

Easter 6
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As we begin our sermon for today, I'd like you all to think of a time when you had to do something that you felt completely unprepared to do. And as you think of that, I'll give some examples that might fit your experience. How about the first time you had to make a speech in front of a crowd. For many people public speaking is their biggest fear, and no matter how well they may know their subject, they may never feel prepared to speak in front of a group. Or how about when your first child was born, and suddenly you had to figure out how to raise them and care for them. As wonderful and beautiful as a new baby is, they don't come with instructions, and it can be overwhelming. Perhaps you can remember feeling unprepared for a test in school, or a job interview, or an opportunity to share your faith, or maybe you can remember a time when you had to confront a close friend about something and you had no idea how you were going to do it. Maybe you're feeling completely unprepared about something in your life right now, that you know you're going to have to face.

The apostle Paul was going through that same feeling in our reading for today from the 17th chapter of Acts. Paul was out on his second missionary journey to various places around the Mediterranean Sea, he was spreading the good news of Jesus Christ, and he was doing pretty well at it, many were eager to hear this Good news and became believers. But then he receives a request to come to Athens, to speak to some of the most learned people in the world to share this Good News.

Athens, of course was the home of all the great ancient philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and they had the greatest libraries and the best schools for learning. Paul must have asked himself "how am I going to be able to talk to these people. I can't debate with them, I don't have their education. How can I possibly get the Good news of Jesus Christ through to these people? I don't even have my partners Silas and Timothy with me to back me up, I have to do this one on my own.

When Paul arrived in Athens, he became even more distressed, because the city was full of idols to all kinds of different gods. So he went to the Synagogue to argue with the Jews, and to the marketplace to argue his point with whoever would listen to him. But when some of the philosophers heard him, they said "Who is this babbler who talks about foreign Gods? Take him to the high court to make his case." Along the way climbing up Mars Hill to the Areopagus where he would be heard, Paul passed all the monuments and temples to the many Greek Gods, a temple to the sun god, the moon god, a monument to the god of the harvest, a temple to the god of fertility, and all the while Paul was wondering what could he possibly say to these wise men, and he prayed for God to be with him, to give him an answer, to give him the words that they might hear him, to give him the words that might spare him his life, and then.....Paul looked over and saw an alter with the inscription:

“To an unknown God.”

And there it was, just what Paul needed, an answer to his prayer.

When Paul came before the High Court he said, “People of Athens, I applaud you for I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through your city, I saw how you have searched for God in so many aspects of your life, in the sun and the moon, in the fruit of the earth, and in your search for God you know that even as you have found God in all these places, you have acknowledged that there may be more, as I found an altar “to an unknown god.” Well, I am here to reveal to you this day, this unknown God, for what was unknown.....I now proclaim to you!

Paul didn't criticize their not knowing God or Jesus, but met them where they were, he even celebrated the fact that they desired to know God in a deeper way. And then Paul went on to tell of the one God who made the world and everything in it, who is the Lord of heaven and earth, and that even though we may search and grope for him, he is not far from each one of us, for it is in him we live and move and have our being. And Paul went on and on, he told them everything he could.....and he told them of the Good News of Jesus Christ, who died for our sins and then rose again..... Well.....At the thought of the resurrection many scoffed at his claims, but others wanted to hear more, and some came to believe.

Paul was in a situation he was completely unprepared for, and yet he trusted God to get him through the adversity..... Never knowing what the outcome might be, he trusted God, for with God, he would never be alone in his struggles.

When Jesus told the disciples that they would no longer see him because he would be ascending to the Father, Jesus said, “I will not leave you orphaned. I will not abandon you. Even though you will not see me, I will live in you.” And Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments, and I will ask my Father to give you an advocate that will be with you forever.” And we know that advocate to be the Holy Spirit. And we know that we receive that gift of the Holy Spirit at baptism.....and as our faithful God has promised us, we know that that Spirit will be with us forever.

We are not orphans. We are children of God, and we belong to God forever. The apostle Paul knew that as well, and he relied on that when the odds seemed stacked against him. If we trust in that promise and know that the spirit of God is with us, we will be comforted and protected, and through trust in God we will be prepared, even when it comes to doing something we feel completely unprepared for.

Like suddenly being laid off, with no source of income in sight. Or when the results from the medical tests are troubling, or when we don't know how to carry on after losing a loved one. When we are feeling overwhelmed, or defeated or rejected. That's when as children of God, we must rely on the spirit of God to be with us, comforting us, carrying us through anything life throws at us. For we are not orphans, we are not forgotten,

God's spirit of life will see us through the uncertainty and through our entire life in this world, even into the world to come.

Of course, we do have a part in this relationship. Jesus says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." And just a few verses earlier Jesus described what he meant to his disciples, he said,

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.

Just as I have loved you, you also, should love one another.

For we not only receive God's promises, his spirit, and his love for us, but we are also expected to share that love with others. When a friend is feeling like they are completely unprepared to do something that they must do, we can be there for them, with support and kindness. And through that love we can help others to get to know and love our Lord and Savior, Jesus.

Because when we leave this time of worship and return to the world out there, it will be very much like when Paul entered Athens. Our world is full of idols and our culture worships many various gods. We may not bow down to golden icons or sacrifice animals before statues, but we are constantly enticed to worship ourselves and to pursue all those material things. There are those that have reduced our Christian religion to a political agenda, and who have invoked God on behalf of some horrendous causes. Some will use religion simply to make a profit. And so we are challenged to keep our Lord's commandments. And we are challenged to be like Paul, who in the face of a situation he felt completely unprepared for, trusted that God would bring him through it. May the Holy Spirit enter our lives and kindle our faith, so that Christ's holy presence might lead us and guide us through whatever may come. Amen.