

**Text:** [Acts 17:16-31 \(CEB\)](#)

**Date:** May 10, 2026

**Title:** “Unknown Gods”

**Theme:** God doesn't hide from us – it's the other way around!

## 1

I've always been fascinated by this story in Acts  
About Paul walking through Athens  
Seeing a statue dedicated to “an unknown God”  
And then using that as a jumping-off point to share about Jesus

But I learned long ago that because I find something interesting  
Doesn't mean a congregation will

So let me start by observing why I think this story still matters:  
Because people are still hungry to hear about this God “in whom  
we live and move and have our being”  
This God who “isn't far away from any of us”

People still want to know who God is  
I think now more than any moment in my lifetime  
I'm seeing God drawing people in

I see it in young people wanting to be baptized  
I see it in people of all ages reaching out to have faith  
conversations  
I see it in all the new faces we see in church week by week

And I also know we do this in a world of conflicting priorities  
Where God's call may seem clear  
But how we live into it is not

And I think this is worth us reflecting on together

## 2

I'm struck when I read this story about the parallels between 2026  
and Paul in first-century Athens

The apostle walked around and became distressed that the city  
was filled with idols

I feel like we accumulate a lot of shiny things ourselves  
Idolatry is the fundamental operating system at work in every one  
of us

It's the reason why the very first commandment is:  
"Thou shalt have no other gods before me"

It is always a human temptation to put our trust in the things we  
can see

Rather than the God we can't  
That's one way to define idolatry

We don't immediately recognize it because – for the most part -  
we're not bowing down to golden calves

But at the same time, I can't help noticing that I don't go anywhere  
without my phone

Have you ever left yours behind for a few hours?

You realize you left it but you're late and already you're too far  
away to turn around and come home –

It's disorienting, isn't it?

When you think about that emotional response

It's clear that our technology is an idol

Likewise, we have the perennial idols of money and power and  
prestige – first-century people would have recognized them  
too

The number of zeroes that ARE or ARE NOT after our balances  
You might say we worship those zeroes

Or look at how we solve problems through force rather than  
through persuasion or relationship  
Military force, brass knuckle politics, lawsuits, power plays

Even just using our influence to trash talk or tear someone behind  
their back  
The ways we use power to settle scores rather than leaving it up  
to God – that can be idolatrous too

Whatever we put in God's place  
Whatever we trust more than God  
Has become an idol for us  
There isn't any one of us who is without guilt on that score

Paul walked through streets where he saw a ton of literal idols  
If he were here today...  
He'd encounter folks that may have left idols behind,  
But who haven't left idolatry behind

Increasingly, I also think he'd be meeting people who have  
become disillusioned with gods who aren't able to save  
And who are looking for something different, something more  
This disillusionment is especially – though not exclusively –  
pronounced among our young people

### 3

The picture Paul paints of Athens is of a culture deeply committed  
to new ideas  
“They used to spend their time doing nothing but talking about  
and listening to the latest thing”  
Curiosity is not in and of itself a bad thing – quite the opposite

But the problem arises when the new thing, the next thing  
Is what we trust to be ‘the’ thing that solves our problems

That will help us to feel better  
To feel more settled and peaceful  
That will offer a solution and  
Unlock a key to understanding our lives

Maybe that's been your own experience  
Where you've pursued one thing after another  
But been left ultimately unsatisfied  
That's the source of our disillusionment

>>The things I perceive people actually want are actually pretty  
simple  
They want to connect with other people  
They want to understand and connect with God

I don't think it's a lot more complex than that  
What Paul walks in to say is – very simply  
“This is a lot easier than you think”

“You put up a statue to a God you don't know”  
It's ridiculous, but Paul points to a statue and without criticism  
says, “I see that you're religious people”  
“I see you're searching.  
Let me introduce you to the God I know”

And he goes on to talk about this great big God  
The Lord of heaven and earth  
Who can't be contained in temples

Who gives us life  
In whom we exist  
and apart from whom we do not exist

The God Paul describes renders all of our idols meaningless and insignificant

And I don't mean to say that in a way,  
I don't think Paul said that in a way,  
That's either condemning or combative

He's making it a logic problem:  
If God is really that big  
The Creator of all things  
The one who made us

Why would we even want to mess around with anything else?  
Why would we want to trust in gods of gold or silver or stone?  
Why would we put our faith in the gods of power or money or technology?

This great big God *wants* to be found by us  
Paul says this too: we were made to seek God  
Maybe even to reach out and find God

Which sounds as though we're somehow being set up  
Like God is playing hide and seek

But that's just not real  
It's not God who hides from us  
It's we who hide from God  
That's been true since Adam and Eve ate the fruit and ran away  
from the sound of God's voice in the garden

And where do we hide?  
Often, it's behind our idols

Paul makes it plain: God isn't hiding  
God sent Jesus into the world so that we can see God clearly  
The Resurrection was the exclamation point on his message

## 5

The fact that you are here today  
The fact that you, at some point in your life  
Have felt a call to be in relationship with this God  
And so you went to a church hoping to find that

Is itself the evidence  
God does not hide from us

God is easily found – in fact, God finds us  
That's not the issue  
The issue is how we understand a God this big

Paul says that what God wants is for us to change our hearts and  
lives  
That's the part that proves more difficult

Because there's always the temptation for us to keep putting  
things in God's place  
And it always comes back to the same handful of things – the  
same idols that have been with humankind from the  
beginning

God isn't hiding from us – God isn't unknown or unknowable  
Instead, it's us  
WE use those idols to hide ourselves from God  
Money  
power  
sex  
prestige  
technology  
We put them in God's place and then ask ourselves – where is  
God?

And so the spiritual life becomes a constant process of listening,  
learning, trying, failing, repenting

This is a life's work  
God initiates that connection  
God calls us and reveals Godself to us – not the other way  
around

But the process of growing  
Now that, we need to take some responsibility for

If you keep reading this story  
The scripture says that some people made fun of Paul  
But others wanted to hear more  
It says, “some people joined him”

That call that you experience from God  
Can only be nurtured in community  
In connection with other Christians

That's why the Church matters  
Why worship matters  
But even more so, spiritual friendships matter  
Faith conversations in your family matter  
Small groups matter

We need relationships where we can read and study and pray  
and serve together  
Because that's where we get the reminder  
Over and over again  
Not to put other things in the place that belongs to God

God's voice is clear – God wants to be found by us  
But God also knows that idolatry is our default operating system

Thank God for the community of faith that reminds us to stop  
chasing after unknown gods  
Because our God is a God we CAN know  
If we just stop hiding behind our idols

Amen.

**By Joe Monahan, Medford UMC, Medford NJ**