

In Homer's epic, *The Odyssey*, the great hero Odysseus is trying to sail home. But there's a hazard in the path of his voyage. It is actually the twin hazards: Scylla and Charybdis. Scylla is a rocky shoal that can cause a shipwreck. Charybdis is a whirlpool that can drag a ship down. It is almost impossible to sail between them without coming dangerously close to one or the other.

21st century Christians are often faced with a different kind of Scylla and Charybdis. In our culture on one side we have scientific claims. On the other side we have claims of faith.

What makes this more difficult in our polarized society, is that some of the more strident voices on the scientific side are avowed atheists. This is by no means universal. There are many scientists who are also people of faith. We have a number of scientists here in our congregation. As most of you know, I have a bachelor's in chemistry with a biology minor, and I taught High school chemistry and physics for 5 years before going to seminary. But there are strident voices in the public market place of ideas that push for science, or more precisely for scientism. Scientism is that belief that science alone can provide all the answers in life.

On the other hand, we have some Christian groups who tend to reject science altogether. They tend to read scripture rather literally, and either ignore modern science or try to twist it to fit their worldview.

And here in Lubbock, we sit a block away from a Big 12 university with all of its intellectual variety. And we also sit near a number of very large conservative churches that would reject much of what is taught at Texas Tech. And we have to navigate between that Scylla and Charybdis.

I've talked to a number of Episcopalian high school and college students over the years about this issue. Most of them express a feeling that at times they have been run over in both directions. Their more conservative Christian friends have questioned their faith. And most of them have reported feeling belittled by at least one high school science teacher or college professor for claiming any kind of faith at all.

It's a tough situation.

I would also add that I think there is another Scylla, another rocky shoal that can trip us up. And that is an overly simplistic view of science. When we think of a scientific worldview we're often unconsciously thinking of an enlightenment worldview. A view that science can know all there is to know. But that's not the real picture of 21st century science.

After all, it's been 90 years now since Heisenberg formulated his famous uncertainty principle. Modern science encompasses Heisenberg, and Schrödinger, and chaos theory, and tells us that there are fundamental limits to what can be known about everything in the universe. And if we seek to know some things, that will force other things to become unknowable.

Yes, our scientific and human knowledge have been expanding rapidly, even exponentially in some areas. You might think of the things we know as an expanding circle.

And the more we know, the bigger the circle gets. But, as the area inside the circle grows, the edge, the circumference of the circle, the boundary between what is known and what is unknown is also growing. The more we know, the bigger the frontier becomes between what we know and what we don't know.

Physicists and cosmologists now believe that most of the universe is made up of things that have been labeled "dark matter" and "dark energy." They haven't yet settled on what they are, and these things haven't yet been directly observed. It's still a huge mystery. And yet, their effects are knowable. Dark matter and energy are now estimated together to make up more than 95% of our physical universe.¹ All of the things we observe, all of the matter, all of the elements on the periodic table are now thought to comprise less than 5% of the total "stuff" in our universe.

There is much we know. But there is much that is unknown.

In the Nicene Creed every Sunday we stand up and proclaim that "We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen."

Can we still make that claim in the 21st century? I believe we can. I don't say the Nicene Creed with my fingers crossed. And to me, one of the wonderful lines is that God is the maker of "all that is, seen and unseen."

When I was a kid, the translation was "visible and invisible." Originally, the creed was speaking of the things of the material world versus the things of the spiritual world.² But to my mind, I also think of things like matter and dark matter. I think of things that are known in our physical universe as well as the unknown. And I do believe God stands behind it all, as the creator of "all that is": seen & unseen, visible & invisible, known & unknown.

In our lesson today from the 17th chapter of Acts, we hear St. Paul speaking about God as creator. What's more, Paul uses the image of the "unknown" as his entry point.

