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Acts 3:11-26 Peter's speech in Solomon's Portico

Peter's speech comes after he and John heal a man (Acts 3:1-10). The man, who was born lame, was carried to one of the gates of the Temple by friends in order to ask for alms.

The crowd, which would have been largely Jewish, is amazed at what they witness and Peter seizes the opportunity to address them. Peter starts by insisting that it is not by his power or John's power that this man has been made well (3:12). Jesus is the source of the man's healing (3:16). And Jesus can be the source of healing because God has raised him from the dead and glorified him.

Because he is speaking to a largely Jewish crowd Peter can press the case further. He first identifies God as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, and the God of our ancestors (3:13). In doing so he is appealing to stories and memories that have been handed down through generations. The God who made and kept promises to our ancestors has done it again, Peter is saying. God has been faithful to God's servant, Jesus. And now Jesus, who has been raised and glorified, is continuing the work he began. Healing and a chance at a full life have come to this man in the name of Jesus!

- What other stories in the life of Jesus does this healing story remind you of? How have you witnessed the healing power of Jesus at work in the world today?

Peter continues by saying he knows that the crowd and the rulers acted in ignorance when they crucified Jesus (3:17). This is a little strange since this crowd is not the crowd that called for or witnessed Jesus' crucifixion. Nevertheless, he urges them to repent, to recognize that in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, God is at work on behalf of humanity. Repent and experience the forgiveness of sins. In this way they will be prepared for the time of the universal restoration (3:21).

- How much, if at all, does ignorance excuse sin?
- If this crowd is not the same crowd that called for Jesus' crucifixion, why would Peter blame them? How might Peter's speech suggest that we, too, are responsible for Jesus' death?
- What exactly Peter means by universal restoration, he never gets around to telling us. But Skinner notes that because Peter names the prophets, he probably has at least as some of those prophetic visions in mind. Check out a few of these prophetic visions: Isaiah 11:1-9; Isaiah 35, Isaiah 65: 17-25,

Psalm 85 (especially verses 7-13). With these biblical images in mind, how do you imagine what the universal restoration might look like?

Acts 17:16-34 Paul's Speech at the Areopagus

The Areopagus is a rock outcropping in Athens not far from the Acropolis. In antiquity it was a place where the council of elders met and tried court cases. By the time of Paul things had changed. The intellectual and governing elite were referred to as the Areopagite Council (named after the site). When Acts says that Paul went to the Areopagus, it probably means Paul addressed the Areopagite Council. The Athenians were intellectually curious and loved the chance to debate new ideas. The intellectual and cultural elite would've gathered here to debate new thoughts and ideas both religious and secular.

Skinner calls Paul's speech a "trophy story," a chance to brag that our guy was there with all the bigwigs, with the intellectual movers and shakers of the day, telling our story. Christianity was hitting the big times and was not going to remain some obscure sect.

- What specific places or types of places are the equivalent of ancient Athens today? How would you present the Christian message in these places?

In our world, we are used to going somewhere (church, usually) to hear the gospel. But in Paul's day the opposite was true. Paul traveled to bring and preach the gospel. In another book on Acts, Skinner writes, "This illustrates an important truth about this gospel: it meets people where they are – in their settings, usually with language or concepts that make sense to their particular circumstances."¹ The gospel is not just for people familiar with Jewish scriptures and thoughts but for everyone, for the Athenians, for the Corinthians, for the Thessalonians, for the Romans, and for us.

In sharing the gospel with the Athenians, Paul first seeks to find common ground, noting how religious they are (17:22) and commenting on an altar he had seen that was dedicated to "an unknown god" (17:23). He uses this altar as a hook. The Athenians have come to recognize that gods (or God) cannot be fully captured in idols or things made by human hands. God is the *creator* of all things, of heaven and earth, after all. Paul continues to find common ground, quoting a couple of Greek poets. The phrase, "in him we live and move and have our being" was

¹ Skinner, Matthew L. *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel: Encountering the Divine in the Book of Acts*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015), 123.

probably first written by Epimenides (6th century BC) and the phrase “for we too are his offspring” was probably written by Aratus (3rd century BC).²

From here, Paul pivots to the Christian message. What they worship as unknown Paul proclaims as known. He moves from the abstract to the concrete. God has been made known to us through a “righteous man” (17:31). Notice, that Paul never uses the name Jesus in this speech. This “righteous man” was raised from the dead and his resurrection has implications for all of us.

The Athenians would not have found much objectionable in what Paul said until he got to the part about the resurrection of the dead. Most Athenians would’ve believed in some sort of afterlife for the soul, but Paul’s proclamation of a bodily resurrection would’ve struck them as strange or foolish (see what Paul writes about the Athenians/Greeks in 1 Corinthians 1:21-24). The Christian message remains an embodied or fleshy message. It is not an abstract concept or idea. Salvation involves our bodies. Paul insists that in the flesh-and-blood person of Jesus God is fully present and the restored relationship between God and humanity made possible in Jesus will involve our bodies. “Resurrected, remade, changed bodies, yes, but bodies nevertheless.”³

- Would you characterize Paul’s proclamation of the Christian message in Athens as successful? Why or why not? What is the difference, if any, between being a successful witness to Jesus and being a faithful one?
- What lessons about presenting the Christian message to nonbelievers today do you think Christians, as individuals and as the church, can learn from Paul’s example?
- Given the Christian insistence on the resurrection of the body, what implications does this have for how we treat our bodies? For how we treat the bodies of others?

Further Reflection

- What major similarities do you notice between how these passages define the Christian message? What major differences, if any, do you notice, and how do you understand those differences?
- How do these passages show Jesus as both consistent with and different from God’s past history with the people of Israel? Why is it important for Christians to remember that, as Skinner writes, “[t]he Christian message

² *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel*, 126.

³ *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel*, 128.

derives from older Jewish convictions and hopes”? What implications does this remembrance have for how Christians should relate to Jews today?

- Reflecting on Acts 17, Skinner writes, “I don’t think anyone can *prove* that Jesus was raised from the dead. That piece of Christian faith depends not on the tools of science, history, philosophy, or militaries but on the witness of the entire church.” In what specific ways has the church’s witness shaped your faith? Which congregations or organizations, and which specific believers, have influenced your belief in the risen Christ?