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Emanuel's Ev. Lutheran Church • Bellevue (Pittsburgh), PA  
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*Acts 17:22-31*  
*1 Peter 3:13-22*  
*John 14:15-21*

Our passage from *The Acts of the Apostles*, speaks to us from a different time. It was probably written in the late 1<sup>st</sup> Century A.D. (or C.E.). It tells tales of the early apostles, of Peter and Paul, of deacons like Phoebe, and martyrs like Stephen.

Paul's mission and ministry was to the Gentiles, and our *Acts* today is a prime example. He stood in front of the Areopagus, one of the landmarks of ancient Athens. Greeks worshipped the spectrum of gods: Zeus and Athena, Dionysus and Poseidon, Aphrodite and Hades. Paul watched and listened, and reached out to the devotion that he saw in the Athenians. He didn't talk about their gods by name, or tell them about how wrong they were. Instead he named their spiritual hunger, devotion, and worship. He celebrated the good in what he saw, to try to help them understand it differently. To teach them how their religious instincts fit so rightly in the story of the God of Israel.

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It seems goofy for us to think about altars standing in worship to idols. But our culture has its own tendencies like this. Church worship numbers, along continued, committed involvement in Christian congregations, may both being decreasing in the U.S.. But there are marks

of worship all over the place. Watching the news reveals the excessive honor we pay to our society's celebrities, to the dominating importance of a certain economic philosophy, and perhaps to a picture of what our country's role is in the world. As individuals, we are plagued by a host of addictions: substances, like alcohol or drugs, spending money we don't have or sex. There are plenty of others. We worship the past and "the way things used to be," while neglecting the present. Or we worship the new and better, neglecting the wisdom of the past.



I think that most of us grope for God, in different ways, and at different points in our lives. Maybe we're trying to figure out what our lives should be about, whether or not we use "God" terms. Maybe we're trying to figure out who God is anyway, growing in new understanding of our creator and redeemer. These often happen during our major life changes: as teenagers and young adults, when we're figuring out who we are; When we serve in the military, or perhaps when a loved one is serving; When we grieve the death of someone dear to us; When we go through a divorce, or extreme difficulties in a relationship; When we long to find a vocation that helps make a difference for our world.

We feel around. We restlessly try to find what it is we need most – whether that's meaning or comfort, or something to fill a hole left within us. We look for guidance, both inside and outside us. We visit the altars

that others have constructed, the things which they have poured their lives into.

At the beginning of his book, *The Confessions*, St. Augustine wrote, "God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you." We humans were marked by God's image, at each of our creations. We were blessed with a hope, a sense of the more that life can be. We were given a longing for relationship with our God. Regardless of what our culture tells us, the stuff and the resumes don't do it. Only God can bring peace to our lives. And it's not just a peace in the head or the heart, ignoring the world around us. It's a peace that passes understanding, that involves our real, concrete, bodily lives, here and now.



In today's gospel lesson, John articulated how God meets us in our longings and desires. Jesus was explaining to his disciples that he would not always be with them. He promised them that God the Father would send the Holy Spirit to be with them. They would receive an "Advocate."

When I hear the word advocate, I think of someone who helps us negotiate with the powers that be: a lawyer, or someone who advocates on our behalf as we deal with complexities in health care or education systems. It's goofy to think that God would us the help we need to... what, negotiate with God? What a twisted mess would be.

But I don't think that Jesus was promising an advocate for humans in that way. It's not that we need someone to speak to God on our behalf.

Instead, Jesus promised that God would send an advocate to us, to advocate WITH us on God's behalf. After Jesus, God gave a gift to humanity, a gift so that we would not be left to grope blindly for God ourselves. That gift was the Holy Spirit, God's very presence with us, helping to open our eyes and ears to God's presence. When we are lost, blindly reaching out for help, the Spirit is already with us: speaking to us, guiding us, strengthening us, and encouraging us in our faith.

It was the Holy Spirit, working in the converted apostle Paul, who spoke with care, instruction, and invitation to the Athenians. It is the Holy Spirit who speaks to us through one another. Who teaches us in the conversation of spiritual friends and mentors, who supports us in the questions that people of any age ask about the Christian faith. Who offers strength to us when we are going through the most challenging times in our lives. Who will grant guidance to Emanuel's, as it continues to discern God's call to the congregation's ministry. It is the Spirit who helps to see others' needs for what they are and to care. Who grants us the ability to truly be with other people, in good times, and when they are suffering or in great need.

There will still be times when we wonder about God or our lives. We will still grope around, lost. We will be tempted, as everyone is, to seek after other things that might ground our lives. All along our life journeys, we have an advocate who is with us. Reminding us of God's love for us, giving us the gifts we need, and inviting our faithful response.