Quick background. Paul is in Athens, which in a real way is THE university town in the ancient world, the intellectual capital.³

Paul has been preaching in the Agora, the market place not only of goods but of ideas as well. It was the place where Socrates taught centuries earlier.

1st century Athens was a city of many gods and many temples. Athenians dabbled in every sort of worship that was present in the known world. They also had numerous

¹ NASA, "Dark Energy, Dark Matter"

² Johnson, *The Creed*, p95ff

³ Though Alexandria might be a close 2nd

philosophical schools. The two biggest in Paul's day were the Stoics and the Epicureans. Acts says that both groups get into a debate with Paul.⁴

And since the intellectual heirs of both Stoics and Epicureans are still around today, I want to say just a tiny bit about them. Here's the quick sketch.

The Stoics were pantheists.⁵ They believed god was in nature, and that the universe was god, and that creation itself was divine. Creation was not separate from god, and god was not separate from creation. It was all one. If you remember the 2009 film, *Avatar*, the planet Pandora would be a Stoic paradise.

On the other hand, the Epicureans were materialists. They believed that everything was made of matter, and that only matter mattered. They usually believed in the gods at some level, but their gods were hands off, they didn't interfere in the world, and they too were made of matter.

The Epicureans would love the old lyric by the rock group Rush, the title track from the album *Roll the Bones* (meaning 'roll the dice'):

Why are we here? Because we're here
Roll the bones
Why does it happen? Because it happens
*Roll the bones*⁶

In Athens, Paul has been engaging in debate with both Epicureans and Stoics. Then Paul is brought before the Areopagus,⁷ the council, so that he can say more about the religion he is proclaiming. There's no real sense of physical danger to Paul. But there is an underlying suspense—how will his Christian proclamation hold up intellectually?

That's where our lesson picks up today.

First, Paul begins by meeting the people of Athens right where they are. He acknowledges that they are very religious.⁸ And he says that while in Athens he observed an altar dedicated to an unknown god.

This was simply a way the Athenians made sure they had all the bases covered. A temple or a shrine for every god, PLUS one extra just in case they missed honoring any gods.

⁴ Acts 17:18

⁵ Though some suggest panentheists

⁶ <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/rush/rollthebones.html>

⁷ There is some discussion as to whether "Areopagus" is used to refer to the council itself, or to the geographical place where the council met, or formerly met

⁸ Acts 17:22

But Paul uses this as a way to start talking about the one true God. He says, "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you."⁹ He's saying, 'You already have an altar to the real God in your midst, you just didn't realize it.'

Second, he proclaims this God is the creator of everything. That sets this God apart from all the false gods worshipped in Athens. "The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands."¹⁰

In other words, the real God doesn't need shrines and temples created by humans. After all, he created humans. He created everything!

Creation is not an Epicurean random accident. It is intentional.

But creation is not the same as God. Creation and creator are separate and distinct.

Third, Paul quotes a Greek poem about God.¹¹ He says, "(God) is not far from each one of us. For 'In him we live and move and have our being'"¹² Yes, the poet was talking about the god Zeus, but Paul uses the line anyway.

And fourth, and most important, Paul says this creator God is not just knowable through his creation. He is more perfectly knowable in a person, Jesus Christ. He is God's appointed emissary, and "of this he has given assurance to all by raising (Jesus) from the dead."¹³ In other words, the resurrection proves that Jesus' message is true.

Now, if you've noticed, Paul is doing something here that we're often very hesitant to do. He is in the midst of a pagan culture with lots of different religious and philosophical options. Yet he sticks to his guns to proclaim what he believes. The one God is the creator of everything and everyone in heaven and on earth. And that one God has made his presence known through the person and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Paul starts where the people are. He tries to begin with things that he and they might have in common. But he doesn't stop there. He ends very specifically with Jesus. Take it or leave it.

