

Text: [Acts 17:16-34](#) – Paul in Athens
Date: April 27, 2008 – 6th Sunday of Easter
Title: “Dionysius”
Theme: In Christ, God is not far from our suffering.

Intro

Maybe it's a bad thing when your sermon requires an introduction, but in this case it's probably necessary. You know I like to do different things in the pulpit now and again.

The Bible is full of people about whom very little is known. Yet their names come down to us through the generations, preserved by the work of the Holy Spirit. And sometimes I can't help but wonder: what's their story?

So, from time to time, I like to tell stories about some of these minor characters, just to remind us that these folks were real people just like you and me.

Today we'll talk about Dionysius (day-uh-NISH-ee-uhs) the Areopagite (ar-EEE-op-uh-jahyt), mentioned in verse 34. His name is a mouthful, I know. He's called the Areopagite presumably because he was a member of the Areopagus. You know what that is, don't you? (Neither did I.)

The Areopagus is a hill in Athens, just below the Acropolis, also called Mars Hill. It was the name not only of a geographic feature, but also

of a council that met there. Originally, they met to try murder cases. Though their power waxed and waned through the centuries, it's likely that they still had the authority to try capital cases in New Testament times.¹

Dionysius was a member of this body, converted by Paul's teaching about the middle of the first century. According to Eusebius, a church historian of the third and fourth centuries, Dionysius became the first bishop of Athens.²

So here's a story about Dionysius. Not THE story, but A story.

Prayer

Sermon

I didn't come to the Areopagus looking for salvation. And I never would have expected to hear anything of value from the wandering Jew who happened into our meeting that day.

When I asked those who had brought this fellow to our gathering who he was, they said they knew him only as Paul. "You must hear what he says about these new gods revealed to the Jews," they told me. He was talking about a god named Jesus and what sounded like the name of a goddess he called *Anastasis*, Resurrection.³

He wasn't much to look at, honestly, a short man dressed in rags, looking as though he had already passed through the fires of hell.⁴ Not that I believed in such a thing then. But it was in his words that I finally found something that made sense to me.

I should introduce myself, I suppose. I'm Dionysius, a Christian.⁵ I know, I know. You're surprised because my name would have you believe I'm a follower of the god of wine, not a follower of Jesus. That *was* true for a time, but no more.

I come from one of the most prominent families in Athens. My father was a member of the Areopagus before me, a man wise in judgment, a skilled orator and eminently rational mind. He was, in fact, the leader of the council at one time, presiding over several of the most famous murder trials of his day. During the biggest ones, his name was on the lips of everyone in Athens. He was greeted and admired everywhere he went – in the streets and in the marketplace.⁶ I was as proud as a boy could be.

I was eleven when his name was once again on the lips of everyone in Athens, but this time in whispers, at least whenever I was in earshot. For weeks, people talked to my mother in hushed voices, looking at

me but pretending I wasn't there, pretending I couldn't hear. Did they think I hadn't yet noticed that my father was gone?

I know it was difficult when his friends at the Areopagus convened to try his murderer. A few of them stopped by my house. They admitted to my mother that during testimony, they had wept, or at least had wanted to.

As soldiers dragged the man to court, my mother stood me near the window so I could watch my father's killer head up the hill toward the circle of stone chairs where the council would try him. "Today, the gods will see justice done," she said.

I was shocked when I realized he looked like a man and not like a monster at all. I don't know what I had imagined. I just pictured any man who would kill someone as kind and gentle as my father as a beast.

Beyond a beast, actually, a devil. But I suppose that's the thing about humanity – our evils are sometimes hidden in places so deep no trace of them is visible on the surface.

Still, I was amazed that he looked ordinary in every way - just a little bent, a little stooped, weighed down by the shackles and by the soldiers who grasped his shoulders hard on either side. I've carried that picture of

him walking up the hill to court, my father's court, in my mind ever since.

The ironies of this world astound me. How unfair that this criminal should walk in to my father's court while my father lay in his grave!

I thought about what my mother had said and wondered what would make her gods so interested in justice this day. They obviously hadn't been as my father lay dying, or they would have done something then.

What did their world have to do with mine?

My father hadn't left us destitute, of course. I pushed my sorrow aside by immersing myself in my studies. My mother made sure of that. I learned from the finest teachers in the city: philosophy, science, mathematics, rhetoric.

My mother did the best she could with me, but she was hurting too. But while she found solace in the comfort of friends, I spent my time with teachers twenty years my senior, men who cared for nothing but philosophy and learning. They could not see a child suffering under the burden of loss. Looking at me, they saw only a young mind that needed training. So I stayed busy, my reading and my studies holding the pain at bay.

It turns out you can only put off mourning for so long. There comes a time when either you learn to live with it or it kills you.

It nearly killed me.

I remember being a young man of seventeen and eighteen, walking around this city with all its statues and monuments to gods of every sort. I wanted to tear every one off its foundations, destroy them, throw them into the sea. What was the point of invoking the names of gods who were nothing more than blocks of marble? My mother's faith was a sham, I was convinced of that – nothing but a mouthful of platitudes to make fools believe there was anything in this world worth caring about.

