Acts: “Provoked”
Acts 17:14-21

As we return to our journey through Acts, our text this morning is Acts 17:14-21. Please stand for the reading of God’s Word.

If you recall, Paul and his team have been in Berea in the region of Macedonia. Paul has had some success in proclaiming the Gospel to the Jews and God-fearing Greeks in Berea. Unfortunately, however, according to vs. 13, some of the angry Jews from Thessalonica have made their way into town agitating and stirring up the crowds. So, we learn in our text from this morning that (vs. 14) “…the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed.”

OK, let’s look at our trusty map once again to get our bearings (https://openoureyeslord.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/map.png). {please show map}

As you can see, Athens is about 200 miles south of Berea. What you cannot see is that Mount Olympus http://www.greekboston.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/164106742.jpg (show pic) stands square in the path of those who would consider walking to Athens from Berea, so most people took a boat.

Our text says that Paul was ushered out of Berea, but that Silas and Timothy remained behind. This bit of information may lead us to assume that Paul was considered the instigator in the eyes of the angry crowds, which comes as no surprise to any of us, right? Remember, now, that Luke…who is writing the book of Acts…was also along on this trip, but Luke is so modest that we don’t know if he accompanied Paul, or if he remained behind with Silas and Timothy, or perhaps he was one of the men who accompanied Paul as far as Athens but then returned with a message for Silas and Timothy. I’m a bit inclined to believe that Luke stayed with Paul, and I’ll tell you why a bit later.

Whatever the case, Paul is now in the city of Athens. Before we pick up the story with vs. 16, let me give you just a bit of background information regarding Athens https://encrypted-tbn0.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn:ANd9GcSrqvV94T7wZcDIK25gLoSZXPj6ZTbvT_rkNPCnUSNGK1B9R17p (show pic)

Ancient Athens is a very, very old city…but it is arguably one of the most breathtaking cities in all the world (http://www.miccai2016.org/files/images/content/General-Information/Greece-and-Athens/shutterstock_251573647.jpg). It is not only beautiful, but it embodies the very essence of classic Greek culture. For that reason, Athens has always been preserved by all her conquerors, even up to this present day.
When you think of the gods and goddesses, togas, classic Greek architecture, sculptures, dramas, philosophies…that was Athens! For hundreds of years leading up to Paul’s arrival, Athens was known to be the religious and philosophical center of the Greco-Roman world, such that philosophers from all over would travel to Athens to have their ideas considered by other philosophers and thinkers. Great thinkers, writers, and artists flourished in the city. Herodotus, the ‘father of history’, lived and wrote in Athens. Socrates, the ‘father of philosophy’, taught in the marketplace. Hippocrates, the ‘father of medicine’, practiced there. The sculptor Phidias created his great works for the Parthenon on the Acropolis and the Temple of Zeus at Olympia. Democritus envisioned an atomic universe. Aeschylus, Aristophanes, and Sophocles wrote their famous plays and it was in Athens that Pindar published his Odes. This legacy would continue as, later, Plato would found his Academy outside the walls of Athens in 385 BCE and, later, Aristotle’s Lyceum would be founded in the city centre.

I tell you all of this history so that you might be a bit humbled as 21st century Americans. We need to be humbled because as modern people, we often tend to think that the ancients were idiots because they didn’t have air-conditioning and the internet. Make no mistake: nothing could be further from the truth. Most of the famous people I just mentioned are those who are still read and studied throughout the world in classical education. Culturally speaking, Athens in the first century would make 21st century Kansas City look like a bunch of bumbling barbarians should we compare the sculpture, architecture, drama, philosophy, and other culture forming creations that came out of that city. When we compare ourselves to the ancient Greeks, we find a pretty strong case for “devolution!” What I mean is this: compared to the ancients, we can only conclude that as a species, we are evolving in our technology but devolving in every other category! The Greeks were incredibly sophisticated in their thinking, writing, arithmetic, and the arts. Remember that it was here in Athens that democracy was born under the leadership of Cleisthenes in 507 BC. That’s over 2,524 years ago! Anyone care for democracy? Has anyone come up with a better way to establish a government? Right…see what I mean?

So…now that you can appreciate ancient Athens, let’s pick up the story in vs. 16, “Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.”

Paul was raised as a Greek-speaking Jew, but clearly this is Paul’s first visit to Athens. I can only imagine how, as a boy, he anticipated one day coming to this great city he had heard and read so much about. No doubt he had heard about and read the famous philosophers and artists who
hailed from the center of Greek culture, and I suspect he had a picture in his mind of what this famous city would look like. Yet nothing prepared him for what he saw on that first day as he walked the streets of Athens: the city was full of idols.

As I was doing research for this message I came across an ancient, second-century Greek geographer named Pausanius who visited Athens 50 years after Paul was there. He wrote in his book Description of Greece that “it was easier to meet a god or a goddess on the main streets of Athens than to meet a man.” That is actually pretty accurate. Historians estimate that the city hosted a population of 10,000 or so, while hosting some 30,000 statues of gods and goddesses.

