

Sermon – May 14, 2023

Pastor Dan Hollis

Acts 17:22-31

If you were listening to the Children's Message earlier, you might recognize this story:

It was six men of Indostan / To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant / (Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation / Might satisfy his mind.

The First approached the Elephant, / And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side, / At once began to bawl:
"God bless me! but the Elephant / Is very like a wall!"

The Second, feeling of the tusk, / Cried, "Ho! what have we here
So very round and smooth and sharp? / To me 'tis mighty clear
This wonder of an Elephant / Is very like a spear!"

The Third approached the animal, / And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands, / Thus boldly up and spake:
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant / Is very like a snake!"

The Fourth reached out an eager hand, / And felt about the knee.
"What most this wondrous beast is like / Is mighty plain," quoth he;
"'Tis clear enough the Elephant / Is very like a tree!"

The Fifth, who chanced to touch the ear, / Said: "E'en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most; / Deny the fact who can
This marvel of an Elephant / Is very like a fan!"

The Sixth no sooner had begun / About the beast to grope,
Than, seizing on the swinging tail / That fell within his scope,
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant / Is very like a rope!"

And so these men of Indostan / Disputed loud and long,

Each in his own opinion / Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right, / And all were in the wrong!

It's okay to be wrong about God. Even the Apostle Paul was at one time.

There was a time when he was *aggressively* persecuting *anyone* who followed *Christ*, instead of *recognizing* Christ as the incarnation of *God's* love on Earth.

And having read some of the letters Paul wrote after he finally came *around* about the whole Jesus thing, I think it's fair to say that even *then* he still managed to be wrong about God from time to time in the years to come.

What he *respected* about the Athenians in today's reading, and what *we* should too, is that they recognized there were things they didn't *know* about the Divine—the Holy—what we today call *God*; they didn't have it all figured out.

And just like Paul, there were things they *thought* they knew that maybe missed the mark. But in contrast to who Paul used to be, instead of being so *certain* of what they thought they knew that they would *arrest* or *torture* or put to *death* people who believed something different... they instead built whole shrines with big letters on them saying, "We don't know everything."

If only more of us could admit that.

When it comes to God, we're infants, fumbling around the playpen, trying to find our mother.

How else does a kid learn? Learn to crawl, to grasp, to walk. To get from point A to point B, to seek and to find. You've gotta grope around, you've gotta trip and fall, put stuff in your mouth you're not supposed to, and touch the occasional hot stovetop.

One way to try to define God is called “apophatic” theology: figuring out what God is *not*. God is not evil, God is not strictly visible, God is not finite or mortal, God is not an object you can hold in your hands. Now the *Athenians*—just like Christians—had *plenty* of ideas about what God *is*—or in their case, “what the gods are.” They sought to funnel the Divine into Its component parts, building shrines and idols to make it all real and tangible and measurable and point-to-able. When you can hold God in your hand, the great-big world seems a lot less scary.

But nobody puts baby in the corner, and nobody puts God in a box. We can say all we *want* to about God’s characteristics—*cataphatic* theology is about trying to define what *is* true about God—but we can never get the whole picture, we can never really wrap our hands around it, because we are mortal minds seeking Something that transcends matter and even time. No matter how long we have on this Earth or how much effort we put into it generation after generation, we as people of faith should recognize that a complete understanding of God will forever be out of our reach. All we can do is bump our head into a corner *here* or trip over something sticking out *there*.

But if you come across an elephant’s leg in a pitch-black room, and call it a tree? You’re gonna have a bad time. Which reminds me:

“Six blind elephants were discussing what men were like. After arguing they decided to find one and determine what it was like by direct experience. The first blind elephant felt the man and declared, ‘Men are flat.’ After the other blind elephants felt the man, they agreed.”

All that is to say, the Athenians were setting themselves up for failure by reducing God to man-made idols of gold and silver you could hold in your hand... but what we *should* learn from the Athenians, what Paul might

have considered their “saving grace,” so to speak, was their openness to the unknown.

A faith that knows all the answers about the whole kit-and-kaboodle is a closed-off faith, a faith that leaves no room for the God it doesn't understand. I'm not saying you're *wrong* about the things you believe, and I'm certainly not saying you should toss it all out with the bathwater just because God's too big to fit in our tiny human skulls. But what Paul respected about the Athenians is something we should aspire to... room in our hearts for God to surprise us. For God to reveal something new to us. For God to take something we thought we knew and turn it on its head.

That's an open faith, a living faith... a curious faith, and a forgiving faith.

Like an infant in a playpen, or a blind man trying to understand an elephant, we should be always reaching out and groping around to try and touch God, to seek the shape of God, to discover a detail here and a revelation there. Because you never know what you're gonna find... and what you *find* could be huge. As Christians we believe that Jesus Christ was a pretty big part of that elephant, and the shape of Jesus tells us *so* much about the true nature of God. And we should be dedicating a huge part of our faith life to making *sense* of Jesus and letting his actions, his teachings, and his example point us to the reality of what God is.

But *whatever* piece of God you interact with at *any* given time, whether it's as big as Jesus, or as small as the smile of a stranger on a sad day... *know* that there is always more to the elephant. And if you're open to it—and *only* if you're open to it—will that elephant surprise you. And unlike an elephant in a dark room, God's surprises never end with you as a pancake.

May your faith be as strong as Paul's, *and* as open as the Athenians... for only with the wide, excited, curious eyes of a child may we truly find God. Thanks be to God. Amen.