

To a Known and Unknown God
Rev. Cindy Maddox
May 14, 2023

Acts 17:16-29

Our Call to Worship began with the words “Bathala Maykapal.”
Unlike Bardwell Smith, and probably some of you as well,
I am not an expert on Asian religions.
But according to what I’ve read
“In ancient Tagalog, the Supreme Being known as Bathala Maykapal
[commonly called simply Bathala]
[was] regarded as the creator and ruler of the universe. . . .
He is said to have appeared during various natural phenomenon
such as a flood, a fire, and an earthquake,
and he declared his authority over the world. . . .
Bathala is considered to be very humanlike in his appearance
as he created human beings in his own image.
Various stories of Bathala across the Philippines describe him as an ageless god
with a flowing white beard but extremely strong and powerful.
Other myths and folklore depict him as a young man at the time of the creation.”¹

You can see why, when Spanish missionaries came to the Philippines,
they chose this god (of many whom the people worshiped)
to represent who we call God.
You could say that they co-opted Bathala, turned him into a Christian God.
And although we now recognize the damage done to indigenous peoples
by colonizing religion,
we can understand why the obvious comparisons led the missionaries to do this.
Bathala seemed but another name for the God they came to proclaim.

The United Church of Christ’s worship resources for today
included part of this story with, to my way of thinking,
not enough acknowledgment of the damage of colonization.
They did point out that many churches are now reclaiming the original name
so that the Filipino Christians are reconnecting
to their pre-colonization religious roots.

¹ <https://mythlok.com/bathala/>

I understand why the Spanish missionaries chose Bathala to become our God,
 and I understand why the UCC's worship resource writers
 chose to highlight this story this week.
 It is because Paul did something similar in Athens.

The portion of the story that Leota read for us this morning
 does not exactly match the portion designated by the lectionary for today.
 I started the story earlier so that we could get a better view of the context
 (and because I like to see Paul being called a "pretentious babbler!")
 Because we started the story earlier we see that Paul was
 "deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols."
 They had idols to every god imaginable,
 and even to one they could not imagine.
 They had an altar "to an unknown god."
 The Athenians were covering all their bases.
 They didn't want to leave anybody out.
 They worshiped the gods of the sky, the sea, the earth, the underworld,
 the gods of fire, war, and metalworking,
 the goddesses of beauty, art, childbirth, harvest, and hunting.
 If it was important to their life, they had a god to oversee it.

According to one scholar, "The great irony of an altar to an 'unknown' god
 is that it is not actually evidence of the Athenians' religiosity,
 but of their extreme superstitions.
 It is too great a risk to forget a god or to offend a god,
 even if said deity was previously unknown."
 Plus, "if one expects that gods in general are capricious in nature
 and quick to wreak havoc on the lives of humans . . .
 certainly a pre-emptive appeal is desired and commendable."²

Paul, we are told, was distressed by this,
 and he argued in the synagogue and in the marketplace
 with anyone who would listen.
 Some of the philosophers there took him to the Areopagus
 and invited him to speak, to teach.
 But instead of expressing his "distress" over their idols, he praised them for it.

² <http://revgalblogpals.org/2014/05/13/narrative-lectionary-paul-gets-philosophical/>

“Athenians, I see how extremely spiritual you are in every way. 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.”

In other words, “This god you call unknown—
this is the real God, and this God wants to be known.”

I wonder, with our various understandings of who and what God is,
if we all believe this—that God wants to be known.

I wonder if we believe that we can know God, even a little.
We can so easily get caught up in our intellectual understandings,
or our past experience of harmful religion,
that we don’t know who or what we seek or if we even should.

I had a dear friend years ago named Bob.
I told you about him once before when I shared the story of the grandfather clock.
He and his wife retired to Asheville, where I was the Associate Pastor.

He had spent his life in ministry—
first serving as an American Baptist pastor,
and then in later years as a pastoral counselor.

Bob was an incredible man, an adamant feminist, a tireless voice for inclusion
of women and LGBTQ people in the life of the church.

One time he and I co-taught an adult class called “Intimacy: Human and Divine.”
Since he had experience working as a counselor,
he took the “human” part of the equation
and talked about various issues that foster or hinder intimacy
in relationship.

I was supposed to discuss the “divine” part of the equation,
exploring intimacy with God.

I remember expressing to him great concerns about my ability to do that!

I had just graduated from seminary,
and here he was, a retired minister!

I was still overcoming my conservative upbringing,
where we knew what intimacy with God looked like.

I didn’t know how to be intimate with God as a liberal Christian,
or even if I could!

