

"NO LONGER IN THE DARK"

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ignorance that I am here to proclaim to you!"

Acts 17:23b (Phillips)

A Sermon by

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Our subject today is "No Longer in the Dark." The strike at Consolidated Edison might have worked havoc with this title, but so far so good! Any church within sight or sound of a great university has reason to be vitally interested in St. Paul's caper at Mars Hill. That venture marked the first recorded confrontation between the gospel and academia. True, Athens was in decline at that time. It was no longer the prime Grecian city in trade and commerce. And yet, Athens was still a long way from living on memory alone. It provided a forum for philosophical debate and speculation unrivaled anywhere.

Paul was in Athens between assignments, as it were. He was there for a bit of a breather waiting for Timothy and Titus to catch up with him from the city of Beroea. What changed this man from a tourist to a witness was his perception of the idolatry of the city. He did not see the celebrated architecture and statuary. Some believe that he could not see because his eyes were frail. Others are mean enough to suggest that he would not see because he was a Phillistine at heart. But Paul was too educated for this. He did not see the celebrated architecture and statuary because he saw instead the plethora of altars, the multiplicity of gods, the moral and ethical turpitude that had overtaken Athens. It is interesting to compare St. Paul's impression of this city with the impression that Lucian, the pagan, experienced. Lucian writes, "When I first came to Athens I gazed with wonder and rapture on all the glory of the city." St. Paul's reaction, given to us in Moffatt's translation, "While Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his soul was irritated at the sight of the idols that filled the city." (Acts 17:16) Behind the word "irritated" is a Greek word that means exasperated beyond endurance. After a man has been struck by light on the

Damascus road, some things begin to matter that didn't matter before. And some things that used to matter much, matter less. So this "warrior at ease" answers the call to dialogue and debate at Mars Hill.

His message opens with a compliment by which he identified with his hearers. "Gentlemen of Athens, my own eyes tell me that you are in all respects an extremely religious people. For as I made my way here and looked at your shrines I particularly noticed one altar on which were inscribed the words - TO GOD THE UNKNOWN" (Acts 17:22,23). The keynote follows when St. Paul goes on to say, "It is this God Whom you are worshipping in ignorance that I am here to proclaim to you!" (Acts 17:23b) Most of us would have let well enough alone. After all, they were worshipping. And in leaving them alone, we would have assumed that we were tolerant. Sometimes I wonder whether our tolerance is large only because our belief is small. Paul had a right to be concerned because man becomes like what he worships. He had a right to be concerned because man is to worship not only in spirit but in truth as well. If God is only a projection, then any old projection will do. But if God is real, then our worship must partake of that reality.

His message, therefore, is an appeal that his hearers forsake idolatry. Atheism has never been a very big problem. It is not very big in the Bible. Strange, when you come to think of it, that the Bible which purports to be a book about God, should spend so little time debating the atheist. About the only passage I know that takes on the atheist directly is that word in the Psalms, "The fool hath said in his heart, 'There is no God.'" (Psalms 14:1) Otherwise, there's nothing. The thing that the Bible is keen about is idolatry. Because man is incurably religious, he will always have his god or gods. He will ascribe divinity to something.

Idolatry is the worship of something less than God in God's stead. The lush sanctifies his intemper-

ance by worshipping Bacchus. The lecher sanctifies his debauchery by placing flowers at the shrine of Venus. The imperialist sanctifies his brutality by imagining himself blest of Mars.

"It is this God Whom you are worshipping in ignorance that I am here to proclaim." One would think that his hearers, alledgedly in pursuit of light, would have welcomed Paul, would have invited him to stay, would have asked him to open their eyes to the inbreak of truth. But the response was a yawn, basically. A few said, "We'd like to hear some more." Some laughed. But for the most part, life went on the next day and the next in Athens as though Paul had said nothing. They had an altar to an unknown god and they wanted God to remain unknown. Paul was saying in effect that with the advent of Jesus Christ "We are no longer in the dark." Their answer, in effect, "Our dark is light enough!" When God remains a blank I can fill him in any way I wish.

