

Athenians

6 Easter, Year A, 5/14/23

First of all, Happy Mothers' Day! to all of us, those among us who have been mothers, and those who have had mothers, mindful of the many joys and griefs that mothering has to offer. May the joys that come to those who find this day joyous help those who find it, for whatever reason, grievous find God's peace and grace in it as well. For me, this is not easy, but the Christ who said "I will not leave you comfortless" – the older, clarifying euphemism for the NRSV's "orphans" that we heard today – will certainly be with us always, even to the ending of the age.

Our sermon today takes its title from something Paul said, and those to whom he said it: "Athenians" – *Athenaios*, in Greek – people of Athens. He addressed them either at a place called the Areopagus – Mars' Hill – or as a kind of law court named for that place, a court that at one point heard "cases of deliberate homicide, wounding and religious matters, as well as cases involving arson of olive trees."¹

One can see the connection: killing or wounding someone, hacking down the trees by which they feed themselves and earn a living, and using religion as a weapon or a thing over which to hurt somebody, are all of a piece. "Cursed be he who moveth his neighbor's landmark," said famously the law in Deuteronomy, and that applies metaphorically as well. Take away what gets people up in the morning, or whatever it is that got them through the night, and you ought at least to have to answer for it. You may have, after all, evidence to show why the burning of the olive grove was an accident, that homicide no murder, or why it was for the best that you made

¹ Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Areopagus>

people aware, if also resentful, of the sweet deceits of their traditional piety. If you do these things, though, at the very least you should tell us why.

To do so in the place where, it is told, the god Ares, Rome's Mars, was tried for killing Poseidon's son Hallirhotius – the name means “sea foam” – is more fitting still. Ares had killed Hallirhotius for having raped Alcippe, Ares' daughter, and the gods of Greece acquitted him of that murder. Perhaps they, like many of us, find we cannot object when rapists finally get their comeuppance, though perhaps it were better than they find it by means of a jury of their peers, as happened this past week to a remorseless, once-and-would-be tyrant in New York, than at the hands of a war god. Some say that Hallirhotius was actually killed by his own axe as he tried to hack down an olive tree sacred to Athena, and that Poseidon blamed Ares for that, too.

Whether law court or the second biggest rock in that rock-hewn town, Athens' Areopagus, Mars Hill, was the sort of place in with Paul would've felt right at home. This is both because of his rabbinic and legal training and by his now being used to arguing his case in front of as many people as would hear him, that he might save some. He doesn't waste a minute getting to his point in our first reading today. He sets about doing what he'd have been hauled there to answer for anyway: feeding his observations about these people's religion back to them with his own sauce and seasoning, telling them that he knows, as they do not, who the Unknown God is to whom they've built an altar and offered worship – as Steinbeck's novel title has it, *To a God Unknown*.

Some say that Paul misread the inscription, which in any case archaeologists have not found. It may be that the altar was dedicated to “The Holy Ones,” or to any of the unknown gods that people find responsible for having done something or other. Say there was a plague, or the sheep got sick, and then all of a sudden the plague was

gone or the sheep made well, and you didn't do it, and nor did anyone else you know. You would, if ancient and Athenian, ascribe this mystery cure to some power that clearly exists, but whose name you do not know. In such an instance, one coming back from our time to theirs would help them name this god "Germ Theory," or even "Germ Reality." I suspect that this would more focus the mystery than demystify it, since the power of very small things to wreak great changes always has a mystery about it, even when we can explain it and engineer our medicines for it. I find that the more I understand the whys and wherefores of life as it has come to be, the more wondrous and mysterious it remains. The great questions at the heart of those mysteries – "Why is there something and not nothing?" and "Why is there this and not that?" – remain without answers, insisting that we accept what we cannot know and that we cannot know, whether or not we call it a god.

In a way, Paul agrees with this. He explains to the Athenians that this god they worship but do not know is the creator of all things, including all people. This god needs nothing from us, abides not in the things we make, and can be hard to discern if you don't know where to look. Where to look? Within – for in this god "we live and move and have our being." The god you know least may well be the god within you, that is, but rest assured that this god knows you well, better even than you know yourself. This god – call it "God" – may have winked at our ignorance until now, but not for much longer. The source of all who live will judge us, and soon, over how we have lived, and what we have done with the many gifts of life unearned and grace irresistible.

