

“It Sounds Rather Strange”

1. Many of you have been to big cities like New York or London or Paris.
  - a. If I think about New York I think of a city that is bustling
  - b. I think of course of Manhattan and its many tall buildings, and large and diverse crowds of people going here and there
  - c. I think about places to go for fun or for education, whether it be to a theater or museums
  - d. and I think about restaurants, the ones that I can't afford, the ones that are the unique places, the ones that appear in TV shows and get written about in magazines.
  - e. I have friends who live in New York. They generally don't live near where they work
  - f. They have to take a train to go from the borough where they live to the borough where they work (most of them Manhattan)
  - g. and it's interesting that in a town as big as that, the people who live there look for the comfort of their immediate neighborhood to make the city feel more manageable.
  - h. And so a friend might work in Manhattan in Times Square but on a weekend she stays close to home and goes to her favorite neighborhood coffee shop or the bodega down the block
  - i. She lives in a sprawling city, but she calls her neighborhood her own, calls her little section of that City her own.
2. The Greek city of Athens was massive by ancient world standards, both in terms of population, in terms of culture and commerce, and in terms of interesting things happening.
  - a. A scholar writes: “Athens was a city that was a hub for intellectual and cultural elite life of the Roman Empire... Philosophers and wannabe philosophers swarmed in the porticoes... of the city. Athens was teeming with writers and historians, geographers and composers, artists and architects, physicians and lawyers. If you were looking for something ancient, edgy, profound, exotic, different, or intellectually stimulating, Athens was the place to be. Athens, as a city, was also quite cosmopolitan in its religious expressions.” <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/pauls-sermon-at-athens/commentary-on-acts-1716-31-3>
  - b. And as a city like modern New York today, the choices for activities were varied and people understood that there was so much going on
  - c. Those in Athens who were culturally astute and curious would watch and listen for new things coming up just like a New Yorker who “discovers” a new little restaurant,
    - i. a hole in the wall in a neighborhood where they don't live but they heard a friend of a friend mention this Nigerian or Korean or Nicaraguan little restaurant that is very much worth the trip there.
    - ii. The Athenians sampled theology and philosophy like New Yorkers sample cuisine.
3. It's into that kind of scene that Paul enters in today's passage
  - a. Paul is trying to preach first with the people in the synagogue, but then with anybody who would slow down enough in the busy square to listen to him.

- b. Picture some guy deciding to stand literally on a soapbox at some corner to speak
  - c. Sampling a new theology like an exotic cuisine, the Athenians gathered and listened.
  - d. And it all sounded a bit strange to them.
  - e. The message that Paul shared was in a way a shockingly different message
  - f. it was of a God who created all things, and who loves humans so much so as to make an appearance in our own flesh to connect with us.
  - g. It sounded like madness to the Athenians who liked their theology complex but logical
    - i. they liked a kind of division of labor among their gods, a god for this and a god for that, with a set hierarchy of these deities
    - ii. In other words, they knew of the full extent of philosophies, but they were most at home with what they had already found comfortable
    - iii. So here is Paul talking about a single God and one who becomes vulnerable for the sake of connecting with us lowly human beings.
    - iv. It is a curiosity and the Athenians come to the square to sample this theological cuisine to find this strange little man talking about this strange God.
4. I wonder how much we allow ourselves to be surprised by the message of the Gospel
- a. Maybe our faith has carved out a specific part of our heart, and we know what we know, and we believe what we believe.
  - b. Like someone who lives in a huge city, we always return to the area near our house to feel most at home.
  - c. And so it may be with how we've opened ourselves up to the story of God and of Jesus
  - d. What was happening with Paul and the believers in those first few decades after Jesus is that they were being surprised by the work of God through Jesus.
  - e. The Spirit of God was shaking things up, and they were facing fresh ways to interpret the ancient words of God, fresh ways to hear God speaking in their time.
  - f. Consider how your faith has evolved throughout your life: how you understood God when you were you, and how you see God now; what teachings of Jesus stir you in a new way today.
  - g. Today in worship we embrace the joy of growth, the challenge of reaching new heights in our lives
    - i. As we prayed for Rett, we recognize that he will grow in the faith with the support of his family and also of us, his church family
    - ii. Rett will hear the ancient stories of faith for the first time, and feel the love of Jesus through your care as you teach him in Sunday school
    - iii. And we will learn from him, because he will have insights about God which will open us to a deepening relationship with God
  - h. That is certainly the case with our graduates, whom we honor today
    - i. We have seen them grow, some from the time they were born.
    - ii. And we have learned from them (and will continue to learn) because their perspective shakes up the established patterns, their wisdom shines new light
  - i. To look at Rett and to look at our graduates and not anticipate that they'll help us grow in our faith would mean that we doubt God can surprise us any more, that God can instruct us with a new perspective.
  - j. As my pastor likes to say, God did not stop speaking with the book (the Bible) went to press

5. God speaks to us in unexpected, surprising and sometimes upsetting ways. But the beauty of God's continuing dialogue with humanity is that it opens us up to God's word coming from each and every one of us, as we are guided by the Spirit, and we learn with and from one another.

Reflection Questions:

1. Share a story of when God has surprised you.
2. Why would the Athenians have been suspicious of what Paul was preaching (Acts 17:16-31)?
3. Share an area where you feel God is currently helping you grow.