

Welcome

We're observing the Easter season this year with a series called Church in the Wild. Hip hop fans will recognize that as a play on the song by Kanye West and Jay-Z, from their album *Watch the Throne*. On that song, they meditate:

*Human beings in a mob
What's a mob to a king?
What's a king to a god?*

*What's a god to a non-believer
Who don't believe in anything?*

*Will he make it out alive?
No church in the wild.*

My friend and hip hop scholar Dr. Daniel White Hodge observes that there's a progression in this verse, from human to mob to king to god. But then they ask the game-breaking question: what's even a *god* to a non-believer?

Does any of this matter to the person who just refuses to play by the rules? Does any of this affect the unbeliever who refuses to try to climb the ladder of success?

Kanye and Jay-Z call that space "the wild". The place outside the status quo. What we might call "out of bounds". The opposite of "wild" is "civilization". Where the streets are paved and the streetlights stay on. Where fences keep out the bad.

They insist there's no church in the wild.

But we're insisting that there is a church in the wild... because Jesus himself is wild. Jesus is radical, revolutionary, wild, untamed. And so should his church be. Jesus calls us to follow him into the Wild, to be good news for those who don't fit in, who claim the Wild as their home.

Welcome to the Wild.

On Easter, we saw that Jesus is a man of the wild, a revolutionary who was executed because he was too dangerous to be left alive, and yet who God raised to life to prove his wild, revolutionary way is good and beautiful and true. Next, we looked at the story of Stephen, a man labelled *profane* by the religious leaders in Jerusalem, a man whose *profane* faith was used as justification to lynch him. A wild church renarrates reality to invite everyone to Jesus' wild new life.

Next, witnessed Saul's transformation, when Jesus flipped his world upside down and he came to join Jesus in the wild - something that was far from an overnight experience for him.

As we're coming to the end of this series, we're going to revisit one of my favorite passages in the New Testament. If you've been around Catalyst a while, you've probably heard me talk about this text. But first, I want to highlight yet another dichotomy we in the church often make between ourselves and the rest of the world: truth and falsehood.

Jesus himself claimed to be the Truth, so it's easy to see how we got there: if we are Jesus people, then we're the ones who know the Truth. If we know the Truth, then it stands to reason that anyone who disagrees with us must be wrong. We feel this especially when we compare religions, but it leaks into everything else - especially politics (at least for the last 40 years or so).

But there's a dangerous turn in there we too often miss: think with me about someone you love, someone you consider to be wise and fully of truth. Maybe it's a parent or grandparent. Maybe it's a favorite teacher or professor. Maybe it's someone in your C-Group.

How do you approach time with that person? I bet it's with a posture of openness, ready to receive, to learn from. You're excited by how the next encounter is going to change you.

Now think about your posture in an argument, or with someone you have deep disagreement with: you're more closed off. This encounter is often something to be survived - you're trying to make it out intact, unchanged.

When we first encounter Jesus, our posture is often that first one: we find new life, hope and a transformed reality. We become a generative openness that allows the love and life we've received from Jesus to flow from us to everyone around us.

But somewhere along the way, we start to close up. We become convinced that Jesus needs to be defended and proved. We go from being open receivers of truth to closed defenders of truth.

We go from facing into the wild with courage and love to facing inward, backs to the wild world God loves.

Message

Turn with us to [Acts 17](#).

This story finds Paul in Athens. Athens is the birthplace of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Its philosophers prided themselves on having the deepest, truest understanding of religion. They didn't hold to the silly myths of their ancestors. They understood those stories pointed to deeper truths, and whole new schools of thought - like Epicureanism and Stoicism - had grown up to explore these deeper truths.

I want to look with you at how Paul engaged these religious elites, these best-of-the-best. Because, if you'll recall Paul's journey of deconstruction and reconstruction, you'll remember that Paul spent a long time reconciling Jesus' resurrection with his Jewish faith. He had to reinterpret everything he'd ever learned and believed through the lens of Jesus' resurrection.

Usually, Paul went to the Jewish synagogues on his trips. He'd start with other Jews, people who shared his worldview, his scriptures, his assumptions. And he'd walk them through his deconstruction and reconstruction, arguing for the truth of Jesus' resurrection from their shared world.

But now Paul is alone, without his team. He wanders the city, and is offended by the countless idols he sees erected all over the city. Maybe because of this, Paul is going to skip the synagogue and go straight for where the philosophers hung out - Mars Hill. Let's look at how he gets there:

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply troubled by all the idols he saw everywhere in the city. He went to the synagogue to reason with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and he spoke daily in the public square to all who happened to be there.

He also had a debate with some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. When he told them about Jesus and his resurrection, they said, "What's this babbler trying to say with these strange ideas he's picked up?" Others said, "He seems to be preaching about some foreign gods."

Then they took him to the high council of the city. "Come and tell us about this new teaching," they said. "You are saying some rather strange things, and we want to know what it's all about." (It should be explained that all the Athenians as well as the foreigners in Athens seemed to spend all their time discussing the latest ideas.) -- [Acts 17:16–21](#) NLT

I'm fascinated by how the philosophers try to discredit Paul at first - they call him a 'babbler'. The Greek word doesn't have a really great English translation; the closest might be 'pseudo-intellectual'. You know that person who took 5 minutes to become a Google-expert in an argument? That person.

To a degree, their confusion is understandable, because Paul seems to be working hard to communicate about Jesus in *their language*. He's speaking to Greek philosophers in terms of Greek philosophy (we'll see that more clearly in the next passage).

