

6 Easter A 2017

Acts 17:22-31

1 Peter 3:13-22

John 14:15-21

I was standing in my neighbor's crowded kitchen  
In the thick of a party  
When another neighbor came hurrying over to me.

Elizabeth!  
I've been meaning to call you.  
Sam is asking questions about God.  
What should I tell him?

Who is God?  
What shall I say about God?

What would you do,  
If your neighbor asked you?

You have ten seconds.  
What will you say  
To the friend and neighbor  
Who has not been inside a church  
Since her wedding day,  
Who has never by her own choice  
Said a prayer or read the Bible?

What will you say  
In two sentences  
That she will remember  
And take back to her four year old?

What will you say  
In ordinary words  
That will be true to what you know  
And still accessible to her?

What will you say  
That will make a difference?

Some of you have heard this story before,  
And so you know:  
I failed the test.  
"Let me think about that for a minute"

Is the wrong answer.  
She gave me a disappointed look  
The party swirled around us,  
Someone joined our group,  
And the moment was gone.

I wasn't ready.  
Be ready,  
Says the letter to the early church  
Written in the name of Peter,  
Be ready to give an account  
Of the hope that is in you.

Be ready for the questions of a child  
Who knows no stories of God  
And does not know that prayer exists.

Be ready for the questions  
Of the tourist  
Who watches a car plow through Times Square  
And kill the woman next to her.

Be ready for the questions  
Of the young man  
Whose church has told him he is unacceptable.

The questions of a country convulsed by anxiety and doubt,  
Waiting, hardly daring to take a breath,  
To see what will happen next,  
What twists and turns our national story will take,  
Where and how the story will change,  
Or evolve, or end.

Who is God for me,  
For us,  
For the world?  
What is God good for?

Why should we have hope?

If you have hope,  
Be ready to give an account  
Of the hope that is in you.

Be ready,  
As the apostle Paul was ready,

After three years of prayer and formation,  
To tell the good news  
Everywhere and to everyone.

Or was he?  
That's what he tells us in his letters,  
And that's what other stories in the Book of Acts would have us believe.

But the story we read this morning makes me wonder.  
When I read this story from Acts,  
I always wonder  
If Paul was ready for the Athenians.

I have stood on the Areopagus,  
On the hill of Mars  
beside the Acropolis high above Athens;  
I have stood where Paul stood  
And reflected  
With awe and wonder and gratitude  
On his witness and his brilliance,  
His courage and faith.

And still I always wonder,  
Did he tell the good news in Athens?

Did he tell the good news,  
Or did he try to beat the Athenians at their own game?  
Did he give them recycled rhetoric,  
When he could have  
Offered them life?

Now don't mistake me.  
Rhetoric is a good game,  
Even a noble art;  
It can be turned to good and work for justice.  
And still – rhetoric is not the gospel.

I admit it,  
Paul's task was harder  
than standing in your neighbor's kitchen  
And finding an answer to the question,  
Who is God?

Paul is standing at the intellectual center of the world  
Facing a bunch of philosophical junkies  
Who are always searching for something new,

And he's supposed to tell them more  
About his strange new teaching,  
As they call it.

No wonder he tries to speak to them  
In their own language  
And fails to name the name of Jesus.  
Wouldn't you be tempted  
When you had one chance  
To speak your truth  
To the most discerning audience in the world  
Wouldn't you be tempted  
To use their words and play their game?

So he tried it,  
And he did okay.  
He talked about searching for God,  
And perhaps even groping for God,  
And even finding God.  
He talked about a man whom God has appointed to judge the world,  
Who was raised from the dead.

But the Greeks were always searching and groping for God,  
And they had lots of stories about coming back from the dead.

So did their hearts burn within them  
When Paul gave his speech?  
Did the world turn upside down?  
Not really.  
Some scoffed,  
And some said they'd be willing to hear more another time.  
A few people believed.  
End of the story.  
Paul missed the mark in Athens.  
He threw away the substance of his truth  
In order to use the language of those around him.

But he learned his lesson.  
From Athens,  
Where the response was lukewarm at best,  
He went on to Corinth.

And there, as he wrote later,  
he decided to know nothing among them  
But Jesus Christ,  
And him crucified.

He came, he said,  
In weakness and fear and much trembling,  
His speech and proclamation  
were not with plausible words and wisdom,  
but in the power of the spirit.

When he came to Corinth,  
He preached  
The love that bears all things,  
Believes all things,  
Hopes all things,  
Endures all things,  
The love that never ends.  
He preached the power of God  
To raise us from death  
To a new life.  
He preached responsibility to the world around us,  
He preached the hard choice  
to match our lives  
to our beliefs.  
He preached the truth of God  
Revealed in the Spirit given to those who gather in Christ's name.  
And the people of Corinth,  
Proud and secure  
At the busy crossroads of the world  
Notorious for their love of luxury and license,  
Believed, and began to change.  
It wasn't easy,  
And it wasn't smooth,  
But they took the good news to their hearts.

And in the end,  
The good news came to Athens as well,  
Who knows exactly how or when.  
Not by the lukewarm preaching of Paul,  
Who tried to be accommodating  
And so missed his chance.  
But the good news came.  
The power of God  
Finds a way  
Even when we mess up.

And so it will be with little Sam,  
Who kept asking his mother about God,  
And who got no answer from her or from me.  
God will find another way

Another person,  
Another time and place.  
Someone will say to him,  
Because God lives, you also will live.  
Because God is love, you will know how to love.  
Because God is everywhere in the world  
Made and maintained by the divine hand,  
You will know joy.

There will be someone  
Who says to Sam,  
Don't lose heart  
When the voices around you call for isolation,  
when alienation fractures the fabric of our common life.  
Don't lose heart  
When it seems the arc of history  
Is bending backwards.  
Have hope.  
Because there is God,  
There is a future,  
And it will be good.

Someone will say these things to Sam.

And there will be another Sam  
Or another mother,  
Who comes to me,  
Or to you,  
And asks the question again:

Who is God?  
What shall I say?

We have one most powerful message to offer.  
There are plenty of other compelling voices,  
Forceful voices,  
Persuasive voices  
Speaking out against the madness of the times.

But for us, as Christians,  
There is one most important message.

There is a God of love,  
Who welcomes and accepts all,  
Whose will is for justice,  
Whose promises do not fail.

A God of love who can be seen and known  
In the person of Jesus,  
The one who lives,  
Because he is the embodiment of love,  
And love cannot be killed.

What would you say?

I blew it that time in my neighbor's kitchen,  
Many years ago now,  
And I knew it the minute she turned away.  
But I went home that night  
And thought about my answer.  
I'm more ready now,  
I believe,  
To account for the hope that is in me.

And what about you?  
What would you do,  
If your neighbor asked you?