All this the people of Athens found tolerable, reasonable, and even acceptable. What Paul said next, though, they found less so. This God sent one among us, he explained, to judge and to save, and when that person died, God brought him back, so that we'd know this God is serious. This the people found hard to accept on Mars' Hill, or in

the court for judging murder, impiety, and olive-burning. Some mocked, some took it under advisement, and a few took it hook, line, and sinker. We know two of their names: Dionysius and Damaris – two people who thought that talk of resurrection and a final judgment made sense as the message and meaning of a god unknown, and of our desire to know what this god really meant and wants. Could whatever made all that is and empowered it to know itself, become self-aware, and be able to tell right from wrong yet not always be willing to choose right and not wrong, really just sit there winking at our ignorance and lack of curiosity, and at our shortcomings and wrongs? Oh, no. Not by a long shot. The powers that be do not reward ignorance or any other form of sloth, even if they might forgive the slaying of the wicked who, for a long time, have had it coming. Deep down, I suspect Damaris and Dionysius knew that their fellow Athenians knew this, even if they wouldn't admit it. That is why there was that altar for Paul to find in the first place, and why the people of the city stood and listened while he told them what he thought it meant, and why that mattered.

One can imagine these two early adopter-types from Athens asking that heartbreak of a question that opens our lesson from 1st Peter today: “Who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?” In English it reads as though rhetorical, and the answer “No-one, of course,” but it is not rhetorical and that is not its answer. The Lord will not seek to harm you if you seek to do good, but other people might, particularly those who wish to do harm. Many a truth-teller, lie-exposer, bribe-resistant, morality-driven doer of good things has been persecuted, as 1st Peter goes on to note, for the sake of righteousness. “If He was,” the text says to this, meaning Christ, “Why not us?” Yea, and more: “The just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God,” which is more than was granted to those who died when Noah was saved. Those folks never had a chance to repent, unlike us. If the Spirit is within you and your

conscience clean – and don't lie to yourself about whether it is or not – you may consider yourself to have gotten right with God. This is true even if you suffer in this world for it, as suffer you will – which, again, is not what anyone was expecting when they signed up for this, but such is life as we know it.

John Steinbeck's novel *To a God Unknown*, which I mentioned above, goes several steps further with these themes. Joseph Wayne, the protagonist, works hard to understand the meaning and intention behind the source of all things. In his case this means the source of the health of the land and its waters in “Nuestra Señora, the long valley of Our Lady in central California, [which] was green and gold and yellow and blue when Joseph came into it,” which he wants to ranch and farm and in which find meaning, a home, a family, and peace.² It takes him a while to find it, and his journey to that finding is not without challenge, peril, and loss. It is also full of beauty and promise, of self-discovery and catharsis, but not one moment in which Joseph preens before other people, in Paul-like fashion, claiming to know their gods better than they do. He has his moments of passion, of course, of fire and need, burning with a love of what lives and what he finds good that can be too hot to bear, but this is but one more reason that he rejoices to find that water is the heart of the life of the land. How goes the old saying? For all our industry and knowledge, we owe our existence and civilization to about 6” of topsoil and the fact that it rains?

But here how Steinbeck evokes it, the place Joseph Wayne found peace, trouble, and all that could be good or God in:

The spring came richly, and the hills lay deep in grass—emerald green, the rank thick grass; the slopes were sleek and fat with it. Under the constant rains the river ran sturdily on, and its sheltering trees bowed under the weight of leaves and joined their branches over the river so

² John Steinbeck, *To a God Unknown*, 1933, chp. 2, public domain text (in Canada) found here: <https://www.fadedpage.com/showbook.php?pid=20220532>.

that it ran for miles in a dim cavern. The farm buildings took a deep weathering in the wet winter; the pale moss started on the northerly roofs; the manure piles were crowned with forced grass.

The stock, sensing a great quantity of food shooting up on the sidehills, increased the bearing of young. Rarely did so many cows have two calves as during that spring. The pigs littered and there were no runts. In the barn only a few horses were tied, for the grass was too sweet to waste.

When April came, and warm grass-scented days, the flowers burdened the hills with color, the poppies gold and the lupins blue, in spreads and comforters. Each variety kept to itself and splashed the land with its color. And still the rain fell often, until the earth was spongy with moisture. Every depression in the ground became a spring, and every hole a well. ³

California's April is much like our May, so it seems fitting to end, this Mothers' Day, with this vision of a land rife with life and beauty, and the power of the god who made it. We may or may not know well this God, but this God knows us well, and loves us enough to want us to live well wherever we are, to be good, and to know it. Be we Athenians or no, praying to an unknown God or no, let us never forget it. Amen.

³ *Ibid.*, chp.17.