Now, Luke calls these statues and sculptures “idols.” Why? What makes a sculpture an idol? A sculpture, or anything else that is fashioned of humans hands, becomes an idol when it is worshipped by people. Since these sculptures were located in temples and placed upon altars, Luke is quite accurate in describing them as “idols,” because temples and altars are where people go to worship. The area in Athens that was known for the highest concentration of idols was in the Stoa Basilelos. The idols would have been honoring Themis, the god of justice; Eueteria, the god of prosperity, Apollo, Agyieus, Hekate, and Hermes along with countless others like Zeus and Athena.

As a monotheistic Jewish Christian, Paul experiences great anguish in his spirit when he sees all the idols. The Greek word used here “parotsunomai” is where we get the English word paroxysm, which is defined as “a sudden attack of emotion.” Paul is literally overwhelmed and overcome with a very troubling conviction that borders on anger. Why? Why is Paul affected in such a powerful and intense way?

Well, do you remember when Jesus gets off the boat from crossing the sea of Galilee and he comes upon a large crowd in Matthew 9? Here’s what Matthew records in Matthew 9, “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

No doubt the Holy Spirit is now bringing a similar conviction to Paul’s heart that the Athenians are harassed and helpless …they, too, are like sheep without a shepherd. These brilliant people of such talent and sophistication are unaware of the One True God who created the Heavens and the earth, the Father God who loves His creation and showed His love by sending His only Son to suffer and die so that the creation might be reconciled to the Creator.

Paul operates on a biblical worldview, so not only does he see the idols, he sees the Liar at work behind the idols. The Athenians are being lied to by the Ancient Liar; they are being duped into believing that everyone can worship their own god…that there is no One God or one way to be saved. No doubt that awareness brings about a righteous anger in Paul…an anger that turns into a
determination to do something about this situation that is breaking his heart and the heart of the God he serves.

Let me pause here for just a moment. I can relate with having a paroxysm…that has happened on several occasions in my life. I will share two very memorable, very intense paroxysms that were similar to what we just read about here in the book of Acts. The first was many years ago when I was on a bus with my college choir in New York City. Our bus driver got turned around and ended up driving through some really rough areas of town. As I gazed through the window at the homeless, the downtrodden, and the sick that lined the sidewalks that day, my heart broke in a way that I had never known prior to that moment. I began to weep, and I could not stop. Christy and I were dating at the time, and she was with me on that bus and later visited with me in the hotel room where I was staying. I simply could not stop crying—it was as though God broke my heart so that I would know how He feels about the injustice of poverty and the plight of the homeless.

The second paroxysm I experienced was during my first trip to India in February of 2014. I had never traveled or spent time in a country where the people worshipped physical idols until I was in the rural villages of Odisha. Everywhere we went, there were idols. Every town we drove through had massive idols of monkeys or hideous, demon-like statues that were said to protect the town. Many of the citizens had idols attached to their cars or idols hanging over the doors of their houses. Once again, I experienced this intense infusion of emotion that was a mixture of grief, anger, and determination. I felt as though I had just been dropped in behind enemy lines, and that I was about to go to war. Make sure you hear me: the Hindu Indians were not my enemies…the idols were my enemies. Why? Because idols are enemies of the One True God. Again, I believe God let me know how He felt about those idols by allowing me to experience that same emotion that God experiences when His creation worships idols. Both paroxysms were very intense…I will never forget either of those two experiences. Both of those experiences have shaped my ministry and fueled my passion for reaching people with the liberating power of the Gospel.

Such is the case with Paul as well. In vs. 17, “So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him.”

Paul jumps into reaching the city of Athens with intensity and passion. He begins his work, as always, reasoning with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. Then Paul goes into the Agora, the marketplace that was located down the hill from the Acropolis. There Paul engages ordinary, run of the mill pagans in a conversation about the one true God.
Luke writes that Paul was “preaching Jesus and the resurrection.” In a ‘god-saturated’
environment like Athens, the mention of the god named Jesus was just one more god among
many for most people to be sure. But when Paul spoke about the resurrection of Christ, we can
assume it caused people to stop and take notice.
Let’s pick up the story beginning with vs. 18: Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also
conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babbler wish to say?” Others said, “He
seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the
resurrection. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what
this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We
wish to know therefore what these things mean.”

The insult leveraged against Paul is that he is a “babbler.” The term literally means “seed-picker”
and refers to a small bird that is picking seed and stones off the ground. The expression was well
known in Athens, and it alluded to a person who picked up a few concepts of a religion or a
philosophy and went around trying to convince people they knew what they were talking about
when they clearly did not.

