colorado as a test subject. Suddenly, all those biomedical engineers were looking at him to see what worked and what didn't. They studied what various regimens did to his heart rate, his lung capacity, his muscle tone, his brain waves. He ran with electrodes all over him. He ran with different shoes, on different surfaces, in different weather. He was willing to try things for them just to see what happened. Today, some of things he helped research in the mid-90s are standard parts of stress-tests and physical therapy. Today, our Olympic athletes have benefited from some of the research to which he lent himself. In the end, Mike lived his dream—just not in the way he thought he would. Today, Mike is teaching physical education at a high school outside Boulder, helping his students learn to stay fit, yes but also learn to turn setbacks into opportunities and disappointments into possibilities.

Paul is great for that—he does that time and again. And it pays off. They may be calling him a 'babbler', but they none-the-less take him to the Areopagus, a place surrounded by the great monuments of Greek culture with the Parthenon in the background. But it's also a group of people—a council made up of the intellectual giants of the day who gather with a whole crowd of onlookers to hear and debate logic, ideas, and the latest fads in thought and principle. Here is his chance. Rather than holing up in a hotel room, Paul spends time walking around the city of Athens, the epicenter of philosophy and logic in that day. The home of democracy. The origin of the university where people from every corner of the known world gathered to study and learn. The little back-woods Jewish boy from Tarsus who grew up learning 'You shall not have any other gods and you shall not make graven images' is walking through the streets of the greatest city on earth at that time surrounded by thousands of idols, alters, and gods. The text tells us he was distressed. Try appalled, sickened, overwhelmed. And now he's got a chance to talk to them. How does he handle it?

In a Peanuts comic strip, Linus listens attentively as his sister Lucy tells him about her potential as an evangelist. She says to Linus: "I would have made a good evangelist. Do you know that kid who sits behind me at school? I convinced him that my religion is better than his religion." Linus is impressed. "How did you do that?" he wants to know, to which Lucy replies, "I hit him with my lunch box!" [adapted from "Crossing The Desert Or Protecting Our Vehicle?" by King Duncan, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

Paul does not seem inclined to use Lucy's method of evangelism. Quite the contrary. He puts off his own distress and instead, attempts to connect with his audience on their turf. "I see that you're very religious," says Paul, affirming the quest in all of us to be part of something bigger than ourselves. Paul acknowledges a shared understanding of divine work within the cosmos. Paul acknowledges their use of reason and logic, and he argues on those grounds. Notice that he doesn't appeal at all to Old Testament prophesy like he does in many of his other sermons to Jewish audiences. The Hebrew Bible wouldn't mean anything to them. Nor does he even mention Jesus' name. Did you catch that? Instead, he quotes their own philosophers to them – Epimenides of Crete, Aratus of Soli, and others, according to the commentaries [gleaned from Brueggemann, Walter, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James D Newsome; *Texts for Preaching: Year A* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) pg. 302]. Paul has taken the time to get to know something about his audience—to listen and learn. He doesn't let his own emotions turn off his brain. What Paul does is find the common ground and the shared inner quest, and then offer up his understanding of God's work in the world—namely through the resurrection and gift of new life. Some people do tune him out. They don't buy in. That's okay. But some are curious. "We'll hear you again", they say, and those are the ones with whom Paul will engage in dialogue.

Essentially, Paul views his mission here as bridge-building. And in today's world, I think that is still our mission as Christians. We have our disagreements, and yet, it is the bridge-builders who change things. In business, in education, in government, and in faith communities, the bridge-builders make the difference between remaining relevant and fading into oblivion. We live in a pluralistic society, surrounded by people with different perspectives, world views, histories, up-bringing, values, and cultural identities than our own. But this need not be frightening. If we learn anything from the greatest evangelist the world has ever known, it is that Christians have something to offer. We bring to the table a unique perspective that values hope, second chances, grace, and compassion. We bring our minds, that when filled with the life-giving power of Christ, see a road beyond the tomb, a new opportunity where others see dead-ends and disappointments. We bring our hearts, that when filled with the love of Christ, cannot help but work for building bridges and connecting with others to build the Kingdom of God. In short, we bring a hunger to journey together, a commitment to journey when all seems like a wasteland, and a reverence for living fully.

In today's world, it's easy to be so very angry. Too many say, "we're smarter than you are!" And so we silo ourselves and divisiveness grows. Paul's message from Mars is to look beyond differences to commonalities – to use whatever you can to share to good news of Jesus Christ. Friends, for the sake of all that's holy, maybe the real question we need to ask is not if there's life on Mars, but is there life in us? As usual, I'll leave that question with you. Amen.