And some of the philosophers think he's just out of his depth. But others recognize he's doing something different - he's speaking about a 'foreign god' in familiar terms.

They're positively *delighted* by this, so they decide to take him to Mars Hill, the famous Acropolis of Athens, so Paul can speak to the city council.

Let's step back for a moment and consider what Paul is doing here. He's going into the Wild and *speaking the language of the Wild*. Watch as we read his speech and you'll notice three things:

First, Paul never quotes the Bible. This is astounding given his letters and what we know of his missionary journeys. Paul was *always* quoting the Bible, showing how Jesus fulfilled Israel's story.

Second, Paul never names Jesus. Again, staggering given how often Jesus shows up in Paul's letters (and you'd think if you're going to tell someone about Jesus you would, uh... name? Jesus?)

Finally, I'll point these out as we read, but Paul quotes from two Greek philosophers - Epimenides and the Stoic philosopher Aratus. Let's read together, so we can get a sense of what Paul is doing here:

So Paul, standing before the council, addressed them as follows: "Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious in every way, for as I was walking along I saw your many shrines. And one of your altars had this inscription on it: 'To an Unknown God.' This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I'm telling you about.

"He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn't live in man-made temples, and human hands can't serve his needs—for he has no needs. He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need. From one man he created all the nations throughout the whole earth. He decided beforehand when they should rise and fall, and he determined their boundaries.

"His purpose was for the nations to seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him—though he is not far from any one of us. For in him we live and move and exist. As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' And since this is true, we shouldn't think of God as an idol designed by craftsmen from gold or silver or stone.

"God overlooked people's ignorance about these things in earlier times, but now he commands everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to him. For he has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead."

When they heard Paul speak about the resurrection of the dead, some laughed in contempt, but others said, "We want to hear more about this later." -- [Acts 17:22–32 NLT](#)

Okay so Paul offers this incredibly strange invitation to know Jesus. It wasn't for the synagogues (where Paul was in his comfort zone). And it wasn't wholly at home in the Wild as it presses on the Wild, inviting those in Athens into a bigger understanding of who God is.

On one level, this is a powerful statement about how God's truth transcends religious categories. God is always bigger than every box we build, and there's something powerful and beautiful about the reality that God is present even within the teachings of the Greek philosophers.

That's an important word for our increasingly pluralistic world. It's tempting to fall back into black-and-white binaries. We're right; they're wrong. Our way is truth; their way is lies. We are safe; they are dangerous. We're good; they're bad.

Paul explodes those categories here, reminding us *and* them that we're all creatures, created by a God toward whom we can't help but reach out, no matter what our background.

Message 2

On a deeper level, though, theologian Willie James Jennings points out how what Paul is doing here is apocalyptic (in that it's revealing the end and inadequacy of our reaching for God). Jennings begins with Paul's investigation of the Athenians' idols:

The idol is a collective self-deception... The idol facilitates a hope of control of both my life and the life of the gods, that is, to draw the gods into common cause with me for sustaining my life...

Yet Paul will not turn Gentile ignorance toward God's condemnation, but toward God's condescension. -- Willie James Jennings, Commentary on Acts

In persisting in their worship of idols (however progressive they imagine themselves to be), the Athenians are engaged in the same fundamental religious process: working to get the gods on our side. Whether through sacrifices or philosophy or esoteric ritual, we convince ourselves we can reach far enough, make ourselves worth or pitiable enough to convince our gods to throw their lot in with us. To make us healthy, wealthy or wise.

But Paul's message destroys any hope that could ever work - and that's good news! Because, as Jennings says, our helpless state doesn't provoke God's judgment against us. We don't have to sacrifice to keep God happy. We don't have to flagellate ourselves or police our borders to keep out the unclean and unholy. We don't have to do anything to avoid God's judgment (which is good news because there's truly nothing we *could* do). Rather, our helplessness provoked God's *condescension*. God came down to us, got on our level. (This is the good use of condescension!). God has come for us.

Again, I find it fascinating here that Paul doesn't even bother to explain that God became human. Why not? Well, for the Greeks, the story of a God becoming human wasn't particularly interesting - Zeus did it all the time. Most of their ancient heroes, like Heracles, were half-god at least. So rather than open *that* can of worms (Jesus wasn't a demigod. He was fully human *and* fully God!), Paul skips straight to the most important thing:

God's choice to raise Jesus' body from the dead is proof that God has come for us. Or, as Jennings concludes:

The point is not the hidden truth of idolatrous practices. The point is that divine desire now enfolds idolators in hopes that God's body will draw them away from the body of the idol... It is his body or your stones. -- Willie James Jennings, Commentary on Acts

We can make our own gods, who fail to do anything for us. Or we can turn to the one who became one of us to save us from ourselves, and we can be transformed.

Paul's sermon is truly a speech for the Wild, one that seeks to understand how God loves every person, not just those born into the right families and right cultures, the ones who come from the right traditions. If God is good news for the Greeks in Athens, then God is good news for everyone, everywhere.

The question for us perhaps comes back to one of posture: How do you approach those you consider 'wild'? Are you defensive or open? Do you imagine that you'll find the Holy Spirit

already at work in their lives, working to make Jesus' body real for them? Or are you defensive? Does your religion open you up or close you off?

Communion + Examen

Jesus opens his body for us.

When in the last week have I been open to encountering the Holy Spirit in the wild?

How have I closed myself off in the last week?

When might I be tempted to close myself off in the next week?

How can I be open and watching for the Holy Spirit this week?

Assignment + Blessing