And the reaction is just that. Right after our reading we're told, some people scoff. Some people are open to hearing more. And, "Some of them joined him and became believers."¹⁴

⁹ Acts 17:23. Note—this and all subsequent scripture quotations are from *The New Revised Standard Version*

¹⁰ Acts 17:24

¹¹ Epimedes, *Cretica*

¹² Acts 17:27-28

¹³ Acts 17:31

¹⁴ Acts 17:32-34

Paul could have watered things down to make them more palatable. He could have compromised on the Gospel message that he had been given. He could have left out the stuff about resurrection and made his message more popular. But he doesn't do that.

In the marketplace of ideas, in the court of public opinion, Paul is "on message." He is faithful in proclaiming the good news he has been given.

And here we are in our university town.
Here we are in the modern marketplace of ideas.
Here we are between our Scylla & Charybdis.

What should we do? Can we still proclaim Jesus as Lord? Can we still proclaim that God, the Father, the Almighty, is the maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen?

And how do we do that in the midst of the polarities in our culture, the divide between extreme scientism and extreme religion?

Well, to me, one of most intriguing avenues comes not from theology but from science.

About 30 years ago I showed my physics class a video that included a portion showing the great physicist, Stephen Hawking. Hawking was still able to talk back then, but just barely.

That Christmas I got a surprise. One of my students and his parents gave me what was then a brand new book: Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. And it was in reading that book that I first encountered an amazing idea of modern physics.

It is the famous Anthropic Principle. The Anthropic Principle says that it looks like this 13.7 billion year old universe is custom made for creatures just like us. For intelligent carbon based life forms like us to exist, the universe needs to be just about the age it is, and needs to be set up in the way it is. An atheist could claim this is just random chance, and it could be. But as a person of faith, I see this pointing towards a creator.

A corollary of the Anthropic Principle is the Fine Tuned Universe. There are lots of forces in the universe, and they appear to be narrowly balanced in such a way that allow the universe to exist. It's as if there are a number of "dials" that all have to be set to rather precise values. And remarkably, all these dials are set to those very narrow values that allow us to exist.

And these values, these dials if you will, are so precisely set that if you change them just a tiny bit, things would change drastically.

Things like the force that holds particles together in the nucleus of an atom. If that force was only 2% stronger, if you cranked the dial 2% higher, no atoms could form.¹⁵ Thus

¹⁵ Leslie, *Universes*, p35

Does the idea of a finely tuned universe prove the existence of God? Certainly not. Does it lend weight to the idea of a Creator God? I would say, 'You'd better believe it!'

And that act of creation means that God is worthy of praise. As we sang a few minutes ago,

*Creating God, your fingers trace
the bold designs of farthest space;
let sun and moon and stars and light
and what lies hidden praise your might.²⁴*

And what's more, the Good News of Christianity is that this same God loves us and cares for us. This God is the source of life and the ground of our being. As Paul said this morning, this "(God) is not far from each one of us. For 'In him we live and move and have our being'"²⁵

One of the strangest things in physics is the idea of Quantum Entanglement. Once two particles linked with each other in a precise way, changes to one particle will affect the other. That link will be preserved even if the particles are widely separated. Einstein famously called this "spooky action at a distance." And as strange as it seems, Quantum Entanglement has been confirmed by experimentation.

I believe this phenomenon gives us image of how we are connected to God. He is not far from us. In him we live and move and have our being. In a real way, we have become "spiritually entangled" with God.

We are connected through our creation. We are connected through our baptisms. We are connected because in him we live and move and have our being.

The God who made the world is not far from us.

The God who made the world loves us. Come to his table. Reach out your hands. Share connection, share communion with him.

*Sustaining God, your hands uphold
Earth's mysteries known or yet untold...
let every life be touched by grace
until we praise you face to face.²⁶*

²⁴ Hymn #394, *The Hymnal 1982*, text by Jeffery Rowthorn

²⁵ Acts 17:27-28

²⁶ Hymn #394, *The Hymnal 1982*, text by Jeffery Rowthorn