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Mars Hill Easter 6A 2011

Irvine United Congregational Church
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Readings: Acts 17:22-31, John 14:15-21

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A shining city on a hill best describes the Acropolis in Athens. And one of the best views of it is from the Areopagus. The name means, “Rock of Ares,” but after the Roman conquest, the name of the Roman God was substituted, and so it was re-named, “Mars Hill.”

When you walk down from the glorious buildings that make up the Acropolis, including the Parthenon, whose parched marble bones are softened by the red poppies that spring up amidst the fallen capitals, you come to a large outcropping of rock. The original stairs that are cut into this hill are worn and dangerous to climb, but people regularly make it up to the top, where you are greeted with craggy, slippery reddish-rock. The hill extends to an edge, where one could tumble down if not careful, towards the agora in the distance, and the Temple of Zeus further on.

Legend says that this was the rock where Ares was tried by the gods for the killing of Poseidon’s son. It became a place of trial and judgment. It is the site of Aeschylus’ tale of the trial of Orestes for the killing of Clytemnestra. It is also the very real place for the trial of Socrates for his unusual religious and political views, and of his subsequent death by drinking hemlock.

Some five hundred years later, it was the place where philosophers and statesmen still came to debate, and it continued to function in Roman times. It was from this location, drawing from the potential significance of the Athenian altar to the Unknown God, that the Apostle Paul is said to have delivered the famous speech, ‘Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands.’

Paul also challenged the Athenians there about the expansive nature of God, and talked of a God that could not be described so as to be depicted on altar or in temple, referring to the Altar of the Unknown God just across the way.

Standing on this hill and drinking in all of this history with our group a couple of weeks ago, Dale pointed to the ground and said, “Don’t you want to pick up a souvenir?” I looked down and through all of the crevices of this slippery mountain of rock visited by Romans, ancient Greeks and civilizations before that, were rusted bottle-caps. Not finding sufficient historical evidence to back which bottled beer the Apostle Paul liked best while chilling with the Athenians...or which one was the best chaser for the hemlock to go down, with the clean taste of natural hops and barley that would make Socrates wipe the foam from his beard with the back of his hand, I decided not to pick one up.

At the beginning of our passage from Acts, Paul is waiting for Silas and Timothy in Athens. As Paul waits in the public spaces of the city, he is disturbed by all of the idols he sees. He begins conversations about this, first in the synagogue, but then in the marketplace with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. In the course of these dialogues, he begins to talk about a theology that was much different than what was accepted as “religion” in that day. As Socrates got himself in trouble centuries before on account of a similar charge and was brought to trial at a place called “Mars Hill,” so too did Paul face the same charge and was taken to the same place to face his critics.

Not too long ago, a young evangelical named Rob Bell graduated from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, and went off to start what is now a 7,000 member church in Michigan. I like the irony in the fact that he named this community, “Mars Hill Bible Church.”

It is a fairly conservative evangelical community, but like Paul, Rob Bell has been saying something that is raising hackles around and atop the Evangelical Areopagus.

So much so, that the last issue of *Time Magazine* featured him and his now-controversial book on the front cover.

The church website describes the source of the firestorm, Bell's new book, this way: "*Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* is a hopeful and inspiring message that articulates how to live the way of Jesus and inspires us to stretch our imaginations on the scope of God's love."

During an art show at his church, there was a picture of Gandhi along with a quotation. A visitor to the exhibit had stuck a note next to the Gandhi quotation that read, "Reality check: He's in hell." Bell was shocked, and this begins his book:

"Really?" he recalls thinking. "Gandhi's in hell? He is? We have confirmation of this? Somebody knows this? Without a doubt? And that somebody decided to take on the responsibility of letting the rest of us know?"

That Bell, an evangelical, would question the existence of hell and the possibility of salvation for everyone, has brought down the wrath of pastors, denominations and Christian circles closest to Bell, all for saying many of the same things we've been saying for decades. Though no hemlock has been offered for Bell to quaff, he has become anathema to many evangelicals and theological conservatives, while at the same time, in the brave move he has made to question long-held beliefs through confronting his own like-minded Christian set, if not his own church, he has shown a fresh spirit bringing fresh air to a dry theology of unquestioned certainty.

R. Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, puts it this way, "When you adopt universalism and erase the distinction between the church and the world, then you don't need the church, and you don't need Christ, and you don't need the cross. This is the tragedy of nonjudgmental mainline liberalism, and it's Rob Bell's tragedy in this book too."