I said as much to Bob, perhaps wanting him to let me off the hook,

perhaps wanting him to explain to me what three years of seminary
had failed to do.

But with tears in his eyes Bob told me that all his life
he had longed for an encounter with God,
had prayed for an intimate experience with God,
to feel God's presence.

"And I've never gotten it," he said through his tears. "After all these years."
I was overwhelmed. Astounded.

Here was a man I admired and adored . . .
a man who exuded God's love and grace
in a way I had rarely seen in my life.

Yet Bob said he had never experienced God's presence,
when I had experienced God through him countless times.

How could he not know?

What exactly was he seeking when he prayed for an encounter with God?
And why could I see in him what he couldn't see in himself?

"God is not far from each one of us," Paul is quoted as saying.

The Rev. Dr. Margaret Aymer writes,

Today's scripture "encourages us to view the entire created order
as the place of God's dwelling.

God is near to us, as close as every motion and breath,
and wishes to be found by those who seek."³

"Paul lauds the vocation of such people who spend their days
seeking and even touching God.

He argues that they have indeed made at least incidental contact with the divine
because God is so close.

Paul chooses as his proof text not a passage of Scripture,
but a word from a Greek poet who describes God
as the one in whom 'we live and move and have our being' (17:28).

The only time we have had an experience of living, moving, and having our being
within another is when we inhabit our mother's womb.

And this image leads to a declaration that humans are offspring

3

of the one in whom they had been carried.”⁴
 I was lucky enough to receive a grant for my first sabbatical,
 and part of that grant was used to explore what I thought of as
 “alternative forms of spirituality.”
 I participated in a conference at the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, New York,
 on “shamanic reiki.”
 I still can’t tell you for sure what shamanic reiki is!
 But I remember one exercise very well.
 We were given instructions ahead of time on how to do this activity alone.
 We were to enter into a meditative space.
 We were told to visit in our mind our favorite safe place,
 to sit and wait as we paid attention to all of our senses in that place—
 what we saw, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched in our minds.
 We were encouraged to look for someone who would appear on the horizon,
 who would come and make themselves known to us.
 We were told to ask whoever appeared, “Are you my spiritual guide?”
 And if “yes” we could ask them whatever we wanted
 and if “no” we were to let them pass.
 Well, this was all a little too woo-woo-ey for me, but I gave it a shot.
 It didn’t work the way I planned.
 My favorite spot out on the water didn’t work
 because I couldn’t figure out how my guide would walk on water.
 I got scared when I thought I saw somebody on the horizon
 who I most definitely did NOT want to be my spiritual guide!
 But finally I settled in and there, under a tree on the Omega campus,
 he came to me.
 My friend Bob. He had been dead a few years by this point,
 but there he was in his green golf shirt and khaki pants,
 smiling at me as though he had missed me as much as I had missed him.
 As instructed, I asked him, “Are you my spiritual guide?”
 He laughed and then he said, “Why are you looking outside of yourself
 for what you already have within you?”
 And I cried—for joy, for loss, for the gift he had been in my life when he was alive,
 for an awareness that maybe, in death,
 he had discovered what he hadn’t known in life—

4

that he not only HAD experienced God
but that he himself WAS an experience with God.

I make no claims to be able to talk to the dead or to have visions.

I may have been slightly delusional due to the sudden loss
of meat and refined sugar there on the Omega campus!

But in that moment, in my seeking, Bob was as real as I needed him to be.
And maybe, once again, Bob was a stand-in for God.
Either way, I found what I was seeking, at least for that season.

I think we are all seekers.

“Maybe not everyone searches for God.

There are those who search for God, those who search for meaning,
those who search for joy.

Some seek health and happiness, some look for family and belonging,
some seek peace and solitude. . . .

Most of us, at some time or other, have a feeling that something is missing.
And we go searching, at least in our minds.

It seems that we are not unlike the ancient Athenians.

They were looking for something.

They were a pagan society, and had erected structures to every god
represented in their pluralistic society,
even one ‘to an unknown god’ to cover all the bases.

Were they still searching? Paul seemed to think so. . . .

What if we took Paul’s advice to look for the God who is not far away,
but actually close by?

What if our inward looking led us to see the places in our souls
where God has already been at work,
stirring in us the desire for meaning?

What if our outward searching led us to see the places
where God has already been at work in the world?

What if our searching could lead us to recognize meaning, happiness,
peace, belonging, and all those other things we need,
that aren’t that far away at all?

In God we live and move and have our being.

The object of our search is right here, with us and within us.”⁵

⁵ <https://melissabanesevier.wordpress.com/2011/05/25/american-idols/>

Thanks be to God. Amen.