The use of the insult gives us a small glimpse into the intellectual arrogance that one would
expect to find among professional philosophers, and I’m sure Paul was more than a little
offended given the fact that his educational credentials would have more than rivaled any one of
the philosophers in the Areopagus. Remember: Paul was no hacker. He was a very highly
educated, trained and esteemed Pharisee, raised both on the Jewish scriptures and the Greek
philosophies taught in his Greek hometown of Tarsus. We’ll see a flash of Paul’s brilliance and
the breadth of his learning next week when we unpack his address to the Areopagus.

The observation to be made here is that the claim of the resurrection is what earns Paul an
audience with the culture makers of Athens. The resurrection of Christ is new…it is unique
among all the claims of all the world’s religions. That is not to say that there are not myths or
religions that talk about people coming back from the dead…there certainly are others myths that
make such claims. However, historically speaking, only those who proclaimed the resurrection
of Christ insisted that it was a historical, well-known FACT…they insisted that it happened and
claimed the eye-witness testimonies of many who saw Christ alive three days after his public
execution. That was new…that was different…and that is why Paul is given an audience in the
Areopagus. We’ll pick up his speech to the Athenians next week.

In closing, don’t miss the ironic dig that Luke slips in here at the end of our thought unit. He
writes in vs. 21, “Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their
time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.” Luke, the historian, weighs in with an
insight that is unusually pointed. If anyone is a “babbler”…it’s the Athenians! That’s his point,
and he’s not afraid to make it! And that little comment is why I think Luke was in Athens with
Paul...clearly Luke thought it ironic and hypocritical for those arrogant Athenian fools to call his friend Paul a “seed-picker!”

Now, let me leave you with three short takeaways from our text this morning:

1) Paroxysms are a good thing. If Christ lives in us…if the Holy Spirit moves in us in a way that gives us the mind of Christ...we can likely expect to have a paroxysm from time to time. In other words, those things that break the heart of God should break our hearts as well. When we see injustice, when we see the plight of the homeless; when we see people taunting others due to the color of their skin or their socio-economic status; when we see people enslaved; when we see children neglected; when we see people devoted to worshipping idols; when we come upon crowds of people who are lost and harassed as sheep without a shepherd…it should flat out bother us. We, like Paul, should be PROVOKED to a point that we become determined to do something about it. If you are not provoked on a somewhat regular basis, it’s time to ask yourself: Does Christ live in me? Have I asked God to break my heart over those things that break His heart? Am I willing to look upon the pain and the evil in the world, or am I simply closing my eyes so that I won’t feel provoked in my spirit?

Listen…Jesus followers walk through life with their eyes open and their hearts ready to respond to the leading of the Holy Spirit. That means paroxysms are part of the deal. When God breaks your heart for a situation that breaks His heart, that is often where your call to make an eternal impact begins. Should God provoke your spirit, don’t run from that experience…walk straight into it, because it is there that you will find how God wants you to join Him in the work He is doing to reconcile the world back to Himself in the name and power of Jesus. If you want to hear a great paroxysm story from one of our church members, dial up Erika Marker and ask her about how she got called into the prison ministry. Ask Dave Carle how he got involved serving among the homeless down at City Union Mission. Ask our friend Joe Knittig how he got called to serve the orphans throughout the world. Ask Sherri Bain how she felt called to serve the hungry in our Encourager’s Office. Ask Betsy Vicknair how she felt called to create our Colonial Cares Ministry. I could go on and on and on, and I’ll tell you that in almost every instance, these people that I mentioned had a Paul-like paroxysm…God broke their hearts over something that broke His, and they responded in obedience. The rest is history.

2) Everyone is religious…everyone. Everyone worships something. Everyone lives according to some moral law. Everyone holds something to be eternally true and worthy of adoration. Nothing has changed…we live in a religious world full of idols. But not all roads lead to heaven; not all religions say the same thing; and no, we are not all worshipping the same God. Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. But don’t let the exclusivity of the Gospel make you hard-hearted towards lost people. Instead, remember that all people…in the very fabric of their being…are like lost children trying to find their way back home. Which means that the idol-worshipping
people living down the street from us all need someone to show them the way home. Which means we need to tell them about Jesus and the resurrection…amen? We’ll look deeper into that notion next week.

3) Finally, know your audience. Paul was exceptionally adept at adjusting his approach to his audience. He didn’t use his synagogue strategy when he was in the marketplace, and he didn’t use his marketplace strategy when he was talking to the highbrows in the Areopagus. Again, we’ll see this unpacked next week, but as you leave here today, be aware of your audience. Our attempt to connect with people and to have a good, meaningful conversation about Truth should always begin with the conversation that people are already having. Be patient, be a good listener, and allow the Holy Spirit to direct you into a contextually relevant and meaningful conversation with people that is not forced, coerced, or canned in some way. People need to know that we have heard them before they will be willing to listen to what we have to say about Jesus. So listen carefully.

As we close, I pray that you will be open to what God’s Spirit is doing in your spirit this morning. As you are provoked by Him, move.

Let’s pray.