What does all of this have to do with Advent? Much, in many ways. Under the blessed nativity scene one could very well use the words of our text as caption, "It is this God Whom you are worshipping in ignorance that I am here to proclaim!" We are no longer in the dark. Christ has put a face on God. He came not only to glorify God, but to clarify God as well. This does not mean that we read God as simply as we read a timetable. There is still great room for mysterium, tremendum, and sanctum in religious experience. It does mean that God who spoke in times past to the fathers by the prophets has in these last days, spoken to us in his Son. (Heb. 1:1-2) The Word has been made flesh. The church, pointing to Christ, may very well say to the world "He has shown thee, O man, what is good."

But the world at large has been no more responsive to this truth than were the Athenians. In the first anthem of the morning, rendered so beautifully for the enhancement of our worship, we heard the words, "O Light Divine! The world rejoices as the morning breaks and shadows fly." This is more wish than fact. Would

that it were so. The assumption that men everywhere are searching for light and ready to receive it is unfounded. This is the academic fallacy - that if a man knows, he will do. St. John is much more to the point, however abrasive he may sound in our ears, when he declares "Men loved darkness rather than light." (John 3:19) We treasure a certain vagueness toward God. We would rather go on with our speculations than obey. We prefer a blind relativity, a dusky twilight in which all cats are grey.

I am suggesting that it is idolatry that keeps us from God, just as the idolatry of the Athenians kept them from welcoming the light. Idols can be made out of mental images as well as metal images. My friends in the Presbyterian Church in the United States, that is, the Southern Presbyterian Church, are at work on a new Confession of Faith. Some of their theologians met recently and noted, among other things, that "Ever since the clash of Jesus with the Pharisees the most dangerous heretics have not been the openly Godless immoral people who attack the church from the outside, but people within the church who are enthusiastically in favor of the Bible, religion, God, morality, and the church - but use them to lend authority and respectability to ideologies and causes they consciously or unconsciously want to enthrone in place of God in Christ." 1

We have the idolatry that centers in our worship of technology. I shall long remember a morning at a major American airport. At the very center of this rather spacious facility a brand new automobile was on display. Men, somewhat bleary eyed from loss of sleep, stood there, attaché cases in hand, gaping, marveling and coveting. Floodlights poured upon this beauty. The chrome gleamed back the early light of day. The silhouette was sleek and suggestive of power. Slowly, seductively the car turned on its pedestal. The more it turned, the more mesmerized the men became. There is only one title for that picture, "America at Worship!" The great god Vulcan who works the forges and secures for us such gains has returned.



And we're still hung up on the old idolatry of race. Else where would the Black Muslims and the Ku Klux Klan get their chaplains from? At one time or another virtually all of us have been guilty of attempting a regional captivity of the Almighty. We cannot make the God and Father of Jesus Christ compatible with this idolatry. Paul told it straight like it was in Athens when he said, "He hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth," (Acts 17:26). The word, "blood" is not in some of the better manuscripts but the intention is there. In saying this, the apostle countered Greek exclusivism that treated other races as barbarians and at the same time countered Jewish pride which treated other nations as heathen or pagan. That word from Paul, not to mention the twenty-seven volumes on Anthropology put out by UNESCO, ought to be enough to knock into a cocked hat any continuing idolatry of race on the part of the white man. Any people given sufficient time, good climate, adequate resources can come up.