The article in *Time Magazine* goes on to say, "Particularly galling to conservative Christian critics is that *Love Wins* is not an attack from outside the walls of the Evangelical city but a mutiny from within — a rebellion led by a charismatic, popular and savvy pastor with a following. Is Bell's Christianity — less judgmental, more fluid, open to questioning the most ancient of assumptions — on an inexorable rise?"

The most hopeful note in the article is Bell's response to this, given his community. He says, "I have long wondered if there is a massive shift coming in what it means to be a Christian. Something new is in the air."

On the day when churches everywhere start to talk about how the spirit is being sent to them, it is this spirit of being open to a more expansive understanding of our interconnectedness, our rightful equal access, and an inclusive vision of the realm of God that is so hopeful. Whether it is Paul challenging the Athenians on Mars Hill in Athens, or Rob Bell challenging a Christian community that has long written more progressive Christians like ourselves off years ago from his own Mars Hill, if we really believe it to be true that that which we name as, "God" is the source of love and the ground of all-being, then slowly, hearts will be turned. This is a good day for our Evangelical brothers and sisters.

The tie to our passage on the very real Mars Hill moves seamlessly into the passage from John, where we hear we will receive an Advocate as we move forward to form our own churches and wrestle with what it is that we really do believe to be true.

Years ago, Preacher Barbara Lundblad said, “I read something rather odd: ‘The reason mountain climbers are tied together is to keep the sane ones from going home.’ Whoever said that was playing with us a bit, for we know mountain climbers are tied together to keep from getting lost or going over a cliff. But there’s another piece of truth here. When things get tough up on the mountain, when fear sets in, many a climber is tempted to say, ‘This is crazy! I’m going home.’ The life of faith can be like that—doubts set in, despair overwhelms us, and the whole notion of believing in God seems crazy. Jesus knew his disciples would have days like that. So he told them we’re tied together like branches on the vine—or like climbers tied to the rope—tied together by the Spirit, to trust in one who is always more than we can understand, to keep us moving ahead on the journey of faith, to encourage us when believing seems absurd. ‘I will not leave you orphaned,’ said Jesus. ‘I am coming to you.’”

One of the famous blues musicians of the 50’s and 60’s was the great blues master Jimmy Reed. Reed was a share-cropper’s son, who brought the throbbing harmonica-and-guitar-driven black rhythm-and-blues of the Mississippi Delta into the popular rock-and-roll mainstream.

There’s an interesting story behind the old vinyl Jimmy Reed records. When you put the needle down again and again in the grooves of his records, there could sometimes be heard, ever so faintly in the background, a woman’s soft voice murmuring in advance the next verse of the song. The story that grew up around this—and perhaps it is true—was that Jimmy Reed was so absorbed in the beat and the guitar riffs of his music that he simply could not remember the words of his own songs. He needed help with the lyrics, and the woman’s voice was none other than that of his wife, devotedly coaching her husband through the recording session by whispering the upcoming stanzas into his ear as he sang.

Whether or not this story is accurate, we might recognize a parallel in today’s text. Jesus tells his followers that the role of the Holy Spirit is, in effect, to whisper the lyrics of the gospel song in the ears of the faithful. When Jesus was present, he was the one who taught, healed, coached them through the proper verses, taught them the joyful commandments. But now that Jesus approaches his death, now that he draws near to his time of departure, now that the disciples will be on their own without him, that task is to be handed over to what we understand to be the Spirit presence with us:

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth.”

Socrates spoke words of truth that angered those who knew him.

Paul escaped with his life on more than one occasion, including his experience on Mars Hill in today’s readings. Now, Rob Bell, from his own Mars Hill in Michigan, is sensing that something new is happening in the church and in our culture, that there is a massive shift coming in what it means to be a Christian; that something new is in the air.” Paul might add to that the words he spoke to the Athenians when he talked about a God that could not be contained by any description made by human hands. That which we will ultimately know to be true...the spirit of truth will lead us there, and it is not ours now or ever to try and create, contain or restrict our growing spirit and intellect-led understanding of what makes us spiritual beings, in community with one another and with the world, and called to follow the great commandments to give back the love that has been given to us by God and the love for each other. Amen.

Scripture for Sunday, May 29, 2011

Acts 17:22-31

22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 23 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. 24 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, 25 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. 26 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, 27 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. 28 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.” 29 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. 30 While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 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.”

John 14:15-21

15 “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. 17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. 18 “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. 19 In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. 20 On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. 21 They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”