When I met a teacher of the Epicurean school of philosophy and I finally thought I'd found something that made sense. What he was teaching was what I was already doing anyway. The Epicureans taught that the highest virtue one can seek is pleasure.⁷ So his philosophy made perfect sense to me. I wanted to learn more. I was already spending most of my nights drunk with wine and women, so why not?

But really all I was doing was giving my quest for numbness a name. Now I wasn't killing myself; I was *practicing a philosophy*.

Above all, I admired the Epicureans' take on the gods. It was as close to atheism as you could get without winding up in prison.⁸ Sure, there *are* gods, Epicurus said, they just don't bother about us.

So why should we bother about them?

It's not a really radical idea. Truth be told, isn't that the way most people live anyway? They go about their own business, while God goes about his. Maybe they say a prayer once in a while, but only when they feel they can't handle the situation themselves. Functional atheists, you might call them, never believing that God could or would love them or be interested in any way in their lives.

That's where I was.

And then in walks this Paul, this wandering Jew who looked as far from a respectable man as I've ever seen. Many of my friends called him a babbler, a man obsessed, raving on and on about Jesus and this Resurrection. Exactly what prompted Theophilus and Onesimus to bring him to the Areopagus I'll never know. But I am certain that somehow it was God's doing, because every word that came out of his mouth was just as though God was saying it directly to me.

I'll never forget the way Paul began his speech: "Men of Athens, I can see how religious you are in every way. In fact, just on my way over here,

I noticed an altar with this dedication: 'To an unknown god.' Friends, the God you have been worshipping as unknown, I have come to proclaim to you."⁹

Paul floored me. His God was not disinterested in human suffering, but rather a part of it. Paul's God was not enjoying himself somewhere atop a high mountain, amusing himself watching the affairs of the people below, every once in a while coming to earth to play tricks, cause trouble, or to settle scores with other gods.

This God Paul spoke of hadn't just created everything, but he cared about everything he'd created. "Indeed he is not far from each one of us," Paul said, "for in him we live and move and have our being." Paul's God was not far removed from my reality. This God stood at the very center of it – not in slabs of rock, or bits of gold, but as a Spirit who sees us and knows us.

And what's more, this God understands your suffering, Paul said. God sent his Son Jesus Christ into the world to proclaim God's ways, God's righteousness, and God's love for all people. God sent him even though he knew that this Jesus must suffer humiliation and death before his message would ever be accepted by the people. And still

many have not accepted this message, even though God proved everything Jesus said by raising him from the dead.

I could not believe my ears. A God who has experienced suffering and death? A God who would submit to such pain for my sake? A God of Resurrection who promised that death is not the end?

This Jesus knew what had happened to me. He understood my suffering, understood my father's suffering. And it mattered to him.

Truly this God is not far from any of us.

I am Dionysius. And that's why I'm a Christian.

By Joe Monahan, Succasunna UMC, Succasunna NJ

¹ *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992) has an excellent discussion on the history of the Areopagus. The council was at the peak of its power in the 6th century BC, and carried legislative, judicial, and religious authority. With the rise of democracy in Athens, its power waned, but apparently it kept the function of trying certain homicide cases. The Romans strengthened the Areopagus as part of its program to allow Athens limited autonomy.

² Eusebius' (about 260-340 AD) church history is an important document. However, its reliability is very much debated among scholars. It would seem to make sense that a prominent convert (like a member of the Areopagus) would become bishop, but there is no way to be certain.

³ Many commentators point out that to Greek ears, Paul's good news about Jesus and the Resurrection may well have been interpreted as *two* new gods: *Jesus* and his consort *Anastasis* – the Greek for resurrection.

⁴ 2 Corinthians 10:10 describes Paul's bodily presence as "weak" and his speech "contemptible." So were the claims of his detractors. In art Paul is usually depicted as short, a bit pudgy, and balding – not much to look at. And one need read no further than Acts 16 to learn what kind of reception Paul and his friends often received when they arrived in a place. I can't help but think he would be the worse for wear!

⁵ Dionysius name means "servant of or devoted to Dionysus." Dionysus is better known by his Roman name Bacchus, the God of Wine.

⁶ The *agora* (AG-er-uh) was the marketplace and center of religious and cultural life in Athens.

⁷ Look at this brief article on Epicurean philosophy, written by C. George Boeree, a professor at Shippensburg University of PA: <http://www.ship.edu/~cgboeree/latergreeks.html>. The same page also includes an introduction to the Stoics, also mentioned in this passage.

⁸ Atheism was not acceptable in Athenian society, and could be punished by imprisonment.

⁹ An interesting aside: supposedly it was illegal to try and curry favor with the Areopagus with flattery. It was strictly forbidden. So if this is what Paul said, he must have put it in such a way that he came across as respectful foreigner, and not a suck-up. Then again, the Athenians had a wide reputation in the ancient world as a very religious people. So maybe this was just accepted as a truism about Athens.