We are also committed to the idolatry of property. Hardly a week goes by but what the issue breaks out - west coast, east coast, somewhere in this country. It seems still to be a moot question as to whether human values or property is supreme. Did you ever take the term "real estate," put it down on paper, look at it, and search out its etymology? The word "real" comes from the Latin, "res," and it means "thing." Stripped of its glorifying adjectives, property is a thing. You can air-condition it, heat it, cool it, light it, landscape it, carpet it, paint it, buy it, sell it, rent it, lease it, mortgage it, but it is still a thing. To a man who was obsessed with this idolatry Jesus said bluntly, "Sell what you have and give to the poor, and come and follow me." (Mark 10:21)

Idolatry reduces to self-worship. The idolater simply projects the values of his own craven spirit and bows down before them. The super-patriot is sure that God is an American. The racist is sure that God shares his color. The Puritan is sure that God hates the sins of the flesh. The Libertine is sure that God hates the

sins of the disposition. The hedonist is sure that God is the author of a good time. And the militarist is sure that God approves his wars. "Arise, shine, Thy light is come." (Is. 60:1) But we prefer the dark to which we are accustomed. It's too difficult to live with truth.

Did it ever seem to you that the repeated celebration of Advent year after year is an anachronism? Looking at it from a preaching point of view, it seemed this way to me this year. How can one sincerely expect that which has already happened? The answer, I think, is this: Chronologically, to be sure we are living anno domine, A.D., but existentially and experientially some of us are still living B.C. We prefer our dark to God's light. We are unwilling to surrender to the light, sensing, and rightly so, that this light must hurt before it heals.

Some time ago I had a dream that Jesus Christ appeared as mystery guest on "What's My Line?" The panel members were properly blindfolded. Jesus was recognized even before taking chalk in hand to write His name. The audience broke out with a wave of warm applause that died before it reached its peak, and fell off into an uneasy silence.

"Members of the panel," said the Moderator, "our guest is self-employed and deals in a service. Let's start the questioning over here."

"Do you sing?" came the first question.

"No," said the mystery guest - the faintest trace of a smile gathering at the corners of his mouth.

"If I may interrupt," said the articulate Moderator, "while it is true that our guest is not a singer - within the frame of reference most in use on 'What's My Line?' - I think it only fair to say that he has brought more song to earth than any other man that ever lived."

"Have you published?" came the next query.

"No." said the guest somewhat apologetically.

"Again, panel, not to mislead you," said the Moderator, "while it is technically true that our guest has not published, it is only fair to say that he has been the frequent theme of more poets, biographers, historians, philosophers and theologians than any other man."

"Have you travelled widely?"

"No," said the mystery guest.

"Let me caution you, panel," said the Moderator, "our guest, it is true, never travelled more than 200 miles from home - before tonight; but he is known, indeed, well known - in every quarter of the earth."

"Have we established the fact that He is an American?" "No?" "Are you an American?"

"No."

"Panel, there's a sense in which our guest is a universal man. In that sense He is as much an American as He is a European or an Asiatic, an African or a citizen of the Near East."

"Are you a military man - commanding other men?"

"No," said the guest, obviously amused by the irony of the question.

"Ah," thought the Moderator to himself, "not a military figure, true, but more men would gladly die for Him right now than for any other man alive."

"Do people come to you for this service that you offer?"



The guest paused, rubbing a hand across his beard, then answered, "No."

"You go to them - where they are. Right?"

"Yes."

"Would you be likely to come to any of us with your service?"

"Yes."

"Would we be better off for having had you come to us?"

At this the mystery guest beckoned the Moderator for a small conference.

"Panel," said the Moderator, "our guest wants to know what you mean by the term 'better off.'"

"O, you know." said the panelist, "would we be healthier, more popular, richer, more successful, less troubled?"

"No." said the guest, "not necessarily."

The Moderator reached for the cards.

"Ten down. No more to go. Panel - take off your blindfolds - and meet Jesus Christ."

## CLOSING PRAYER

"The dearest idols we have known,  
Whate'er these idols be,  
Help us to tear them from Thy throne,  
And worship only Thee."

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen.

### FOOTNOTE:

"Proposals on Theology" pps. 55-57, quoted by Ernest Trice Thompson in Affirmation, Vol I, #3, p. 53, Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Va.



